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gender agenda**

Gender & post-Soviet discourses

Baltic Worlds special section

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Introduction. Gender and post-Soviet discourses

During the last decade, the debates about social transformations in post-Soviet countries have mainly been focused on whether these processes have come to an end, what kind of trajectory they have or had, and, most importantly, whether it is possible to place countries so different from one another under the common rubric “post-Soviet”.¹

In this issue, we take up this discussion using the framework of gender studies, providing the reader with the perspectives of researchers who have lived or worked in the “post-Soviet countries” and whose research is primarily concerned with that space.

The idea to put together this special Baltic Worlds section, “Gender and post-Soviet discourses”, was much inspired by a workshop with the same name that took place in May 2013 at Södertörn University.² We realized that despite the numerous academic and public discussions about gender transitions in the post-Soviet and, more broadly, post-communist and post-socialist space,³ there is an urgent need to reach a deeper understanding of the everyday discursive practices implicated in these changes. We follow the lead suggested by the prior research in this field by discussing the presence of history in what are now defined as “post” discourses, by talking about the Western-Eastern symbolic axis that runs through both the cultural space and the academic perspectives, and by highlighting the political nature of gender issues.

The Soviet past appears in the articles of this issue as a common denominator that apparently has never dissolved and now more and more visibly determines the present, defines the everyday in the most bizarre and unexpected forms. The authors highlight the different sides of

what Alexander Etkind and several other scholars refer to as the “conservative revolution” of the beginning of the 21st century.⁴ This revolution, as we see it, becomes the third one to mark the post-Soviet countries as belonging to the same space: although scholars have talked about the “post” countries in relation to the two modernist revolutions of the 20th century – the socialist/communist and the capitalist,⁵ – it is this third, *counter-revolution* that to a large extent forms the gender discourses of today. The main aim of this revolution, as we understand it, is to articulate the uniqueness of the given national culture by referring to “roots” and “origins”, which in many countries of the post-Soviet space in fact leads to a strengthening of traditionalism and patriarchy.⁶ Paradoxically, in this search for originality, the countries use the same technologies and tools as every other country and follow the global trend of establishing their “unique national identity”.

What does this tendency mean to the scholars focusing on gender issues? Our contributors show that gender today becomes not only a political issue, but also a political trigger. It becomes a platform for political domination and ideology mainstreaming as well as for political activism and engagement. Whether our authors talk about online political activists, the portrayal of Fathers of the Nation, or comic books and education, gender appears as a conjunction between the past and the present, where the established present seems not to recognize the past, but at the same time eagerly reenacts the past discourses of domination.

These discourses of domination are

constructed through various dimensions. In this issue, we try to provide an intersectional perspective on gender in post-Soviet discourses in which the contributors focus not only on gender, but also on class, ethnic, racial, and religious background, and on sexual identity.

The issue opens with an article by Madina Tlostanova, who looks at the importance and specificity of the geopolitical positioning in postsocialist gendered discourses using Central Asia and the Caucasus as graphic examples and highlighting the intersection of the postsocialist and the postcolonial.

Ilkin Mehrabov continues the discussion on the southern Caucasus by addressing the political challenges and threats to female online activists and journalists in Azerbaijan. His main focus is on state *surveillance apparatuses*, both online and offline.

The role of the state in defining the limits of women’s presence in the public sphere and public space is also discussed by Ekaterina Vikulina, who turns to the political meanings behind the prevalence of paternalistic images in Soviet and post-Soviet photography.

Daria Dmitrieva continues the discussion of representations of masculinity by turning to early post-Soviet comics, discovering that comic art becomes a form of sublimation of post-Soviet trauma.

Despite the evident need for research in the subfield of masculinity studies, thanks to Tetyana Bureychak’s thorough overview, we learn that masculinity studies have not succeeded in becoming established as an academic discipline in Ukraine – nor in the rest of the post-Soviet countries.

Rounding out the issue is Yulia Grad-

skova’s essay, which reveals some of the possible reasons behind the problems we have highlighted in this introduction, one of which is gender equality being “lost in translation” into national languages and local discourses.

We are delighted that this issue appears as a forum for both emerging and established scholars who are engaging in an exciting discussion about gender and post-Soviet discourses. ✕

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- 1 The post-Soviet space includes 15 independent states that emerged from the Soviet Union after its dissolution in 1991. The 15 states form five groups: the Russian Federation (recognized as a successor state to the USSR); the Baltic states – Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania; East-Central Europe – Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova; the Southern Caucasus – Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia; and Central Asia – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.
- 2 The workshop “Gender and Post-Soviet Discourses” was sponsored by the Centre for Baltic and East European Studies (CBEEES) at Södertörn University and by the academic network CERES (<http://www.helsinki.fi/aleksanteri/ceres/>).
- 3 See e.g. Ildikó Asztalos Morell et al., eds., *Gender Transitions in Russia and Eastern Europe* (Gdansk: Gondolin, 2005); Natalia Stepanova and Elena Kochkina, eds., *Gendernaya rekonstruktsiya politicheskikh sistem* [Gender reconstruction of political systems], (Saint Petersburg: Aleteya, 2004); Alexandar Stulhofer and Theo Sandfort, eds., *Sexuality and Gender in Postcommunist Eastern*

Europe and Russia (New York: Haworth, 2005); Elena Gapova, Almira Usmanova, and Andrea Peto, eds., *Gendernye istorii Vostochnoi Evropy* [Gender histories of Eastern Europe] (Minsk: EHU, 2002), etc. The most recent publication is a special issue of the journal *Feminist Media Studies* on post-socialist femininities: see Nadia Kaneva, “Mediating Post-Socialist Femininities: Contested Histories and Visibilities”, *Feminist Media Studies* 15–1 (2015): 1–17, doi: 10.1080/14680777.2015.988389.

- 4 Alexander Etkind and Alexander Filippov, “Konservativnaya revoliutsiya: nezavershennaya epokha” [Conservative revolution: an unfinished era], *Gefter*, January 28, 2015, accessed February 17, 2015, <http://gefter.ru/archive/14142>.
- 5 Susanne Brandstadter, “Transitional Spaces: Postsocialism as a Cultural Process”, *Critique of Anthropology* 27–2 (2007): 131–145, doi: 10.1177/0308275X07076801.
- 6 Anna Temkina and Elena Zdravomyslova, “Gender’s Crooked Path: Feminism Confronts Russian Patriarchy”, *Current Sociology* 62–2 (2014): 253–270, doi: 10.1177/0011392113515566.

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Postcolonial post-Soviet trajectories

and intersectional coalitions

by Madina Tlostanova

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, many nations and ethnicities artificially collected under the umbrella of the Soviet empire – the so-called Second World of the Cold War era – have started their centrifugal movement away from the metropolis in quest of other vassals, partners, and zones of belonging and influence. This process has been going on for over two decades. Today, not only the CIS but also Russia itself with its remaining colonies (e.g., the Northern Caucasus) seems to have lost all of its cultural bonds, except for linguistic ones. There are no values or goals left to link the millions who had the misfortune of being born in this huge and uncontrollable territory. Yet a number of scholars still insist on the existence of some common post-Soviet imaginary, most probably doomed to be erased, museumized, and/or commercialized with the stage exit of the last generation of people formed in the USSR. This imaginary is grounded in a specific spatial history, generating unhomed subjects forced to survive in the doomed spatial-temporal localities of post-dependence: “the prison-bitched country where no repentance ever took place and people submissively forgave and forgot their humiliation”, according to Alexei German¹ and the portrayal in his disturbing film *Khrustalyov, My Car* (1998).

Post-Soviet centrifugal processes take place with varied success as courses change from the neoliberal West to Russia (often

involuntarily), and sometimes in yet another direction of de-Westernization. The European ex-colonies of the USSR are able to join Europe, albeit as poor cousins, whereas the situation of non-European ex-colonies is complicated by racial and religious othering. Made into the honorary Second World in the Soviet

era, today these people are rapidly slipping into the position of the global South, with its own human hierarchy, where the best places of the world proletariat have already been taken by the ex-colonies of the modern Western empires. Consequently, the non-European Soviet ex-colonies have no choice but to reproduce their doubly colonized status, or to build coalitions with de-Westernizing China, Malaysia, the Arab Emirates, or Turkey. The latter option does not automatically guarantee a better attitude on the part of the coalition partners, but it at least leaves behind the old Orientalism and progressivism that stalled relations with both Russia and the West. It is important to take into account the gaps between the official politics of the post-Soviet states and their neocolonial leaders, and the grass-roots social movements that are connected with common people’s efforts to survive, and that lead to the mass migration and diasporic existence of millions of dispensable lives.

In this context it is important to take account the *politics of location in knowledge production*, in Adrienne Rich’s words,² the situated knowledges, as Donna Harraway

abstract

The article considers the centrifugal trajectories of the postsocialist world in the direction of the secondary Europe and the global South as seen through the prism of gender relations and at the intersection of the postsocialist and the postcolonial. The author focuses on the importance and specificity of geopolitical positioning in postsocialist gendered discourses using Central Asia and the Caucasus as graphic examples. Some attention is given to the analysis of border tricksterism as it is expressed in gender theorizing coming from the non-European post-Soviet ex-colonies, and to the issue of the continuous invisibility of these theories and practices for the larger feminist frame – both Western and non-Western – which continues to hinder successful coalitions.

KEY WORDS: postcolonial condition, post-Soviet women, intersectionality, feminist coalitions, geopolitics of knowledge.



Scene from Alexei German’s film *Khrustalyov, My Car*.

would have it,³ the “small stories, situated in specific local contexts” according to Nina Lykke,⁴ or the *pluriversity* in the formulation of the decolonial option.⁵ Pluriversity is a coexistence of many interacting and intersecting non-abstract universals grounded in the geopolitics and body politics of knowledge, being, and perception, in a conscious effort to reconnect theory and theorists with experience, with those who are discriminated against, to reinstate the experiential nature of knowledge and the origin of all theory in the human lifeworld and experience.

The decolonial option stresses our inescapable localization in the colonial matrix of power that cannot be observed from the outside – from the convenient vantage point of God or Reason – as the products of the colonial matrix promoted through its enunciators. They present their option as an abstract universal, hiding its locality and appropriating diversity in the form of its control by universal epistemology as demonstrated in numerous multicultural projects. In the pluriversal world where many worlds coexist and interact, countless options communicate with one another instead of promoting one abstract universal good for all. These options intersect, sometimes inside our bodies and selves, and each locus of intersection is an option. Decolonial pluriversity is parallel to intersectionality, but operates on a different level: its target is not the constellation of race, gender, class, and other power asymmetries, but rather the aberration of the universal as such.

The geopolitics of knowledge and the post-Soviet women

Geopolitical positioning has long been an important element of intersectionality as exemplified in women of color and transnational feminisms. Nina Lykke points out that the analysis of geopolitical positioning “requires a self-reflexive stance on global/

local locations not only in relation to crude and rather abstract categories such as East-West/North-South [...] it is necessary to engage in much more detailed reflections on unequal relations between nations, regions, mother tongues, and so on and to analyze the ways in which they generate various kinds of problematic methodological particularisms or universalisms in research”.⁶

THIS OBSERVATION is particularly true in relation to the experience of the post-Soviet women who are today either aspiring, in the endless catching-up logic, the status of the second-rate gendered subjects of the First World, or sliding from the position of the honorary Second World to that of the global South, marked by the secondary colonial difference and acting as the subalterns of the subaltern empire Russia, multiplying the numbers of dispensable lives unable and unwilling to fully share the postcolonial stance. From the specific Soviet modernity with its own colonialism, we shift to the situation of global, neoliberal colonialism, equalizing in a way the ex-colonizers with the ex-subalterns, casting us all out from modernity and making the postsocialist subject silent and invisible,⁷ yet able to retain the internal power asymmetries and discriminations not always visible to the external observer. For instance, the post-Soviet racial taxonomy and normalized epistemic asymmetry still tags everyone with Asian or Caucasus blood as underdeveloped and arrested “savages” unfit to theorize any experience including our own (particularly if this experience includes an obvious racial and gender discrimination on the part of the Russian state and the Russian majority in power) and dictates that the non-European, post-Soviet gender theorists occupy the position of native informants and diligent pupils of their Russian and/or European teachers.

An Egyptian writer and gender activist, Nawal el Saadawi, detected a similar syndrome in a Wellesley conference on women



Azerbaijani Soviet poster.



Shah-i-Zinda, Samarkand, local girls displaying Central Asian hijab fashion.

PHOTO: ARIAN ZWIEGERS/FLOKOR

and development: “The well-meaning US organizers . . . had no idea how maternalistic and condescending they sounded, in both words and attitudes, when they read papers or talked at the participants, telling them how to behave For the US organizers, power was not the issue, because they had it, and thought it normal for us not to participate” The organizers had the capacity to turn the Third World women’s protests into “personal defects”.⁸ Something similar is to be found in the post-Soviet space with its silences and omissions, unspoken resentment and continued scorn between Russian and non-Russian, secondary European and non-European gendered subjects. These non-Europeans are often even less aware of their position and the discrimination they face, and less ready to formulate a specific stance, than European women of color are. This is an indicator of thoroughly colonized minds and bodies marked by one maniacal urge to become a peripheral part of someone else’s modernity, even at the expense of their own kind. These people, in contrast to many honest and open-minded European feminists, are not really expressing any interest in coalitions with the Orientalized gendered Others, but instead stick to their own agendas which belatedly repeat and reproduce the Western ones. In the case of post-Soviet inequalities, intersectionality can hardly act as a reconciling device in the way it can in Europe, where anti-racist gendered migrants claim it as a weapon and a way of identifying the ongoing conflict with European white feminism.⁹

THE LOCAL HISTORY of the non-European ex-colonies of the Russian empire and the USSR – the Janus-faced second-class empire, marked by external imperial difference and double colonial difference USSR – generates specific multilayered identifications, modes of survival and re-existence, and intersectional tangents growing out of the multiple dependencies on modernity/coloniality in its Western, and also its insecure Russian and

Soviet forms, as well as complex and often contradictory religious and ethnic cultural configurations. They disturb the simple binarism of the modern/colonial gender matrix as they multiply and distort many familiar categories and discourses such as Orientalism, racism, Eurocentrism, imperial and colonial masculinity and femininity, and colonial gender tricksterism evolving in the domain of individual agency and social change. The specific Soviet experience of an *other* emancipation and efforts to create its own New Woman in her metropolitan and colonial versions, grounded in the double standards and reticence that was typical of the whole Soviet system, places the gendered subjects of the ex-colonies of Russia and the USSR into conditions that are not quite postcolonial and not entirely postsocialist, and that cannot be attributed to race, ethnicity, or religion, nor to ideology and class. Yet in the continuing situation of epistemic power asymmetries, the nuances of the Soviet gender trajectories, to say nothing of the presocialist local genealogies of women’s struggles and resistance, tend to be erased.

MARIA MATSUDA URGES us to “ask the other question” in order to avoid the inevitable blind spots in intersectional investigations. She suggests that we include categories that would not appear obvious in this or that particular study, which of course enriches the complexity and subtlety of intersectional analysis: “When I see something that looks racist, I ask, ‘Where is the patriarchy in this?’ When I see something that looks sexist, I ask, ‘Where is the heterosexism in this?’ When I see something that looks homophobic, I ask, ‘Where is the class interest in this?’”¹⁰ This is crucial for any effort to understand the situation of non-Russian women from the former and present colonies of the Russian/Soviet empire. A good example in this case is the flat and frozen interpretation of veiled Caucasus women exclusively through terrorist discourses as black widows and potential suicide bombers.

The hijab and the trajectory of Central Asian women

For a limited number of Caucasus women, the hijab indeed becomes a sign of political-cum-religious identity, as in other Muslim locales in the world. Yet there is a larger group of women in the Caucasus who choose to veil themselves for reasons other than religion or politics. In this case we find a specific intersection of class, religion, and ethnicity which does not easily yield to the simple “but for” logic. These women obviously experience discrimination when they travel to Moscow or other predominantly Russian cities. Yet in their native republics they are often marked by the hijab as possessing a certain social status, not anything religious as such, but rather a piety whose Muslim interpretation mingles with the ethnic-national traditional ethical codes. These are mostly middle class women for whom it is prestigious to cover themselves. (In some cases, it is a necessary condition for a good marriage; in other, it is a play on a stylized archaization, the construction of a *halal* self, similar to subcultural youth identities, behind which often stands an urge to become rooted in an essentialized or escapist identity.) Ostracized as potential terrorists in the Moscow metro, in their own world they would show a condescending attitude to those women who cannot afford a good, expensive hijab and who simply must work to support their families. Discriminated against in one world, they themselves become discriminators in a different world. This logic was pointed out by Patricia Hill Collins, who wrote that in the matrix of domination there are no pure victims or oppressors and the oppressed often becomes the oppressor.¹¹ This new Caucasian hijab fashion defies most other interpretations of the hijab because there was and is no traditional, unmarked hijab here. There are only political and boutique versions of hijab in the modern Caucasus since veiling has come only recently, and from the outside, to this region – one of secondary and late Islamization, where Islam is hybridized with local polytheistic and often feminocratic cosmologies.

BY CONTRAST, the Central Asians are universally seen in modern-day Russia as dirt poor, and are placed lowest on the scale of humanity, to the point of erasing the gender markers so that the so-called illegal women migrants have a status akin to that of the African-American slaves: these women are seen as biologically female, yet culturally and socially subhuman. These bare lives are used and abused in compulsory long workdays, sexual trafficking, and as producers of children to be sold as live goods. The religious factor is completely erased from their othering, since religion is a cultural marker and these dispensable lives are located outside culture. They were born and made to exist in the grip of global colonialism in its different versions – the neo-colonial world of Central Asia and the post-imperial (and also neocolonial) world of metropolitan Moscow. Any serious intersectional study would have to take into account the diachronic element of these women’s positioning – their trajectory towards today’s condition, which is different from that of African-American women or Latinas in the US. In some cases clearly deprived

of their social status and rights by Russian and Soviet colonization, and in other cases first discriminated against by their own ethnic national and religious environments and later accorded a number of rights thanks to colonization and Sovietization, the ancestors of these future post-Soviet slaves traveled the forced path of Soviet modernism with its double standards, racism, othering, violent emancipation, and low glass ceilings in relation to all non-Russian women, but also with such socialist advantages as universal education (although Russified, and not always of good quality), minimal social guarantees within the Soviet colonial mono-economic model, limited vertical social mobility for national minorities in accordance with Soviet multiculturalism, and honorary membership in the Second World. It is crucial to keep this in mind when tracing the trajectory of Central Asian women towards their contemporary condition of neo-slavery and their firm placement in the global South, without a share in its political agency and epistemology.

There is one more group of Caucasus and Central Asian women that does not fit the usual discrimination dichotomies. I define them as tricksters and border dwellers who switch codes and identities as a way to survive and resist. These people often belong to the middle-class educated strata of the post-Soviet societies; they are the postcolonial products of the Soviet multicultural policies who often grew up in the metropolis, and, through their linguistic and cultural competence, can easily belong to mainstream society, yet are constantly reminded of their inferiority and eventually choose not to assimilate. Such people experience discrimination in subtler but no less profound ways. Moreover, their assumed privileges, in comparison with those of illegal migrant slaves, turn into more sophisticated derogations on academic, cultural, and intellectual levels. The very existence of this group of people is not convenient to many Western and Russian researchers as it destroys their progressivist taxonomy, which is grounded in Orientalist stereotypes, and pigeonholes Central Asian and Caucasus women as stereotypical downtrodden and retarded Orientals/Muslims, or as Soviet modernized party activists and Westernized emancipated gendered subjects – invariably rejecting their culture to become New Women according to the standards of Soviet or Western mod-



Feminist graffiti in St Petersburg: “Cooking and fashion – that’s NOT freedom”.

PHOTO: QUINN DOMBROWSKI/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

ernism.¹² If Central Asian or Caucasus gender theorists are ever allowed into the international feminist club, it is usually in the capacity of meek apprentices of the Western gurus, who trade their independent thinking for a comfortable place in Western universities, and, despite experiencing Orientalism in their everyday academic lives, refuse to question the generally accepted Western scientific approaches, defending them as objective and uncontaminated by locality and/or ideology.

Postcolonial gender theorists mimicking Western feminism

The few existing investigations of gender issues in the non-European Soviet ex-colonies seldom depart from the West-centric, fundamentally Orientalist yardstick and universalized set of concepts and assumptions for analyzing non-Western gendered Others. Many Western specialists reproduce this unconsciously. Their Russian clones follow the incurable Russian penchant for mimicking the West and reproducing its theoretical paradigms applied to local material, yet at the same time retain their old role as mediators and translators of modernism into the non-European colonies, compensating for their own inferiority complex vis-à-vis the West in the persistent habit of teaching colonial Others how to be. The post-Soviet ex-colonial Others are the most promising group of researchers, having all the ingredients for an insightful analysis of their local histories and contemporary struggles. Yet they are too often victims of the old parochial epistemic regimes that assume that knowledge is produced in the West, or in a few exceptional cases, in Russia, and agree to play the role of native informants or diligent pupils of Western and/or Russian feminism, reproducing derivative discourses delegitimizing any previous models of gendered resistance.

The obvious reason for this is economic and institutional. The massive indoctrination with Western feminism, supported by grants and accompanied by particular ideological demands in the first post-Soviet years, resulted in the emergence of many gender centers and programs willing to start from scratch, as if there had been no Soviet history of gender struggles. Or, in some cases, the history was acknowledged, yet misinterpreted by the mostly metropolitan post-Soviet scholars utilizing Western approaches such as post-Lacanian psychoanalysis. This syndrome is obviously a manifestation of a new kind of mind-colonization, which has resulted in an unhealthy self-orientalizing and self-negation on the part of the ex-colonial Others¹³ that is hard to resolve.

TODAY, WHEN RUSSIA is rapidly turning into a fundamentalist police state, any type of feminism, and particularly the gendered forms of political and social activism, raise suspicions in the corridors of power. Practically all post-Soviet feminist organizations in Russia are now either banned or harassed as “foreign agents”. These unfavorable conditions further postpone the possibility of any intersectional coalitions and alliances. The minuscule islands of institutionalized academic gender studies and the exceedingly moderate and conciliatory state-supported gender institutions abstain with increasing frequency from any independent theorizing, preferring to collect statistical facts and apply someone else’s

methods to the analysis of mythologized post-Soviet reality.

In the Caucasus and Central Asia, Soviet modernism is replaced with either the Western progressive model or the peddling of nationalist discourses characteristic of young postcolonial nations that permit only specific ideas and propagandistic models of national culture, mentality, creativity, and religiosity. The complex indigenous cosmologies, epistemologies, ethics, and gender models discordant with modernism and colonialism are erased or negatively coded, even in the works of indigenous scholars, who are forced to buy their way into academia by conforming to Western mainstream gender research. So the tripartite scheme of the colonial and ex-colonial post-Soviet gendered Other persists: it sees women as forever climbing the stairs of modernity – from traditionalism through the Soviet half-traditional, half-modern model to the Western liberated female.¹⁴ In contrast with Chinese gender theorists, who refused to walk the path of universal feminism wearing Western shoes uncomfortable for their feet – for the simple reason that they had already walked a long way on their own path,¹⁵ gender discourses in peripheral Eurasia often remain in the grip of progressivism and developmentalism. It thus becomes all the more important for the ex-colonial, postsocialist gendered Others to get acquainted with some alternative non-Western approaches to gender, to be “indoctrinated” by the theorists and activists of the global South.

There is still little reciprocal interest between the ex-socialist postcolonial world and the global South. The global South was disappointed in the ex-socialist world, which failed to accomplish its expansionist mission. It also still codes “postsocialist” in ideological, not racial terms. As a result, gender activists are seldom ready to accept the equation between colonialism and socialism. However, this misunderstanding is already vanishing with the growth of contacts, dialog, and genuine interest on both sides, and a conscious refusal to follow the logic of modernism with its agonistic rivalry.

Intersectional coalitions, creolized theories, and transversal dialogues

By finding intersections in our experience and sensibilities, we can recreate a flexible gender discourse which would answer local logic and specific conditions, yet would be able to find resonance with other voices in the world. In order to do this, it is necessary to take a border pluritopic position that negotiates between modernity in its various forms and its internal and external Others. Such a strategic intersectionality allows different de-essentialized flexible and dynamic groups to understand each other in their mutual struggles. What is at work here is a horizontalized transversal networking of different local histories and sensibilities mobilized through a number of common yet pluriversal and open categories, such as colonialism or the postsocialist imaginary. As a result, we can replace the frozen categorical and negative intersectionality that often entraps the groups of women it focuses on in a situation of sealed otherness and victimhood, merely diagnosing their multiple oppressions, with a more positive resistant and re-existent stance of attempting to build an alternative world with no Others. Such a positive



Frontline defenders' view on the situation of NGOs in Russia.

intersectionality would develop in the direction of an open creolized theorizing as defined by Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih: “Creolized theory is open to vernacular grammars, methods, and lexicons [...] in the sense that it is a living practice that precedes yet calls for theorization while resisting ossification. Creolized theory enables unexpected comparisons and the use of different analytical tools”. It becomes “urgent to attempt theory in the many idioms and languages that are congruent with our diverse orientations as transnational producers of knowledge.”¹⁶

AN OPEN AND CRITICAL intersectionality helps to make a shift towards a more conscious agency, laying the groundwork for a future solidarity. Transversal crossings of activism, theorizing, and, often, contemporary art, are among the most effective tools in social and political struggles against multiple oppressions and in the creation of another world where many different worlds would coexist and communicate with one another in a positive and life-asserting intersectional way aimed at restoring human dignity and the right to be different but equal. It is necessary to further elaborate an open critical basis that would take into account the existing parallels between various echoing concepts and epistemic grounds of gender discourses and would find an interdisciplinary, or better yet, transdisciplinary language for expressing oppositional gendered being, thinking, and agency across the transcultural and transepistemic pluriversal loci. Then the post-Soviet non-European gendered Others can finally hope to exercise our right to keep our dignity and no longer plead to be accepted by the West, the global North, or Russia. ✖

Madina Tlostanova, professor of philosophy at the Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration, guest researcher at CBEEES, Södertörn University, in 2014.

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Gendered surveillance and media usage in post-Soviet space

The case of Azerbaijan

by Ilkin Mehrabov

The global magnum opus of smear campaigning against journalists happened in Azerbaijan when the sex video of the famous anti-corruption journalist Khadija Ismayilova was released on the Internet. Ismayilova, known for her critical investigative reporting, is a journalist associated with the Azerbaijani service of *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, where she frequently reports on the issues of misconduct, malfeasance, and unethical business dealings of government officials and bureaucrats. As she herself describes events in an interview given to *Ms.* magazine, which she conducted while in Los Angeles to receive the Courage in Journalism Award from the International Women's Media Foundation,

the government planted a video camera in my bedroom, and they filmed me when I was with my boyfriend. In Azerbaijan you are not supposed to have a boyfriend, and you are not supposed to have sex if you are not married. Honor killings are still a huge problem in Azerbaijan. I feel that was a calculation in taping me in my bedroom. They did it in the hopes that someone in my family would arrange to kill me after seeing it. So they blackmailed

me by sending me pictures from the footage and told me to behave or I would be defamed. And, well, I didn't behave. I made it public on my own and said I was being blackmailed.¹

Khadija Ismayilova's case is an illuminating example of how semi-authoritarian governments are engaging in disruptive moves against disagreeable journalists and political opponents based on the normative gender dynamics that exist in various socio-cultural contexts. Within this scope, this article is an attempt to explore the limits of gendered surveillance in Azerbaijan – that is, how and to what extent female activists and women journalists are monitored and affected by the surveillative apparatuses of the state, both online and offline. The article also tries, albeit very briefly, to investigate the gender dimension of Azerbaijani political activism and protest practices; and how the gender stereotypes, together with the more general problem of the digital gender gap, are being used by the state authorities to control public opinion. The conceptual framework of the article is based upon two main sources of information: the netnographic narrativization of Khadija Ismayilova's case in con-

abstract

This article is an attempt to explore the limits of gendered surveillance in Azerbaijan – that is, how and to what extent female activists and women journalists are monitored and affected by the surveillative apparatuses of the state, both online and offline. The article also very briefly examines the gender dimension of Azerbaijani political activism and protest practices. The questions of how gender stereotypes, together with the more general problem of the digital gender gap, are being used by the state authorities to control the public opinion are also addressed.

KEY WORDS: Gendered surveillance, surveillative apparatuses, Khadija Ismayilova, Azerbaijan.



PHOTO: YOUTH MEDIA CENTRE BAKU

Young protesters being detained by police after an unsanctioned protest in the center of Baku, October 2012.

junction with an electronic correspondence conducted with her on March 30, 2013; and quantitative analysis of Internet connectivity data in Azerbaijan, obtained from the Caucasus Research Resource Centers' *Caucasus Barometer 2011 Azerbaijan* survey.²

Gender and offline surveillative apparatuses in Azerbaijan

Azerbaijan currently ranks 177 among the 196 studied countries (Sweden and Norway head the list) in the *Freedom of the Press 2013* report of the Freedom House;³ it ranks 156 among the 179 countries in the Reporters without Borders' 2013 *World Press Freedom Index*;⁴ and, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists, is among the "top 10 worst jailers of journalists"⁵ in the world. But what happened to Khadija Ismayilova was extremely shocking even under the circumstances of a country where people are accustomed to frequent mistreatment and jailing of journalists. The blow was so low that, contrary to the blackmailers' expectations – those who had demanded that she "abandon her investigation of links between President Ilham Aliyev's family and lucrative building projects in Baku"⁶ – the journalist was fully backed by the whole society, to the point that even the "religious figures of the country [...] expressed their support"⁷ for her cause. According to Ismayilova, it was precisely because this support came from the "mosque communities and other conservatives", who are otherwise "usually among her critics",⁸ that her life was saved. As a result of the journalist's keen insistence in trying to uncover who was behind the attempt to blackmail her with the sex video, events unfolded in a way such

that "Ismayilova did not hide. Instead, she tracked the letter to a Moscow post office. She discovered curious wires inside her apartment and then found the phone company worker hired to install them"⁹ – and due to her investigations it was revealed that the camera was set up in her bedroom in July 2011, almost eight months before the blackmailing attempt took place. This incident caused a number of heated debates among the local and global human rights and media advocacy groups, as

Ismayilova is not the first Azerbaijani journalist to fall victim to such an attack. Other victims include editor-in-chief of "Azadliq" newspaper Ganimat Zahid, finance director Azer Ahmadov and reporters Natig Gulahmadoglu and Gan Tural. Video clips containing intimate scenes were posted on internet, in violation of the journalists' privacy. This pattern indicates that the Azerbaijani government, illegally deploying the technical and human resources of intelligence agencies, repeatedly organizes centralized smear campaigns against journalists who publish material critical of the government.¹⁰

All the people cited above, in a quotation taken from the Institute for Reporters' Freedom and Safety's declaration about the case, are male journalists, with the exception of Khadija Ismayilova, who so far is the only woman publicist to be targeted with such defamation and shaming campaign attempting to silence her critical reporting. According to Ismayilova herself¹¹ there are no other accounts of female journalists or activists who were

ever targeted in such ways or imprisoned¹² – except for the very few examples of women protesters being taken into short-term custody or put into jail for brief, token periods of time, like the five-day prison term of Gozel Bayramova, deputy head of the opposition Azerbaijani Popular Front Party. Yet, as the recent consecutive arrests of first Leyla Yunus,¹³ head of the Institute of Peace and Democracy, and human rights defender working on the issues of political prisoners; and then Khadija Ismayilova¹⁴ herself, also clearly indicate, national law enforcement agencies, and hence surveillative apparatuses, are rapidly shifting towards a more gender-neutral position. Now, when it comes to the defamation of political opponents, smear campaigns against disagreeable journalists, or the jailing of professionals with oppositional stances, there are no gender differences anymore, and women are targeted in exactly the same way as their male counterparts. The similar trait can be observed when skimming through recent years' Azerbaijani protest photos and videos as well, which are filled with disturbing imagery of women activists being verbally and physically harassed, emotionally abused, forcefully dragged away, or bloodily beaten by police officers, military personnel, security guards, civil agents and other representatives of various law enforcement agencies. So, in the real, offline world, women now started to be treated in the most brutal ways, paralleling the treatment of male dissidents and journalists – be it the close surveillance of their intimate lives or the outright violence against them. Such transformation invites a closer look at the situation of women activists in the online realm.

Between modernism and traditionalism: Azerbaijani women online

Despite the numerous claims that most of the imprisoned Azerbaijani male dissidents were closely monitored and detected

with pinpoint accuracy through their social media communications and usage – such as Jabbar Savalan, a 20-year-old student member of an oppositional youth organization, being taken into custody “after he posted on Facebook calling for a ‘Day of Rage’ in Freedom Square in Baku, echoing the calls for protest in the Middle East”¹⁵ – there is no known example of any female activist being specifically targeted for her online presence and activities. Based also on the thorough quantitative and qualitative analysis of 2003–2013 Azerbaijani offline and online protests – the subject of another study seeking to build a categorical map of protests in Azerbaijan, which is not reproduced here due to the space constraints¹⁶ – it can be argued that the surveillative apparatuses of Azerbaijan, aiming to monitor and keep under control Internet users' online media and social networking practices, are currently targeting male activists only, since there are no clear indicators that the women protesters are kept under the close online surveillance as well. It can be speculated with some confidence that the national surveillative apparatuses are not fully aimed at women yet; or, to be more precise, there is no persuasive evidence that the same measures – taken to prevent an online call for action from turning into an actual offline protest, as in the case of Jabbar Savalan – are being used against women within the online world. Several phenomena could explain this.

FIRST OF ALL, DESPITE ALL the secularization and modernization processes Azerbaijan has undergone during the Soviet era, it is still very much a traditionalist country, where most of the male politicians and bureaucrats put constant emphasis on family values and “women's primary identities as mothers and wives”¹⁷ – despite the fact that Azerbaijan has one of the highest ratios of female parliamentarians¹⁸ among post-Soviet countries. In this sense it is very hard to disagree with Manijeh Sabi's claim that “Azerbaijan society remains as a fortress for patriarchy”; it is

also not very easy to explain an “inconsistency between women's economic participation in the labor force and formal emancipation of women on the one hand and their apparently subservient and male-protected position on the other”.¹⁹ Suzanne Rothman, a Fulbright English Teaching Assistant based in Baku, observes that the “gender attitudes, specifically the way men interact with women in public, remain stuck in an anachronistic rut” behind the “façade of modernity” in Azerbaijan – with women constantly being “constrained by the preferences of their male relatives” and thus mostly remaining “locked in tradition-bound roles as mothers, wives, sisters, and daughters”.²⁰ Within the socio-cultural context of such a dominant patriarchy – where women are already heavily monitored and patronized within the course of everyday life through the normative gender codes established by their fathers, brothers and husbands – very little state effort is required for the additional monitoring of women's



Khadija Ismayilova received the prestigious Courage in Journalism Award from the International Women's Media Foundation (IWMF) in a 2012 Los Angeles ceremony.

journalist through a defamation campaign based on her private life was widely discussed, especially in the Facebook forums of religious women dissidents; and although many of these religious women did not approve of premarital sex at all, the plain fact that this most intimate moment was recorded and distributed through the Internet, with the putative governmental involvement, elicited open criticism and harsh condemnation. Such an expression of strong solidarity of religious women with Khadija Ismayilova's quest for justice might also explain – although this is pure speculation – the surprising support the journalist received from the religious communities in Azerbaijan. Circumstances like this point to an emerging possibility and potential for the formation of alternative online platforms, leading to a greater empowerment of women and gender equality through merging various, otherwise separate, female activist movements – especially given that so far there is no proof of online women dissidents being surveilled. Despite the currently low number of women connected to the Internet, there is a growing tendency among Azerbaijani women's organizations and female activists to build websites, start discussion forums, and establish Facebook groups – indicators of a healthy growth of Internet portals and milieus related to women's issues, which might foster a dialog and mutual understanding among women with different backgrounds. ✕

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Frequency of Internet use by respondent's sex (%)

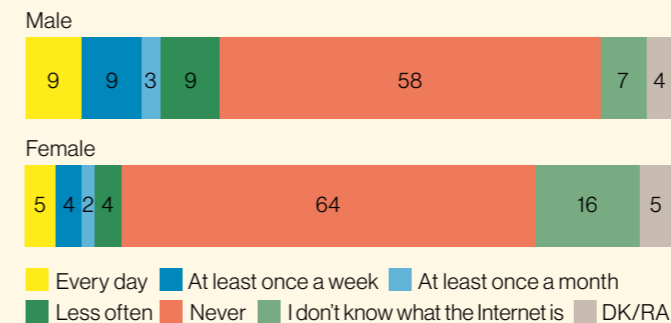


Figure 1: The distribution of Internet use by gender in Azerbaijan.²¹

online behavior and conduct. And most of the time – due to the country's extremely low Internet penetration – such state surveillance might not even be necessary, since, despite all the claims of government officials for establishing widespread and far-reaching Internet connectivity within Azerbaijan, analysis of actual numbers reveals gloomy picture, especially in relation to women's Internet usage.

As the figure provided above clearly shows, only 15% of 711 women respondents of Caucasus Research Resource Centers' *Caucasus Barometer 2011 Azerbaijan* survey use the Internet frequently, if at all, and an astonishing 80% either have never used it or do not even know what the Internet is. By combining Facebook's own Ads-selling program data with the World Bank's demographical information, Katy E. Pearce, assistant professor at the University of Washington, and one of the leading experts on information-communication technologies usage in South Caucasus, provides a much more elaborated and detailed analysis of Facebook usage,²² social media platform claimed to be carefully watched by the national law enforcement and intelligence agencies in Azerbaijan. According to Dr. Pearce's calculations, only 36% of Facebook users in Azerbaijan are women – whereas in neighboring Armenia the gender balance of users is fairly even; and in Georgia there are about 10% more women than men on Facebook. In this sense, the low number of people and households having an Internet connection, combined with the much lower percentage of women – compared with men – using the Internet in everyday life, might explain the lack of evidence of surveillance of online women activists.

Concluding remarks

Although the conditions of the Azerbaijani female activists depicted here might seem depressing – with women dissidents being surveilled and intimidated in the offline world because of their professional roles and oppositional positions, and the lack of women in the online realm – not everything is so gloomy. The case of Khadija Ismayilova being blackmailed with a sex video proved the emergence of something extraordinarily different in relation to the classic operational grounds of Azerbaijani online and offline female activism. The attempt to silence a woman

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Paternalistic images of power in Soviet photography

by Ekaterina Vikulina

abstract

The study was based on the power images of the Soviet period during seventy years, from the beginning to the end of the Soviet regime. The images of the leaders in the widely distributed press played an important part in shaping the ideological platform in the Soviet Union, including the regulation, control and support of a certain gender order. The representation of gender was studied in the subjects of pictures of the country's authorities and heroes. A significant role in power representations was given to the body, which is the basis of ideological norms and rules.

KEY WORDS: Representation, gender, power, Soviet photography.

The focus of this study is the gender aspect of Soviet power, its focus, and its normative status in mass media representations, particularly in magazines. Dynamics of change were traced over a period of seventy years, from the beginning of the Soviet regime to its end. A period of such great length was chosen in order to delineate the full range of changes that took place during the Soviet era, changes that nonetheless overlay a certain continuity in the way media functioned as a means of regulating, controlling, and supporting a gender order.

The images of leaders and officials were published on the front pages of Soviet magazines and served as a pattern of gender norms and bodily codes for the rest of the citizenry. These photos, which appeared in popular, widely distributed publications, played a significant role in shaping the ideological platform of the state. The visual rhetoric of those photos, the context of their emergence, and the techniques used in their production are considered to be one manifestation of power in Foucault's sense of the term.

The media is a space for biopolitics, a means of impacting on our sensuality and our bodies through images of popular culture. Power, politics, and the media are inseparably linked in the creation of "true values" for the masses, including forming representations of gender.

A photographer's selection of a frame is not accidental. He or she stops at one of the endless fragments of reality and makes a choice about its visual embodiment. This makes photos subjective, expressive of the author's opinion, but at the same time, it transmits existing public views about the subject. As Peter Burke noted, what images record "is not social reality so much as social illusions, not ordinary life but special performances", and that is why they offer unique evidence for the history of values or mentalities.²

Photography had a special role in representations of Soviet power. This medium had to certify a historical fact, to indicate the success of the socialist construct, to convince people who were assessing communism. Nevertheless, attitudes towards photography as a propaganda tool changed throughout the Soviet period. Bold experiments of the 1920s, marked by a fascination with sharp angles and the technique of photomontage, were replaced during the Stalin period by caution, a fear of uncontrolled information, which led to the retouching of many photographs, transforming them into something with the poses and gestures found in the fine arts.

In turn, the democratization of Khrushchev's image was closely related to the development of photography, the dissemination of amateur photography, and an extended arsenal of pictorial means and options. In the 1960s, photography was promoted as a modern technological medium and was used to propagandize the success of Soviet science, notably the space program.³

THE OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH presented here were to analyze how the country's leader appeared in the press, how images of power changed throughout the period, and what representations of power were valid. In addition to the analysis of iconographic schemes, it is important to see who is represented together with the leader in the pictures, his entourage. The image becomes paternalistic in relation to someone who is represented nearby. Hence considerable attention was paid to images of the "First Lady". In this article, the difference between representations of leaders is examined with regard to the relation of a main character to the secondary subjects in the picture (common people, a wife, etc.). A significant role in power representations was also given to the body, which is the basis of ideological norms and rules.

Because the official view of gender roles in Soviet photography was manifested most completely in magazines with wide readership, the present study is based on the material of popular Soviet magazines such as *Sovetskoe Foto* [Soviet Photo], *Ogoniok* [Little Flame], *SSSR na stroike* [USSR in Construction], *Sovetskii Sojuz* [Soviet Union], *Krestianka* [Woman farmer], *Rabotnitsa* [Woman worker], *Sovetskaia zhenshina* [Soviet Woman], *Fizkultura i sport* [Physical Culture and Sports], and *Zdorovie* [Health]. These periodicals are the most appropriate for the research thesis because they are mass-produced and because of their propagandistic function; but they are also important because of the greatly varying contexts in which images of politicians appeared. This gives us a wide spectrum of leaders' representations.



Images of revolutionary women from the magazine *Sovetskaia Zhenshina*. Nadezhda Krupskaya is the first one in this list.

The methods of semiotics and the approaches of visual and cultural studies are essential to this study. Feminist critiques of visual culture, with their attention to the construction of female and male images and to the political meaning of their circulation in media production, have special significance for this type of analysis. In addition, these concrete historical images were examined in the wider cultural and political context. The importance of such an approach has been noted by many authors.⁴

The representation of gender was studied with regard to the characters, events, scenes and settings of pictures in which authorities and heroes of the country appeared. Attention was given to the context of the image's publication (the type of magazine and the accompanying text), the choice of the genre (staged photography, reportage, official portrait), the artistic methods (composition, framing decisions) and the set of photographic codes (close-up, camera angle, distance from the subject) that allows us to see how the image was constructed. The presence or absence of certain iconographic schemes, such as traditional poses, was also noted.

In this analysis, I distinguish several modes of constructing a paternalistic image of power. First, there is the presence of certain iconographic schemes in pictures glorifying the figure of the leader. This was observed mainly in photos of the Stalin period, but it was also noted to some degree in shots of Lenin. This is not to suggest these schemes were not used in other periods, only to highlight the dominant trends. Second, the demonstration of the principle of familial relations through kissing and hugging is analyzed in the photography of the "Thaw". Finally, the image of the First Lady serves as a marker of gender attitudes in society and represents the female hypostasis of power. Photos of First Ladies from throughout the Soviet period are reviewed, as well as some from post-Soviet times, in order to emphasize the similarities and differences of the two epochs.



Members of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet and Council of Ministers of the Soviet Union published in *Ogonek* 32 (1966).

Iconography of the leader

As is known, Lenin firmly discouraged visual representations of living Bolsheviks, including himself, but the fact that the Monumental Propaganda project was his initiative "legitimized the practice of singling out individuals for heroization".⁵

The iconography of Vladimir Lenin was made up mainly of portraits and shots for longer news stories that emphasized the uniqueness, simplicity, and humanity of the political figure, and of his family photos.⁶ One of the most famous photographs of Lenin had been taken in January, 1918, by Moisei S. Nappel'baum.⁷ This first official portrait was reproduced countless times in magazines and newspapers. It shows a close up of the leader looking directly at the viewer. The close distance, the steadfast gaze, the play of light and shadow created the personification of a new kind of power, expressing Lenin's individuality, his unpretentiousness and his attention to other people. The clothes also accentuated the simplicity of the leader. Artists were guided by photos presenting Lenin wearing a suit, vest, tie, overcoat, and cap, which was considered informal attire in this period.⁸

Lenin was photographed with his comrades and with Red Army soldiers, peasants, and workers. Reportage shots from meetings stressed the exclusivity of his personality, but most of the photos showed the leader among others, equal to the people photographed. Nevertheless, certain gestures of the leader, such as his outstretched arm, and camera angles elevating his cutting figure at the podium, were subsequently used in artworks to create the canonical image.

Paternalistic traits can be seen not so much in the photos as in the photomontages of that time, in which Lenin was often presented as a larger-than-life figure raising his hand and pointing in the direction of the bright future. Such proportions show Lenin's

grandeur in relief against other people. The masses appeared in representations of Lenin after his death, and by the early 1930s "had become an indispensable ingredient" in posters featuring the leader.⁹

Such a representation of Lenin as the leader of the masses, was close to Stalin's iconography, which visually realized the metaphor of "the father of the nation". At the end of the twenties, Stalin was still portrayed together with his colleagues and the people, but the thirties tended to present him in the figure of the leader. At the beginning of the 1930s, Stalin became the Lenin of his day, and then some. A drawing of Stalin in profile with Lenin's profile behind him was published in *Pravda* in 1930; the next year *Bol'shevik* for the first time ranked Stalin together with Marx, Engels, and Lenin as a source of wisdom on materialist dialectics.¹⁰

When Stalin was portrayed together with Lenin, his image was usually placed on the right. Jan Plumper writes that in symbolism the left side means the beginning and the woman, and the right side – the end and the man. Thus Lenin always had to appear to the left of Stalin.¹¹

Another example of Stalin's magnification was to show his figure against a background of people and things much smaller than him. Perspectival distortion was widely used in Soviet posters. The most famous exponent of this technique is Gustav Klutis, a Latvian artist who worked with photomontage and who "forged a new path in the creative application of this device for the glorification of Stalin".¹²

Few people had the honor of being photographed with Stalin. Several children were among these exceptions, and served the symbolic generalization of a paternal guardianship over the nation. For example, in the magazine *USSR in Construction*, Stalin is seen applauding a happy, multinational group of children.¹³

Widely known are the pictures with the little Buryat girl Gelya Markizova in his arms. The Tajik girl Mamlakat Nahangova presents another variation on this theme. She was a schoolgirl who exceeded the norm for cotton picked, and Stalin personally presented her with an award in 1935.¹⁴ From the very beginning of the cult of Stalin, he was portrayed only with girls. The presence of girls emphasized the inaccessibility of the leader: the differences of sex and age expressed the distance between him and others.¹⁵

The body of the leader had a special status: "Accordingly, while the population dissolved into a single united hyperbody, the singular body of the Leader hypertrophied and multiplied".¹⁶ Paintings and photographs before the Thaw dealt primarily with the ideal body of the leader, transforming his physical features into the perfect figure of the national leader.

Changes in the ideological regime during the Thaw had profoundly affected various aspects of politics, including the representation of power. They are evident if we compare the pictures of Joseph Stalin and Nikita Khrushchev. Photography of the Thaw did not seek to embellish the image of the leader; it did not avoid ordinary physical details of the head of the state. The First Secretary of the Communist Party was represented as an ordinary human being. While the images of Lenin and Stalin were

V. Lenin and N. Krupskaya. *Sovetskaia Zhenshina* 3 (1970).

Indira Gandhi and Leonid Brezhnev in Moscow, 1976.



Mamie Eisenhower and Nikita Khrushchev in 1959.

The Gorbachev couple. *Sovetskaia Zhenshina* 3 (1991).

timeless (“He is always with us” and “Lenin lived, Lenin lives, Lenin will live”), the figure of Khrushchev was rooted in the present. Where Lenin’s expression “was serious, determined, thoughtful, or slightly ironic, but never jovial”,¹⁷ Khrushchev allowed himself to laugh, to smile broadly, and to show his emotions in other ways.

The image of power became prosaic and everyday. Periodicals did not gloss over the image of the head of state; they did not hide the features of his mediocre body.

COMPARED WITH THE STRICT, frozen photo portraits of Stalin, of which there were few,¹⁸ power during the Thaw was represented more informally. Images of Stalin were glorified by the angle of the composition and the lighting, but portraits of Khrushchev did without such expression and represented the uncomplicated appearance of a Soviet bureaucrat. His clothing emphasized the ordinariness of his appearance: a jacket and tie replaced the military uniform of the Generalissimo.

Khrushchev’s photos were published in great quantities on the pages of periodicals. He was often surrounded by people – Party members, workers, and others. Photographers often used wide-angle shots of the Party’s meetings and activities, capturing not only the leader, but also his entourage. This expedient also worked to “democratize” the image of power.

Hugs and kisses: the sensualization of power

Corporeal confirmation of the promulgated ideas was important to the authorities during the Thaw. A hug and a kiss became a representation of concern for the population of the country, of the granting of assistance to downtrodden people of Africa, or of gratitude for a mission fulfilled. Thus, in the pictures of the Thaw, a kiss and a hug acquired the meaning of a political act. The significance was contextual; it depended on whether the action took place during an official meeting, at a meeting with he-

roes of the country, or with representatives of a particular group.

“The era of kisses” began not with Leonid Brezhnev, as many think, but in the time of the Thaw. It was then that the authorities resorted to emotional expression, to warm gestures – whether a handshake or a hug. Power involved physical contact; it became sensual and tactile. Hugs became the norm at official meetings, as evidence of a trusting relationship, but also extended to Khrushchev’s meetings with ordinary people. The emphasis on sincerity during the period demanded the confirmation of feelings by appropriate gestures.

Khrushchev and his entourage confirmed agreements and cemented their friendship with numerous hugs and kisses. Others of the epoch tried to follow suit. Khrushchev pressed German Titov to his chest (“Fatherly Hug”)¹⁹; cosmonauts in turn threw themselves into each other’s arms (“Star Brothers”)²⁰ as well as those of family and friends (“Joy of the Meeting”).²¹ It is noteworthy that the titles of the pictures referred to family relationships.²² This emphasized warmth, but at the same time signified a hierarchy. The hugs duplicated in the names and captions of the photographs became the norm for visual and verbal expression.

“Parental” discourse was also reproduced directly by Valentina Tereshkova at a press conference in the mention of a “space brother” and Khrushchev’s “fatherlike” concern.²³ The photo “Good Luck and Happiness to the Discoverers of Stellar Roads!” by Vasily Peskov also demonstrates the “family ties” of the leader and cosmonauts.²⁴ Khrushchev is raising his glass to the health of the newlyweds, Valentina Tereshkova and Andrian Nikolayev. Khrushchev stands next to the bride and groom in a place normally occupied by their parents. Actually, “parental” power also lay in the fact that the marriage was arranged by the authorities as a propaganda move.

A similar expedient, in which love or marriage received a blessing by the intervention of higher authorities had long been known in Stalinist cinema.²⁵ Photography in this case repro-

duced the familiar story. A kiss and a hug in the Soviet photography of fifties and sixties belonged to the public space and often took place in front of witnesses. They were framed with people around, ordinary citizens or top government officials, which had the effect of verifying and confirming the event. There are similar situations in the Soviet cinema of that time.

Hugs also expressed political support for particular nations. Khrushchev embraced Fidel Castro and black young men with emphatic enthusiasm, and held a Burmese girl and a Russian boy (“Good Hands”).²⁶ He symbolized assistance to the oppressed African people by a welcoming gesture, gathering black students into his arms.²⁷ At the Sixth Youth Festival, fraternization took place among all nations, but special attention was given to guests from Africa. Support had to be demonstrated for these countries’ fight against colonialism.

These photos represented Khrushchev as the “father of the nations”, as a “friend” and a “brother”, thereby implying family relationships between peoples. This was a way to demonstrate the international nature of Soviet power and the “parental” tutelage of the Soviet state in relation to other nations. This indulgence in the form of “Helping Hands” produced the friendly image of the Other, building a hierarchy and ensuring the cultural hegemony of the socialist society.

The Thaw cultivated a sensual approach to the world. Displaying hugs and kisses, their permissibility or prohibition, depending on the context, created a sexual tension that attracted attention. But mostly it was a demonstration of familial relations.

Female hypostases of Soviet power: images of First Ladies

In his book *The Women’s Liberation Movement in Russia: Feminism, Nihilism, and Bolshevism*, Richard Stites points out that the Soviets never succeeded in matching educational and economic equality of the sexes with political equality on any level. From 1918 until 1924, Stasova was the only woman to appear of the

Central Committee; from 1924 to 1939 there were only four women members in the Central Committee (Nikolaeva, Artiukhina, Krupskaya, and Kalygina). Before 1956, no woman ever sat on the Politburo or the Presidium, the chief political bodies of the Party.²⁸ Nevertheless, despite their factual absence in the higher echelons of power, women were not excluded from the scope of power’s representation.

Lenin’s wife, Nadezhda Krupskaya, for example, always occupied a special place in the Soviet pantheon. She often appeared in the pictures of her high-ranking husband. A great deal of attention was given her in particular by the *Sovetskaia Zhenshina* magazines. The image of Krupskaya as a faithful friend and fellow member was to be an inspiration to millions of women. No female image appeared so close to power during the years that followed. None of the wives of later Soviet leaders – not Nina Khrushcheva nor Raisa Gorbacheva, nor the minister of culture Ekaterina Furtseva, nor the first woman cosmonaut Valentina Tereshkova, nor many others – could begin to approach the status of the “grandmother of the Russian Revolution”. The image of Lenin’s wife remained intact as the image of Lenin, whose only competition after his death was Stalin.

NEVERTHELESS, THE IMAGE of Krupskaya typically used was not an aesthetically pleasing one, one that would alleviate or hide physical imperfections. For the young Soviet country, that would look like a shameful rewriting of the past. The Nadezhda Krupskaya in these pictures was a “comrade in a skirt”, with minimal references to sexual identity.

For generations of Soviet people, Krupskaya was a model Communist. Materials about her appeared in the Soviet press regularly, from the early twenties to the late eighties.

Such attention can be explained partly by Lenin’s respectful attitude to his family circle, and, in particular, to Krupskaya, a fact noted by researchers.²⁹ But this issue was not limited to the personality of Lenin, but was rooted in the new ideology. Pre-

cisely in Lenin's era, the role of women in the political process was taken to be important. Maria Ulianova, Lenin's sister, and the Western communists Clara Zetkin and Rosa Luxemburg shared with Krupskaja the image of "flaming revolutionaries". Their portraits were set in honorable places in Soviet textbooks and magazines, but Krupskaja was always on the top of this "female list".³⁰

Stalinism accentuated the gender division, the polarized concepts of femininity and masculinity. Stalin's time continued to cultivate heroic revolutionaries, to glorify female workers, collective farmers, and delegates. However, in the higher echelons of power, there was no representation of women. In the shadow was also Nadezhda Alliluieva, Stalin's wife, whose image did not appear in the Soviet press.

The role of the First Lady changed with the Thaw. Nina Khrushcheva, who accompanied her husband on state visits, occupied a special place in relation to the higher echelons of power. For the first time, the wife of a Soviet leader was present in the pictures of official visits of the head of state. Khrushcheva was captured with her husband in a meeting with the Eisenhowers, and with Charles de Gaulle and Yvonne de Gaulle at the Élysée Palace. These photos placed Soviet leaders in a new context of high-society life.

In several pictures, Nina Khrushcheva was even shown without her husband. She was seen giving interviews to American journalists, shaking hands with children, talking with the chairman of the UN General Assembly, Victor Belaunde, communicating with young Frenchmen. Through these pictures, power acquired its feminine hypostasis. At the same time they emphasized the role of women in the Soviet Union and the importance of family ties by presenting the leader of the country as a good family man.

IN SOVIET PHOTOGRAPHS, women were represented as having power, mainly as delegates of the congress. Their role in the political life of the country was limited mainly to the declaration of women's rights in the Soviet Union, and to the struggle for peace. It was these issues that were most important at the World Congress of Women, for example, which took place in Moscow in 1963. However, although magazines wrote a great deal about the labor achievements of female workers and peasants, the Soviet era actually had created few recognizable figures of women in power.

These included the minister of culture Ekaterina Furtseva, the only woman to become a member of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the CPSU, and the cosmonaut Valentina Tereshkova. Both greeted the Soviet people from the tribune of the Mausoleum.

The most recognizable Soviet woman was Valentina Tereshkova. Her image played an important role in the representation of women's rights in the USSR. Tereshkova symbolized and validated the victory of socialism and the equality declared by the Constitution. She was an example for all Soviet women, because she functioned in such a difficult role on a par with men. After passing the physical and intellectual trials at the same level as



Hugs and kisses of Nikita Khrushchev: V. Egorov, "Nikita Khrushchev and Fidel Castro", *Sovetskoe Foto* 11 (1960). V. Smetanin, "Fatherly hug", *Sovetskoe Foto* 9 (1961).



men, Tereshkova proved the power of the "weaker sex". The first woman in space was a deputy and a member of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR and the Chairman of the Committee of Soviet Women until 1989. Her image became a symbol and guarantee of gender equality in the country, and her pictures appeared in the press on a regular basis right up until the end of the Soviet era.

The vast number of members of the Politburo was a visual sign of the stagnation period. Only portraits of the general secretary of the CPSU could compete with their numbers. All magazines were crowded with photographs of Brezhnev. Even during Stalin's cult of personality, there were not as many images of the leader as there were in the seventies. Brezhnev was everywhere: applauding from the tribune, shaking hands with workers, signing agreements at the negotiating table, receiving awards, saluting the people from the mausoleum. Pictures were staged of his speeches at the congresses, with the hall full of applauding delegates.

Leonid Ilyich Brezhnev was by no means the sole representation of power – his comrades in the Party also appeared in pictures, but no one else stood out from the faceless state apparatus. The other members of government constituted the background for the leader of the country. Among the women pictured next to Brezhnev were Indira Gandhi and Valentina Tereshkova, as well as ordinary Soviet female workers in reportage photos. Brezhnev's wife was not featured in pictures. Even in the compilation of the family archive, which was published by *Ogonek* on the occasion of his seventieth birthday, her pictures were absent.³¹

The Gorbachev couple clearly contrasted with the tradition of downplaying family ties, appearing together at official meetings and visits abroad. For Soviet citizens such behavior presented an unusual image of power, so it caused considerable misunder-



Boris Yeltsin with the Patriarch Aleksy II. Photo by Y. Feklistov, *Ogonek* 31–33 (1992).

standing and annoyance. This rejection was even discussed on the pages of *Sovetskaja Zhenshina*, which tried to rehabilitate Raisa Gorbacheva in the eyes of the public.³²

Even in the last moments of his reign, coming down the steps of the plane from Foros with his wife and daughter, Gorbachev was shown as a perfect family man.³³ But in the eyes of the public, this was not a positive characteristic, and it did not win him any points as a political leader – quite the contrary.

The post-Soviet postscript

At the beginning of the 1990s, Boris Yeltsin was portrayed in a crowd, among people, thereby embodying democratic values.³⁴ In another shot, with dozens of microphones focused on him, he presents a visual metaphor of publicity.³⁵ He was also shown drinking tea with the Patriarch – this meant that he respected tradition.³⁶ In general, the new government tried to surround itself with churchmen in order to express its continuity with the prerevolutionary past.

At the same time that the royal family was rehabilitated, there were publications about the family relationships of royal personages, and about the execution in Yekaterinburg.³⁷ Materials were accompanied by photographs of a married couple, the Tsesarevich, and the Grand Princesses. The declaration of prerevolutionary values and a call to go "back to the roots" that came after perestroika initiated a return to the patriarchal model.

After Raisa Gorbacheva, who had irritated her compatriots because of her various activities, the figure of the First Lady vanished into the shadows for a long time. Naina Yeltsina did not appear in the press. Her absence in the pictures of her husband indicated a change in the view of the social role of women: public and private were separated even more than before.

Since the election of Vladimir Putin, the First Lady has rarely

been seen in the media. In the words of the *Daily Beast*, during the second term of Putin's presidency, his wife was, in effect, "invisible".³⁸ The disappearance of Lyudmila Putina from the public sphere indicated that Putin had built his image ignoring the family context, as if he were an old bachelor.

The image of Superman – practicing judo, skiing, surfacing out of the deep sea with ancient amphoras – does not need a women's supplement, which would simply detract from the main character. The image is created simultaneously for all women in the country. Leadership is represented in all spheres and even beyond normal human limits. He is not only the head of state, the "father of the nations", but also the "king of beasts", the leader, quite literally, of a flock of cranes.

The reign of Dmitry Medvedev was described by many as a weakening of vertical power. It is symptomatic that the President's wife became a more powerful figure at this time. Thus, the active position of the First Lady is one of the most important markers of democratic tendencies. The historical process in Russia attests to this.

THE RELATIVE FREEDOM of the twenties, which created and glorified the image of the woman revolutionary in the faces of Krupskaja and Kolontai, was replaced by the patriarchy of Stalin's time, which passed under the shadow of the "father of nations". After Khrushchev's Thaw, which took Nina Khrushcheva from the home into the public sphere and placed Valentina Tereshkova on the same level as the men atop the Mausoleum, there came, with the cult of personality of Brezhnev, stagnation. The process of perestroika weakened the old gender mindsets, but not for long. With the post-Soviet "return to the origins", the patriarchal model came back again, reinforced by market relations.

Paternalism in its visual embodiment asserts itself through iconographic schemes which emphasize the role of the leader through the scale of his figure contrasted with others and depict him as the "father of nations", the leader of the masses, and their high patron. Gestures also play an important role, expressing trust relationships of the ruler and the people to approve the family character of their connection. Finally, the presence or the absence of the First Lady in power representations, as well as that of female politicians, also indicates the gender politics of the society. The paternalistic model determines the position of a monarch as a sole ruler, while the wife is reduced to at most a decorative function, to a symbol stripped of its power.

The study of images of power permits the revelation of their ideological character, and the detection of a paternalistic attitude and the degree of authoritarianism of a regime. It thereby helps to formulate a critical position towards power, because truly democratic reforms are possible only with a change of gender norms, where equality is a vaccination against the scourge of autocracy. ❌

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- 2 Peter Burke, *Eyewitnessing: The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence* (London: Reaktion Books, 2001), 28.
- 3 Susan E. Reid, “Photography in the Thaw”, *Art Journal* 53 No. 2 (1994): 33. The Soviet space program included not just space exploration but rocketry in general.
- 4 For an example, see Burke, *Eyewitnessing*, 187.
- 5 Victoria Bonnell, *Iconography of Power: Soviet Political Posters under Lenin and Stalin* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 139. Monumental art was proclaimed by Lenin as an important means for propagating revolutionary ideas.
- 6 Key elements in the aesthetics of Leniniana were simplicity and humanity: “Leniniana cultivated the image of Lenin as a simple and modest man whose outstretched arm projected a new type of power”. These attributes were later transferred to Stalin, with whom they acquired unprecedented proportions (Bonnell, *Iconography of Power*, 146).
- 7 Bonnell, *Iconography of Power*, 140.
- 8 Bonnell, *Iconography of Power*, 143.
- 9 Bonnell, *Iconography of Power*, 154.
- 10 Bonnell, *Iconography of Power*, 158.
- 11 Jan Plamper, *Alchemy of Power: The Stalin Cult in the Visual Arts* (Moscow: NLO, 2010), 110.
- 12 Bonnell, *Iconography of Power*, 163. One example is Klutskis’s 1936 poster “Kadry reshait vse”, in which Stalin is posed against a red background like Christ in many icons and surrounded by smiling men and women bearing flowers. Klutskis’s poster “K mirovomu oktiabriu” (1933) utilizes a perspectival distortion to aggrandize Lenin and Stalin, whose giant feet are positioned near crowds of very small people (Bonnell, *Iconography of Power*, 163, 166).
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- 14 [Photo], *Sovetskii soiuz* 5 (1953): 8.
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- 21 Gennady Kopusov, “Joy of meeting” [Photo], *Sovetskoe Foto* 10 (1962) 23–25.
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Going west or going back?

Searching for new male identity

by Daria Dmitrieva

“Russia, the year of 199... The state does not exist. There is no army.” With these words, the action and fantasy comic book *Through Blood and Suffering* begins. No army: the main structure that organized male identity has collapsed in the crisis of the 1990s. The great search for the post-Soviet male identity begins.

One of the symbolic forms in which this search took place was the comics. What answers can research into comics give us about male identity? Comics show and tell at the same time. This symbiosis creates a special type of narration – text and visual line complement each other, forcing the reader to perform two types of work – reading the text and reading the visual narration, which, without a doubt, requires a greater engagement by the reader, and allows the authors of comics to enlarge their expression.

In this paper, I will show how the comics of the publishing house Veles-V.A. produced symbolic forms that represent problems of masculine identity that existed in the 1990s in Russia.

abstract

The stereotype of the Soviet man was destroyed in the early 1990s. New forms of culture, such as comic books, tried to invent new male models. In 1991, a group of authors started to publish the comic magazine *Veles*, in which patterns of male identity were constructed. The comics expressed a form of sublimation of post war and post Soviet trauma. The new patterns drew inspiration from three areas: American superheroes, epic Slavic characters, and the heroes of the war in Afghanistan. The army and the Afghan experience became the cornerstone, on which the new understanding of the male identity in the new cultural environment was built.

KEY WORDS: Comics, postsoviet Russia, monsters, male identity, Veles.



The Mice Are Burying the Cat, a 1760s lubok print. It has been commonly thought that this plot is a caricature of Peter the Great’s burial.

When the authors of these comics created their images of heroes, they tried to find some exemplars and fundamental values on which to base them, instead of the broken idols of the USSR. Where did they search for them? How were their fears and hopes symbolized? In the end, what values did they find? I studied Russian comic art produced by the publishing house Veles-V.A. in Ekaterinburg, which existed from 1991 to 1998. Dur-

ing this period, seven issues of the magazine *Veles*, two issues of humor comics, and two issues of “The Collections of Comics” were published.

THE FIRST THREE RELEASES of the comic strips were published in 1991 on black-and-white newsprint. The issues were called “The Collection of Comics”. Starting in 1992, the issues began to be published in a magazine format, called *Veles*.

The authors were searching for models of their heroes in Western culture (Mazda, Batman, Conan, Spider-Man, and others), Slavic mythology, the Far East, the fantastic future, fairy tales, and the historical past. Connecting mythological and media modes creates a special type of imagery, the new heroes of the 1990s – New Slavs or “new Russians”. According to my estimations, 20% of the stories in all the Veles-V.A. issues are devoted to humorous topics, and the remaining 80% to heroic stories in different genres, mostly fantasy and fiction. Veles’s comics contain no stories centered on a female character; these stories are narrations by a man about a man in a situation of social crisis.

I argue that the search for a hero is very symptomatic of the Russian male consciousness of the 1990s. By examining comics by Veles-V.A., I will also show how a man of the 1990s thought of his body, his role in the family, his social status, and more: his place in the political system, his relations to authorities, his purpose, and his highest aim.

The roots of comic art in Russia

The tradition of comic art in Russia commences with primitivistic pictures, *lubok*. The peculiarity of *lubok* is that it involves a viewer – a reader – in a kind of game with socio-political signs.² In the beginning of the Soviet era, the same role is occasioned by the political poster. As Jose Alaniz writes,³ visual culture forms the central front in the war of ideas. The Proletkult's projects are the primary example of this. In the second half of the twentieth century, two currents of comic strip art were formed in the Soviet Union. The first are the dissident comics. Some people who had been subject to persecution shared their experience in visual form. The most striking example is *The Rock-Painting* by E. Kersnovskaya.⁴ Her notebooks, which she created in the Gulag, with comments, which she inserted later, is a story transferred to a visual form – “the evidence of the historical process”, as Walter Benjamin wrote.⁵ The second, official line of comic development in the USSR is children's comics. Everyone read the magazines *Funny Pictures* and *Murzilka* as a child. Here, the comic strip performs an entertaining and humorous function.

It can be concluded that the comics' themes were always either burning social issues, containing direct political statements, or merely childish.

The situation changed in the 1990s. Comic art began a new life in Russia. At the beginning of the post-Soviet period, comics were produced by keen enthusiasts, who knew Western comics and admired them. With the help of such an unexpected cultural form as comics, authors tried to embody in visual images their anticipation of a new life, new stories, new possibilities, and new identities.

The Veles-V.A. publishing house existed from 1991 to 1998; and published comics until 1995. It was not the only project of its kind: there was also, for example, the comic magazine *The Fly*⁶ in Ufa and the PIF publishing house in Yekaterinburg. All these were individual initiatives: people without experience and professional knowledge, but full of enthusiasm, began to draw and publish comics.

War, identity, masculinity, and comics

The publishing house was originally registered as a company of the Russian *Union of Afghan Veterans Veles-V.A.* – and this was no accident. The title *Structural unit Veles* was placed on the cov-



"Red blood". *Veles* no. 6, 1996.

er of the first issue. At the bottom of the page was the note, “By purchasing our products you are making a contribution to assistance work for disabled people and the families of the fallen”.

Initially, the publishing house was conceived as a patriotic project associated with veterans of Afghanistan. The editor-in-chief and manager of the project was an agent of the Air Force, Igor Ermakov. In 1985 to 1987, he had participated in combat operations in Afghanistan and received many military awards.

The Afghan War generation tried to create comics in post-Soviet Russia. They were not businessmen and knew nothing about marketing and the comics industry. Still, their work is very representative, because these authors' comics also became a sphere in which the fears and stress of 1990s could be sublimated. Afghanistan formed their values and it is not surprising that the topic of war and defense was extremely important to the publishers.

THE DISCOURSE OF WAR in the USSR spreads far beyond the phenomena directly involving the military and its activities. V. A. Sukovataya⁷ notes that war is a central topic in the Soviet public consciousness. Even the topic of labor is understood in terms of a military struggle, such as a “feat of labor” or a “battle for the harvest”. The feat on the battlefield is one of the central cultural scenes in the formation of masculinity. Its image on the screen served an ideological function in Soviet gender ideology, in which the role and the image of the soldier is somehow incorporated into other contemporary heroic roles and images of masculinity, whether as a miner or a builder of an underground railway, a steplejack, a communist, an engineer, or a seaman.

War increases collective masculine identity and forms a set of connections between the dominant masculinities, the hierarchies of homosocial power, and the politics of the male body. The discourse of protection of women and children designates the constancy of the protected. The enemy, which can also be constituted by the problem faced by labor (in the battle for the harvest, etc.), is always assigned by the state. This characterizes the Soviet masculine identity as opposed to that of the West.

What happens to the structure of “Who is protecting whom from what?” of Orwell's perpetual war during the period of political and social crisis of the early 1990s?

In 1991, with the nearly complete elimination of the regulatory function of authorities, all suppressed aggression and sexuality becomes free and is immediately directed towards

a great number of objects: at formerly protected women and children, at other men; autoaggression and a whole complex of phantasms appear – vague media representations consisting of indistinct images of an enemy. A Soviet man, unaccustomed to the new active role, starts to search for “his own war” or to create it artificially. The comics of the Veles-V.A. publishing house, in this regard, are very symptomatic.

Searching for the new masculinity: why?

We may examine the traumatic experience of the state's collapse in the two-part comic story *Through Blood and Suffering*. The plot is extremely vague; the full importance of what is happening is transmitted by the particular details. The country is experiencing a post-apocalyptic shock. The protagonist, Andrew, a soldier, is sitting at home doing the laundry. Suddenly he receives the order (it is not known from whom: the letter is slid under the door) to go to the forest and find a messenger there. The scene of Andrew's packing for the campaign is significant – originally, it is the classic Soviet cliché “Portrait of a Man with Vodka”: he sits at the table, shown full face, in front of him a bottle, a faceted glass, and sliced bread. We also observe a live grenade on the table, which indicates the status of a warrior. The next few shots involve him equipping himself in his uniform and grasping the weapon. The equipment of the hero is drawn in detail right up to his cap, which he wears in the manner of an action hero from an American movie.

Military attributes become the key to the restoration of the usual picture of the world of a Hero-Defender – the mission is received, he starts to fulfill it. Andrew goes to the forest, where he accidentally meets the family of the former university employee, Yura with his wife, son, and sister. The situation “women and children” is restored. Yura is a typical unemployed man of the 1990s, trying to adjust to the new capitalist way of life. This need to adjust, to change, is embodied in the following figure: at night it turns out that Yura and all his relatives are vampires, robots, and zombies, and at night they attack Andrew. Social transformation is shown as a process of physiological mutation. The topic of lycanthropy is found in practically all of the comics. In the comic book *Duel*,⁸ a lovely wife suddenly turns out to be a monster; in the fairy tale about Ivan, a peasant's son, a woman turns into mermaid; in the comic book *Veles* a warrior man turns out to be a woman; and so on.

These transformations indicate two important things: the fragility and instability of the familiar world and the enemy's image blurring and dissolving into everyday life.

Blurring the contours of the enemy leads to blurring the concepts of friend and foe: familiar relationships are being shaken. (An example is the comic book *Duel*: in the first frame, the hero is sitting with his wife drinking wine, and in a second frame, she becomes a zombie and tries to kill him.)

But let us come back to the comic book *Through Blood and Suffering*. The shaky, restored structure collapses. Andrew destroys everybody, leaving only the child Sergei alive, but nearly turned into a monster, half robot, half zombie.

Foreseeing trouble, Andrew still cannot kill Sergei; he takes him along instead. Here again is the logic of protection: a child needs to be protected. They fight together against savages and the communist helicopter, the pilot of which calls Andrew “the Democrat.” However, it is obvious that if there is no army, the tasks to be accomplished still seem vague. As a result, Sergei attacks Andrew and turns him into a vampire.

Andrew, in turn, attacks the messenger whom they have been going to see. Thus, the hero is transformed into something else entirely.

In this comic, the logic of the loss of identity of a Hero-Defender is sequentially presented: initially it is the providers of goals that disappear – state and army (a kind of totality), then the representation of the protected individual (“women and children” turn out to be monsters), then the enemy (anyone can be an enemy, even a child), then the task (the messenger becomes the victim), and then the hero himself (I'm a monster, not a military man).

BUT THE COMIC'S STORY does not end there. A rather non-trivial way out of this situation is offered as one more transformation happens. The boy, Sergei, returns to being a nude blond boy with a perfectly proportioned body, and caps off the triumph of the developing race, which appears through the sequential transformation “man-vampire-superman”. The pronounced physicality of the new Sergei bears emphasis. The political and economic situation in 1991 resulted in a change of moral ideals, involving most of all sexual liberation in the public

sphere. “Post-Soviet masculinity is trying at any cost to overcome the Soviet ‘trauma’ of asceticism and asexuality, and as a result, becomes a ‘neurotic masculinity’,” writes the professor and theorist in the field of gender studies V.A. Sukovataya.⁹ And in the image of the transformed Sergei, we see the new type of masculinity – a narcissistic masculinity. In *The Theory of Libido and Narcissism*, Freud¹⁰ speaks about secondary narcissism – numerous cases of delusions of grandeur and erotomania in



Through Blood and Suffering. 1992.

which the subject is the main protagonist. The individual is trying to reproduce his infancy, where there are not boundaries between subject and object. The *Veles* comics manifest the same effort.

Search in the Slavic mythology

The example is one of the central comic strips of the magazine – the serial comics story *Veles*.¹¹ The main character is a young man called Veles, the adopted son of the Slavic god Volos. He was brought up by his servants – pseudo-mythological persons – Pleshilo and Baba Yaga. Pleshilo is a small creature, who can perform magic if needed, and Baba Yaga is an old woman living in the forest. Vladimir Propp saw her as the guardian of the border between life and death, but in the comic, she is just the foster mother of the main hero.

Veles himself has a heroic, mythological body. The body of the hero has manifest gender characteristics – broad shoulders, powerful trunk, muscles in sharp relief, large stature. His face also has all the signs of masculinity – wide square jaw, broad nostrils, large eyebrows, high cheekbones. There are clear similarities between the hero of the *Veles* series and a savage man in the Western tradition such as Conan the Barbarian.¹² (Indeed, the Russian authors make no secret of their sympathies: they had already published a translated comic book about Conan in the second issue of the *Collection of comics* in 1992.)

IT IS INTERESTING that at a certain moment the hero Veles turns out to be naked and then for some time continues his exploits without clothes. Nudity is an important factor in the development of the hero, his achievement of excellence and of superhuman status. We have already seen this in the comic story *Through Blood and Suffering* in the updated image of Sergei.

The hero Veles fights various enemies. Originally, the purpose of the battle is to test himself. Having passed three tests (battles with a bear, with wolves, and with an eagle), Veles is given a task by his adoptive father Volos. The mission is extremely obscure – to get the “datura flower” (some kind of drug, with the help of which Almighty Volos will supposedly conquer all people – but this is unknown to the hero). Having received the task, the hero, without further questions, begins to execute it – it is a



Veles, no 5, 1994.

comfortable situation for him, as we have already seen. He has incredible strength and the ability to conjure. However, there is one condition – loving a woman will deprive the hero of strength.

IN GENERAL, IMAGES OF WOMEN are rare in the pages of these collections and only four types can be found: a friend or companion-in-arms, a forbidden sexual object, an enemy, and a monster. Often a woman who is initially attractive turns into an ugly monster, threatening the hero's life.

At a certain stage in the adventure, Veles meets a beautiful girl, Vesnyana, who attracts him, but the formidable Old Queen of the country tries to shift the hero's attention to herself. The hero turns both women down because he remembers that love can strip him of his strength. As a result, young Vesnyana is replaced by an older woman, an enemy, who in the end causes the loss of a young lover and an attack on the hero by a huge swarm of wasps. The hero cannot influence the events, so he does not respond to the rupture of relations with his beloved.

The comic's authors try to oppose the Soviet pattern of suppressed, injured masculinity to an ideal image, an “I-man” of flourishing physicality and sexuality. But it is still suppressed by two things: an unmotivated prohibition on sexual relations, and an unauthorized and unmotivated purpose. Both of these factors are introduced from the Soviet past and make him experience the trauma of his own masculinity again and again through the impossibility of realizing it in normal sexual relationships. The hero has to sublimate his strength in new exploits; he actually falls into an exclusive circle: he is lonely, and women and other men are excluded from the field of vision. Limited sexual-

ity with expressive physicality turns the hero's adventures into a process of continuous traumatic experiences.

The trauma returns in the form of fantasies of more and more gigantic enemies. All of them best the hero several times; they have dark threatening appearances: mammoths, dragons, snakes, monsters. . . .

Finally, the hero arrives at the place where the datura flower grows, but he cannot seize it: he does not have the strength to pull it out of the ground. The situation is resolved unexpectedly. The goddess of death Morshana appears, who uproots and gives a flower to the hero for no special reason, without any conditions, just because she liked him: “I liked you, pretty,

stupid!” she says and gives him a flower. This turn of events raises the question about the value of the flower and of the heroic deed of its acquisition. Indeed, a great deed is not important in itself, it is only important as the formal presence of a task and the activities involved in executing it.

We see the narcissistic masculinity of the hero with the perfect body who admires himself. He and his exploits form a single world where monsters are a required element. Any difficulty is resolved by external influence, as if that is the way things should be.

Searching in the West

Masculinity also develops, in a different way, as the adaptation of something foreign. Comics are a phenomenon of Western culture, and, of course, the authors try to adapt characters to create a model of masculine identity. Their adaptation of the superhero Batman¹³ is illustrative.

The author of the work is unknown; only one series of comics was released, and the adventures remained unfinished. Interestingly, Batman is used on several levels. First, there is the formal graphic level: Batman is painted in the style of the contemporary comics about this superhero; it is the Batman of the 1990s. The authors were graphics masters and knew contemporary American comics well, as indicated by how their use of the graphic organization of the panels to express the dynamic structure of the plot, the choice of foreshortenings, and the representation of the characters.¹⁴

Second, he is adapted as a hero: he is presented as a defender, although active and independent. Third, at the level of plot: Batman, as the American millionaire, decides to help the children of the Volga region, not with his millions, but by struggling against a maniac with an axe.

ALSO IN THE COLLECTIONS of *Veles-V.A.* are comics involving Conan the Barbarian, the Japanese-American hero Mazda, calques from multiple action films, and the agent Z (a detective comic character) – to name just a few. Around some Western heroes an original story is created – for example, the comic strip *Save the Earth*¹⁵ uses the stylistics and the heroics of *Star Wars*.

In fact, the comics of the early 1990s, the aim of which was to entertain teens and adults, were often created by direct transfer of the Western tradition to the Soviet sphere.



Batman. *Humor comics* no 1, 1992.

uncertainty of the Russian authors' search. None of the series achieves much development, or completeness.

Searching in the Soviet past

We see that the search for a hero – a model for the formation of a new type of masculinity – takes place in comics in several ways: in mythology, in Western popular culture, and in fictional epics. But the search in the recent Soviet past turns out to be the most productive.

The first issue of serial comics, *Red Blood*, became a sensation.¹⁶ The main character Ivan endures challenging trials and tribulations during the war in Afghanistan. He loses friends, and witnesses death, cowardice, and heroism. At home waiting for his girlfriend. . . . The authors narrate their experiences of the war in Afghanistan, and the comic book receives the greatest response, judging by letters reprinted from readers.

“Each generation has its own war – the Civil War, the Great Patriotic War, Afghanistan. . . .” says Ivan, the *Red Blood* comics' hero, to his girlfriend before his mobilization. Ivan reproduces the most important Soviet male identity: that of the warrior-defender. “War, as an experience of gender policy, is one of the key methods of forming the male/virile body,” the researcher Irina Novikova¹⁷ says.

The authors classify this comics as a documentary, inscribing it in the tradition of such works as *The Rock-Painting* by

Neither Batman nor other adapted characters can reduce the stress associated with the loss of male identity. The authors of these comics enthusiastically and expertly replicate the original stylistics of the prototype, but cannot develop an alien for their type of heroic character, cannot give him a fully developed life in the literary work.

The comics about Western heroes are episodic; they do not occupy a significant place in the pages of the issues, being rather a kind of literacy campaign in the culture of comics rather than a serious attempt to set the behavioral model of a Western hero before the Russian reader.

The appeal to a variety of Western heroes, from Conan to Batman, from Ninja Turtles to characters from *Star Wars*, shows the

Kersnovskaya, and the Western graphic novels about a Holocaust survivor *Maus*, by Art Spiegelman, and *Perspolis* by Marjan Satrapi. The purpose of works like this is to compensate for the absence of photos and documents – any visual fixation of the experience – and to create the author’s own version of events from the perspective of a sharp social criticism. According to Peter Burke,¹⁸ acts of “obvious–vision”, such as making documentary comics or photographs, are the moments that permit us to imagine the past and bring us face to face with history. Similar processes take place in the comic book *Red Blood* by Veles about the war in Afghanistan. The authors specifically point out that some of the images in the comics are based on actual photos, such as those depicting mutilated bodies of soldiers who have been tortured by the mujahedeen.

IN THE COMIC BOOK, Ivan’s strength, endurance, self-control, and ability to stand up for himself are often depicted. But more actively, the authors of the comic book unfold a discourse of the soldier’s code of honor and the importance of testing oneself “for heroism”. The first series of comics is dedicated to the period before departure for Afghanistan, which is particularly interesting.

Symptomatic is the scene in which the hero and his friends are walking through the streets of the city, and retirees are talking about them: “What have we come to? Look, young people wear everything American.” Indeed, the characters are dressed in the fashion of the time – skinny jeans, jackets, and so on. T-shirts and other types of shirts tightly cover their muscular chests. The girls passing by stare at them. The hero is understood as a real man – he gets approval from a woman, and the disapproving comments of the elderly only support the image of his manliness – he looks unmistakably like a man. Moreover, thanks to the remarks of old women we begin to sympathize sharply with the hero: these retirees do not know that the man they are criticizing has enlisted in the Air Force.

In the comics, we see that for its authors the Red Army is an ideal place for identity formation. The reminiscence about the oath of allegiance occupies the central place in the first chapter of the comic book as an event of paramount importance. The



Red Blood. Veles no. 1, 1992.

main character Ivan enlists in the army as a volunteer and specifically wants to get to Afghanistan to “test himself”.

FURTHER EVENTS UNFOLD around the hero’s service in Afghanistan, his military missions and Afghan fighters, the mujahedeen. A man’s body is a soldier’s body. At the level of the plot, the comic story gradually unfolds from the memory complex about the Soviet era to the chaos of war and captivity; however, the hero does not lose himself in it. This is no longer the post-apocalyptic chaos of the comic *Through Blood and Suffering*, and the enemy is not a fantastic monster, but one designated by the state: in the first issue the hero says that he must “fulfill his international duty in Afghanistan”.

The appeal to the topic of war symbolically restores the order connected with the structure of a warrior-defender,

and produces a powerful nostalgic impulse, forcing authors and readers, as early as 1993, to turn to the Soviet past for the reconstruction of male identity.

The hero remembers “his war”, and, following him, we encounter history.

According to Benjamin,¹⁹ modernity takes the image of destroyer of the present. The present is dissolved in the past, transformed into debris before the eyes of the astonished angel of history:

His face is turned towards the past. Where we see the appearance of a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe, which unceasingly piles rubble on top of rubble and hurls it before his feet. He would like to pause for a moment so fair . . . to awaken the dead and to piece together what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise, it has caught itself up in his wings and is so strong that the Angel can no longer close them. The storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the rubble-heap before him grows sky-high.

Red Blood takes us back to the point in the past, to the lost Paradise, when everything was right – there was a war and a sense of confidence in the reality of one’s own experience of being a man.

Conclusions: which identity, then?

The Veles-V.A. comics present a broad, complete coverage of the social problems of the transition to the post-Soviet period, and, in symbolic form, represent for the Russian reader a new form of entertaining comics. This form becomes not so much simply a guide to new values, but, to a greater extent, a mirror that reflects the complex of the loss of male identity that occurred after the collapse of the Soviet state system.

As we have seen, the “Hero-Defender” type of masculinity was shaped in the Soviet discourse, for which the most important structuring phenomenon is war. The entire reality of work and family life is also understood as a military situation, in which every man has a clearly defined place – he was the defender of “women-and-children” from an enemy assigned by the state.

The man still remains passive and depressed, he did not choose his goals, and in the job assigned him by the State and the Party, it is not his duty to try to achieve for himself and his family any kind of well-being, but rather to defend and protect.

Comics thus appear in the crisis period of rupture with the traditional Soviet masculinity and become the bearers of traces of this trauma. The authors of comics try to find new hero models, searching for them in Slavic mythology and in Western culture. In the second half of the 1990s, they produce the comic book *Red Blood*, which returns to the figure of the war, allowing the hero to reconstruct his identity nostalgically, and to survive the traumatic experience of the crisis of the 1990s. A man returns to his past and finds confidence in himself in the present.

Since the late 1990s, this process still has not been completed. Designing one’s own history, fantasizing about it, giving it additional values and meanings – this is one of the strongest trends in contemporary Russian culture. Symbolization of the experience of the past to overcome the crisis gave rise to the liquidation of historical reality as a whole. In its place, it creates a wonderful new past where it is possible to find the necessary identity – the patriarchal warrior – as if the 1990s had never happened. ❌

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Studies on men and masculinities in Ukraine

Dynamics of (under) Development

by Tetyana Bureychak

Over the past two decades, gender relations have become an issue of growing public and academic interest in many post-Soviet states. This can be clearly seen in the increase in gender studies publications, research, and dissertations, as well as in the introduction of gender studies courses in university curricula and the establishment of gender studies research centers. At the same time, the major focus of most of these projects has been on women, femininities, and sometimes sexualities, which are primarily discussed in relation to patriarchy and gender inequalities. Masculinities, meanwhile, remain on the fringe of academic discussion to date. This paper aims to discuss the underproblematization of men and masculinities in the post-Soviet context with a particular focus on Ukraine. It offers an overview of the dynamics and contextual peculiarities of the development of men and masculinities studies, questions their comparability with the “Western” history of this discipline, and discusses the potential of this field of studies in the post-Soviet context.

abstract

Despite the growing field of gender studies in the post-Soviet context, issues of men and masculinities remain on the fringe of academic interest. This paper discusses the underproblematization of men and masculinities in the post-Soviet context with a larger focus on Ukraine. It offers an overview of the dynamics and contextual peculiarities of the development of men and masculinities studies, questions their comparability with ‘Western’ history of this discipline, and discusses the potential of this field of study in the post-Soviet context.

KEY WORDS: men and masculinities studies, gender, post-Soviet context, Ukraine.

Gender studies in Western academia

Academic interest in the analysis of men and masculinities from a gender perspective is quite recent, not only in post-Soviet countries, but also in Anglo-Saxon countries (Australia, the US, and Great Britain), where this field of studies primarily emerged.¹ The explicit emergence of this field dates back only to the late 1970s. The initial interest in men and masculinities from a gender perspective is related to the second wave of feminism, as well as to other, rather mixed factors, such as gay liberation movements, the spread of both pro-feminist and antifeminist men’s rights organizations, growing public concerns with the changing roles of men, and debates on the crisis of masculinity. Despite the different agendas pursued by these initiatives – which ranged from criticizing and combating patriarchy to protecting men’s traditional roles – they contributed to the recognition of men’s gendered experience and questioned the concept of masculinity. Strengthening emancipatory movements and discourses related to gender and sexuality coincided with the development of gender, LGBT, queer, and men and masculinities studies in academia in North America and Europe. The pro-feminist men and masculinities studies aimed to contribute to a more critical analysis of men’s experiences, one that did not seek to empower men, but instead constituted an important exploration of gender power relations by looking at how power is reproduced, sustained, and normalized in relation to men. To emphasize this pro-feminist orientation of the contemporary research, the field is sometimes labeled “critical studies on men and masculinities”.²

The dominant analytical perspectives in men and masculinities studies have been substantially reconsidered since the late 1970s.³ The key emphasis of the first wave of studies on men and masculinities was to demonstrate the socially constructed nature of masculinity and its detrimental effects on men’s psy-

chological and physical well-being, but since then – as a result of the immense criticism this approach received – the focus has shifted to complex relations of masculinity and power. The second wave of men and masculinities studies (since the 1980s) emphasized the limitations of sex role theory and drew attention to pluralities of men’s experiences. Inspired by Gramsci’s theory of hegemony, R. W. Connell⁴ introduced the concept of hegemonic masculinity, which has become one of the most influential in the field.

The third wave of men and masculinities studies (since the two thousand aughts) has been inspired by post structuralism, intersectionality theories, and queer and postcolonial studies. It has deepened the focus of analysis on material and discursive gender power relations, and on linkages between social action, power, and fluid, contingent, and performative identity processes. Despite the growing recognition of cultural diversities and global and transnational processes, the Anglo-Saxon tradition continues to dominate men and masculinities studies.

Challenges of the post-Soviet context

The post-Soviet context represents dynamics of political, social, and gender transformations that are rather different from those found in Western Europe and North America. Although particular aspects of gender agendas in post-Soviet states may vary due to local political, economic, cultural, and religious situations, the Soviet heritage is one of the important common reference points in the process of establishing new gender hierarchies. It affects the current nation-building processes and visions of gender relations. One of the important peculiarities of some post-Soviet countries, including Ukraine, lies in the parallel coexistence of mutually exclusive gender agendas, i.e. gender-egalitarian and gender-traditional discourses. The former reflects the aspiration of the country to be seen as a part of Europe and to follow its democratic traditions. Ukraine is one of the few post-Soviet countries that has adopted a special law on equal rights and opportunities of women and men⁵ and has supported a range of state initiatives aimed at promoting gender equality. At the same time, the absence of effective mechanisms and efforts to enforce the legislation on gender equality, combined with regular sexist speeches by leading Ukrainian politicians, reveal the merely formal or declarative character of these legal initiatives. Despite the integration



Some of the books on men and masculinities studies published in the post-Soviet space: Sharon Bird and Sergei Zherebkin (eds.), *Naslazhdenie byt' muzhchinoi: Zapadnye teorii maskulinnosti i postssovetskie praktiki* [The pleasure of being a man: Western theories of masculinity and post-Soviet practices] (Saint Petersburg: Aleteya, 2008); Igor Kon, *Muzhchina v meniaiushchemsia mire* [A man in a changing world] (Moscow: Vremia, 2009); Tetyana Bureychak, *Sotsiologia maskulinnosti* [Sociology of masculinity], (Lviv: Magnolia, 2011).

of gender-egalitarian principles in current Ukrainian legislation, the dominant public discourses and practices remain patriarchal.

THE POPULARITY OF THE gender-traditional discourse is largely connected to resistance to the communist past, a resistance that has become vital for the framing of national identity in the post-Soviet Ukraine. According to the new national narratives, restoration of traditional gender relations is often presented as a way to revitalize the Ukrainian nation, to preserve the family, and to renew moral traditions that the Soviet system destroyed. These views have received particular support from the national media, as well as from political, religious, and non-governmental organizations. This tendency, also common in other postcommunist and postsocialist countries, is sometimes referred to as a “patriarchal renaissance”.⁶ The situation in recent years is particularly aggravated by the advent of “anti-gender organizations”, by the intensification of a self-styled “moral agenda”, and by legislative initiatives to ban abortion and “propaganda for homosexuality”.⁷ There has been a wide range of initiatives of far-right and religious groups aimed at the protection of traditional Christian values, the traditional family, and national identity. The form of these initiatives has varied from Internet attacks and trolling of organizations and persons promoting gender equality issues to the organization of massive street demonstrations (called “family carnivals”) and violent attacks against events and people connected with LGBT issues. The common discourse behind most

“UKRAINE IS ONE OF THE FEW POST-SOVIET COUNTRIES THAT HAS ADOPTED A SPECIAL LAW ON EQUAL RIGHTS AND OPPORTUNITIES OF WOMEN AND MEN.”

of these initiatives and attacks emphasizes corrupt morality, a weakening of the institution of the family, and the undermining of national traditions, all of which are seen as consequences of gender equality politics, feminism, and the visibility of the LGBT community.

Promoting pro-feminist gender studies in such conditions is rather challenging, as it goes against the dominant political and public discourses. Although women and gender studies are taught in many Ukrainian universities nowadays, the field is still not formally recognized. Even where courses on gender studies have been introduced, they often have a marginal status within the curriculum and are treated as unimportant and unserious, e.g., as an attempt to follow fashion, or as a mere diversion for the students. Apart from the symbolic devaluation of gender studies, some other common challenges for the development of this academic field are connected with the dearth of good academic resources in the Ukrainian and Russian languages, the inaccessibility of international academic databases and the most recent international scholarship in the field, and the limited number of translated works even by the classical gender studies and feminist writers. Although this situation has improved, the problem remains significant. All these challenges are highly relevant to men and masculinities studies.

GENDER STUDIES in the post-Soviet context originated from women's studies. Despite the broadening of the scope of problems discussed and the diversification of the research agenda of the humanities and social sciences by the recent addition of gender perspectives, the focus on women remains dominant in gender studies in Ukraine. An explicit academic interest in men and masculinities in the post-Soviet space has emerged predominantly in Russia in the early part of the past decade. In contrast to Anglo-Saxon history of men's studies, this interest was to a much smaller degree connected with grass-root activism and pro- or anti-feminist men's organizations. The interest originated within academia as a part of gender and women studies. The temporal dynamics of the academic development of research on men and masculinities in Russia is reflected in the publications on these issues.⁸ The first academic books on men and masculinities from a gender perspective were published at the beginning of the two thousand aughts. This publication process, however, was not sustained, and had significantly decreased by the end of the decade. Despite the peculiarities of the Ukrainian context, the similarities of the post-Soviet gender processes in Russia and Ukraine make these publications important and relevant resources for Ukrainian scholars.

Men and masculinities studies as an academic subject is still marginally represented in Ukrainian academia. Although many gender studies courses taught at the universities integrate discussion of masculinities, teaching

men and masculinities studies as a separate discipline is still uncommon. Only two universities have offered such courses up to now.⁹ Although the reception of these courses has been positive,¹⁰ this situation cannot be seen as representative. The fact that there are no similar courses indicates low interest in this area or challenges in its fulfillment, insufficient institutional support, and a lack of experts in the field.

Western theories and post-Soviet practices

The influence of the Anglo-Saxon theoretical traditions on the development of men and masculinities studies in the post-Soviet context is in evidence on at least two levels – terminological and theoretical. The Anglo-Saxon terminology in gender studies is widely applied and integrated in the vocabulary of post-Soviet gender studies. It has, in particular, resulted in the transliteration of the term “masculinity” and its validation as a category of gender analysis. This shows that it was easier to adopt what was, in the local context, a relatively value-free term, instead of redefining the semantically loaded term *muzhnist* (“masculinity” in Ukrainian).

Another influence of the Anglo-Saxon theoretical tradition on the post-Soviet men and masculinities studies is the application of Anglo-Saxon theories in the analysis of post-Soviet masculinities and men's experiences. The problematization of the applicability of the Western theoretical heritage to the post-Soviet context is not unique and has been discussed by gender studies scholars for a long time.¹¹ This discussion is also highly relevant to men and masculinities studies, which, due to its rather short history, has not developed any significant theoretical models that would be able to capture the peculiarities of the local masculinities. Given the insufficiency of local methodological tools, importing theoretical terms from the West becomes almost inevitable. To legitimize this practice, Igor Kon remarks that, since there is much more research on men and masculinities conducted in the West, it is likely that the quality of the research is higher. “If you have little milk, how can you get the cream?” he asks, metaphorically referring to the insufficiency and potentially lower quality of the local research on men and masculinities.¹² At the same time, the uncritical application of theoretical tools developed in a different context may be problematic, which is not commonly recognized by the post-Soviet scholars.

“THE ANGLO-SAXON TRADITION CONTINUES TO DOMINATE MEN AND MASCULINITIES STUDIES.”

ANALYSIS OF PUBLICATIONS on men and masculinities in Ukrainian academia gives a good picture of the content and accents of the research in this field. Most of them have been published since the second half of the two thousand aughts, which indicates the newness of interest in men and masculinities issues in Ukraine. The publications examine a wide range of problems, such as the

socialization of boys, discussed by Martsenyuk;¹³ fatherhood, by Koshulap¹⁴ and Martesnyuk;¹⁵ nationalism and masculinity, by Bureychak;¹⁶ Cossackhood as a contemporary model of masculinity and a historical practice, by Bureychak¹⁷ and Zhrebkin;¹⁸ dominant social roles of Ukrainian men, by Janey et al.;¹⁹ homeless men, by Riabchuk;²⁰ men and sports, by Bureychak;²¹ Martsenyuk, and Shvets;²² men as clients of social work, by Strelnyk;²³ representations of masculinities in Ukrainian literature, by Zagurskaya²⁴ and Matusiak;²⁵ and men's subcultures, by Hrymch.²⁶

Analysis of references to Anglo-Saxon theories in the works of Ukrainian scholars reveals the following common patterns: (a) key concepts in the field are mentioned without being followed by an explanation of their application in the research;²⁷ (b) Western theories are most commonly referenced without reflection on their relevance and applicability to the local context;²⁸ (c) Western theories are often taken for granted as appropriate and accurate with respect to the local context, and they are rarely questioned or modified.²⁹ One can thus observe a minimal critical perspective towards the application of the Western theoretical tools in the research of Ukrainian scholars. This situation can also be seen in frames of post-colonial theory as a kind of colonization of the mind,³⁰ where Western feminist theories are perceived as normative points of references regardless of context.

The potential of studies in the post-Soviet context

Apart from many structural problems that hinder the development of critical research on men and masculinities, an important reason for the low interest in the studies on men and masculinities in the post-Soviet context is misunderstanding or undervaluation of their potential by gender studies scholars in Ukraine. The few attempts to include the discussion of men and masculinities in gender research and gender studies have been accomplished mostly as a way to compensate for the previous lack of interest in this subject, and as recognition that men, too, are gendered. Although these research motivations are important, they are not enough. Attempts to counter the strengthening of the patriarchal gender order in many post-Soviet states should not ignore the critical potential of research on men and masculinities. Problematizing and counteracting the power hierarchy, violence, discrimination, and symbolic exclusion cannot be effective if it is focused only on the experiences of people traditionally categorized as vulnerable and oppressed. Since men or particular groups of men commonly benefit from patriarchal privileges, leaving men and masculinities issues unexplored means leaving those privileges unexamined, invisible, and hence unchanged. How this situation can be changed is an important question. It is doubtful that any significant and effective initiative for the promotion of studies on men and masculinities will be introduced at the political level in the near future. Thus, a likely positive scenario for promotion of this field can be fulfilled by strengthening individual scholarly initiatives, consolidating efforts by scholars through diverse academic projects,

and promoting crossdisciplinary and transdisciplinary gender studies and studies on men and masculinities. This would open up new possibilities for fruitful dialogs and joint research. Another important vector for contributing to greater visibility and institutionalization of men's studies is to transcend academic boundaries and establish closer cooperation between gender studies scholars and others involved in strengthening the pro-feminist agenda, e.g. grassroots organizations, the media, and policy makers.

Conclusions

The analysis of the development of the research interest in issues of men and masculinities provides evidence that this direction of studies has not yet become a legitimate and strategic component of gender studies in the post-Soviet context. The experience of Ukraine in this respect does not stand out, despite the fact that the political climate there is less conservative, at least on a formal level, than in many other post-Soviet states when it comes to the development of pro-feminist gender studies. The dominant discussion of gender relations and structures, inequalities and discrimination mostly focuses on their consequences for women as one of the most vulnerable groups. The knowledge about women thus remains knowledge of the “Other”, i.e., the group that is systematically discriminated against and that does not fit the norm. At the same time, the mechanisms by which certain social groups are empowered – for example, white middle and upper-class heterosexual Ukrainian men – the reproduction of the gender system which supports these gendered hierarchies, and the analysis of differences in men's experiences are still poorly explored. Although there have been some attempts to “add men” into gender analysis, so far these attempts have primarily been made in order to balance the gender perspective and demonstrate that gender is not only about women. Critical analysis and deconstruction of men's privileges, which could intellectually and politically invigorate post-Soviet gender studies, has not yet taken place. Pro-feminist men and masculinities studies in Ukraine is emerging under rather problematic anti-feminist ideological conditions. This, combined with limited local academic resources, limited access to international scholarship, and undervaluation of the critical potential of this field, further marginalizes this area of studies and makes developing it a tremendous challenge. ❌

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Translating “gender equality”

Northwestern Russia meets the global gender equality agenda

by Yulia Gradskova



The iconic Soviet statue of a male worker and a kolkhoz woman by Vera Mukhina symbolizes the ideal of equality under communism.

abstract

The article analyzes discourses and practices of gender equality as a part of Nordic cooperation with Northwestern Russia. I explore how ideas and institutions of gender equality were approached by those involved and what problems of “translation” were present. While some of the representatives of the local authorities in Northwestern Russia saw cooperation on gender equality as an opportunity to realize the new ideas, in most of the cases the Soviet-style interpretation of women’s issues as a part of “social problems” and protection of motherhood prevailed.

KEY WORDS: gender equality, Northwestern Russia, Nordic-Russian cooperation.

After the annexation of Crimea and the growing international isolation of Russia, it might be difficult to think about local politics in the Russian subregions¹ as having to accord with the international discourse on human rights, justice, or gender equality. However, in the more than 20 years during which Russia was classified as one of the “transitional” and “post-socialist” countries, it was assumed that Russian officials, members of city, subregional, and local elective bodies and civil servants of various categories and levels, would be aware of important international documents regarding global standards of governance, and would be expected to work towards the realization of such standards. Among the many international documents ratified by Russia were the UN’s Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)² and the ILO’s Workers with Family Responsibilities Convention (ratified in 1998). Together with the Russian Constitution – which preserved Article 19 from the Soviet Constitution on equal rights, freedoms, and equal opportunities for men and women – the international documents constituted the legal framework during the 1990s and 2000s for different activities and institutions seeking to support women’s rights and gender equality.³

THIS ARTICLE IS DEVOTED to the analysis of the discourses and practices connected to ideas and institutions of gender equality using the example of one of the regions of the Russian Federation, Northwestern Russia. I am interested in how the ideas and institutions of gender equality were approached locally, in particular, by the civil servants involved in the cooperative projects with Western (mainly Nordic) partners.

The article is the result of my participation in the project on gender equality politics in the Baltic Sea region⁴ and is based on documents and publications on gender equality in Russia as well as on the interviews with leaders of women’s organizations and civil servants in Northwestern Russia and organizers of Nordic-Russian cooperation. In order to protect my informants in the current hostile political climate with respect to gender equality and feminism in Russia, I refer to them by initials, and have changed some personal details.



Valentina Tereshkova at a plenary meeting of Soviet Women's Committee July 1968.

PHOTO: RIA NOVOSTI

Gender equality on the democracy agenda

The beginning of the political and economic transformation in Russia that started with perestroika and continued after the breakdown of the Soviet Union gave birth to a vital and diverse women's activism that was supported and encouraged through broader programs of support for civil society and women's rights.⁵ The Northwest of Russia played a special role in this process. It is the only region of Russia having a border with the EU (indeed with several EU countries, since 2004) and is the region closest to the northern part of Europe, which is known for its gender equality achievements. These factors contributed to the rapid development of the multilevel Nordic-Russian cooperation, where ideas of women's rights and women's political and civic participation played an important role.⁶

According to CP, one of the coordinators of cooperation with the Baltic countries and Russia on gender issues (in the Nordic Council of Ministers), from the beginning the Nordic organizations viewed the work against discrimination on the grounds of gender as very important.⁷ The Nordic cooperation partners (state departments as well as independent organizations) were encouraged to start working together with all public institutions in the ex-socialist countries that were ready to work for the protection of women's rights in one way or another.⁸ As for Russia, during the 1990s and early 2000s, the cooperation with the regional and local authorities and civil servants seemed to be very promising, in particular because of a substantial autonomy of subregions from the center as a result of the political reforms of the early 1990s. Indeed, the head of the subregion was usually elected to her/his post, while the subregional legislative body was responsible for some specific set of subregional laws. All of this allowed researchers and some politicians to look at the sub-

regions as unities that could be analyzed from the perspective of different political regimes.⁹ The relative autonomy of the subregional authorities was important for the plans to create some kind of local machinery for gender equality in Northwestern Russia in the process of cooperation with Nordic organizations and under the pressure of the local women's associations.

The cooperative activities that included the civil servants varied, including invitations to join the delegations from different subregions of Northwestern Russia to big international conferences, training for personnel and volunteers of the crisis centers, big yearly women's forums (such as the one in Karelia), and excursions for civil servants, leaders of women's organizations, gender researchers, ombuds, and other representatives of Russian society to the Nordic countries in order to observe how gender equality institutions function there.¹⁰ As is the case with other international and national organizations seeking to spread ideas on gender equality and women's rights, Nordic agencies and organizations saw distribution of knowledge about democracy, gender, and discrimination to be one of the important aims of cooperation. Indeed, the partners in Russian subregions were expected to learn about democratic citizenship and ways of defending equality of rights of all the citizens regardless of their gender and sexual identity.

THE DOCUMENTS PRODUCED in connection with the cooperative efforts mainly showed "best practices", and presented the Nordic countries as the gender equality experts. At the same time, the Nordic cooperation partners mostly ignored the fact that the Russian population was well familiar with the ideas of equality between men and women due to Soviet equality policies. For example, the President of the Nordic Council, Rannveig Gudmundsdottir, in her speech in St Petersburg in 2005, expressed the hope that one day Russia would experience the same level of

gender equality as women in the West: "Little by little, they [the Russian women] are also beginning to enjoy the same opportunities to play an active part in society and politics as women in the West have enjoyed for decades now".¹¹ Such an evaluation of the situation in Russia paved the way for joining the transnational feminist agenda on the promotion of women's rights in Russia and "unproblematically" making a connection between positive changes for women and the end of state socialism and the beginning of democratization. In the process of cooperation, the positive Nordic experience of gender equality and democracy had to be "translated into Russian" – linguistically but also in terms of more general social adaptation.¹² However, it was no easy task taking into account the Soviet history of the politics of "equality of women and men". For example, the "big campaigns" typical of feminist organizations in Western Europe did not work properly in the post-Soviet space: these campaigns were rather suspect to the extent that they were "too connected to the practices used during the period of state socialism".¹³ Furthermore, the Nordic model of gender equality was inseparable from the ideas of women's participation in wage labor and the goal of achieving the same economic status as men. However, as had been shown in the publications on cooperation with American feminist organizations, many women in Russia (as well as many women in other parts of the world), did not see work as "unproblematically liberatory",¹⁴ especially under current neoliberal trends.¹⁵

Obstacles and possibilities for gender equality

The collected interviews and documents show that the reactions of the local civil servants from the different levels of the subregional hierarchy to "gender equality" as a goal for cooperation were diverse. At the beginning, in the mid-1990s, the subregional and local authorities were rather surprised when confronted with the expectation that they support the NGOs working for gender equality and the prevention of discrimination on the grounds of gender. The story told to me by the head of the Gender Center in Karelia, LB, illustrates this very well.

When LB, after visiting the 1995 Beijing conference and a couple of other international meetings of Eastern European women supported by the Nordic Council of Ministers, returned to Petrozavodsk, Karelia, and established her organization there, she decided to start a cooperative effort with the subregional authorities. However, the local authorities were not ready for such cooperation, she recalled bitterly. Indeed, she had to explain to the representatives of the subregional government that "Russia has signed all these (international) documents on gender, thus (at the level of the region) they should be followed". The local civil servants did not trust her and wrote a letter to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Moscow asking for explanations with regard to the documents that were signed by the Russian state. According to LB, after receiving confirmation from Mos-

"HOWEVER, IT WAS NO EASY TASK TAKING INTO ACCOUNT THE SOVIET HISTORY OF THE POLITICS OF 'EQUALITY OF WOMEN AND MEN.'"

cow, and after numerous long discussions, the head of the local administration finally decided in 1998 to create the special commission dedicated to the situation of women in Karelia.¹⁶

Later on, following the tactics learned in the seminars on lobbying for women's issues that had been arranged as part of cooperative effort, LB and her colleagues attempted to get the female civil servants interested in women's NGOs, and women's rights. It was by no means easy, however:

We were trying to engage women from the government in our work. We were drinking with some of them, had dinner with the others, were helping to take care of others' children – so everybody had the possibility of getting involved.

In time, however, the civil servants from different regions and levels started to participate in the projects involving crisis centers, support for women's NGOs and the organization of seminars and workshops on different issues related to gender equality.¹⁷ My study on civil servants supports mainly the data received by several researchers with respect to the rapid growth of women's organizations in Russia: it was usually explained with the help of "window of opportunity" theories.¹⁸ Much like those NGO leaders who, in the situation where civil society activism became popular after the years of "stagnation" under late socialism, wanted to use their organizational skills and ideas related to the opportunity provided by grants to support new women's organizations, some of the civil servants were ready to take advantage of possibilities for cooperation in order to use their organizational skills and to bring some of those institutions that were functioning abroad into Russia and display their usefulness.

THE SUBREGION THAT probably achieved most in the way of the visibility of gender-related issues was the city of St Petersburg. That achievement was not only connected, most probably, to greater financial support from abroad, knowledge resources in the form of gender programs in several universities, and a large number of women's organizations passionately engaged in activism, but also can be explained by the active position of several civil servants who considered the implementation of gender equality to be important. One of them, X, was one of the key persons in the city "equality machinery" (consisting from three staff members).¹⁹ The last was centered on the Council for Coordination of Realization of the Gender Equality Policy created in 2004 in the St Petersburg's government. This Council was responsible

for the realization of the Statement for Advancement of Gender Equality; the last version of the statement (the planning up to 2015) was posted on the webpage of the state administration.²⁰ This statement is a unique document for the Northwest region and for Russia as a whole due to its direct use of "gender equality" in the text. In addition, the state-

ment, from a purely rhetorical standpoint, seems to be fully in accordance with UN and EU policy on gender equality; the main aims of the activities include the creation of the conditions for equal participation in decision making, equal rights, and equal treatment on the labor market, equal access to social protection and health care, prevention of gender related violence, and anti-discriminative measures in the sphere of education.

CONVERSATIONS WITH several experts, including representative of the St Petersburg office of the Nordic Council of Ministers (Norden) and C, an expert on gender from St Petersburg University, showed that a lot of the “invisible” work for the adoption of the statement and the beginning of its implementation had been possible to a large extent thanks to the personal efforts of X.²¹ In the early two-thousand aughts, X had been a student of the school for civil servants in St Petersburg, where she attended courses on gender, among other disciplines, prepared in coordination with the Moscow Center for Gender Studies.²² She had become interested in the problems of gender equality and in the application of theoretical knowledge to city policy. Thus, in this case international cooperation on issues of gender equality at the level of subregional government and authorities led to important achievements not least as a result of personal efforts on the part of a particular civil servant.

On the other hand, the success of this cooperative project could be seen as rather limited if we consider its merely declarative character. Subsequent developments of the situation around the statement indicate that the success of the creation of the local machinery was only temporary. Indeed, the composition, functions, and name of the city government’s department responsible for the realization of the statement were changed many times,²³ while progress towards the realization of the goals described in the document ceased for all intents and purposes around 2010.

The implementation of gender equality

The ideas and institutions of “gender equality” that were brought by the Nordic and other “Western” partners to Northwestern Russia were, as noted above, usually presented as components of the programs for the support of democracy and development. However, as the collected material shows, most of the local leaders of women’s organizations as well as civil servants involved in the gender equality programs had to translate these ideas and institutions into the local context. Such a contextualization often led to significant changes in the interpretations of goals and policies connected to the sphere of women’s rights and the improvement of the situation of women. As my informant C, the gender researcher and participant in the elaboration of the St Petersburg gender equality statement, conveyed to me, “gender” in the title of the regional program could be seen as a kind of neutral and un-

“THE WOMEN’S ORGANIZATIONS WERE DESCRIBED AS THOSE MAINLY DEALING WITH GIVING PRACTICAL HELP TO FAMILIES.”

problematic term: “It is something nice and not very clear, not like ‘women’ or ‘feminism’.

Indeed, many of my interviewees, even when discussing issues of rights and discrimination, were still focusing on social rights and their “gender” aspects. Thus, GM, the civil servant from Novgorod, was proud that, during the years of active cooperation with foreign countries, the gender researchers from the university actively cooperated with local authorities and influenced the policy documents: the program for improvement of the situation of women in the Novgorod subregion was adopted. Still, as IB, the leader of an organization of businesswomen closely involved with the local authorities, sees it, it was not exactly a program trying to increase equality:

But the focus was on the social problems. It was not about women’s education and transformation. It provided support for families with many children, the organization of holidays. . . . It was from 2001.²⁴

At the same time, IB mentioned financial problems as a significant impediment to the successful collaboration of women’s organizations and local authorities in following the Nordic way:

Concerning the Swedish experience, for example, we were trying to create these resource centers. We know how it should be. But nobody gave us money. In practice, we continue working as such a resource center – we give consultations, we help different women find places in different structures. But, as opposed to Sweden, there is no support for such resource centers that deal with women entrepreneurs, or women trying to participate in decision-making at a different level. And there (in Sweden), such organizations could get money for an office, for activities, some small salaries. We do not have anything like that.²⁵

H, a civil servant from St Petersburg positioned rather high in the local hierarchy, presented a narrative on the development of cooperation with Nordic countries and the progress of gender equality policies in St Petersburg as Soviet-style stories about “victorious progress”, in which “socialism” seems to have been replaced by “gender equality”. She was ready to recognize the importance of cooperation, especially in the early post-Soviet period: “We must be grateful to those programs, the humanitarian, social programs that are realized by the (Nordic) Council of

Ministers, among others”.²⁶ However, the leading role in her story belonged to the city authorities, while women’s organizations were presented only as “helpers” who “manifest quite high activity” in one or another campaign led by the authorities. Also, the women’s organizations were described as those mainly dealing with giving practical



A sustainable society requires gender equality, because a work force that includes women creates a more sustainable economy.

help to families, women, and children, those who receive state financing in order to “perform tasks and provide services important for the state”.²⁷ The feminist or political women’s organizations were not mentioned at all.

Finally, another civil servant from St Petersburg, J, remembering the story of local politics on gender equality, stated that even if the difficult word “gender” was not easy to explain, the campaign for gender equality was more a success than a failure:

It was the first plan in Russia for gender equality for women. . . . We made an agreement with all the heads of administration in the city – there are 18 – we made an agreement with all the heads of the committees, thus we received 63 confirmations. . . . And everywhere we had to explain: What should be done so that men and women are equal and for the term “gender equality” to be used like other Russian words. In this way, we explained what “gender” means.²⁸

Conclusion

On the basis of the material studied, we find that cooperation on gender equality issues was a difficult task with contradictory outcomes. While now it seems obvious that the political agenda of gender equality has failed in Russia (at least for the term of the current political leadership), and that the current Russian government is not interested in independent women’s organizations protecting rights and democracy, the collected materials show rather a complex picture of local discourses and evaluations of attempts to implement gender equality in the region during the last twenty years. Indeed, in some situations, the previous participation of the Russian local authorities and other state-related bodies in such cooperative efforts seems to be manipulative – an attempt to use cooperation and “gender” for their own political goals; in other cases, though, civil servants sincerely tried to cooperate



Training on gender inequality in a school in Smolensk, Russia, as part of the EU Partnership, September 24, 2011.

with women’s organizations in order to establish institutions that would protect the rights of women. In such cases, however, their interpretations frequently seem to be more in accordance with Soviet notions of “solutions to women’s problems”.

Nevertheless, the emphasis on social problems and social rights made by many of my interviewees (as opposed to the emphasis on democracy assistance promoted by most of the Nordic cooperation programs) could also be seen as an attempt to pay attention to the “local problems”, to be more in accord with the post-Soviet context in which neoliberal economic reforms contributed to a decrease in the standard of living for a large part of the population, especially in regard to family welfare. Even if this emphasis on the “social” as opposed to the “political” could easily be explained by the growing strength of the authoritarian regime in Russia, the social aspects of the “women’s question” in contemporary Russia could hardly be ignored (see, for example, recent publications of the Egida organization from St Petersburg dealing with the protection of women’s rights as workers²⁹).

Finally, the unsuccessful “translation” of “gender equality” into Russian reveals numerous difficulties and indicates that the realization of the transnational feminist agenda could meet with serious obstacles not only in the countries of the “Third World”, but also in some former “Second World” countries. ❌

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references

- 1 The Russian Federation consists of 83 subregions, most of which are called oblast. Among the other kinds of subregions are 21 autonomous republics and two federal cities, Moscow and St. Petersburg. The Northwestern Federal District (*Severo-Zapadnyi federalnyi okrug*), or Northwest Russia, is one of the federal districts of the Russian Federation. It consists of eleven subjects of the Russian Federation, including the city

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