

Striving for Femininity: (Post-)Soviet

by Fran Markowitz

Au lieu d'adhérer au féminisme, les femmes de l'ancienne Union soviétique redoublent d'efforts pour être féminines, un droit naturel qui, croient-elles, leur avait été enlevé sous le

The formal equality guaranteed by Soviet law, as many described it to me, was a cruel hoax that produced untenable hardships for women and precluded them from being feminine.

régime socialiste. Cet article examine les symboles culturels et les conditions sociales qui continuent à renforcer le manque de féminisme des femmes.

One of the very first surprises to confront me as I began fieldwork among emigres from the (former) Soviet Union over ten years ago,¹ was that Russian born and bred women were far from the western caricature of dowdy female Bolsheviks. Destroying my expectation that they would be carelessly dressed in formless woolen skirts, bulky sweaters, and massive coats, the Russian women I saw in New York (and later in Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, Chicago, Toronto), were usually attired in figure-hugging, eye-catching clothing, sporting stylish coiffures and more than ample amounts of bright cosmetics.

Making themselves attractive was a very deep concern of these women, and, as I found out, not new to their arrival in the West. Indeed, when I inquired about the time, energy, and effort I saw them putting into their physical appearance, many of my women friends replied by passionately describing the lengths to which they had gone in the Soviet Union to find a silky blouse, a flattering pair of shoes, hair dye, or mascara.

More recently, during visits in 1993 and 1994 to Moscow, St. Petersburg, Riga, Ekaterinburg, and Minsk, I noticed that cosmetics, fashion magazines, lacy underwear, and hair care products—nearly impossible to obtain during the Communist era—were ubiquitous, and the women of Russia had become eager consumers. When I asked them about the popularity of beauty manuals and appearance-enhancing cosmetics, I was told the same story I had heard in the U.S. and Israel so many times before: women are “naturally” concerned with being beautiful and will go to any lengths to achieve this goal.

Pierre Bourdieu suggests that the propensity of human

beings to naturalize commonsensical understandings provides the basis for sociability and allows for further cultural elaborations. He calls this realm of culture its doxa, principles that are so embedded in the knowledge necessary for daily life as to render them unchallenged.

My search for the doxa of post-Soviet femininity brought me to inquire about the position of women in Russia and the USSR, women's relationships with each other, with men, and with the state. I would like to suggest that Russian women's call for a return to their “natural femininity” is a logical consequence of their historically-informed critique of communism and a means to alleviate at least part of their centuries-long plight.

Women in Russo-Soviet history

First, it is important to note that although there has been no mass women's movement in the Soviet Union since the end of the 1920s,² things weren't always this way. During the Russian revolutionary struggle, prominent feminists brought women's issues to the fore in developing a platform for the new Soviet state (Lapidus 1978; Stites; Clements; Edmondson). In 1917 the Soviet Constitution granted to the previously unenfranchised women of the Russian Empire an entire array of citizenship rights and responsibilities; most importantly, the establishment of their independent personhood through political and economic participation. Subsequent measures assured them of equal pay for equal work, a liberal maternity leave, free abortion on demand,³ a state-wide system of nurseries and pre-schools for infants and small children, and afterschool programs for bigger ones. Along with providing women with the means necessary for work force participation, the state attempted to reshape the relationship between husband and wife. It outlawed the purchase and abduction of brides and created a civil marriage ceremony that stressed equality of the spouses.⁴

With the establishment of these laws and implementation of their measures, women were urged to direct their energies away from private or familial matters toward the general concerns of their country. Declaring the “women's question” solved in 1930, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union disbanded its *Zhenotdel* (Women's Section), and from that time forward, Soviet women had no legitimate forum for their specific concerns. Indeed, until the era of glasnost, these concerns—like the “nationalities question,” drugs, crime, prostitution, and poverty—were said not to exist. The only “real” (i.e., official) problem in the post-Lenin, pre-glasnost USSR was how to mobilize and centralize the masses in order to establish and foster socialism.

Un-Feminism

During the 1930s, and then especially throughout the war years, women were aggressively recruited into the Soviet workforce, joining, and ultimately replacing men in strenuous construction and menial farming jobs (Jancar; Lapidus 1978). At the same time, women were also moving into and making inroads in the professions. Yet the primacy of their pre-revolutionary position as bearers and carers of children, values, morality, and domesticity was never seriously challenged; women were expected to be both workers and mothers (Molyneux; Rosenham).

By the 1970s, Soviet gender roles had stabilized and became predictable. Several female Soviet authors published sociological and statistical research proving that

women in the USSR had gained equality with men both in the workplace and in their marriages (Iankova 1977; Ivk; Rumiantseva & Pergament; Sonin). Other observers, including both Soviets (Kurganoff; Mamonova 1984) and westerners (Jancar; Lapidus 1978, 1983; Holland), saw quite a different picture. While certainly agreeing that women could be found in the full range of occupations, they pointed out that women tended to cluster in health care, child care and service provision, and in the lowest rungs of agricultural, industrial, and professional work. Even more telling, Soviet women were solely responsible for food-shopping, housekeeping, cooking, laundry and child care, onerous tasks that earned them no pay, and no recognition (see Baranskaya). Balancing these tasks and the roles demanded of them required that women in the Soviet Union be both persons⁵—productive workers with jobs in the public sector—and feminine—domestically-inclined, care-giving, soft and beautiful, and other-oriented (Iankova; Hanson & Liden; Alexandrova; Attwood 1985, 1990; Markowitz 1993, 1991; Gray).

Soviet femininity: rejection of socialist sameness

The problem, as women saw it, lay not in their having special roles and a feminine personality ideal, but in their constrained ability to perform in these roles and manifest this personality. The formal equality guaranteed by Soviet law, as many described it to me, was a cruel hoax that produced untenable hardships for women and precluded them from being feminine (Jancar; Lapidus 1978, 1983; Mamonova 1984; Meyer; Molyneux).

Soviet women (and men too, for that matter) usually did not look to the political arena as a way out of this contradictory and unsatisfying position. They strongly believed that the legal question of female emancipation had been resolved and that this resolution determined their fate. Vladimir, a Soviet emigre in his late forties commented in 1985:

Yes, there is equality in the Soviet Union between men and women—women do all the hardest work, and they have more jobs than men. On the *stroika* (construction site) they have the jobs that call for dragging and pulling while the men sit in cranes and other machines. At work, they have the same jobs as men, but after work they have additional jobs—standing in line to buy groceries, preparing meals, taking care of the children, and cleaning the apartment. What do men do? They are tired at the end of the working day, so they sit on the sofa and have a before-dinner drink. (Markowitz 1993, 185)



Dita Shehu

Not only do they believe that the Soviet government had resolved the question of equality between the sexes but also that there is nowhere further for this question to go (Jancar).⁶ Tanya, a former Moscow journalist who emigrated to Chicago in 1989 told me in April of 1991, "Feminism exists in America because American women want the same rights as American men. There is no need for this in Russia because we all have the same rights—on paper, in the Constitution."

The problem of women's status in the Soviet Union, then, did not lie in an insufficiency of state action but in

"Naturalizing" women's roles as the providers of softness, beauty, and hope served as a harmless antidote to the difficulties of Soviet life.

the very action that the state took. Equality, Soviet women insisted, is not what they want. Socialism failed to deliver its promise of a better life precisely because it dictated "equality" where equality does not and should not exist. Seizing upon the "equality" imposed unnaturally by an artificial state system as the key symbol of their discontent, (former) Soviets proclaim that men and women are by their nature different sorts of beings and ought to be treated accordingly. In dozens of interviews I was told that until socialism is disbanded, women would be unable to be women—and men men. After Socialism the hopes they hold for alleviating the grim double-burden of women's lives, are not to be found in feminist agitation or in state legislation but in restoring a "natural" balance between men and women. Disdainful and angered by what they consider to be the disastrous effects of political programs for women's equality, (formerly) Soviet women, as a rule, have rejected the feminist movement and strive instead to regain their "natural" femininity (see Reiter and Luxton).

Femininity as resistance

Russian women, through their bodies and in their homes, have been resisting despair and domination for centuries (Atkinson; Hubbs). Unlike the *narodniki*, the Bolsheviks, and then later their opponents, women phrased their resistance in subtle, personalistic, and evasive terms. Witnessing the catastrophic results of head-on challenges to the powers that be, they learned well how to *obkhodit* (to go around) dogma and officialdom to achieve their goals, and to posit a remedy to a grim lifestyle that seemed would never change. "Naturalizing" women's roles as the providers of softness, beauty, and hope served as a harmless antidote to the difficulties of Soviet life. Proclaiming that their true place is in the

home, with their husbands and with their children, they could remove themselves, at least ideologically, from the harshness of their double-shift (Gray). In addition, this proclamation gave to them uncontested authority in the domestic domain. Contrarily, feminism was threatening, for such a movement, as seen through the lens of their own experience, would not lighten their load but authenticate the status quo, impeding their hopes for a less difficult, more fulfilling alternative.

It is for a parallel set of reasons that the indigenous *Mariya* movements of the late 1970s and early '80s, which urged contemporary Russian women to model themselves on the self-sacrificing Mary the Mother, also failed to attract numerous adherents (see Mamanova 1984). Elevation of self-abnegation and surrender to God over women's active role as creators and carriers of beauty, too would have stripped them of power and an important vehicle of self-expression.

Today, in the wake of the disintegration of the doctrine of communism and its attached institutions, the people of the former USSR and its satellite states are struggling to piece together politically legitimate, economically feasible, and ideologically compelling systems to bring them out of material want, psychological confusion, and cultural malaise. Inspired by blurred images of an idealized past that surely never was, some are calling for a return to the old regime, others are attracted to equally totalitarian, nationalistic, right-wing parties, while others turn their energies to the Russian Orthodox Church (see Huseby-Darvas; Gyani; Funk and Mueller). Still others, eschewing a backward-looking solution to a contemporary problem, embrace the free-market by becoming entrepreneurs, or new-style petty businessmen. By and large, however, the masses of the former Soviet Union are struggling with their daily tasks of making a living, providing support for their families, and trying to squeeze some drops of hope, amusement, and satisfaction out of their lives in these times of flux.

Susan Brownmiller suggests that femininity is a "romantic sentiment" (14) which

[B]y incorporating the decorative and the frivolous into its definition of style...functions as an effective antidote to the unrelieved seriousness, the pressure of making one's way in a harsh, difficult world. In its mandate to avoid direct confrontation and to smooth over the fissures of conflict, femininity operates as a value system of niceness, a code of thoughtfulness and sensitivity that in modern society is sadly in short supply. (17)

Femininity, thus embedded in post-Soviet women's doxa, builds a legitimate strand of resistance into the harshness of official culture and allows for a soft self-assertion that feminism necessarily precludes. While on one hand the values and practices of femininity may unwittingly serve to perpetuate the status quo—and thus

women's exploitation—on the other hand, femininity, as women's mandate to bring beauty and light into an otherwise glum and desperate situation, operates as an avenue for women's self-expression and provides the entire society with a glimmer of hope for the future.

Fran Markowitz is a Senior Lecturer of Anthropology in the Department of Behavioral Sciences at Ben-Gurion University, Beersheva, Israel. She is the author of A Community in Spite of Itself: Soviet Jewish Emigres in New York (Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993) and is currently co-editing a volume on Sex, Sexuality, and the Anthropologist.

¹I am referring specifically to my fieldwork among Soviet Jewish emigres conducted in New York City (1984-86), in Israel (1987-88), and in Chicago (1989-1991).

²While there were a handful of Soviet era feminists (see Holt; Mamonova 1985, 1989; Molyneux), they had a very limited following, and even less credibility among the millions of Soviet women, to say nothing of the men. In the post-USSR Russian Federation, the Women of Russia Party, dedicated to preserving protective legislation for women and children, garnered 25 of the 450 seats (a mere 5.5 per cent, despite the fact that women comprise close to 52 per cent of Russia's population) in the December 1993 elections to the State Duma.

³After Stalin assumed the position of General Secretary of the Communist Party, abortion was outlawed for a time. Restrictions were also placed on divorce. In 1956 the Khrushchev regime re-established earlier divorce laws and free access to abortions.

⁴The Russian Orthodox wedding ceremony included a ritualistic handing-down of the father's whip to the bridegroom (Atkinson citing M. F. Vladimirkii-Budanov, *Obzor istorii russkogo prava* (1886) and V. I. Sergeich, *Leksii po istorii russkogo prava* (1890).

⁵Even this is not completely accepted by everyone. A famous Russian proverb states: *Kuritsa—ne ptitsa, Bylgaria—ne za granitsa, Zhenshchina—ne chelovek* (a chicken is not a bird, Bulgaria is not outside our national borders, a woman is not a person).

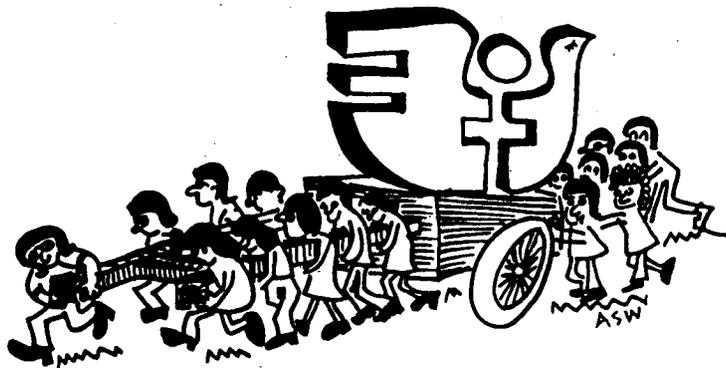
⁶In September 1991, on the ABC-TV Nightline broadcast of a Town Hall Meeting with Soviet President Gorbachev and Russian Republic President Boris Yel'stin, an emigre woman enquired about proposals to elevate Soviet women's position. From her age and accent, it appeared that this questioner had been in the U.S. for quite some time, including at least part of her school years. Most emigre women with whom I've spoken in New York, Chicago, and Israel would not even think of turning to anyone in the government to remedy women's problems.

References

Alexandrova, Ekaterina. "Why Soviet Women Want to Get Married." *Women and Russia: Feminist Writings from the Soviet Union*. Ed. Tatyana Mamonova. Boston: Beacon Press, 1984.

- Atkinson, Dorothy. "Society and the Sexes in the Russian Past." *Women in Russia*. Eds. Dorothy Atkinson, Alexander Dallin, and Gail Warshofsky. Lapidus. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1977.
- Attwood, Lynne. "The New Soviet Man and Woman: Soviet Views on Psychological Sex Differences." *Soviet Sisterhood*. Ed. Barbara Holland. Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1985.
- Attwood, Lynne. *The New Soviet Man and Woman: Sex-Role Socialization in the USSR*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1990.
- Baranskaya, Natalya. "Nedelya Kak Nedelya" (A Week Like Any Other). *Novy Mir*. 11 (November 1969).
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *Outline for a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977.
- Brownmiller, Susan. *Femininity*. New York: Linden Press/Simon & Schuster, 1984.
- Clements, Barbara Evans. *Bolshevik Feminism: The Life of Alexandra Kollontai*. Bloomington and London: University of Indiana Press, 1979.
- Edmondson, Linda Harriet. *Feminism in Russia: 1900-1917*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1984.
- Funk, Nanette and Magda Mueller, eds. *Gender, Politics and Post-Communism: Reflections from Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union*. New York: Routledge, 1993.
- Gyani, Gabor. "Political Uses of Tradition in Post-Communist East-Central Europe." *Social Research* 60.4 (1993): 893-914.
- Gray, Francine de Plessix. *Soviet Women: Walking the Tightrope*. New York: Doubleday, 1990.
- Hanson, Carola and Karin Liden. *Moscow Women*. New York: Pantheon, 1983.
- Holland, Barbara, ed. *Soviet Sisterhood*. Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1985.
- Hubbs, Joanna. *Mother Russia*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988.
- Huseby-Darvas, Eva. "Feminism, the Murderers of Mothers: The Rise and Fall of Neo-Nationalist Reconstruction of Gender in Hungary." Unpublished ms., n.d.
- Iankova, Zoia A. "Changes in the Structure of Social Roles of Women in Developed Socialist Society." *Izmeneniye Polozheni'a Zhenshchiny i Sem'ia* (Changes in the Position of Woman and the Family). Moscow: Institute of Social Research of the Academy of Sciences, 1977.
- Iankova, Zoia A. *Sovietskaia Zhenshchina - Sotsialny portret* (Soviet Woman: A Social Portrait). Moscow: Political-Literature Press, 1978.
- Ivk, Zoia Maksimova. *Trud Zhenshchiny i Sem'ia* (The Work of Woman and the Family). Minsk: Byelorussia Press, 1975.
- Jancar, Barbara Wolf. *Women Under Communism*. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1978.
- Kurganoff, I. A. *Women in the USSR*. London, Ontario: S.B.O.N.R. Publishing House, 1971.
- Lapidus, Gail Warshofsky. *Women in Soviet Society*.

- Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978.
- Lapidus, Gal Warshofsky. "Introduction." *Moscow Women*. Eds. Carola Hanson and Karin Liden. New York: Pantheon, 1983.
- Mamonova, Tatyana. "Introduction: The Feminist Movement in the Soviet Union." *Women and Russia*. Ed. Tatyana Mamonova. Boston: Beacon Press, 1984.
- Mamonova, Tatyana. *Russian Women's Studies: Essays on Sexism in Soviet Culture*. Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1989.
- Markowitz, Fran. *A Community in Spite of Itself: Soviet Jewish Emigres in New York*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993.
- Markowitz, Fran. Field notes, 1991.
- Meyer, Donald. *Sex and Power: The Rise of Women in America, Russia, Sweden and Italy*. Middleton, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1987.
- Molyneux, Maxine. "The 'Woman Question' in the Age of Perestroika." *New Left Review* 183 (September-October 1990): 23-49.
- Reiter, Ester and Meg Luxton. "Overemancipation? Liberation? Soviet Women in the Gorbachev Period." *Studies in Political Economy* 24 (1991): 53-73.
- Rosenham, Mollie Schwartz. "Images of Male and Female in Children's Readers." *Women in Russia*. Eds. Dorothy Atkinson, Alexander Dallin, and Gail Warshofsky Lapidus. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1977.
- Rumiantseva, M. S. and A. I. Pergament. *Spravochnik Zhenshchiny-Rabornitsy* (Handbook of the Rights of Soviet Women-Workers). Moscow: Profiz-dat, 1975.
- Sonin, M.Y. "Sotsialno-Ekonomicheskiye Problemy Zan'iatnosti Zhenshchin" (Socio-economic Problems of Women's Employment). *Izmeneniye Polozheni'a Zhenshchiny i Sem'ia* (Changes in the Position of Woman and Family). Institute of Social Research, Academy of Sciences, USSR. Moscow: Na'uk Press, 1977.
- Stites, Richard. *The Women's Liberation Movement in Russia*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978.



Reprinted with permission of the International Women's Tribune Centre
Artist: Anne S. Walker

ALISON NEWALL

Ode to my Stretch Marks

On a beach in Mexico I lie,
a bikini clad cipher.
I am no longer picture
perfect.
Not for me the swim suit edition:
I'll never now be
food for fantasy
cause an airbrushed
hush from the
pages of a magazine, be
subject to a hungry
gaze.

But
my thighs can tell a story:
fine tracers of faded lines
embroider breasts
embellish hips
spell out my adventures
in the wars of birth.

I am borne into a new generation,
become one with those who know,
by their blood's baptism,
another code.

I do not envy those
perfect girls:
their bodies tell no tales
they become images
for other people's stories.

Alison Newall is currently a Ph.D. student at McGill University writing her thesis on Lucy Maud Montgomery. Her short story "Loons" has been published in Hejira.