

Reading Between Novosti Lines

BY ELIZABETH WATERS

In 1975, I was working in Moscow as a style-editor for Novosti Press Agency. Because it was International Women's Year our department processed, in addition to the usual manuscripts on Soviet goals and achievements, several on Soviet women. They detailed with pride the great strides forward women had made at the work-place. They told how Soviet women engaged in all manner of occupations — flew in space, designed bridges, operated complex machinery — yet at the same time continued to be “real women,” found time to go to the beautician, made fancy-dress costumes for their children. Soviet woman came over in this propaganda as the ultimate Superwoman — loving wife, perfect mother and successful worker — equally at ease with tradition and emancipation.

As I did my job of correcting the grammar and improving the syntax I reflected on the possible reactions of a Western woman who got to see the translation when it was finished: the non-feminist would, I guessed, most likely find the stress on economic independence and labour productivity rather alienating; the feminist, on the other hand, might well recoil from the picture of unadulterated domesticity, the assumption of an essential femininity.

The Soviet synthesis of tradition and emancipation has its roots in history. The Bolsheviks, who took power in 1917, were urban and educated and saw themselves as part of the Western socialist movement; the country over which they ruled, however, was overwhelmingly rural and lived according to a patriarchal code. Given the isolation of the new regime and the economic and social problems facing the country after the years of war and revolution, there was little that the Bolsheviks could do, even with the best intentions, to implement their slogans of equality. Neither the

political and civil rights enshrined in Soviet law during the first years after the revolution, nor the educational opportunities opened up by the government in the 1920s, had much impact on the lives of ordinary women. By the thirties, Stalin was in control of the party and the country had been set on a course of forced industrialization and authoritarian rule. The Bolshevik party no longer had any best intentions. In fact, even in the immediate post-revolutionary period many party members were lukewarm in their commitment to feminism, instinctively believing that women were different emotionally and psychologically, that socialism would leave untouched the family hearth and the woman as its guardian angel. By the thirties, revolutionary idealism had ceased to act as a constraint on popular prejudices. The falling birth-rate and the destabilizing effects of economic

policies were causing alarm. In its search for social control the party sought to promote the family. Motherhood was celebrated through posters and poems and eventually even through medals. The socialization of housework no longer merited mention as an aim of communist construction; instead cooking, cleaning and childcare were viewed as the responsibilities of individual families, specifically of their womenfolk. While women were needed as mothers and housekeepers, they could not be spared from production. The ambitious industrialization plans in the thirties required an ever growing army of women workers. During the Second World War, women workers replaced the men who left for the front; after the war they stayed on to take the place of the men who never returned. In the decades since the war, the Soviet economy, over centralized and inefficient, has remained short of labour power and unable to function without women's participation. In the decades since the war,



the home too has continued to make its claims on women's time. During the 1970s, pro-natalist policies were introduced by the government in an effort to reverse the decline in the birthrate. As living standards rose an ideology of domesticity gained ground and women's homemaking qualities received greater attention than before. Family and work remained women's twin responsibilities. The synthesis of tradition and emancipation persisted.

Waged Work

In the 1980s, women constituted 51 percent of the Soviet labour force and, in sharp contrast to the pre-revolutionary period when Russia was a predominantly rural country and the overwhelming majority of women were peasants, over 70 percent of those gainfully employed were engaged in non-agricultural occupations. This high percentage of women in the workforce has been presented in Soviet propaganda of the type I style-edited at *Novosti* as evidence of the successful emancipation of women: guaranteed employment and equal pay for equal work are said to ensure economic independence and equality for women in the USSR, in contrast to the non-socialist world, where women are disadvantaged in the labour market at all times and suffer particularly during periods of recession. The USSR and the other countries of the communist bloc certainly pioneered recognition of the principle of equal pay for equal work, but nowadays legislation and individual wage agreements in many Western countries have followed their example. Women in the West still earn less than men despite this legislation because they tend to be employed in jobs that are relatively unskilled or are seen as such. The situation is, in fact, little different in the Soviet Union where women earn under 70 percent of the male wage. And while a larger number of women are employed outside the home than in the West — though over half the student body in higher education is female and though in certain professions including medicine, engineering

and accountancy the number of women employed is considerable — the similarities in patterns of employment are more striking than the differences.

The vast majority of Soviet textile and clothing workers and over half of the workforce engaged in the manufacture of bread and confectionery are women. It is almost unheard of for men to be telephone operators, typists, secretaries or daycare workers. In teaching (and in medicine too) most employees are women, though this is not the case at the top of the profession where high levels of skill and responsibility are matched by better rates of pay and a predominantly male personnel. Over the past few decades, occupational segregation has grown, though not, it should be noted, in the medical profession, where a conscious policy of preference for male applicants is being pursued. In the rural sector of the economy too, the number of women employed as machine operators has fallen sharply, and as many as two thirds of women on the farms are agricultural labourers engaged in seasonal, unmechanized work requiring minimal skill. Women in the Soviet Union, as elsewhere in the Western world, tend to be employed in specific branches of the economy and, within any particular

branch, to be engaged in a limited number of jobs, usually unskilled and poorly paid.

Household and Family

In the period immediately after the October Revolution, some of the more radical members of the Bolshevik party argued that public services such as can-tees and laundries would replace the private household. Resolutions were passed in favour of the abolition of housework. In 1918, a Congress of Working and Peasant Women heard a paper on domestic servitude by a prominent party member, Inessa Armand, deploring the time and energy women were forced to waste over their saucepans and wash tubs. Lenin, the leader of the Bolshevik party, also took a dim view of housework. It chained woman to the kitchen, he said, crushing, strangling, stultifying and degrading her, reducing her to the role of 'domestic slave.' Party radicals expected that, as the community took responsibility for the household chores, as women participated in life beyond the four walls of the home, and as relations between the sexes were transformed, the size, shape and functions of the family would change so radically that, in the view of some, the term 'the family' would no longer be appropriate. The idea of the 'withering away of the family' however, never gained widespread acceptance in the party, nor did it become a firm item on the Bolshevik political agenda in the same way as the nationalization of industry or the provision of universal education. In the thirties, when the Stalinist political order became entrenched, the idea was denounced as 'petty-bourgeois' and 'anarchist.' The family was identified as the basic cell of socialist society and the private household recognized as an inevitability for the foreseeable future.

Housework remains to this day an integral part of family life, a time-consuming and exhausting chore. The high technology harnessed in the service of the Western kitchen has so far found little application in the Soviet Union. The shortages of



goods in the shops and the long lines outside, for so long a staple of Western reporting on the Soviet Union, still show no sign of disappearing. In Natalya Baranskaya's short story "A Week Like Any Other," published in the journal *New World* in 1969, the heroine details her incessant round of cooking and cleaning. On shopping she makes the following comment:

Personally I'm the sporty type. I'm always running. I run this way and that way. A shopping bag in each hand. I climb up and down. Down off trolley buses, up onto buses, down into the subway, up off the subway. There are no shops where we live. Though we moved in a year ago, the shops are still not finished.¹

Little has changed in the last twenty years to date her descriptions of the life of the working woman, balancing job and family, forever on the brink of some disaster. Women still spend approximately 24 hours a week on domestic responsibilities, only a small improvement on the situation at the time of the revolution. Since the 1950s, the number of canteens, laundries and retail outlets has increased, but not enough to make much difference. Social services have been thought of by the government as a complement to the private household rather than a replacement, and the vision of a society without housework has not resurfaced. When, in 1975, Inessa Armand's 1918 speech on domestic servitude to the Women's Congress was published in a volume of her writings, it was in an abridged form which omitted the passages advocating the abolition of domestic labour.

Mothering

Every year on March 8th, the Soviet press features articles on Soviet women and carries tributes from the Communist Party to their hard work and self sacrifice. *Pravda*, on one recent occasion, thanked women for the contribution they were making to the building of socialism in their many roles, listing in first place their work as mothers in 'educating the rising generation.' 'With a sense of deepest respect,' the

paper wrote, 'we turn to the woman-mother. To raise and educate the younger generation is a noble calling and a great responsibility.' Mothering has indeed become one of woman's greatest responsibilities. An increased amount of time spent on childcare partially explains why the Soviet woman takes as long on her domestic responsibilities as she did seventy years ago. Time saved as a result of the gradual spread of washing machines and refrigerators has been off-set by the greater demands of raising and educating a family.

Many social scientists echo the view that mothering is the exclusive right and duty of the woman. They argue for improvements in training and employment opportunities and for an extension of public services to reduce the burdens of domestic work, but continue to assume that child-care, whether organized within the family or by public institutions, will remain women's responsibility. Nature, in their view, has equipped woman for motherhood by shaping her psyche along special lines: women are tender and patient, loving and kind, less inventive than men, but more pragmatic, better biologically fitted for home-making and for motherhood. These traditional notions of sexual difference have a popular resonance, reflecting widely held views in the community about the behaviour appropriate to women and to men. Soviet citizens, whatever their ethnic group — Russian as well as Uzbek, Latvian as well as Georgian — and whatever their educational levels — intellectuals as well as workers — tend to agree that women are cut out for the domestic sphere. Soviet society was until recently predominantly rural, and tradi-

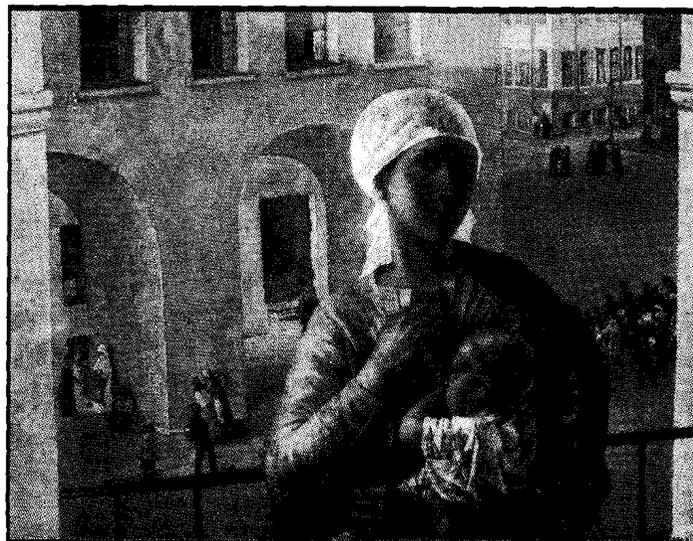
tional notions of woman's place are still firmly entrenched. Soviet society has for decades been in constant flux, buffeted by revolution and war, by forced industrialization and collectivization, by purges and repression. Fixed notions of family and gender, holding out the promise of permanence in private lives, continue in consequence to exercise a strong appeal.

Politics

As well as being tender and patient, loving and kind, women are said to be shy, emotional, indecisive and compliant — qualities that are thought to be compatible with domestic roles but not with leadership roles in public life. Over the seventy years since the Russian Revolution, female membership of the Communist Party has steadily increased from under 10 percent in 1920 to approximately 25 percent at the beginning of the 1980s, but at the top of the party hierarchy women are a rarity. In the Soviet and trade union organizations the pattern of female participation has been the same: the number of women in the local branches is high, but in the central apparatus, where decisions are taken and power lies, women are few and far between.

Perestroika

Since 1985, when Mikhail Gorbachev was appointed General Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party, the country has been set on a course of *perestroika*, restructuring. Many political and economic theories, previously held to be self-evident truths, have come up for public discussion and criticism. In an attempt to breathe life into the flagging economy, private enterprise in the form of cooperatives and leasehold family farming has been legalized. In an effort to reactivate the political process, the virtues of democracy have been rediscovered. *Perestroika* has been characterized by unprecedented openness about the past failures of Soviet development and the country's present shortcomings, an approach encapsulated by the other buzz word of the present period — *glasnost*. The Soviet media have publicly and heatedly debated a



Petrograd, by Kuzma Petrov-Vodkin, oil on canvas, 1927

whole range of social problems — drugs, prostitution and AIDS — whose existence in the Soviet Union was previously denied.

Perestroika, however, has so far failed to tackle the inequalities that women suffer in Soviet society: their secondary position in the work-force, their second shift in the home. A few women have become prominent in public life. A sociologist, Tatyana Zaslavskaya, has made a name for herself as an eloquent and erudite advocate of reform; Zoya Novozhilova (see p. 61) has been appointed ambassador to Switzerland; Aleksandra Biryukova, who in 1986 became CPSU Central Committee Secretary, was in 1988 elevated to candidate member of the Politburo. But for the majority of women it has been life as usual. *Glasnost* has done little to make sexual inequalities a matter of public discussion and concern. As Zoya Boguslavskaya shrewdly comments (p. 57) the propaganda stereotypes of the emancipated Soviet woman have hidden reality from view. Furthermore, the “woman question” is associated in the Soviet mind with the era of revolutionary barricades and female tractor drivers — times long past. Many of the women who have managed to achieve a position of authority in Soviet society prefer like *Ninotchka* ‘not to make an issue of their womanhood’ and smile condescendingly whenever the “woman question” is mentioned.

Over recent years, Soviet economists have argued for streamlining the Soviet economy and warned that unemployment (something which, officially at any rate, has not existed since the 1930s) is inevitable. The likelihood is that if redundancies are declared, women will be seen as the most appropriate candidates, and that women’s participation in the workforce will decline. This prospect has not drawn anxious comment. On the contrary it has been welcomed, on the grounds that women should not be expected to shoulder the burdens of both homemaking and work, that the country has become prosperous enough to be able to afford to return women to their purely womanly pursuits. In other words, the synthesis of tradition and emancipation is being questioned, and tradition is now

emphasized at the expense of emancipation; less attention is paid to work, more importance is attached to homemaking, childrearing and femininity. Harsh words have been penned in the Soviet press about those women who fail in their traditional roles, who are bad wives, and about mothers who drink, neglect their children, overstep conventional morality. Prostitutes have been singled out for censure, accused of betraying their sex and their country for the sake of fine clothes and the easy life. Describing the methods these women use to make money, one lawyer commented in the republican press:

I respect the emancipation of women, but one perhaps ought to think of restoring the old rule banning women from restaurants in the evening unless accompanied by men. The woman who hangs outside a restaurant waiting to be let in, who sits at a table without a man, a glass of cognac in her hand, does not give others any reason to have a very flattering opinion of her.

A few weeks later, the paper published a protest from a female reader. Of course women should not go out alone at night, she wrote, in fact, it was probably best for

them not to go out in the day either, or at least only if completely veiled! Her reaction epitomizes a new spirit that has been visible over recent months (in the period, in other words, since the *Novosti* articles published here were written). A well-known sociologist, Maya Pankratova, has argued that women ought to be able to choose whether to concentrate on work or family, instead of being expected to conform to a single type. Some women, she argues, may prefer to stay at home and they should be able to do so without being made to feel guilty; but for those who want to make a career, the door should be open. Professional women, finding that often the doors are only half-open and the porters unwelcoming, have drawn their own conclusions and acted accordingly. Women journalists recently followed the example of cinema workers in forming their own unofficial organization. Criticisms have been voiced in the press of the male monopoly of the world of diplomacy and politics, and the inadequate provisions in Soviet maternity homes have been exposed.

In 1979 a group of women published a journal in Leningrad registering their dissatisfaction with their social status, cataloguing the subordination of women in Soviet society, demanding greater financial support and respect for mothers and a greater say in the economic and political life of their country. The journal, *Woman and Russia*,² was unofficial, its organizers were persecuted by the authorities and forced to leave the country. Ten years later, the official Soviet press is just beginning to take up where these dissidents were obliged to leave off.

¹An English translation of “A Week Like Any Other” appeared in *Spare Rib* 1977, pp. 53-59.

²*Woman and Russia; First Feminist Samizdat*. London: Sheba, 1980.



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