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Introduction: women's studies and women's issues in Russia, Ukraine and the post-Soviet states

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Until the late 1960s, history had been predominantly regarded as the actions of great men and governments; the historians of every culture had largely ignored the female sex, and hence the history of over half the human race.¹ It was the 'second wave' of the feminist movement in the West in the 1960s and 1970s which stimulated interest in the history and experience of women,² who had previously, in the words of the new feminist historians, been 'hidden from history',³ 'made to disappear'⁴ by the unwitting or deliberate neglect of historians, who had been predominantly male. Although much interesting work in women's history has appeared in the last twenty-five years, there is still much scope for future research in this area. In many countries the discipline is still in its infancy; it is only in the United States that women's history has secured a widespread and stable institutional base in university and college curricula.

Russian women's history

In Russia, until very recently, the history and experience of women has not been regarded as a serious subject of study, partly because Russia and the USSR have always been irredeemably patriarchal societies, and partly because during much of the Soviet period, from the rise of Stalin to the late 1960s, the Communist Party had decreed that the 'woman question' (*zhenskii vopros*) – the Russian term for the whole range of issues concerning the legal, social, political, philosophical and cultural status of women – had been 'solved'.⁵ At the same time, foreign historians and social scientists studying Russia continued to follow the agenda considered important in the USSR, focusing well into the second half of the twentieth century on political élites and economic forces, even after social history, which included a study of previously neglected groups such as women and the working class, had become a respectable, even fashionable discipline among historians of other countries.⁶ The dilatoriness of Slavists in investigating Russian social history may partly, perhaps, be ascribed to the Soviet government's refusal to allow access to many vital archival sources, and partly to the intrinsic interest and political significance of a study of the origins and exercise of political power in Russia and the USSR, subjects about which many people in the West knew little,

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and which in any case corresponded more closely to the interests of western historians and social scientists, the majority of whom were male. Although political history and high politics in Russia and the other states of the former Soviet Union have been, and still remain, fascinating and rewarding subjects of study, it has now become clear that the women's movement in the West and the growing influence of social history in university history departments have promoted some of the most exciting and productive research into Russian and Soviet society over the last two decades.⁷ Western historians and literary critics began to discover, often with the force of a revelation, that 'In Russian history, there were women too.'⁸ Works on Russian women's studies are now so numerous that it is impossible to list all the important research on this subject, although the output of research in this field is still not widespread in the former USSR itself, and is relatively small in comparison with the study of women's history and culture in Britain, the United States and Germany.

The historiographical context

From the mid-1970s, western historians of Russian women have begun to publish the fruits of their research, concentrating initially on the history of the women's liberation movement in Russia in the years 1860–1930,⁹ and the lives of prominent revolutionary women and feminists, such as Aleksandra Kollontai, or her predecessors in the nineteenth-century radical movement;¹⁰ then, as it became easier to gain access to Russian archives, examining the lives of less exceptional women, such as peasant women and factory workers.¹¹ More detailed subsequent research has focused on women rulers,¹² and on the experience of women of various classes and professional groups at different periods of Russian history.¹³ At the same time, social scientists began to explore the problems attendant on the alleged 'emancipation' of women by the Soviet regime, which had come to public attention in the USSR in the late 1960s with the publication of Natal'ia Baranskaia's story *A Week Like Any Other*.¹⁴ The double burden that women were obliged to bear, and the harmful consequences for society and the Soviet family.¹⁵ If the first western research to some extent followed Soviet agendas, concentrating on women's struggle for political emancipation, subsequent research has been more concerned with showing how the patriarchal system shaped women's lives, and how women, living in a society which wished them to be powerless, responded creatively to its attempts to control them. Within the USSR, the public discussion in the press of issues which had formerly been taboo, and the influence of the western feminist movement, led Soviet women themselves to make tentative attempts to re-establish a native women's movement. At first, during the Brezhnev era, the small band of Soviet feminists could only operate underground;¹⁶ but after the inception of glasnost, the women's movement began to take public, often very diverse forms.¹⁷

This volume is an attempt to continue the path-breaking work in Russian women's studies initiated by previous feminist historians and social scientists, filling

in certain gaps which have appeared in the literature and extending previous research on the social and economic situation of women in Russia and the ex-Soviet Union during the Gorbachev era into the first three years of the post-communist period.¹⁸ Many of these contributions are revised versions of papers first presented at a conference on 'Women in Russia and the Former USSR', held in the University of Bath in March–April 1993, but others have been offered specially for inclusion in this book.

The theoretical dimension

There is no unanimity of theoretical viewpoint in this volume, although the contributors all write from a feminist perspective, in that they take it for granted that a study of the role played by women in the history of the Russian and Soviet empires, and an analysis of the political, social and economic position of women in the ex-Soviet Union today, are subjects of interest and value in themselves – issues which would still be highly debatable in the former USSR, and even in some western departments of history and Slavonic studies. Work in Russian women's studies is far from being completely accepted by academic establishments in the West, although a measure of recognition is now evident from the occasional incorporation of chapters on women and the family in mainstream treatments of Russian history and society.

Linda Edmondson's essay, 'Equality and difference in women's history: where does Russia fit in?', directly engages with many important theoretical issues raised by feminist historians in the past twenty years, in the context of Russian women's history both before and after the Bolshevik Revolution. She demonstrates how at different times in history emphasis has been laid on women's equality or difference, questions conventional assumptions about sexual difference and rehabilitates the concept of egalitarianism in the teeth of the critique launched against it both by contemporary western feminist theorists and anti-feminist women in the post-Soviet states. She highlights the potential dangers posed by any political philosophy emphasizing gender difference, which tends to devalue individual identities among both men and women, especially in a society like Russia, with its long tradition of autocracy, arbitrary censorship and suppression of the individual.

This book aims to build upon some of the best traditions established by previous work in Russian women's studies and women's studies in general. Hitherto much research in Russian women's studies has focused either on history, literature or the social sciences;¹⁹ but it has been decided to combine research in history, culture and contemporary society in this anthology, because in women's studies (and in Russian studies too), rigid boundaries between disciplines have come increasingly to be seen to be artificial.²⁰ Several contributors, notably Hughes, Hoogenboom and Kelly, use evidence from art and literature, demonstrating that such primary sources, and the literary and psychoanalytical theoretical approaches that cultural historians can bring to bear on them, can be valuable and

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illuminating, even though some historians may feel uncomfortable with this kind of evidence.²¹

In the last twenty years, a growing number of feminist historians have argued that it is important not only to reappraise women's situation in the past, but also to gain direct insight into the experience of women themselves. Many contributors to this volume attempt to recover women's own voices, through the use of memoirs, diaries, autobiographies and correspondence, wherever these may be obtained. Such an approach suggests that, while the political dimension of Russian women's *subjection* should not be lost, it is also vital to stress women's *subjectivity* and their own perceptions of their experience, and to explore the strategies they devised in accommodating to or resisting a patriarchal society. The contributors implicitly acknowledge that a simplistic appropriation of the term 'patriarchy', without an analysis of the specific historical contexts in which male oppression and female subordination or resistance may occur, is abstract and artificial.²²

Another boundary now perceived as unhelpful is the former rigid division between the tsarist and Soviet periods of Russian history. Contemporary Russian and Ukrainian feminists regard their current situation as indissolubly linked with the history of women's oppression and the fate of the first-wave women's movement in their countries, which had been largely suppressed until the Gorbachev era. The rediscovery of this forgotten tradition through the works of western scholars proved to be a revelation for many Russian women groping their way toward a feminist consciousness during the 'period of stagnation' under Brezhnev.²³ Subsequently, glasnost and the burgeoning indigenous women's movement provided a stimulus for feminist scholars in Russia and the other post-Soviet states to initiate a serious reappraisal of women's contributions to their own history, society and culture.²⁴

Many contributors interweave past and present, suggesting that contemporary trends in the post-Soviet states cannot be adequately analysed without an exploration of their origins in the Gorbachev era. *A fortiori*, the traditional values espoused by current leaders in Russia and Ukraine had their origin in the patriarchal, pro-natalist policies propagated in the Brezhnev era (and earlier, in Stalin's time). The post-Soviet states are still being governed by conservative men whose policies on women, like those of their predecessors, are largely determined by economic and demographic factors and who, while rejecting some aspects of their communist past, are now able to articulate with impunity more extreme patriarchal views than those propagated during the 'era of stagnation', since they no longer have any reason even to pay lip-service to idealistic Marxist notions of women's equality.

The juxtaposition of research into women's history and the situation of women in contemporary society renders it abundantly clear that, whatever the political system in Russia, it has always had predominantly negative consequences for women. The conservative values propagated in the perestroika and post-perestroika eras have their roots much further back, in long-standing patriarchal Russian and Soviet attitudes toward women. Under the rule of the tsars, the Soviet

regime and the new democratic rulers of Russia and Ukraine, power has always rested in the hands of men who have legislated for women. It is not only the Russian state which has been patriarchal; reform movements in Russia, even those sympathetic to women's rights, have always been eager to instruct women that political issues other than those of primary concern to women are most important; that it is first necessary to struggle for a new society, and only then to address women's problems. Radical Russian men always seem to have been able to persuade prominent women to accept this point of view. This was true at the beginning of the twentieth century of the 'socialist feminist' Aleksandra Kollontai, who attacked the 'bourgeois feminist' movement because she believed that it was necessary to make the revolution first, before dealing with women's issues; and it was equally true of dissidents of the Brezhnev era like Elena Bonner. It has also been true of the new political parties and movements of the Gorbachev era: Russian democrats and Ukrainian nationalists have only been interested in liberating people from the communist system, and have little interest in women's rights; and these attitudes have been carried on into the post-communist governments. Some eastern European feminists have called the system which has developed since 1990 'male democracy'²⁵ and certainly, democratization in Russia and Ukraine does seem to have been a 'gendered concept',²⁶ granting men and women equal rights in the formal sense, but suggesting that their duties were to be very different: women's would be firmly rooted in the moral, spiritual and thus private sphere.

Most contemporary historians of women are researching the experience of women in their own countries; there have previously been comparatively few international or multi-national collections based on one country or one theme in women's history.²⁷ However, historians and social scientists in the former Soviet Union, fettered by political and patriarchal constraints,²⁸ have been slow to explore the history and contemporary situation of women in their own countries, so the work of foreign scholars in this field is still invaluable to women of the post-Soviet states in their efforts to reconstruct their own past. It is, nevertheless, also very gratifying that this volume (like the 'Women in Russia' conference itself)²⁹ is able to illustrate the new-found freedom of Russian and Ukrainian feminists to research their own societies and to exchange information and opinions with western researchers. The contributions by women active in the feminist movement in Russia and Ukraine, written in a highly charged, committed style which differs from the more dispassionate papers by western scholars, are important documents which focus on the problem of male power and female impotence in their societies; they seek to form and inform the contemporary women's movement in their countries, and remind us that the issues discussed here are of more than academic interest – indeed, they are matters of life and death to many women in the Soviet successor states.

Some of the early research in Russian women's studies was based on the paradox that many western scholars and feminists were attracted to this subject because they took at face value the Soviet government's claim to have emancipated

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women; but when they did further research, the exploitative, misogynistic nature of the Soviet regime emerged clearly. By the 1990s, however, it had become evident that western feminists would have to learn to be careful not to impose their own modes of thinking uncritically on women from the former USSR.³⁰ Many women in the post-Soviet states are highly suspicious of western *feministki* who, in their opinion, have an easy life and cannot possibly understand their problems.³¹ There are a number of possible reasons why Russian and Ukrainian women have so little sympathy for western-style feminism: the general conservatism and misogyny of Soviet society inherited from the Stalin and Brezhnev eras; traditional communist hostility to 'bourgeois' feminism; the stereotypes presented in the media which make Russian women feel that to be a feminist inevitably means that they will 'lose their femininity' and cease to be attractive to men; the fact that Russian women are tired of ideological slogans about 'equal rights', which in practice mean that they are obliged both to work full time for negligible pay and to shoulder the bulk of the domestic chores; and, finally, the fact that Russian women simply do not know what feminism is, since western feminist ideas have been consistently misrepresented in the Soviet and post-Soviet press. Perhaps most importantly, in the post-communist period many Russian and Ukrainian women perceive 'feminism' as intimately linked with discredited Soviet socialism, as yet another 'ideology' which is hostile to the individual. Dialogue between scholars and feminists in the West and the East has demonstrated that it is not easy for the two sides to understand each other, but it is hoped that greater information will lead to greater tolerance of each other's point of view. The time has now come for western feminists, while continuing to point out the dangers of new forms of male exploitation in the post-Soviet states, to acknowledge, even to celebrate the cultural differences between women in the West and the former Soviet Union.

This book also differs from earlier studies in that it focuses on certain new issues which became topical in the Gorbachev era, and have grown even more important and controversial in the post-communist states, with the sexual revolution and the transition to a market economy: problems attendant on women's sexuality, health, reproduction and identity, and those related to women's work, unemployment and entrepreneurial activities. The disintegration of the Soviet empire and the rethinking of the colonial heritage have also raised new questions about the relationship between gender and ethnicity and their contribution to the formation of national identity. Hitherto much research has concentrated almost exclusively on *Russian* women, or has been devoted to women of specific countries or areas, such as Central Asia or the Baltic states; but this anthology juxtaposes essays on Russian women's history with a consideration of the unique position of Don Cossack women in the nineteenth-century Russian empire; and compares the contemporary situation of Russian and Ukrainian women, in an attempt to highlight the similarities and differences between the cultural traditions and position of women in two major areas of the Russian and Soviet empires. Marian Rubchak and Solomea Pavlychko point out that Ukrainian women are heirs to the same

Soviet cultural experience as Russian women, while stressing the inevitable dichotomy which exists between the perceptions of the colonizer and the colonized.

While focusing mainly on Russia and Ukraine, this volume also aims to emphasize the diversity of women's experience in the former Soviet Union. After the breakdown of the unitary state and the monolithic vision of the Communist Party, it is important to highlight the range of differences which can exist both within a national experience, and between the multi-national post-Soviet states. In the Russian Federation itself, pluralism is now the watchword: it has become clear that, contrary to the simplistic view frequently propounded by the Soviet Communist Party, there is no single collective entity which can be labelled 'Soviet women' (still less, 'post-Soviet women').³² This volume suggests that there is a huge difference between the lives and opinions of young and old women, urban and rural women, professional and uneducated women, prostitutes, lesbians, religious women, radical feminists and women of all ages and nationalities who wish to return to the traditional values of home and family. Such richness and multiplicity remind us that it is impossible to universalize a particular pattern of experience for women, and also warn against the perils of Eurocentrism and westernism. In this connection, the juxtaposition of essays by western scholars, émigrés and feminists still living in Russia and Ukraine provides an interesting range of different views on the contemporary situation. Elena Sargeant's analysis of women's issues in post-Soviet Russia, for example, is written from the perspective of a woman who has lived for many years in the USSR, which differs in some respects from established western analysis, and also from some received opinions in Russia, notably her comments on the falsity of Soviet 'equality'. Another source of diversity is the inclusion of valuable contributions on women's issues by male scholars, and the quotation of opinions by men in the post-Soviet states, which illustrate the different views which can be adopted by men and women toward such issues as abortion and reproduction.

Women in Russian and Soviet history

In most countries, feminist historical research has concentrated heavily on modern history since 1800, but Lindsey Hughes helps to fill this lacuna, contributing to the rediscovery of the significant place women occupied in Russian culture long before the 'woman question' was put on the political agenda of the nineteenth-century Russian radical movement.³³ Her study of Peter the Great's two weddings is a subtle discussion of a culture in forced transformation and the effect that these profound social and political changes had on women's status. Whereas some previous research has tended to focus on the history of gender inequality, female oppression and male dominance in Russian and Soviet culture, the chapters by Rubchak, Kelly and O'Rourke, while by no means avoiding such issues, demonstrate that certain women in Kievan Rus' and the Russian empire

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possessed more freedom and influence than we have hitherto been led to believe.³⁴ While adding to the documentation of women's marginalization and subordination in Russian and Soviet society, some contributors, notably Kelly, O'Rourke and Pilkington, also recover the private sphere of women's experience, yielding new insights into the role of sexual difference in Russian society and of patterns of female sociability, ritual and the history of private life. While not denying the reality of the patriarchal order, they emphasize that women have sometimes been able to use it to their best advantage.

To use terms coined by Gerda Lerner, the essays on women's history fall either into the categories of 'compensatory history', the history of notable women (for example, the studies of Peter the Great's wives and Vera Figner's autobiographical writings), or 'contribution history', which describes women's contribution to, and subjection in, a male-defined world (as in the essays analysing women's role in nineteenth-century merchant and Don Cossack communities, generally known for their quintessentially masculine pursuits).³⁵ Whereas Lerner regarded such developments as transitional, a stage in the growth of new conceptual frameworks, these and other papers in the volume corroborate the view that 'Such a process of recovery may take place alongside further theoretical developments and coexist with them. Indeed, the very process of recovery can yield important theoretical insights.'³⁶

Such new insights are contained in the papers of Edmondson and Buckley, who rethink contentious historical debates, reappraising the role of male feminists in nineteenth-century Russia and of women Stakhanovites in Stalin's time. Now that it is fashionable among Russian intellectuals to disparage the radical and communist past, it is more necessary than ever for western scholars to pursue research in these areas. Edmondson presents an objective picture of the conflict between nineteenth-century male liberals and radicals, suggesting that their approach to 'the woman question' was largely determined by their own ultimate political interests; and Buckley focuses on the 1930s, a period for which sources in Russian women's history have been scarcer than for other periods. She highlights the genuine enthusiasm which some women demonstrated in contributing to the reconstruction of Soviet industry and agriculture in Stalin's time, and the considerable resistance provoked by female shock workers and Stakhanovites. Another new approach is employed in Donald Filtzer's essay, 'Industrial working conditions and the political economy of female labour during perestroika', which provides an interesting addition to the literature exploring the collapse of the Soviet regime in 1991, suggesting that the exploitation of women industrial workers under perestroika helped to destabilize the system as a whole.

This book also explores certain previously hidden aspects of Russian history, which form a fascinating background to current debates about women's work, sexuality and reproduction. In 'Teacups and coffins: the culture of Russian merchant women, 1850–1917', Catriona Kelly rediscovers the 'forgotten class' of merchant women, showing that many nineteenth-century women displayed considerable entrepreneurial talents, although they can hardly be regarded as

models by either contemporary feminists or the new breed of businesswomen in post-communist Russia.³⁷ Sue Bridger, Elena Sargeant and Solomea Pavlychko highlight the re-emergence of such talents in contemporary Russia and Ukraine, sometimes directed toward surprising and unusual ends. Janet Hyer and Susan Gross Solomon reveal that even in the 1920s, generally considered to be a period of relative sexual freedom for Soviet women, the regime tried to control women's bodies and the reporting of sexual practices. In 'Managing the female organism: doctors and the medicalization of women's paid work in Soviet Russia during the 1920s', Hyer shows how the Soviet regime attempted to regulate women's fertility, adopting a rational approach to women's bodies based on economic factors; in 'Innocence and sexuality in Soviet medical discourse', Solomon demonstrates how sexuality and venereal disease were socially constructed: emphasis was laid on the alleged 'innocence' of the Russian rural peasantry in comparison with the depravity of city life, although the prevalence of nationalist, racist attitudes meant that free sexual practices and rampant venereal disease in Buriat-Mongolia could be acknowledged. Williams and Riordan suggest that regulation of fertility and sexuality has been a common practice in Russia, both before and after the 1920s. Williams's discussion of the reasons why a culture of abortion has grown up in Russia, which in 1994 still deserves the dubious accolade of 'absolute world leader' in abortion,³⁸ and Riordan's valuable overview of the position of sexual minorities in Russia and the former Soviet Union graphically illustrate the adverse effect which the policy of the Soviet government had over many years on the health and private lives of women, lesbians and homosexuals. The history of sexuality and reproduction in Russia reflects long-standing heterosexual male hostility to both homosexuality and women's sexuality, and a desire for the subordination of women.

Women in contemporary society

The essays focusing on the position of women in contemporary Russia and Ukraine assess the main implications of the perestroika and post-perestroika eras for women in the former USSR, concentrating on key issues such as women's role in politics, society and the economy, the intensifying demographic crisis³⁹ and the increase in pornography and violence against women. The discussion presented here makes no claim to be exhaustive, to duplicate other literature on women's issues or to present a unified point of view, but simply to update previous research and stimulate debate on many vital questions.

The contributions of western scholars and Russian and Ukrainian feminists graphically demonstrate that the perestroika and post-perestroika eras so far have had contradictory effects on the position of women. On the one hand, glasnost and the limited freedom of speech which followed it⁴⁰ have allowed the Russian press to discuss many issues affecting women's health and reproduction which could formerly only be discussed in *samizdat*, such as abortion, contraception, the terrible conditions in maternity hospitals, venereal disease and AIDS.⁴¹ However,

some issues which concerned male behaviour, such as domestic violence and rape, have only come lately to be discussed in the press, in the 1990s.

Another progressive development in the Gorbachev era was that some new concepts began to be used in discussions of women's issues, such as 'man's world', 'patriarchal relations of man to woman' and 'patriarchy'.⁴² Some voices were raised suggesting that two parents should help in child-rearing, and that there were no 'women's problems', just problems of concern to society as a whole – views which were quite unusual in a Soviet context.⁴³ However, a 1989 article entitled 'How We Solve the Woman Question' by three women with feminist sympathies, including a contributor to this volume, Anastasiia Posadskaia,⁴⁴ based on draft recommendations on the status of Soviet women commissioned by the Council of Ministers,⁴⁵ provoked little public response, arousing more interest abroad than within Russia itself. Women's studies began to develop in Russia through the new Gender Studies Centre, established in Moscow in the spring of 1990, albeit with considerable resistance from the male academic establishment, which particularly objected to the unfamiliar concept of 'gender'.⁴⁶

In the economic sphere, women obtained greater protection against heavy work and unhealthy working conditions (at least on paper), and were able for the first time to make choices about how to divide their working time: to do part-days or weeks in their paid jobs; to opt for flexi-time; or even to choose temporarily to give up paid work altogether. But although for many Russian women these options appear attractive, there is a danger that those who make such choices today will find that they are unable to rejoin the full-time workforce in the future. On a more positive note, the opportunity does now exist for women to engage in public discussion of economic problems that concern them, and to start up their own businesses, if they have the money and know-how.

On the negative side, the flood of words unleashed by glasnost in the perestroika and post-perestroika periods has led to little effective *action* on women's issues. By 1994, daily life was still as hard, or harder than ever, for many women; glasnost had exposed many problems in need of analysis, but horrific conditions still prevailed in abortion clinics and maternity hospitals,⁴⁷ and rape crisis centres had still not been established throughout the country (although two now exist in Moscow).⁴⁸ It was still true that 'given the backwardness of the country's pharmaceutical industry, the main method of terminating a pregnancy is abortion'.⁴⁹ Although by the post-communist period women's issues have come to be treated more frequently in the media,⁵⁰ formerly taboo issues such as lesbianism and contemporary feminism are still often treated in a superficial, sensational manner.⁵¹ In the nascent Russian market economy, many laws concerned with the social protection of women have proved ineffective, or contain the hidden agenda of making women 'unprofitable employees' who can be made redundant with impunity.⁵² New problems have been created by Yel'tsin's laws on the privatization of housing, which have encouraged criminal gangs to terrorize, even murder elderly women living alone.⁵³ In order for investigative journalism to achieve positive practical results, in 1994 there is still, as Mary Buckley argued in 1992, a need for