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978-0-521-41388-6 - Women and Society in Russia and the Soviet Union

Edited by Linda Edmondson

Excerpt

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Introduction

Over the past two decades, the study of women in Russian and Soviet society has become one of the liveliest areas of Western research into Russian literature, history and the social sciences. The spark that ignited this new enthusiasm was, for many, the women's movement in the West, which burst into life in the late 1960s after a long quiescence of almost fifty years. For some of those who became involved in Russian women's studies, this new wave of feminism affirmed what they already knew; for others it had the force of a revelation; for still others it produced confusion or ambivalence and only slowly prompted them to view the world – and academia – from a new perspective. But however the new ideas were received, there is no doubt that they were responsible for generating a widespread curiosity that had never previously existed in the West about the history of Russia's female population, about Russian women writers and artists and about the current social and economic situation of women in the Soviet Union.

During this twenty-year period, however, most of the Western scholars who pursued these new concerns were living with a paradox. Many were initially attracted to the study of Russian and Soviet women because it seemed (from a Western perspective) that a degree of equality and recognition had been won by women in the Soviet Union that had not been achieved in the West. Whether or not they were working within a Marxist framework and whether or not they were sympathetic to the aspirations of Soviet socialism, they were impressed by Soviet claims not only to have legislated complete sexual equality, but also to have provided the conditions for its full realization – if not in the present, then at least in the foreseeable future.

The paradox lay in the fact that this apparent liberation was not matched by any serious interest among Soviet scholars in the processes whereby women were supposed to have achieved this state. Scholars in the Soviet Union were discouraged from writing about women, firstly by the inherited assumption (shared by the academic establishment in the West) that the subject was peripheral and even frivolous; and secondly

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by the strait-jacket into which the history of women's liberation and the analysis of gender roles had been forced by Marxist–Leninist dogma. The Western historians, literary specialists and social scientists who sought information and enlightenment about the history of the women's movement, about women's contribution to Russian culture, about the complex problems raised by the Soviet legislation of equality and about the impact on women of the social and economic upheavals of the Soviet period, discovered that they were obliged to provide almost all the answers to their own questions.

Within the last few years this situation has begun to change. Even before the inauguration of glasnost, the bald claims made in the Stalin period and for a while thereafter, that the 'woman question' had been 'solved' in Soviet society, had been superseded by anxious concern about the seemingly harmful consequences of sexual equality for society and the Soviet family, and about the 'double burden' that women were forced to bear as a result of their liberation. As Sue Bridger and Mary Buckley discuss, in this volume, the Gorbachev era saw a very rapid development of the debate on the 'woman question' in contemporary Soviet society. Many areas that were formerly taboo were soon opened up, notably the discussion and graphic representation of sexuality, which before glasnost had been at least as heavily censored as in Britain during the 1950s. As both these contributors point out, the implications contained within much of this renewed debate are quite retrogressive, from a Western feminist viewpoint. Nevertheless, the public reopening of questions that previously were officially closed, has facilitated the reemergence of a native feminist movement and the beginnings of a serious, enquiring appraisal of women's contribution to Russia's history and culture.

It has become a cliché to state that women occupy a marginal position in the patriarchal culture and public life of Western society. Unfortunately, the cliché still contains a great deal of truth. Without question, this peripheral status led many Western researchers to assess more favourably than they would otherwise have done a society where both sexes expected to be in paid employment and where the ruling ideology (if not its implementation) was explicitly egalitarian. With few exceptions such researchers concluded, on closer scrutiny, that Soviet society in its way was as exploitative and misogynist as their own, and that the low level of material prosperity made Soviet women's lives more onerous in most respects than the lives of the majority of women in the affluent societies of the West. Once it became possible for Soviet feminists to express their opinions without fear of retribution (as occurred a decade earlier) and to engage in their own academic

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research, many of the same criticisms that Western feminists had made of their own societies were expressed by Soviet feminists of theirs. The freedom of Soviet scholars to describe reality instead of concocted fantasy has had an enlivening effect not only on their work, but on all of us in the West. Opportunities have grown by the month for an open exchange of information and opinion between Soviet and Western researchers. If it continues, the study of women and gender relations in Russia and the states of the former Soviet Union will be transformed.

Although women remain under-represented in the sacred groves of Western academe and the study of women is still generally accorded marginal status, the margin has been pushed somewhat further towards the centre in recent years. In North America, particularly, more women are being employed by university departments, more are being appointed to influential committees and more attempts are being made to remove the 'glass ceiling' that prevents women from being promoted to senior positions. Women's studies courses are popular with students (predominantly female) and increasing numbers of teachers in higher education are recognizing gender as a legitimate category of analysis, along with class, race, ethnicity and religion. A similar shift, if less pronounced, has been taking place elsewhere in the West. The 1990 World Congress for Soviet and East European Studies, the source of the contributions to this volume, was testimony to the shift. These essays form only a percentage of the total number of papers presented whose theme was women or gender in Russia or the Soviet Union. We may at last have grounds for hoping that the emancipation of scholarship in Russia – as in East-Central Europe – from the prison of conformity and dogma, will continue to be matched by the release of Western academic thinking from stereotyped, male-centred perceptions.

The reader of this anthology should not look for any sort of chronological narrative or thematic consistency, even though the essays are arranged in a rough chronological order. The period covered is approximately the past century, but there is a yawning gap in the historical coverage between 1930 and the Gorbachev era. While Charlotte Rosenthal and Marina Ledkovsky between them offer a continuous survey and analysis of women writers from the Silver Age to our own, the volume illustrates not only the great variety of recent research on women, but also the huge scope still left for further research. The gulf in time between Elizabeth Waters' chapter and Sue Bridger's is partly a consequence of the rather random choice provided by an academic meeting like the Harrogate Congress. But it also reflects the fact that so many vital questions were left unexamined from the moment Stalin finally imposed his control to the moment when glasnost was formally

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declared. Elizabeth Waters notes in the conclusion to her chapter that there was an official silence on the subject of prostitution for over fifty years. The same can be said of many subjects that have been taken up in the Soviet media in the last six years, as well as those that have not yet been broached. Western research, though extensive, was always constrained by the distortions and silences of Soviet scholarship before glasnost, and it is only within the past few years that scholars in the West have felt free to explore all the themes that engaged their interest.

Academic research in the West has been hemmed in by other barriers besides those erected in Moscow. It long suffered in the past from a distinct narrow-mindedness, closeted within separate and well-defended disciplines. History, literary studies and the social sciences have each tended to be so self-contained that little creative exchange was possible. Women's studies are essentially inter-disciplinary and this anthology has been designed to break down not only some of the barriers between subjects, but also the frontier-post of 1917, which for too long has neatly but unhelpfully compartmentalized the tsarist and the Soviet periods.

The selection in this volume is not by any means comprehensive. Quite apart from the gaps in subject matter and period that have already been mentioned, I must record with regret that a number of very thoughtful and imaginative papers had to be omitted, for reasons of space. I should like to thank all those who offered their papers for inclusion in this collection and to express the hope that they will publish them elsewhere in the very near future. This book is intended as just one contribution to the growing literature on women and gender relations in Russia and the Soviet Union and it is hoped that it will encourage much-needed further research in this area. Finally, I should like to thank all the contributors to the book for providing in their stimulating, well-researched and sometimes provocative essays some answers to many of the questions raised over the past two decades and, even better, for asking new questions that were never posed before.

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1 ‘Better halves’? Representations of women in Russian urban popular entertainments, 1870–1910

Catriona Kelly

Railway train, oh railway train!
Brightly painted, on you run –
Take me, take me, railway train
To my Petersburg bit to have some fun!¹

This chapter extends an earlier study of mine, on misogyny in the Russian popular puppet show *Petrushka* (the equivalent of *Punch and Judy*). In that earlier study I argued that in the *Petrushka* show a female character was very often held up to ridicule whilst the male hero was not, that sexuality was an important element in this ridicule, and that this situation raised important problems of audience reaction which had not been properly dealt with by the three standard interpretations of *Petrushka* (vulgar Marxist class-based analysis, reading of the text as primal fertility ritual and the Bakhtinian theory of carnival).² The aim now is to move out from the study of the character and ramifications of one discrete popular urban tradition of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and make some observations about the representation of women in a range of genres used for urban entertainment at that period. As before, I shall be putting considerable emphasis on the context of performance, and shall be analysing the question of the audience’s reception. But I hope to take the final part of the discussion rather further, expanding a little on the possible implications of patterns in popular entertainment for wider issues of urban history at the turn of the century. Now, as then, an explicitly feminist perspective will be adopted.

The analysis of material by and about women raises some particular problems. It is fashionable to talk of the past as a difficult cultural text which requires decoding. But where this text presents women, the problem is, rather, how immediately, often distressingly, comprehensible the material seems. It may require defamiliarization (in the Formalist term) rather than decoding. To elucidate: the network of male–female power

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relations understood by the word 'patriarchy' is susceptible to many historical variations. The political, economic and cultural dominance of men is not always identically constituted. To give one historical example: as the Soviet scholar N. L. Pushkareva has recently pointed out, the well-known restrictions on aristocratic women's movements outside the home in medieval Russia have to be understood against the background of a cultural system which also placed considerable restrictions on *men's* movements outside the home.³

Some of the texts which I shall look at do seem to place proscriptions on the behaviour of women which are familiar from other cultural contexts as well. As my title 'Better halves' suggests, an important aspect is the jocular presentation of marital and extra-marital relations. One central assumption is that women's sexuality is dependent on men's, another is the idea of the venal susceptibility of females to male financial largesse. In some ways this early capitalist world seems close to the late capitalist world, as is hardly surprising. But I hope to suggest that these stereotypes of female behaviour, though powerful and dominant, did not exist in isolation in the popular imagination and that the way in which they were perceived may not always have been as straightforward as first impressions might suggest.

The chapter is set out in three sections, as follows. First, there is a brief discussion on some problems of sources and methodologies. Second, there is a rather longer section dealing with the places where these genres were performed, and the composition of their audiences. Then follows a section where the genres themselves are analysed: as a preliminary, internal textual evidence is considered, and the chapter concludes with a discussion of how this material might be related to other elements in the popular culture of Russian cities.

The final part of the analysis is much the most problematic. I am aware of the objections which have been raised by historians to the pretensions of New Historicist exercises in close reading. These objections were recently given lucid exposition by Peter Burke: '[The New Historicists] do not always seem to be aware when they cross the line between evidence and speculation. At times they seem to be attempting to base conclusions about cultural or social history on little more than a close reading of a few texts.'⁴ But it does seem worth trying to establish whether the selection of texts here is representative of any general trends, though the conclusions based on such a small amount of material can only be speculative. The aim must be to set up some general outlines which might be filled in later by investigation of other areas.

First, then, to the source and methodology problems – which are, in fact, quite considerable. When I told one ethnographer in Moscow

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recently that I was working on 'women and urban popular culture before the Revolution' her reaction was the aside: 'Who on earth gave her such a mad subject?' In a certain sense, of course, she was right: there was insanity in choosing an area so wide-ranging and so under-researched that it could be described as an undiscovered continent. It was also more than a little eccentric to select an area, which, as the remark quoted itself indicates, has suffered from a great deal of prejudice.

This prejudice is, firstly, attributable to the pro-rural bias of Russian and Soviet ethnography. It was only in the late nineteenth century that collection of urban ethnographical material began in earnest. Apart from phenomena which were sweetened by nostalgia because they seemed to be about to die out (for example, the peep show and the puppet show *Petrushka*), most of the material provoked hostile reactions even then. I shall cite some typical observations. V. Mikhulevich wrote in 1880 that only the Zaonezh'e had managed to 'preserve in purity the crystals of Russian folk fantasy'. In a characteristic synthesis of sartorial and aesthetic prejudice, he described popular urban genres as 'false and savage frock-coat-pot house poetry', saying, 'the so-called educated towndwelling member of the lower orders has dolled himself up German fashion . . . and has stuffed his vocabulary full of flowery bookish words and turns of phrase, has crammed his head with sappy romances and jolly rhyming verses – all of them, of course, in a form distorted to the point of caricature'.⁵ In 1914 Aleksandr Iakub described many popular songs as 'mindless junk', saying that collections of them were 'littered with rubbish from the café chantant and the open stage'.⁶ It is scarcely surprising that records of this material from before 1917 are far scantier than those of rural material, though they do exist. Mikhulevich quoted at some length from the material which he criticized, as did P. V. Shein in his late-nineteenth-century collection of songs transcribed from the oral medium, and Gleb Uspenskii in his essay on *chastushki*.⁷

Since the Revolution, suspicion of urban popular material has continued. It has been collected, but in smaller quantity than rural survivals; and between the mid-1920s and very recent times publications of it were extremely selective, since a label of 'petit-bourgeois vulgarity' and 'lumpenproletarian gypsy-ism' clung to many of the genres.⁸ Recent indications are that attitudes are changing: there has, for example, recently been a major publication of narrative jokes collected in Lenin-grad.⁹ But access to informants with first-hand knowledge of pre-revolutionary folklore is now very difficult and it is likely that much important material is gone for good.

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The subject has also suffered from the blindness to gender issues which has characterized Russian culture for at least the last fifty years. A recent article in *Russkii fol'klor* pointed to the necessity of collecting urban folklore and suggesting a model questionnaire: this assumed that all informants would be men and that family traditions and most genres of folklore would be passed down in the male line.¹⁰ However, appreciation that rural women had their own culture began in the early days of the Russian 'discovery of the people'. It provoked not only sententious reflection on 'peasant women's suffering', but also the gathering of women's own words (for example, the remarkable oral petitions made by village women against their husbands' cruelty).¹¹ The industry of folklore collectors in country districts also amassed material in another category, that of the presentation of women by men.¹² Hence, the paucity of material on lower-class urban women (whether in their own words or words about them), is probably as much attributable to anti-urban as to gender bias.

The relative importance of the two types of prejudice might be a matter of argument, but their combined effects are not. External records of the lives of lower-class urban women do exist; specific sub-cultural groups such as factory workers or prostitutes have received most attention. There has, though, been less concern to record women's actual utterances, still less folkloric texts emanating from them.¹³ Any assemblage of women's own texts, therefore, tends to have an accidental character, and I have had to concern myself as much with what was said *about* women as with what was said *by* them.

As is only natural, the ideological explosiveness of these 'low' and 'vulgar' genres has also affected the methodology for their analysis. The iteration of dogma has been more common than the construction and elaboration of theories. Moreover, most studies on the culture of urban lower-class women deal, in the first instance, with political activism, and popular literary genres have been given little consideration. Two exceptions to this generalization, a book by V. Krupianskaia and N. Polishchuk, and a dissertation by Anne Bobroff, deal with material of only semi-urban origin (drawn from the Urals in the former case and the Central Industrial Region, especially the town of Kineshma, in the latter). Both studies are concerned, in the first instance, not with entertainment, but with texts tied to the seasonal 'calendar festivals' (Christmas, Shrove, Trinity Week), family festivals (marriage and funerals) and certain social rituals (fortune-telling and the departure of recruits into the army). Krupianskaia and Polishchuk have, moreover, applied what they describe as 'aesthetic' principles in selecting the folkloric material addressed, perhaps in order to facilitate their

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assertion that factory women enjoyed a higher 'cultural level' than did village women. Bobroff, whose spread of texts is wider and more representative, does use some material which overlaps with mine, but in many ways I find her approach unsatisfactory. She argues that popular entertainment texts, like other folklore, had one function: to condition men to bond to a peer-group of other men, women to bond to one particular man, the father of their children. This bonding was, she argues, biologically efficient in that maternal deprivation has an adverse effect on the development of all the primates (the rhesus monkey is adduced as an analogy here). But it made women politically impotent, able to protest only about issues which touched the welfare of their children.¹⁴

Objections could be made to the crude socio-biological reductionism of Bobroff's rhesus monkey analogy in an absolute sense; more to the point, it does not seem to suit the facts of life in the Podmoskov'e very well. Bobroff cites figures showing that the rate of mortality in Russian industrial centres between conception and adulthood was extremely high.¹⁵ Hence, it is clear that women's conditioning could only have answered a biological imperative if that had been reduction in population numbers. Further, the arguments which she advances in order to belittle the importance of women's support groups, and deny the significance of texts in the male voice praising women or of texts in the female voice criticizing men, are not persuasive. But what is most important for my case here is that she models a society where folkloric genres were all used, irrespective of genre and context, in a pedagogical manner, and ensured a stable and cohesive set of complementary roles, which no historical process could apparently reverse. As I shall demonstrate, I think the 'pedagogical' purpose of popular entertainments is open to question. I shall argue, firstly, that the picture of social roles which they give is, though discriminatory, blurred and confused, and, secondly, that their relation to wider circumstances is contingent, problematic and fluid. Examination of this material may help to illuminate a little-known aspect of a period when, in fact, working women did occasionally become involved in protests in their own right, despite such disincentives as the family wage and a religious ethic which placed a high value on self-sacrifice.¹⁶

My definition of 'popular' here will be fairly general: I shall deal with genres which circulated amongst a lower-class audience: workers, small traders, artisans, domestic servants, casual labourers, prostitutes, the unemployed. The range may seem unduly wide, but there is, I feel, a need to get away from the dizzying circularity of the arguments employed by some Soviet commentators, with their rigid denomination

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of worker folklore versus *petit-bourgeois* folklore. The latter material is classed as vulgar because it is *petit bourgeois*, and *petit bourgeois* because it is vulgar, that is, if the commentator disapproves, it is labelled as the product of a retrograde class. It is likely that some categories of the broad group which I have outlined disapproved of entertainments: Old Believers, for example, would have seen them as the work of the devil, and the most politically self-conscious workers would also have disapproved in theory if not in practice. But there was some use of 'low' genres even by those who disapproved of them. The radical political songs which circulated amongst factory workers could never have had such success without a milieu where songs of all kinds enjoyed great popularity. Similarly, as the collection of Old Believer paintings held in the Krutitskoe Podvor'e section of the Historical Museum, Moscow, indicates, devout Old Believers drew on the secular tradition of the *lubok* print in their dissemination of religious propaganda.¹⁷

The places of entertainment where the genres which I shall describe were performed can be defined as 'lower-class' for the following reasons. They were all cheap, if not free: contributions might be invited according to means, or a low entrance price might be set: the range was 5 kopecks up to just over a rouble. (For comparison's sake, one might cite the 10 to 25 roubles charged for entrance to the *Bat* cabaret in Moscow in the 1900s.)¹⁸ All the popular entertainments were accessible: the tickets were on public sale and in most cases no formal dress was required. The genres in which they all specialized were what is termed *Kleinkunst*, that is, were small scale: sentimental and comic songs, short farces, jokes and comic monologues.

There were quite a lot of places in Russian cities which satisfied these criteria of brief verbal entertainments available for low prices. To go from the most informal up, there were, firstly, the courtyards, streets, parks and other public places, where singers, musicians, puppeteers, clowns and so on gave performances. 'On Sundays the pavements [in working-class regions of Moscow] are packed with people of the lowest orders . . . and the sound of the inevitable accordion accompanies the singing of popular songs', wrote one commentator in the 1880s.¹⁹ Secondly, there were the *traktiry*, *kabaki* and other eating and drinking houses, where it had been customary since at least the late eighteenth century for landlords to provide entertainments (gypsy choruses were much favoured), and also for patrons to invite entertainers off the street to give their shows indoors. The atmosphere of such a show was captured by Dostoevskii in *Crime and Punishment* (an account written in 1866, so a little earlier than our period):