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Russian Women: Living in History's Shadow

Angela Brintlinger and Steven Conn

Marietta Chudakova is a remarkable woman. A literary scholar of international renown, she has recently left the safe halls of institutes and research libraries for the world of politics. During the 1991 coup attempt, she spent all night at the barricades outside Moscow's "White House." Five years ago, at Yeltsin's invitation, she became a member of the President's Pardon Commission, meeting weekly to consider the fates of prisoners at federal penitentiaries and work colonies throughout Russia. Endeavoring to make a difference through humanitarian work, she has striven to improve conditions in orphanages and children's hospitals in the far-off region of Gornyi Altai. When in December of 2000 President Putin was considering adopting the Soviet national anthem, Chudakova virtually single-handedly led a campaign in the press to prevent this re-Sovietization of society. Chudakova believes that she, as a member of the "creative intelligentsia," has an important role to play in helping Russia find its way toward a democratic society.

Among other things, Chudakova is not a Feminist. So she insisted recently while lunching at the Ohio State University Faculty Club.

Chudakova embodies the conundrum faced by at least some in the west when they have considered what Russians call "the woman question." On the one hand, in the 20th century Russian women achieved levels of education and professionalization and had access to political power, to divorce, and to abortion that made some western feminists envious.

On the other hand, Chudakova is surely not alone among Russian women of influence and authority who reject categorically the label "feminist." As women now renegotiate their position in a society simultaneously undergoing economic and political transformations, many do not see their situation in the same way that western feminists might, and many Russian women still view "feminism" as a suspicious import from the United States. As Lena, an ambitious twenty-year-old student in St. Petersburg, sees it, feminism is something only for women "with personal problems." Tatyana Mamonova, one of the first contemporary Russian feminists, has argued that "in Russia women's consciousness lags behind the laws, and in America the laws lag behind women's consciousness." Tanya Yevdokimova, 29, a research librarian at the Academy of Sciences, put it more wryly: "The difference between American and Russian women is that American women are fighting to work in the coal mines, and Russian women are fighting to get out of them."

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, discussions of Russia's "woman question" have tended to revolve around two poles. A salacious, sensationalizing press has broadcast and advertised Russia's new "pornocracy," highlighting the burgeoning sex industry. Some of these reports merely titillated. Others wagged a disapproving finger. Few pointed out the irony that the end of the state-run Soviet economy and the birth of a so-called free market left some women with no other economic alternative. A second direction has been the search, with some success, for Russian women who resemble closely their western feminist sisters. *Ms. Magazine* found its Russian feminist in Mamonova (who was exiled abroad in 1979 for just that crime). Intellectuals

such as Tatyana Tolstaya have had the opportunity to state their views from the pages of *The New York Review of Books* and other authoritative American journals - views that are weighty, if in Tolstaya's case ardently "non-feminist." The irony missed in the search for Russian women who fit western style is that such women often choose to relocate abroad. Sexual exploitation and the emergence of western-style feminism, albeit with decidedly Russian accents, are both significant stories of the post-Soviet era. But, needless to say, they tell incomplete tales.

The twentieth century began auspiciously enough for Russian women. The 1918 Bolshevik Family Code guaranteed legal equality for women, and access to divorce and abortion was made far easier than in most western countries. Then in the 1930s Stalin declared, in a gesture that now seems both comic and sinister, that "the woman question" had been solved. At the end of the twentieth century, it was easy to see that Soviet women achieved equality in much the same way that five year plans were always met and grain harvests always exceeded predictions. Stalin's declaration did usher in a nearly fifty year freeze on the discussion of feminist issues -- not only had the "woman question" not been solved, it went largely unasked. As Igor, a Petersburg delivery man, explained, "For us the 1930s ended about two years ago."

There has never been one "woman question" in Russia, but rather many. During an extended stay in St. Petersburg in the summer of 1999, we attended a conference on women's issues and interviewed a number of women from all over Russia, trying to ascertain for ourselves the state of the "woman question" in post-Soviet Russia. In our conversations with women, it became clear that as some test the new economic and political waters, as others see their future in the traditions of the Orthodox church, and still others feel ill-positioned to succeed in the new Russia, the historical legacy of life under the Soviet system may prove the most difficult challenge for Russian women to overcome. Our discussions did not provide an answer, but we hope that what we learned can add some complexity and nuance to how the question is asked.

A Woman's Conference: "Woman in a World of Male Culture"

As he began to speak, First Vice Governor of St. Petersburg Vyacheslav Shcherbakov looked bemused. "Thank you for the invitation to this conference," he declared, "with its rather incomprehensible title." The Vice Governor had come to the quiet halls of the Nevsky Institute of Language and Culture to open a conference entitled "Woman in a World of Male Culture: The Path to Herself." Shcherbakov went on to admit that he no more understood the meaning of "male culture" than he did the need to examine women's place in it. "But," he pronounced graciously, "women know what it means; they know what to call their own conference." Having fulfilled his role of imparting a certain bureaucratic gravitas to the proceedings, Shcherbakov disappeared at the first coffee break, taking most of the television cameramen with him.

On July 15 & 16, 1999, several dozen women largely from Petersburg, but from as far away as Moscow, Saratov, and Tadjikistan, gathered to consider questions like: "Who said that women and power are not compatible?" "Why does the stereotype that a real woman is not capable of running a business still persist?" "What does women's culture mean in a traditional society?"

That Russian women still find themselves in a “traditional society” is surely true, and Shcherbakov was not the only one who felt confused by the conference. Historian and anthropologist Elena Okladnikova reported that even women don’t quite understand the point of conferences on women’s issues: “A young journalist from Radio Russia called me the other day to ask about the conference, and after I’d explained that we were gathering to talk about women’s place in contemporary society, she continued to ask, almost plaintively, ‘But why? I still don’t understand. Why is this necessary?’”

The conference was something of a hodge-podge, ranging over a variety of disparate topics. But as Galina Fortunatova, president of the Filosofova Women’s Humanities Institute and one of the conference organizers, stressed, bringing people of various disciplines together was a major goal of the event. “We need such events,” she stated, “for our own intellectual pleasure.” Fortunatova’s “intellectual pleasure” had a certain urgency, however. “Right now the patriarchal-conservative culture is very strong,” she explained, and “we are experiencing a ‘retreat backwards’.”

The women at the conference - scholars, government advisors, journalists, and teachers - ended the event by discussing an issue of concern to them all: women and power. The representation of women in political positions has fallen considerably since the demise of the Soviet Union. Tatyana Dorutina of the St. Petersburg League of Women Voters pointed out that while 75% of middle-level government jobs are now held by women, and 82% of the lowest government jobs employ women, in elected positions, women are virtually absent. Natalya Yevdokimova, a petite woman with sharp features and a penetrating voice, and in 1999 the lone woman on St. Petersburg’s 49 member city council, put it bluntly, “It is very difficult to work in a male collective. You have to be a head above everyone else.”

Perhaps Shcherbakov should not have been so perplexed. In addition to his vice governorship, Shcherbakov heads the Commission for Improving the Position of Women in St. Petersburg, an organization attached to city government which brings together women from education, business, and other sectors.

If in the United States social problems have generated social movements, then in Russia social problems still generate government-sponsored commissions. This is another legacy of life under the Soviet system. After Russians recovered from the exaltation of pulling statues of Stalin down, they realized that the only people who had any experience actually running a country were, for better or worse, the now former apparatchiks of the Soviet Union.

Svetlana Yakovleva is such a person. Fifty years old and trained originally as a mechanical engineer, she too has a job in local government, with a wonderfully Soviet-sounding title: Head of the Department of Social Prognostication in the Social Development Agency of the Committee of Labor and Social Defense of the Population of the City of St. Petersburg. She is also the managing secretary of the Commission for Improving the Position of Women in St. Petersburg.

Svetlana’s Commission, created in June, 1997, minced no words in its founding document:

“The women of St. Petersburg are full-fledged citizens who have high levels of education and employment qualifications. However, it is onto the shoulders of women that the most labor-intensive and presently unprestigious aspects of life fall: housework and the raising of children, health care, education, social resources, culture, and others. The burden of the socio-economic costs and political changes which have occurred in our country has fallen heavily onto women, and this has led to a severe worsening of their position.”

While Svetlana takes a certain patriotic pride in the fact that “an article about equality of rights and opportunities has been in our Constitution since 1978, one year before the United Nations’ Convention of 1979,” she acknowledges readily that Soviet women had to live with the “double burden” of working both inside and outside the home. In post-perestroika times, that burden may have become worse. Women remain stuck at the bottom of the employment ladder, and without the paternalistic protection of the Soviet state, they can now be fired, or discriminated against, even more freely. As Svetlana pointed out, “women have more work at home, and men know this. That’s why they don’t put women in higher positions.”

To address this “worsening” situation, the Commission is charged, almost kaleidoscopically, to work on equal legal rights for women, equal participation in government and political life, equal access to employment and financial resources, improvement of health care for women, ending violence against women, and supporting girls and young women in the areas of education, health, and family life.

Its elaborate ten-page plan of measures to be taken reflects the lingering legacy of Soviet political culture and divides responsibilities up between a bewildering variety of agencies, committees and commissions - nearly two dozen by Svetlana’s count. Yet both the Commission, and the conference, in their apparently simple demands for women’s equality, underscore in two senses that many Russian women do not view their problems and the solutions to those problems in quite the same way that western women might.

First, the very notion of what “equality” means is not self-evident. For Svetlana, for example, “the fact that women are more busy at home shouldn’t be an issue at work. There should be no allowance for the fact that women are burdened at home.” Marina Dibrova of the Nevsky Institute, an organizer of the women’s conference and a woman who is succeeding in the new Russia, is deeply suspicious of the word equality because it is still too redolent of Soviet era rhetoric: “I don’t want equality,” she says, “Under the Soviets we were all ‘equal,’ but some people work hard, some are lazy. In the old system, the result was the same. I don’t want that.” For women like Marina, the very language of equality remains too poisoned to be used.

Second, the Commission stands as a reminder that many Russians still see change as being a strictly political process that emanates from the top, through governmental structures. A feminist movement culture, of the kind that has helped drive change in the west, is still nascent in Russia. “There’s the answer to your question about a women’s movement,” Tanya Yevdokimova tells us with both sadness and sarcasm. We are standing in front of the grave of Galina Starovoitova, strewn with sashes and bouquets from people like the Gorbachevs and the Rostropoviches. Starovoitova was the highest flying female politician in the Federal government, and for her success and visibility she was assassinated in November, 1998. For Tanya, the killing was a

sobering reminder of the difficulties and risks women still face in the male world of politics: “She caused too much trouble, so they killed her. This was a message for women in politics.”

Whores and Madonnas

It was one of those perfect glasnost moments. Early in 1987 Phil Donahue brought his particular brand of televised talking to Moscow to demonstrate to Russia a world of broadcast possibilities they had never dreamed of. During one of the shows, he asked a woman in the audience a question about sex. She responded: “We have no sex in Russia,” and the audience burst out laughing, leaving a befuddled Donahue with a microphone limp in his hand.

As Tanya recalled this episode to us, she explained that under the Soviets, “women’s sexuality and femininity were never discussed.” Pregnancy was certainly encouraged, she points out, but she feels that pregnant women were, and still are, viewed suspiciously and treated badly, “even if the pregnant woman’s wedding ring is in full view.” Their bellies show evidence of sex to a disapproving world.

There is an extraordinary history of private and family life in the Soviet Union still to be written, a history of communal apartments, of children taught to inform on their parents, of the state apparatus a third person in every couple’s bed. In 1918 Bolshevik Aleksandra Kollontai summarized how women would achieve emancipation when she wrote “a woman should learn to look for support. . .not from men, but. . .from the state.” Under Communist rule, a woman could report a cheating husband to the local party boss, and the husband might well be fired from his job. But as Tanya points out, “it is a little unnatural to bring the government into the bedroom.”

While Soviet women had easy access to abortion, they had virtually no access to other forms of contraception and virtually no access to information about sex. The vanguard revolutionary state promulgated sexual mores that would have pleased the most prudish Victorian. Articles appearing in official publications as recently as 1980 told readers that the “ideal duration of the sexual act” was roughly two minutes and that any man who held back to increase his partner’s pleasure risked doing terrible damage to himself. Tanya chuckles when she remembers her own high school course on “married life,” an innovation in Soviet schools in the 1980s, which addressed important questions like “who should take out the garbage,” but never mentioned a word about sex.

Enter, to fill this void, a proliferation of pornography on the one hand, and a multitude of advice books and manuals sponsored by the Orthodox Church on the other. The former has been much reported in the western press, and without question the pornographic turn that Russian culture has taken, masquerading often as “sexual liberation” or as part of the “new freedom,” is disturbing.

Even in the mainstream economy, women now find themselves subjected to astonishing sexual discrimination. “Help wanted” notices in newspapers routinely specify age and physical type when looking for female workers. Inna Denisenko, an assistant theater director in her mid-30s, is emphatic that for older women, job opportunities in the private sector are difficult to come by. As for young women, she says cynically, “they can always find jobs as waitresses, secretaries,

dancers and so on.” Inna’s sense is backed by statistics provided by Commission Secretary Yakovleva: 70% of the officially registered unemployed work force of St. Petersburg is comprised of educated women 40 years of age and older. “Now what’s needed,” she admitted, “are young, attractive women.” And indeed, young women in St. Petersburg in the summer of 1999 wore their skirts short, their fabrics sheer and clingy, and their heels precariously high. For many women, variations on these sartorial themes have become the dress-for-success uniform in the new Russian economy.

What may prove at least as significant for the future of women in Russian society, but which has been less remarked upon in the west, has been the return of the church to the center stage of Russian life. One can sense the revitalization of the church by merely walking around Petersburg. While many buildings are abandoned and crumbling and roads look permanently pitted, lavish sums are being spent restoring and re-gilding the city’s churches. St. Petersburg’s Kazan Cathedral symbolizes, as perfectly as any, the re-emergence of the church in Russian life. The magnificent 18th century neo-classical building sits off Nevsky Prospect, a semi-circular arcade of Corinthian columns reaching out to embrace the street. The building also embraces a central tension of Russian life in the past several years. The Soviets turned the cathedral into a museum of the history of religion, a didactic monument to state-sponsored atheism. Recently the Russian Orthodox Church has regained control of the building, and so therefore, just at the moment, the museum and the church sanctuary must share space, each glowering at the other across the cathedral’s central aisle. If, in the Soviet past, the state had been the most important institution in shaping women’s lives, then in the Russian future, the church may take on that role.

At one level, the return to the church is an expression of “Russianness,” a desire to shape a new sense of national identity by reaching back to the one institution that pre-dates the Soviet era, and which for many stands as a symbol of opposition to that regime. Yet from a feminist point of view, the very nomenclature of the Orthodox Church gives one pause. Its all-male hierarchy is headed by a “patriarch,” and that term conveys a good sense of the place of women in the church. Needless to say, women can’t be priests, but they are also not permitted to enter certain areas of the newly refurbished churches. They must cover their heads upon entering a church, and it is not uncommon for women to be chased out of churches for wearing pants or lipstick. Tanya, for one, can’t understand why women should be drawn back to Orthodoxy. While she is in no way nostalgic for the Soviet Union, she points out, “under the Soviets, we tried to achieve equality for women. Now the church wants to put women back . . . in the ‘golden cage.’” It is no coincidence, Galina Fortunatova argues, that with the return of a general unemployment for the first time since the early 1920s, the patriarchal myth of woman as the “keeper of the hearth” has returned as well.

A plethora of church literature, widely available in cheap paperback editions, offers women a critique of modern Russia, and proposes solutions straight out of the middle ages. *What Every Girl Needs to Know*, for example, is a manual for teaching Orthodox girls how to live in the secular world, presented in the form of conversations between a mother and her eldest daughter Nadenka as the girl grows up.

Nadenka and her mother talk about all sorts of topics, from the usual “where do babies come from?” to the evils of television. Nadenka’s mother worries about her daughter’s computer class in school, since as she has read somewhere, “sitting in front of a computer is very dangerous,

especially for girls. Eighty percent of women whose work is connected with computers are unable to give birth to healthy children."

Beyond the advice she gives her daughter, Nadenka's mother is herself an object-lesson for the way women should reorient their lives in a post-Soviet, neo-Orthodox Russia. She has a higher education, but gladly abandoned her profession so as to spend her days making her family of four children happy, leaving their father (absent entirely in the book) to support them all. Thus, when Nadenka comes to write an eighth grade essay on "The Choice of a Path in Life," motherhood is the obvious, Orthodox answer.

Those who want authentically medieval advice turn to the anonymous 16th century *Domostroi*, or "Rules for a Russian Household," which is now widely available in cheap new editions. It is certainly an interesting historical artifact. As Carolyn Pouncy, who translated the *Domostroi* into English in 1994, wrote, "the *Domostroi* opens a window on a world that. . . has long since disappeared." But our edition, purchased for about eight cents at the Hermitage museum shop - one of the few items for sale that was affordable, even cheap, for ordinary Russians - did not present the *Domostroi* entirely as an historical curiosity. There is something insidious about a book which provides, among other things, specific instructions on the correct way for a husband to beat his wife.

It is impossible to know how seriously readers take this kind of advice. But as Svetlana Yakovleva, herself now a church enthusiast, insisted: "Women are all believers." Whether or not Russian mothers and daughters are actually looking to Nadenka and her mother as models, they are faced with a new dilemma. Under the Soviets, women never had the opportunity to discuss the meaning of their gender identities. Now that they have the chance to do so, they are caught between the rock of pornography on the one hand and the hard place of repression masked as "tradition" on the other.

Left Behind

For Nadya Semakina, 35, the old system might well have worked. Born in the Udmurtia region of central Siberia to peasant parents who worked on a kolkhoz, a collectivized farm, she moved to Izhevsk where she found work in a large factory making, among other things, Kalashnikov rifles. After a few years of this, and of enthusiastic Komsomol work recruiting new members for the party, she was sent by the factory directors to Leningrad State University to study the History of the Communist Party.

That a daughter of peasants from a Siberian ethnic minority could have the chance - at state expense - to study at one of the most prestigious universities in the country was one of the benefits of life in the Soviet Union. Nadya's plan had been to return to her factory, degree in hand, to enjoy a life of job security and modest comfort.

Under the Soviet system, the autonomous republics - places that weren't big enough to be their own Soviet Socialist Republic but were too small to be neatly digested by Russia - functioned much like distant colonies, enriching the central state in Moscow and in return receiving the benefits of Sovietization. Such a place was Udmurtia, which was developed as an outpost of the Soviet military-industrial complex. After the collapse of the empire, these places have been

hastily and unceremoniously abandoned, left to negotiate their futures with a central government that no longer has much use for them, nor interest in them.

Nadya has the high, wide cheek bones of the Udmurts, a Finno-Ugric people. She laughs easily, a musical, infectious laugh which, like her face, makes her seem more open than the Russians of St. Petersburg. It also belies the fact that her life has not unfolded the way she thought it would.

She took her degree in 1990, after Gorbachev cancelled the national history exams, after the whole notion of “the history of the communist party” had been discredited as a tasteless joke, and after her factory back in Udmurtia had any use for most of its workers, much less a woman with a degree in Communist Party propaganda. She returned to Izhevsk and found work teaching at a technical high school. Stuck there, she was earning 900 rubles a month, roughly \$36 in 1999.

Nadya was a true believer, and she has had to cope with twin disappointments. The last ten years have demolished every article of faith she grew up with. In its place, there has been little, and she stands as one of the many women for whom the promise of a new Russia has remained unfulfilled. Perhaps not surprisingly, she too has turned to the church, albeit quietly and tentatively. A former candidate for membership in the Communist Party, Nadya was recently baptized, and like many other Russian women nowadays she wears her gold cross around her neck at all times. “The Russian people have always been devout,” she says by way of explaining the transposition, “and when the Bolsheviks came to power, they transferred their belief from God to the leaders. . . .And when people saw you couldn’t believe those leaders, they returned to the church.”

Perhaps because of her Soviet education, which taught that the “woman question” had been solved, perhaps because of the traditional society in which she was raised, Nadya does not see her problems, or indeed any of the hardships that have beset Russian women, in “feminist” terms. While she thinks individual women might enter politics “if a woman is not fulfilled in her home life, if she needs something more,” she can’t envision a larger women’s political agenda.

Whatever anger Nadya felt at being “betrayed” by the Soviet Union has now melted into a gentle sadness. She describes this in a way which aptly summarizes both a sense of the past and the present by saying “under the Soviet system we believed that at any moment the bright future would arrive. And then the future kept moving farther and farther away.” Nadya, like many Russian women, was caught standing on the fault line as the tectonic plates of history shifted.

A lot has happened in Russia since the summer of 1999. The west continues to view the sudden transfer of political power and the new reign of Vladimir Putin with some combination of suspicion, confusion, and anxiety. But for Russian women, one suspects that the challenges and aggravations of daily life, and their perceptions of their own economic and political autonomy and power, have changed little.

The biggest and most sinister news to have come out of Russia recently is Putin’s closing of the independent television station NTV. This encroachment on a free press has been greeted in the

west with alarm and protest. Marietta Chudakova had a different take on the situation. In her mind, NTV was itself to blame for not behaving responsibly and with a certain measure of restraint in its attacks on the government.

That a self-described “creative intellectual” and opposition figure like Chudakova could impart some measure of blame on NTV for its own demise might come as something of a surprise. Yet it underscores once again how these issues are viewed differently in Russia and in the west. The “woman question,” then, needs to be asked in the context of how Russians have adopted and adapted certain western ideas. The challenges faced by Russian women, as they negotiate their way through both a new political culture and a set of economic convulsions, remind us that in the west even oppositional movements have grown in the philosophical soil of the 18th century Enlightenment. Ideas about individual liberty, civil rights and an individual’s responsibilities in a democratic society may have been framed, at least in the United States, by slave owners and aristocrats, but these same ideas have proven just as inspiring and subversive to abolitionists, civil rights marchers and anti-Vietnam protesters.

It is these political traditions, and the institutions built by them, that have come imperfectly and incompletely to Russia. Peter the Great brought the Enlightenment to Russia in the early 18th century when he built the city that still bears his name. Yet enlightened as he might have been, he was also a despot who built his city in a fetid swamp on the bones of thousands of serf laborers. Fittingly, among the first buildings to be put up in “the Venice of the North” was one that quickly came to be used as a prison. Feminism in the west has been built upon these same principles, but Russian women don’t quite have those traditions upon which to draw.

The Soviet Woman, in Nadya’s words, “was first and foremost an outstanding industrial worker.” Heroines for young Soviet women came in two kinds: the officially lauded worker, whether on earth like the famed tractor driver Pasha Angelina or in space like the first cosmonaut, Valentina Tereshkova, or the “heroine-mother,” who gave birth to many children in the years after World War II, helping to rebuild the human resources of the Soviet fatherland. Now women talk about “self-realization” - a concept which seems to include happiness in personal life as well as the ability to follow one’s own professional and educational interests. As Elena Okladnikova re-interpreted the subtitle of the women’s conference, “the path to herself means the possibility of becoming a human being.” Through most of the 20th century, what discussions there were about the notion of equality revolved almost entirely around the question of labor. Tanya Yevdokimova is not the only woman to tell the coal mine joke. It is a standard refrain, a humorous shorthand for Russian women to summarize the circumscribed nature of what equality meant. “Self-realization” and “becoming a human being” sound at once grander, more vague, and more basic, and one wonders, in the new Russia, who will replace Pasha and Valentina as models of fully-realized women.

Whatever else their history has done to them, it has left Russians superb ironists. July 22 is the birthday of Nikolai Chernyshevsky. Chernyshevsky spent time in a czarist prison where in 1863 he wrote the influential, proto-revolutionary book *What is to Be Done* - a book, as it happens, whose plot revolves around the problem of women’s equality. We were reminded of this anniversary by the electronic message board in a St. Petersburg subway station in 1999, which then flashed, “136 years later and we’re still asking ‘what is to be done?’” Russian women, in particular, find themselves just learning how to ask that question.

