

Healing the Soviet Legacy Towards Women

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In October 1992, in Moscow, the Higher Women's Courses were opened in the recently founded Russian State University of the Humanities. This fact, despite a rather modest coverage in the press and TV, may be regarded as one of most successful developments on the way to a real democratization of Russian society. And this is not just because the so-called "woman question" finally gained the right to be analyzed seriously by the Russian intellectual establishment, and, accordingly, to enjoy a special status in the Russian cultural environment. The Higher Women's Courses (bringing to mind the famous Bestuzhev Courses in tsarist Russia, which became the symbol of emancipation and women's struggle for equal rights to education and social activity) are a focal point attracting a serious scientific potential—psychologists, philosophers, historians and theorists of the women's movement. Undoubtedly, the courses form a real basis for a cultural and, even more, a social rehabilitation of women in Russia in the post-perestroika period.

It may seem surprising that at the time when various peoples and ethnic groups, from whole republics to tiny hamlets, raised voices in defense of their rights, such a large part of society as the women of the former USSR all throughout the mayhem remained silent. Even at the height of glasnost, when most of the wide gaps concerning information about the Russian past and present were filled up at lightning speed, the mass media rarely and reluctantly addressed problems of contemporary women. Certainly, there appeared—drawing much attention—publications about prostitution and female alcoholism, female prison camps and psychiatry wards, but they were in line with similar articles on previously "prohibited" subjects. The whole world learned with interest about the new beauty contests (previously a taboo), as well as about Russian participants in international shows such as Miss Universe and Miss Europe, who from time to time came home with a prize. Sometimes they became "girls of the year," like Miss Kurochkina from Moscow, the winner of the latest competition.

However, all this had absolutely no relation to the real life of real women in the former USSR. Their life remained a kind of *terra incognita*, which aroused little interest in journalists. On the contrary, judging by media coverage in recent years, any attempt to address this problem runs up against either irony, open aggression (for instance, the newspaper *Moskovsky*

Komsomolets glibly interpreted one of the first women's conferences in Dubna as an "assemblage of over-excited lesbians"), or complete misunderstanding. As an example of the latter, I may refer to an article in *Ogonek* (by a woman journalist), where the author in a simple way explained to five million readers that the major problem of Soviet women is the inadequate salaries attained by their husbands. Thus closing the subject, so to speak.

The reasons for the lack of understanding are not only the complete absence of feminist practice in Soviet Russia, nor the fact, as justly noted by Barbara Heldt in her new book about Russian women, that all Russian newspaper and magazine editors are men—but, mainly, the deep-rooted totalitarian tradition of regarding women first and foremost as merely a reservoir of cheap labor which does not need any special attention. Soviet women endured the burden of shock-work in projects of the early five-year plans, the "Labor Front" of World War II, post-war reconstruction of the

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economy, and many other things—up to laying railway tracks during the last years of the Brezhnev period. It should be noted that while in the past, men were in a minority on hard-labor jobs due to natural reasons (killed or wounded at war, or busy replenishing the army with "secret labor reserves" in concentration camps), in the later years they simply preferred more comfortable occupations. The very

fact that by 1985 two thirds of medium-rank supervisors in enterprises were women (including team-leaders, whose lot is a permanent quarrel with the workers) is significant—men simply refused to take such hard, low-income and irreputable jobs.

Post-totalitarian society, having declared its renunciation of the "damned past," inherited too much from its totalitarian predecessor, especially the deeper wounds not always noticeable at first sight. It seems that the hardships of the "transition period" will also have to be overcome at the expense of women. At least, such is the tendency.

It is common knowledge that women, especially those with children, are now the main victims of perestroika and its consequences—in particular, of its various economic experiments. The highest percentage of unemployed, laid-off, and underpaid in the workforce are women. Women are the first to suffer from the breakdown of the health care system and the sky-rocketing prices for medical services, from the "progressive" experiments with paid education, from the lack of baby food and clothes, from the fact that suddenly many public utilities, which were always notorious for their poor

performance, have now halted their operations altogether—those remaining being affordable only to businessmen's wives.

The situation for Russian women sharply deteriorated from the financial point of view, compared to the Brezhnev "period of stagnation," when, for instance, children's governmental allowances not only stimulated higher birth rates, but even served as inducement for some families to adopt orphans. Today, a one-child family hardly makes both ends meet, and the grant for a lone mother (500 rubles per month) is enough just for a pair of diapers or a pound of cheese. The result is a much greater number of abandoned or sick children, and more abortions, with which Russia has left far behind not only the West but many African countries as well.

To this should be added the moral discomfort. While in the totalitarian period women generally felt equally deprived of rights as men, in today's free and democratic Russia their situation has clearly changed for the worse. First, the popular culture, which engulfed the country like a landslide, regards women as one more consumer good. Pop culture, with the help of the democratic press, has made soft porn a kind of "trade mark" for democracy (according to the principle "everything previously forbidden must be beautiful"). And nobody cares or feels ashamed; on the contrary, this is perceived as a pleasant reminder of

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the "Western way." Second, due to the circumstances, women are practically excommunicated from taking part in state affairs. Only five percent of the members in the last Congress of People's Deputies were women, and only three women are in Yeltsin's circle. Maybe if there were more of them, our politicians would not have committed many of the strange blunders which made them famous. In any case, the atmosphere at that Congress would not have been "barracks-like," as justly declared Galina Starovoitova, a former Yeltsin advisor and one of Russia's staunchest women.

As a result, among all the "grandiose" plans women were simply forgotten. The most notorious example is the long struggle of the Council of Soldiers' Mothers, which advocates change in the cruel army practices—which until now brought no serious results.

Post-totalitarian society becomes less and less suitable for women to live in, and more and more indifferent to their interests and needs. Therefore, it is not surprising that many of them prefer emigration. Significantly, in most cases women are the initiators of the entire family's departure—and economic conditions are far from being the only reason.

Social rehabilitation of women should be today's top item of priority, just like in the recent past it was the rehabilitation of other victims of the

totalitarian state such as minorities, peasants and others. If the women's problem remains unaddressed, further social progress in Russia is just not possible. The complexity of the task includes not only the magnitude of the means needed to achieve this (organizations and active people), but the fact that the issue lies deep beneath in the Soviet mentality, and is closely linked to the very basis of totalitarian thinking.

As is known, the totalitarian mentality is based on a surrealist and mythological perception of the outside world. Instead of using data obtained by natural and social sciences, such mentality exists only in relation to a myth, and not with reality. Hence, the myth becomes a kind of second reality, replacing the first one. And that was going on for years.

As is known, the Soviet leadership perpetrated the Great Soviet Myth with literature, the art of socialist realism, and provided the various creative unions with armies of highly skilled architects of Soviet mythology. The myth about the Soviet woman was at the very heart of the Great Soviet Myth.

The Myth of the Soviet Woman

The Myth was founded on three basic classical women characters created by glorious authors. The first one, resembling the austere personality of a heroic eros, was made by Maxim Gorky in his novel *Mother*, which sculptured the image of a soldier's mother fully committed to her son's cause. Attentive schoolchildren reading the novel were usually shocked to find out that Nilovna (the mother) was under forty years of age (in the mythological interpretation she was presented as a very old woman). The second character was created in the play *Lyubov Yarovaya* by Trenev. He interpreted the classical conflict between love and duty under new conditions, where Lyubov Yarovaya without the slightest hesitation abandons her previously beloved husband, a White Guard officer, for the sake of the bright Bolshevik future. Finally, the third romantic character was the last companion of Pavel Korchagin in the famous novel by Nikolai Ostrovsky, *How Steel was Tempered*, who left her middle-class family in order to care for the dying fighter. It is significant that in all three cases, the traditional man-woman relations were not only completely forsaken (Nilovna is only a mother, Yarovaya gives up her love, Raya fell in love with a dying man), but instead other relations are shown, binding the woman to some higher power. In this way, these relations resemble another traditional dialogue: "daughter-father," where father may be the Party, the army, the comrade leader, or the Soviet people as a whole. These types of relations were consistently maintained by the Myth; it was permanently being developed, presenting an endless variety of versions (in the final scene of the famous film *Circus*, unattractive Petrovich, who fell in love with an American girl Mary, adopts her colored child—but it is not really him alone that does this but the whole of the Soviet people).

Instead of love, the Myth offered Soviet women unity with a noble idea and participation in the construction of a new world; it promised to adopt all her children and bring them up to become heroes. No surprise there that many real women believed this, especially so when real men were either killed or were cutting trees in prison camps for the sake of the same bright Bolshevik future. The Myth also estranged woman from her body, her family and children (brought up by the state-run kindergartens and schools), from personal interests and from freedom.

Being formally the most emancipated in the world (the first decrees of the Soviet regime, which drew to its side a great number of women in all countries, indeed proclaimed equal rights and freedoms with men), in reality the Russian woman was not only subjected to an even greater oppression than before—she was not only exploited at work and home (everyday life still remained backward and patriarchal)—but was the victim of a state attempting to exterminate in her all the “special” qualities which made her a woman.

A typical example of these imposed “equal rights” is the law of 1928 on unilateral divorce. Anyone wishing to end their marriage could only send a postcard to the proper authorities. Immediately, post offices were flooded with cards from divorcing husbands who wanted to skip on alimony and other inconveniences—which the law simply did not provide for. Fortunately, this law did not last for too long.

As for the family, not without some efforts on the part of the state, it was finally destroyed in Russia—deprived of stability, put under the control of working collectives and Party organizations, permeated with denunciation practices and mistrust. Not only did the classical theorist Friedrich Engels reprove its uselessness, but the builders of socialism also understood that the family nucleus, as some separate world, represents a danger to totalitarianism because it gives rise to confidence and independence—traits for which the state had no use.

And as a result of all these cataclysms the Myth produced the well-known picture by Deineka: A young muscular creature, not overburdened with thoughts or romance—a kind of mutant, builder of the new life. A symbol of the time. A sign of the epoch. Her contemporary would be that Miss Universe, Masha Kurochkina, about whom even *Pravda* wrote with enthusiasm. The symbol of the same days (although unfortunately in another country) is the badge with Hillary Clinton bearing the words “Vote for Hillary’s husband.”

I still hope that some day Russia also shall have such presidents’ wives. But in the meantime something should be done by women themselves. It is time to put the barracks in order—not wait for that mere proclamation of democracy to do the job.

There should be awareness, at last, that the necessary elements for the birth of a women’s movement have emerged in Russia. In other words—for

feminism. However, and most probably, this will not be feminism as an ideology, as in the West, but rather somewhat different—perhaps as a practical struggle for basic rights. After all, women in Russia have somewhat different problems to deal with.