

# Introduction

# 1 Victims and agents: gender in post-Soviet states

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The past decade has seen tumultuous change. The Soviet empire in Eastern Europe came to an end after ‘revolutions’ in 1989, themselves the result of Gorbachev’s encouragement of economic and political reforms in Czechoslovakia, Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria, the German Democratic Republic and Romania. Germany was reunified, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) disintegrated and a shaky Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) was born. The process of perestroika instigated ‘from above’ by Mikhail Gorbachev after he became general secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) in 1985 was far-reaching for Soviet citizens, for East Europeans and for the world. Gorbachev may not have intended many of its most far-reaching consequences, but once confronted by them he was forced by the weight of historical demands ‘from below’ to concede them.

Numerous textbooks have analysed the changes and continuities of the Soviet state.<sup>1</sup> Likewise, the history of perestroika and glasnost has, by now, been well told.<sup>2</sup> Their relevance to gender has received sufficient attention, although generally from female scholars still plugging the gaps left in conventional monographs.<sup>3</sup> Quite what to make of gender in chaotic transitions, from state socialism to new systems trying to adopt market mechanisms, is more hazardous.

All former Soviet republics are in periods of state building, but despite changes in economic and political direction, institutions of the past have not been shattered. Indeed, charges have been made that old bureaucracies are as secure as before and mushrooming, even though fresh legislatures have been elected. In a context of flux, lively debates have taken place about the significance of parliamentarianism versus

presidentialism, with strong support for the latter. With constitutions now in place giving extensive powers to presidents, future holders of executive power have the potential to wield enormous clout whether in Turkmenistan, Russia or Ukraine. Who is president of Russia remains of immense importance to the entire post-Soviet world. Changes in Russian economic and foreign policy bear relevance to other states due to Russia's commanding geopolitical position. Russia's huge land mass, as the map on pages xvi and xvii illustrates, stretches from the Pacific, across Northern Asia and into Eastern Europe. Leaders in some Soviet republics, particularly Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Ukraine and Georgia, had wanted independence precisely to end Russian domination. Fear of its return has not been allayed. Nationalist proclamations made by Vladimir Zhirinovskii and others fuel apprehensions about the intent of some Russians to re-establish the borders of the former USSR. Leaders in newly independent states, however, as well as being sensitive to Russia's geopolitics, are increasingly looking to build links elsewhere. Governments in the Baltic states have turned westwards, particularly to Scandinavia. The Central Asian republics are drawn towards the Pacific and to the Indian subcontinent, to China, Korea, Japan, India, Pakistan and elsewhere. Caucasian leaders, too, look west, south and east. Leaders and business communities are directing their attention well beyond Russia, but all the time are aware of Russia's economic and strategic importance to their futures.

#### Gender and transition to what?

The literature on the collapse of state socialism and on transitions to new, albeit undefined systems in the general direction of 'market' economies which do not quite look like them,<sup>4</sup> suggests that women fare worse than men. They are the first to be laid off, are subsequently hired (if young) more quickly if 'attractive' and able to perform sexual favours, and are not taken seriously by political parties. Most party programmes ignore women, or if they receive a mention they are encouraged to return to the home.

One interpretation is that women are thus the 'victims' of transition.<sup>5</sup> They are vulnerable, find themselves in situations beyond their control and have their life dreams shattered. But this wholly negative picture is incomplete. Men, too, are victims of change, affected by developments around them. But since 70 per cent of the unemployed are female, the impact on gender of economic change has been differential. Women have suffered more in job losses, in a sexualisa-

tion of hiring practices, in the general spread of pornography and in violence from men. The percentage of women elected to the legislature has also fallen. So women's political representation is much lower than men's, especially since 'male' parties do not speak for women in women's voices. The argument that women should return to the home is a most repetitive one made by men for women.

Although women are more likely to be disadvantaged by economy and polity than men, it would be inaccurate to downplay the fact that men have suffered in transition. Unemployment, disorientation and soaring inflation have made huge impacts on their lives. Women and men find themselves buffeted by changing circumstances, subdued by inflation, threatened by crime and pressured to find new ways of coping.

But women and men are much more than victims. They are also agents of change and reaction. While thousands of men are 'victims' of their masculinity and have been required to fight in Tadzhikistan, Nagorno-Karabakh or in Chechnia, so thousands of men have inventively found ways of managing in new, often dire, circumstances, be it as entrepreneur, mafia thug, taxi driver in the evenings after the 'first' job is over, bodyguard or engineer securing a research grant in the West. Likewise, women have energetically sought new channels, be it as private hairdressers, tour guides, employees of McDonalds, Coca Cola and Pizza Hut or as nightclub dancers. Those with Western languages do especially well, employed by foreign firms in Russian cities and paid in dollars.

One crucial element of 'transition' is uncertainty about the future. Russia forever seems to be suffering yet another 'critical moment'. In August 1991, the critical moment was whether or not the putshchists would endure and what they would do to the 'democrats', led by Yel'tsin, holding ground in the Russian parliament. In April 1993 another critical moment was whether or not Yel'tsin would dissolve parliament for blocking his reforms, as he threatened. The building tension between the executive and the legislature was temporarily diffused by holding a referendum.<sup>6</sup> This, however, did not resolve deeply rooted policy differences between Yel'tsin and his parliament about the minimum wage, pensions and fidelity to the budgetary requirements of the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Yel'tsin argued that the parliament had been elected in 1990 in the Soviet state and so was inappropriate to the new Russian state. Of course, he neglected to point out that he, too, had been elected president of Russia in June 1991, also before the collapse of the USSR. Another

critical moment swiftly followed in the autumn of 1993, with Yel'tsin dissolving parliament, many parliamentarians resisting and finally Yel'tsin giving the order for troops to shoot at the 'White House'. Independent for just two years, citizens of the Russian Federation witnessed their president bombard parliament; not an auspicious start for democracy in Russia or in the CIS. The story of the brutality on surrounding streets has largely been hushed up.<sup>7</sup>

Elections to the new Federal Assembly followed in December 1993. The lower house, or State Duma, has 450 seats, 225 of which were drawn from a party list and 225 from single-member constituencies. The upper house, or Federation Council, is a much smaller body of 178. When citizens went to vote in December 1993, they were also asked to vote in a referendum on Yel'tsin's new constitution which gave extraordinarily strong powers to the president *vis-à-vis* parliament. For many advocates of a strong parliamentary system, this spelt a constitutional return to authoritarianism. Yel'tsin had already enjoyed 'special powers' up to December 1992, granted by parliament to help him push through economic reforms. Parliament, however, had been reluctant to extend these powers further and Yel'tsin, in fact, attempted to prevent the Congress of People's Deputies from convening in December 1992.<sup>8</sup> Yel'tsin, to many, seemed unable to relinquish the vast powers he had accumulated. His defenders argued that what Russia needed was a strong hand to see the Federation through hard times and to steer a steady path of reform. His critics dubbed him yet another tsar.

The election results in 1993, however, shocked many. The communists, agrarians and liberal democrats in 1993 did much better than most expected. These forces opposed reform. Yel'tsin's new parliament was not radically different in composition from the previous one. Ongoing tensions, then, between executive and legislature were inevitable. Communist success in subsequent elections to the Duma in December 1995 caused anxiety among reformers who feared that Genadii Ziuganov, leader of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF) would win in the presidential election in June. Although polls in April and May 1996 suggested that the communists were still in the lead, Yel'tsin's energetic campaign, with heavy emphasis on the dangers of returning to communist ways, saw him recover ground. In the first round of voting, he won 35 per cent of the vote compared to Ziuganov's 32 per cent and Aleksandr Lebed's 15 per cent. By striking a deal to incorporate Lebed' in his team, he then proceeded to victory in the second round of voting which took place

in July. Yel'tsin received 53.7 per cent of the vote compared to Ziuganov's 40.4 per cent. Amid power struggles in the government and renewed concern at the very last minute about his health, Yel'tsin once more assumed the presidency with questions being asked about what would really be new, how the state could cope with foreign debt, how taxes could effectively be collected and above all, what difference Lebed' would make to the army, security and foreign policy. Women's issues lacked profile in these campaigns.

### Victims or agents of power?

A debate has been raging in the West about 'victim feminism' and 'power feminism'. To pick but two examples, in her book *Backlash: the undeclared war against feminism*, Susan Faludi made a convincing case that 'fear and loathing of feminism is a sort of perpetual viral condition of our culture' but not always in an 'acute stage'.<sup>9</sup> 'Backlash' characterised feminism as afflicting society with numerous evils – women were caught in the 'equality trap', living a 'lesser life', 'dehumanised' by careers and 'uncertain of their gender identity'.<sup>10</sup> Women were thus victims of an evangelical male reaction to notions of equal rights at home, at work and in politics.

By contrast, Naomi Wolf's controversial *Fire with fire: the new female power and how it will change the 21st century* insisted that, whereas the 1980s may have been years of backlash, the 1990s brought a new era of 'genderquake'. Women were now 'a political ruling class', but bearing the historical distinction of 'being the only ruling class that is unaware of its status'.<sup>11</sup> Women's anger at injustice had given rise to awakening and action, a 'power feminism' that was successful because women refused to let themselves be victims.

Many women in the post-Soviet states would probably be highly amused by the concept of 'genderquake', and unlikely to view one as imminent in Russia, Armenia or Uzbekistan. None the less, they have been engaged in numerous ways of seeking solutions to their plight. Although the results are mixed, the tendency is for women to find themselves working harder and harder in order to subsist. Simultaneously, women are surrounded by a male backlash against Soviet propaganda about the heroic 'emancipated woman' of the communist past. Both democrats and nationalists have railed against the inappropriateness of forced liberation 'from above' by the state. Their argument runs that woman was thereby deformed and robbed of her femininity. And many women, too, have subscribed to this view.

### Generalisation and difference

Whilst one can make some generalisations about the fate of women and men as states of the former USSR are being transformed, 'gender' as a variable is further qualified by factors of nationality, age, education, geographic location and religion. 'Men' and 'women' are not homogeneous categories. There are thus variations among women and men and overlapping tendencies between them. Alongside general patterns, one can find exceptions; alongside apparent certainties are ambiguities.

Conventional social science examines tendencies and trends, with the objective of offering generalisations about behaviour patterns. This book explores many such generalisations. However, analysts should be careful not to let generalisation overpower diversity, difference and heterogeneity. The experiences of post-Soviet women are far from identical, notwithstanding certain similarities. One does not have to subscribe to post-modernism to be aware of immense variations across the post-Soviet states, although post-modernist sensitivities may prompt penetrating questions. The label 'post-Soviet', while handy for quick reference to the states once part of the USSR, inevitably obscures the variations between Georgian and Lithuanian, Russian and Kazakh. Moreover, within each state different categories of women and men lead very different lives.

The chapters which follow highlight similarities and differences across states and within states. They also note continuities and discontinuities over time. Despite attempts to promote privatisation, many elements of the old Soviet system persist, thereby sometimes redefining what leaders intended or shaping leaders' policy programmes. Moreover, many institutions and organisations did not collapse with the old system, but had to find new ways of surviving and mechanisms of adaptation in new economic and political settings.

### Chapter breakdown and organisation

This book is organised according to theme and state. Hitherto, the literature on the USSR generally paid more attention to Russia than to the other fourteen republics. This was firstly because Soviet institutions were, in the main, run by Russians and Russia was effectively the empire builder. Second, some might argue that the sheer size of Russia meant that it merited disproportionately greater attention. Third, most specialists of the USSR in the West knew Russian, not Azeri or

Georgian, one consequence being that specialists on Russia far outnumbered scholars proficient in the languages of other post-Soviet states. Those who were specialists on the fourteen republics also tended to produce a separate and parallel literature.

The collapse of the USSR has thrown into sharp relief the importance of studying all the newly independent states and also different regions within states. Thus, this volume sets out to combine continued detailed discussion of Russia and Ukraine, building on past work and on fresh scrutiny of other independent states, some, such as Armenia and Georgia, having received fuller coverage in the past than others which have received relatively scant attention, including Kyrgyzstan (formerly Kirgizia) and Kazakhstan.

Part I concentrates entirely on Russia. Like this book's predecessor, *Perestroika and Soviet women*, it sets out to give an interdisciplinary treatment of the position of women in Russia from 1991 to the present day.<sup>12</sup> An interdisciplinary approach is essential for a full understanding of developments due to the interrelatedness of economics, politics, society and culture.

Given that the direction of the economy in many ways determines life opportunities, the first analysis focuses on women and work. Sarah Ashwin and Elain Bowers question the generally held assumption that female unemployment is higher than male. They point out that some recent statistics indicate the opposite and also show that female unemployment is declining. In fact, the much-predicted mass lay-offs of women have not yet occurred. They go on to discuss women's attitudes towards work and the importance for working women of the 'collective'. They conclude by predicting an accelerated 'downgrading' of female labour.

The picture in the countryside also defies stereotypes. Sue Bridger shows that, in 1991, in some regions under 10 per cent of those taking on private farms were rural people. Those keen to take up the new private farming were town-dwellers moving to the countryside. When the interest of country people in private farming grew, it tended to be former farm managers, specialists and brigade leaders, who were generally male. Women, however, were as crucial as ever for the labour power they offered, thereby perpetuating traditional patterns of the division of labour. Through the use of vivid quotations, Bridger gives rural women a voice in describing their overworked lives. Bridger goes on to stress the difficulty in calculating rural unemployment and argues that whether women are badly underpaid or unemployed, the result is similar – subsistence farming. Nora Dudwick's



essay on Armenia in Part II nicely complements Bridger's analysis. Dudwick, too, maintains that subsistence agriculture is now an important survival strategy. In Armenia, privatisation has contributed to the insecurities of rural women. An additional dimension is that rural men have left Armenia to become contract workers in Russia and other Slavic states. Dudwick describes how sometimes the consequences for Armenian women are tragic, including forced sex with fathers-in-law and brothers-in-law, no money coming in, abandonment, suicide and the setting up by the male of a 'second family' in his new locality. Should women seek a similar comfort, they are branded 'prostitutes'. Double standards, worldwide, die hard whether they pertain to hiring, promotion, sexual behaviour or election to parliament.

Private business activity is engaged in by women in towns, too. Based on interviews with women entrepreneurs in Moscow, Marta Bruno argues that businesswomen developed an alternative ideology for the market mechanisms surrounding them. Woman's 'soul' and femininity were described by the women themselves as keys to their success. Male and female entrepreneurship, then, were located in different cultures. Women, Bruno suggests, had priorities other than making money, such as supporting social programmes and promoting 'Russianness'. Although women were forced into business in order to survive, once in it they held very different attitudes from male entrepreneurs and also from the wives, daughters and mistresses of businessmen. Networks of support among the women were thus vital.

How Russian women live in town and countryside does not necessarily match their ideal. Rebecca Kay opens the section on 'society' by introducing media images of womanhood and women's own perceptions of what constitutes an ideal. Drawing on letters written by women in 1992 entering a competition on 'The Perfect You', Kay shows that women tended to see their ideal man as strong and reliable, there to protect the weaker woman. Although there were shades of different opinion, the idea of woman as homemaker was not challenged. The ideal woman was guardian of the hearth, a perfect hostess, enjoying life with an ideal man. Kay also examines attitudes towards marriage, parenthood and paid work. She concludes that many of the beliefs held by young women have deep roots in the Soviet past.

Ideal men, however, appear to be wanting. Lynne Attwood's chapter underlines the extensiveness of violence against women in Russia. Official statistics on women murdered by husbands and lovers

are alarmingly high, making the much-publicised mafia killings pale by comparison. Attwood notes the appalling old myths that persist in the justification of rape. She discusses policies on rape and male violence in Soviet and post-Soviet Russia, media treatment of violence and the recent development of hotlines and crisis centres.

Linked to this theme of ideal men and women, the idea has developed among forced migrants in Russia that ‘men were men’ and women were appropriately ‘respected’ only in the republic from which they have come. The life of migration and adaptation was perceived to have robbed women of their femininity and made them ‘nasty’. Men, their womenfolk felt, now drank more than before and behaved more crudely. In her chapter on migration, Hilary Pilkington underscores its gendered aspects and, based on her own fieldwork in Central Russia and the Middle Volga, she challenges some of the mainstream conclusions of recent Russian research.

Disruption in daily life and the need to adjust to new realities has been suffered by the Afghan madonnas as well as by forced migrants. Kathryn Pinnick introduces readers to the *afganki*, the rarely mentioned women who served in the Soviet war in Afghanistan. Although the war is now over, the policies surrounding it and the consequences for those who participated have resonance for the war in Chechnia. These women lacked financial benefits, received no recognition and were tarred with the media suggestion that they were prostitutes not heroines; so they formed Anika, an organisation to press for the same status as men who fought in the war. The *afganki* were thus forced into political action in order to fight for their rights. Pinnick also discusses the political action pursued by the soldiers’ mothers. This chapter neatly links social problems and political action.

Whereas the *afganki* became politicised in order to defend themselves, the former Soviet Women’s Committee, renamed the Union of Women of Russia, entered the conventional political arena in 1993, as one of three members of a new political movement, ‘Women of Russia’. Surprising success in the 1993 elections to the Duma resulted in twenty-three deputies from Women of Russia entering the lower house of the Federal Assembly. Chapter nine discusses how the Soviet Women’s Committee adapted itself to changing economic and political circumstances. In addition, based on interviews conducted in 1995 and 1996 with deputies who had been members from 1994 to 1995 of the faction ‘Women of Russia’ in the Duma, Buckley examines their perceptions of success, of shortcomings, of the ‘female’ contribution to politics and of whether or not a women’s party is needed. She also