

Russian Women

Life In The Former Soviet Union After the Fall

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Behind the male facade of business and politics Russia is a country run by women. Their labor keeps the population from starving. Yet post-1991 economic changes have led some women to reason that if they have to be beasts of burden they are not willing to take men along for the ride.

If this process gathers momentum, it will bring about the most radical transformation ever seen in Russian society. I saw glimmering signs of change when I lived in Russia in 1993. I went to satisfy my curiosity about the reality of Russian life, behind both Eastern and Western propaganda.

I settled in the Volga city of Samara, 500 miles east of Moscow, and I found work teaching English. My home was a room in an eight room communal flat, with a cold-water kitchen and no bath. [1] Before 1991, I had been to Moscow and Leningrad, but these are to Russia as say, New York and San Francisco are to the U.S. I was curious about the “deep provinces,” as Russians call them, and this industrial city, off-limits to Westerners for 45 years, showed me all the harshness of Russian existence—and its occasional joy.

One hot afternoon on the way to the post office, I was struck by the scene before me: it seemed as though the whole essence of Russian life was being played out on that very street. The sidewalk was full of drunks lying ragged and comatose in the sunshine. A few were haggling for eau de Cologne with street trading grandmothers. While men rode by in cars, speeding off to sign pieces of paper in offices, women filled the streets.

They jostled for food in restive queues; laden with string bags they fought their way onto buses. Women and girls lined the sidewalks, peddling nylon blouses, toothpaste and toilet paper. Others trudged past to fill their pails at street pumps or chased after the evening refuse cart with buckets of household waste.

While the post office clerk shuffled off to look for envelopes, I watched a cockroach crawl along the counter. I laughed to myself as I recalled Trotsky’s avowal that the Russian revolution would mean “the people’s final break with the Asiatic, with the seventeenth century, with icons and cockroaches.” [2]

I understood then that revolutions never make a clean break with a country’s civilization. Russia was not a fundamentally different land before and after 1917—or before and after 1991. Revolutions and wars have come and gone, but the cockroaches survive and the women still queue up at the water pump.

Russian life has maintained a continuity of its own. Catastrophic upheaval resulted in Military men serving new masters, bureaucrats sitting under changed portraits, and secret policemen hounding fresh heresies, but every Russian ruling elite has relied on the exploitation of labor, and that labor has been disproportionately female.

Women were the caryatids that held up both autocracy and socialism. It is they who keep contemporary Russia from complete collapse. Women work; men wield power. The pre-revolutionary peasant woman pulled the plough her husband guided. Within peasant communes men supervised land management and distribution; women could lodge appeals with the commune, but men had control over decision making.

The post-1917 USSR was able to industrialize at an unprecedented rate by drawing women into farms and factories. Women performed the toughest and lowest-paid tasks within each sector of the economy. In 1961 Khrushchev remarked of agriculture: “It is the men who do the administration and the women who do the work.” [3]

Until the 1980s, women made up over 50 percent of the workforce, yet on average they received 70 percent of the male wage. They carried the “double burden” of work outside the home and within it. Most Russian men consider housework beneath them.

Like in the Western world, the new enterprises employ women as clerks and secretaries rather than as managers or directors. No more than an estimated 1–2 percent of the new class of entrepreneurs are female.

“Women got practically nothing during the ‘great carve-up’ when Party and other property was divided up”, says Olga Voychenko of the Research Centre for the Social Protection of the Family. “It was mostly men from the nomenklatura who carried out this expropriation of the expropriators. Women were left as small-scale market traders...privatization passed women by.” [4]

“I think it’s the most outrageous discrimination. The bosses are nearly all men and the subordinates are women. It’s just a reign of terror on the lines of ‘I’m the boss and you’re the idiot.’” [5]

Under economic rationalization women are the first to lose their official jobs. For every three men made redundant [laid off], there are seven women. The process is accompanied by the usual rhetoric about “woman’s natural role.”

Women are not always unhappy to lose jobs which are stressful and poorly paid and where they often have to wait months to receive their salaries. I knew many women who welcomed redundancy as a chance to devote more time to housework, childcare and earning a living. They used every resource at their disposal to survive—selling or bartering any available commodity: toilet paper, sex, vodka, piano lessons.

The transition to the market economy has for many been a return to a subsistence economy. Dachas are the key to survival—and an added burden for women. These are not the luxury villas of former party bosses, but kitchen gardens with wooden sheds in one corner. Most provincial families have access to a dacha; those who do not, exchange goods and services for their produce.

Women do most of the cultivation. They often have to stand for hours on public transport to reach their dachas; few can drive. In September female energy pours into the labor-intensive task of preserving fruit and vegetables for the long winter.

It is women who have been the shock-absorbers of economic “shock therapy.” If not for their efforts, the transition to a market economy would have resulted in mass starvation and complete social breakdown.

Just as their peasant forebears avoided enslavement by fleeing beyond the borders of Muscovy, [6] some young women are choosing to emigrate, usually through a real or a fictitious marriage to a foreigner. Life abroad may not fulfill expectations, but women hope it will be an alternative to intensely hard work, low status and life with a drunken husband. (Russian men have the world’s highest alcoholism rate, and this has markedly increased since the collapse of the Soviet Union.)

Yet most Russian women still remain in their hometowns and marry local men. During my year in Samara I felt the cultural gulf yawn wide over the question of marriage. I could never understand the desperation of so many fascinating and capable women to form alliances with hopeless men. (This enigma is not uniquely Russian, but nowhere else have I noticed such a stark contrast between the sexes.)

Women wanted to marry as young as possible for fear of being “left on the shelf.” Those in their twenties told me their greatest fear was to be an “ad,” single woman of 30 or 40. Divorcees in their thirties or forties scurried around trying to hook another mate. Women were certainly not fueled by Harlequin fantasies; few harbored romantic illusions about domestic life. They were resigned to male unwillingness to help in the house or the dacha.

At best, they hoped for a husband with a limited taste for the bottle. When I asked female friends why they believed they needed husbands they thought me strange for even posing the question. My cultural blinkers finally dissolved when an exceptionally brilliant friend introduced me to her fiance.

He was a pompous man of limited intelligence. I said I feared her future life with him might be desperately boring. She replied shortly that she did not love him but would learn to get along with her husband, as most women did. She said she enjoyed an interesting and entertaining life in her own head and with her closest female friends. Companionship was not something she sought in marriage.

What was important to her was to unite ‘herself with a man who would work with her towards a shared economic goal.

I understood then that for centuries Russian women have viewed marriage as a survival strategy. They were terrified of the prospect of being unattached, free-floating particles in a world where everyone else was connected by an invisible web of family relations. A union with a man was also a union with his family and friends. Women felt marriage would anchor them in society; what they were anchored to was of comparatively small importance.

This attitude is a holdover from the Soviet past. Under the Soviet system everyone regarded the state as a massive storehouse of goods and services to be plundered. It was hard for lone individuals to gain access to this storehouse. Alliances had to be forged and the firmest of these were made through family connections.

Today the situation is changing as basic survival becomes the overwhelming preoccupation of the vast majority of Russians. Women feel that men are increasingly heavy economic and emotional burdens. A woman who works all day selling jeans in the street may not want to come home to a man who drinks away all her profits. In the past her husband might have held a position in a factory from which he would have pilfered products to be sold or exchanged for vodka plus whatever goods the couple needed. The supply of filchable state resources is disappearing, and with it much male economic muscle.

Despite her broken back, the pensioner who lived in the room next to mine went out in all weathers to peddle plastic carrier bags. She was thereby able to keep her husband in vodka and eau de Cologne. In the early morning he would stagger in and collapse in the corridor. I could hear her cursing him as she dragged him through the door and put him to bed. She regarded him as a cross she had to bear and it was evident she would always support him.

Younger women are less prepared to follow suit. An acquaintance in her twenties told her fiance that she would not marry him until he had set himself up in business. He was a college lecturer, a profession which no longer pays a living wage. She worked for a foreign company, and was not prepared to use her salary to keep her husband.

In today's era of wild capitalism individualism is filtering through all levels of society. The old economic basis for marriage is disappearing in Russia in a way that parallels the process in the West. But in Russia conditions are very different.

Feminism in the western sense-scarcely exists as there is no mass of middle-class women howling for their slice of the capitalist pie: Crucially, Russia no longer provides any welfare support. My Russian friends were deeply puzzled over how I could exist in this world without a family—and also without a permanent job. (Their attempts to remedy the situation with “a nice Russian man” were politely rejected.) They were skeptical when I explained that British welfare payments were the basis of my “individualist” lifestyle.

The most fundamental changes to Russian society will be wrought by women. Few of them care who sits in Moscow's White House for they are almost completely excluded from formal political activity. Both democrats and nationalists expect them to stay at home and fulfill their womanly mission of breeding future cannon fodder. Women have already made it clear they are not prepared to do this. Many mothers went to Chechnya and organized their sons' escapes from the army.

Most significantly, the birth rate has already fallen below the rate of population replacement. This is partly because of a dramatic rise in the death rate over the last five years, but also due to a growing reluctance of women to give birth. [7] If this process of refusal continues, political and social commentators will loudly and vainly bemoan the disappearance of the “traditional Russian family.”

As in the West, the process, once begun, will be inexorable. I am not going to try to predict the shape of any future Russian society; I just want to return as soon as I can.

Notes

1. See *Little Tenement on the Volga*, C.S. Walton (Claudia Press 1995).
2. L.D. Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution*.
3. Khrushchev, *Izvestiya* (December 26, 1961).
4. Quoted in *No More Heroines*, Bridger, Kay and Pinnick (Routledge 1996).
5. Ibid.
6. These runaway serfs were the original Cossacks.
7. In 1993 male life expectancy was 59 and falling, down from 65 in 1987.

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