

INTERSECTIONALITY VIA ZOOM

Reflections on teaching an online course on gender and Soviet history for students from/in authoritarian Russia

by **Yulia Gradskova**

Since December 2023, everything in Russia that indicates some connection to LGBTQ+ rights, but also queer cultures and histories, can be seen as an extremist¹ activity to be punished by law in the Russian Federation. Abortion rights in Russia have been increasingly restricted for some time, but during the fall of 2023 the threat of a total abortion ban came closer to reality, through attempts to prohibit abortion in private clinics (already practiced in several regions in Russia) and withdrawing it from the services provided by medical insurance. Some of the organizations dealing with gender research were also declared “foreign agents”,² while Gender Studies was taught only at very few Russian universities even before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine; above all, at the European University in St Petersburg. After February 2022, teaching the gender approach to different disciplines and subjects in Russia became practically impossible.

THE AGGRESSIVE WAR pursued by the Russian state against a neighboring country has many repercussions of violence inside Russia, among them the further growth of gender-based violence and gender inequality inside the country. The horizontal feminist resistance network Feminist Anti-War Resistance (FAR) spreads

information via its Telegram channel and in the underground newspaper *Zhenskaia Pravda*³ about the increased number of cases of domestic violence, rape, and murder where the perpetrators are often men returning from the front. In particular, former criminals who were granted pardons in exchange for enrolling into the army. Former perpetrators of domestic violence enrolled in the army also get to be pardoned.⁴

“FORMER PERPETRATORS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE ENROLLED IN THE ARMY ALSO GET TO BE PARDONED.”

It is in this context that in the fall of 2023, for the first time, I decided to teach free of charge a short online course on gender, intersectionality and Soviet history for students of the Russian Free University⁵ (*Rossiiskii Svobodni Universitet*). Since April 2023, the NGO-driven university has the status of an undesirable organization

in Russia. More than 80 people registered for my course; however, from the beginning there was a lot of uncertainty on both sides due to fear that students could be accused by the Russian authorities of collaboration with an “undesirable organization”. In order not to be detected while participating in the online course, many students did not use their real names; some never spoke, merely writing down some comments. Indeed, the university introduced a new security protocol that allowed the students not to disclose their identity to other course participants if they did not want to.

BUT WHAT DID the students need to know about the gender approach to the Soviet history? How much could my experience of teaching gender studies in Sweden help? How many and which publications on the gendered approach to Soviet history available in the Russian language should I include? Selecting teaching materials for this course and communicating with students made me reflect on the place and content of gender education in the Russian language and to some extent for those who live inside an authoritarian country⁶ waging an aggressive war.

One would assume that for a university that aims to promote democratic values and academic freedom, one of the important subjects would be gender studies.



Briva University in Latvia is hosting the virtual Russian Free University, since april 2023 considered as an undesirable organization in Russia.

PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

However, in the first years at least very few courses at the Free University focused on gender.⁷ While the number of gender courses at the university is now growing⁸ and even a program on “Social sciences and gender studies” is being developed, it is particularly important to ask what kind of gender studies education is being promoted. We need to discuss how we can educate in gender studies in a militarized, authoritarian Russia waging a war.

IN FACT, AS A RESULT of anti-gender campaigns, the teaching of gender studies is meeting new challenges even in those countries where its integration into the university system has apparently been well established for several decades already. Even in Sweden, known as a gender equal country where sexual democracy has always been supported, gender

studies recently found itself under attack as “not scientific enough”: some voices in Sweden suggest that gender studies is too ideological a discipline.⁹ On the other hand, previous research has shown that what are termed “anti-gender movements”¹⁰ cooperate transnationally. Kristina Stoeckl, for example, has shown that the World Congress of Families, a transnational organization supporting heteronormative families and opposing abortion and LGBTQ+ rights, was organized with the participation of Russian conservative public intellectuals. The cooperation of Russian conservatives with anti-gender groups and movements in different countries, including inside the EU, makes the issue about teaching gender studies particularly topical for Russian students, not least from the perspective of the stability of gender equality in EU countries as well.

Yet how can teaching be organized in a context where attending a lecture that discusses LGBTQ+ rights/histories is almost comparable to attending a meeting of an extremist organization? How can the teaching of gender studies be done to best contribute to a democratic development, and lay grounds for the day when the dictatorship will end? What kind of gender studies do students in Russia need and what kind of teaching do students in exile need now?

In what follows I give my own answers, or, rather, reflections and participatory observations.

PUBLICATIONS ON HOW gender studies were taught in the Russian Federation pre-February 2022 often compare how the teaching there was different from in the “West”.¹¹ Having my own experience

of teaching gender studies in Sweden and many years ago, in the late 1990s, the course “Introduction to Gender Studies” at Moscow University, as well as discussing the gender perspective at international conferences while composing the course plan, I decided to bring together at least two areas in the online course that to my mind needed more attention: gendering Soviet history and the intersectional perspective.

THERE WERE MANY challenges to teaching Russian students even on this online course: the issue of language seems to be particularly important for the university, specifically when teaching gender studies and in particular, the use of feminines, which could be against the norms the Russian state imposes. But I wonder how much translation of international terms is needed. The issue of translation was taken up by Russian feminist activists in online discussions, whose participants already several years ago noted among other things that foreign theoretical terms cannot simply be included in teaching, but need special explanations.¹² In the context of the state’s attempts to control the use of the Russian language this seems to be an important issue for everybody teaching from a gender perspective in Russian.

Another challenge to consider was the students’ use of Soviet cultural production (and thus, Soviet discursive constructions with respect to different ethnic groups, genders or races) that continues to be the source of (stereotypical) ideas such as the Soviet “help” with the emancipation of non-Russian women. The online course’s short format didn’t allow in-depth discussion of historical events and their cultural representations, for example in films, although the students asked for this. Many Soviet films are broadcast in Russia today as objects of nostalgia without critical contextualization, even less so, of course, from a gender perspective. The questions that students asked were linked in some cases to such uncritical and stereotypical assumptions about Soviet history based on these cinematographic images.

While some student had some knowledge about gender and feminist theory, I

noticed that the intersectional approach seems to be at the same time particularly important and somehow missing from previous gender education. Indeed, it is intersectionality, the approach looking at intersections of discrimination based on several grounds/axes (on the basis of sexuality, gender, race, ethnicity, religion, etc),¹³ that I find could help to uncover differences in statuses and multiple “invisible” discriminations among overtly

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“equal” and “raceless” Soviet people whose sexuality was fully silenced in official history writings. In spite of Igor Kon’s publications on Soviet queer history,¹⁴ the appearance of gender perspective in research into women’s history in many autonomous republics (not least research on the Muslim women’s movement for education in the first third of the 20th century)¹⁵ and Madina Tlostanova’s decolonial perspective on Soviet history and uncovering racialization and inequalities between the majority Russian population and the population from the imperial borderlands,¹⁶ it seems that the intersectional approach to Soviet history was not fully represented in gender education in the Russian Federation, even when the latter was available pre-February 2022. The combination of hierarchical inequalities was even more neglected in discussions of the state policies and gender systems of late socialism.

Finally, gender researchers have always paid a lot of attention to the politics of feminist translation. Works of some

radical (and some liberal) feminists were translated (see European University¹⁷), but the classical works by Black feminists, including Kimberley Crenshaw’s works, were never published in translation in the Russian Federation. The famous statement of Black Lesbian Socialist women produced by Combahee River Collective, however, was translated into Russian by Russian speaking PhD holders abroad only a few years ago.¹⁸

I would argue that lack of attention to intersectionality, Black feminist theorizing, queer theories, non-Eurocentric feminist thinkers and decolonial perspectives contributed to serious limitations of gender studies in the Russian Federation even when it was possible to teach this discipline in some universities. Indeed, the lack of support for the Black Lives Matter (BLM) campaign, or the symbolic placement of studies on social problems of migrant women or queer people as being “special” outside of mainstream gender themes, can be connected to the lack of attention to intersectionality and resources to research and teaching on it. Further, although gender researchers have published a lot about the new middle class in Russia,¹⁹ it seems that it wasn’t the gendered lives of those economically disempowered that was the focus of analysis. However, such a perspective is important when studying a society that was undergoing a fast neoliberal transformation.

THUS, I DECIDED TO focus my course on the intersectional perspective on Soviet history and to start teaching it from the theoretical works of the Black feminists: first of all, Kimberly Crenshaw. Among my students there were those who were familiar with some of the names and theories, yet by the students’ questions I understood that they perceived this starting point as a very unusual one when speaking about the gender system of Soviet society. As it continued, the course included analysis of cross-sections in fighting gender discrimination and colonial oppression in the Russian imperial borderlands in the 1910s and 1920s. It also drew the students’ attention to the Soviet state and everyday homophobia and discriminative laws

against homosexuals, gendered aspects of the politics of Russification, forced “emancipation” of non-Russian women by the Soviet center, gender consequences of Stalinist deportations, and militarization of masculinity as result of the Cold War culture of militarism.

THIS APPROACH DID not follow the “moderate” way of presenting Soviet gender history through the politics of legal equality, double burden, and masculinity crises of late socialism, but none-the-less it seems to be interesting for many students. Even attending my class on intersectional and decolonial gender approach to Soviet history might be dangerous for some of the students – some participated in my course under changed names and some never showed their faces – but communication with the students in different forms gave me the impression that attending it was not only a way of getting new knowledge and an unusual perspective on Soviet history, but also opened a possible way of understanding the present, not least the mechanisms of present day state propaganda about “traditional values” and militarism. Some students asked about the possibility of other gender courses; the latter really gives some hope.

I can finish by saying that it seems teaching via Zoom can affect the authoritarian machine of propaganda and disinformation and we should not miss this chance. But now, as before, it is still the content of gender courses that is of particular importance. ❌

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references

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- 2 See for example, on Ivanovo Gender Center <https://holod.media/2021/10/04/interview-shnyrova/#>
- 3 Yulia Gradszkova, “Feministiskt antikrigsmotstånd: Hur är det att som feminist kämpa mot Rysslands krig mot Ukraina?” [Feminist Anti-War Resistance: What is it like to fight Russia’s war against Ukraine as a feminist?] *Nordisk Ostform*, vol. 37 (2023). Available at: <https://tidsskriftet-nof.no/index.php/noros/article/view/5566>.
- 4 See for example, FAR (Feminist Anti-War Resistance) Telegram from March 22, 2023, on the rape of a 9-year-old child in Kurgan by a former Wagner mercenary. See also *Zhenskaia Pravda* from December 20, 2023, about by pardon of the former murderer of his girlfriend, Vera Pekhteleva, in Kemerovo due to the murderer’s participation in the war. In April 2024 FAR was considered undesirable in Russia and therefore closed down *Zhenskaia Pravda*.
- 5 The university was registered in 2020 in Latvia. Teachers work on a voluntary basis and free of charge. Read more at: <https://brivauniversitate.lv/en/statements/statement-of-the-academic-council/>
- 6 The students of the online university include political exiles and the Russian-speaking diaspora as well as students who still live in Russia.
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- 8 The new courses include, for example, a course on gender perspectives in journalism and a gender approach to studies of the Middle Ages.
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- 11 About feminist translation, see Dinara Yangeldina, “Generations of Feminist Translations: Connecting Russophone Academic and Activist Feminist Translation Debates Across the 2000s and 2010s” in Sätre, A.M, Y.Gradszkova & V.Vladimirova, *Post-Soviet Woman: New Challenges and Ways to Empowerment*, Palgrave (2023).
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- 13 See Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color”, *Stanford Law Review* vol. 43 (1991): 1241–99.
- 14 Igor Kon, *Klubnichka na berezke. Seksualnaia kultura v Rossii* [Strawberry on a birch tree. Sexual culture in Russia], (Moskva: Vremia, 2010).
- 15 Alta Makhmutova, *Pora i nam zazhech zariu svobody. Jadidism I zhenskoe dvizhenie* [It’s time for us to light the dawn of freedom. Jadidist and the women’s movement], (Kazan: Tatarskoe knizhnoe izdatelstvo, 2006).
- 16 Madina Tlostanova, *Gender Epistemologies and Eurasian Borderlands* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2010).
- 17 Some examples: *Хрестоматия феминистских текстов* [Reader of feminist texts] Translations, E. Zdravomyslova, ed., A. Temkina (St. Petersburg: Dmitry Bulanin Publishing House, 2000); B. Friedan, “Загадка женственности” [The Mystery of Femininity] in Прогресс [Progress], 1994; K. Millet, “Теория сексуальной политики” [Theory of sexual politics] in *Вопросы философии* [Questions of Philosophy] no. 9, 1994, 147–172.
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