

# ORGANIZING WOMEN BEFORE AND AFTER THE FALL

## Women's politics in the Soviet Union and post-Soviet Russia

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*In 1917 Russian communists installed a revolutionary government that called for an end to private property and the beginning of collective ownership of industry, agriculture, and commercial ventures. Their system – called communism – was based on the ideas of Karl Marx, who maintained that human oppression developed principally from inequalities in systems of producing goods (including food) necessary to sustain life. Collective ownership, communists believed, would eliminate those equalities. Between 1917 and the collapse of the Soviet Union (as Russia became known) in 1989, official communist decrees had also declared women equal and had set quotas to ensure women jobs and government offices.*

*Late in the 1920s, Joseph Stalin came to full power intending to modernize the economy through massive industrialization. His crash program brought women into the workforce at perhaps the highest rate in the world. After 1945 the Soviet Union forced countries of Eastern Europe to become communist too. As part of a Soviet empire, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria, Romania and other states instituted similar policies to bring women into the industrial workforce and into politics.*

*The collapse of the Soviet Empire in 1989 opened a debate about the place of women in post-Soviet societies in Russia, Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, and other states in East and East-central Europe and in Asia such as Kazakhstan. The fall of this system and the turn to the free market brought drastic unemployment to women, their departure from government, and the curtailment of services such as daycare centers that had allowed women to work in the first place. Equality of women – which they had never actually enjoyed – was seen as part of evil Soviet oppression; inequality was equated with being modern and Western, as the West had visible inequities in wages and in women holding public office. Thus, feminism was a taboo subject, because it was discredited with the communist past even though communists had hated feminists because so many were middle class.*

*This meant that defending women's position, bad though it had been under communism, was difficult, if not impossible, in the new political and social order. Those who watched the situation of women become worse found few models for activism. US and Western European feminism was interpreted as 'man-hating,' whereas under the Soviet system women saw their men being oppressed and kept out of politics too. Women accepted and men expected the reinstatement of patriarchy, whether in government or in jobs. Moreover, under Soviet censorship the household and private life had become a refuge, and public debate and experience in conducting civil society had become virtually non-existent.*

*How, then, could women turn back the tide that was ending their rights to contraception and abortion, to daycare and medical treatment, and even to jobs? What would their relationship be to the state that had simultaneously declared them equal and kept them unequal? As one government after another ended the right to abortion or put women out of work (they usually constituted two-thirds to three-quarters of the unemployed), would-be activists searched for answers. This chapter gives an account of what happened in the largest post-Soviet state, Russia, where old Soviet agencies for women and new leaders struggled to address women's position under the new political conditions. Despite horrendous living conditions and growing violence in everyday life, they built a variety of organizations.*

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We want to cross the border of isolation; we want to act and be together but we still have not understood ourselves and sometimes move in very different directions.

(Ol'ga Besolova)

For women here, it is very important to have their own voice, to speak independently. To speak not from a position of class, or one half of the population which has been rescued by somebody else, but to set up their own agenda. . . . This accent on independence is very crucial for understanding Russian feminism. . . . Our women have to understand after years of forced solidarity, not real solidarity, that only real solidarity of women could help them, could change their position in society.

(Anastasia Posadskaya)<sup>1</sup>

Two conclusions emerge from the most recent scholarship on women in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe: that the transition from communism has had numerous negative political and economic impacts on women, and that this transition has also opened up opportunities for independent women's organizations to challenge the centralized, state-sponsored women's organizations and to forge a new feminist politics (see e.g. Konstantinova 1992; Lipovskaia 1992; Rimashevskaja 1992). In this chapter, we build on these insights and seek to show how women have organized in response to these dilemmas. We argue that although appreciation of the historical development of the state's policies toward women and of the severe socio-economic gender consequences of the transition from communism is essential to understanding contemporary women's politics in Russia, any analysis that assumes persistent dichotomies between independent and formerly state-sponsored women's organizations or that emphasizes only resource constraints for women's mobilization misses the purposive and dynamic character of women's politics in Russia.

Our analysis is based on bibliographic research and information collected during four research trips to the Soviet Union and to post-Soviet Russia in which we interviewed leading activists in traditional and emerging women's groups. These groups focus on women's issues, broadly defined, at the national and Moscow regional levels.<sup>2</sup> Before we move to the interview material itself, we will briefly survey the historical legacy of the Soviet period for women's rights and women's activism. We will then examine the present political and economic context, discuss some of the women's organizations we have been following, and analyze the main factors influencing the development of a unified women's movement in Russia.

### The historical context and legacy

The Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 brought with it the great promise of women's equality in Russia: Marxism-Leninism held that as socialism was established, women would achieve equality with men. Important Bolshevik feminist activists like Inessa Armand and Alexandra Kollontai challenged the new regime to hold fast to that egalitarian goal. As a result, the state examined a range of issues important to women and implemented policies designed to improve the position of women in Russian society.<sup>3</sup> Consideration of those issues, however, was always undertaken within parameters defined by the Communist Party. In part because the party faced acute difficulties in consolidating its rule and establishing socialism, women's interests were sacrificed to what was defined as the greater good. In fact, from the Revolution forward, women's equality was never an end in and of itself, women's political participation never a primary goal.<sup>4</sup> As the Soviet state became increasingly centralized and repressive under Stalin, it placed sharper limitations on women (and on men), cut off the relatively wide-ranging discussion about women's rights and equality that characterized the early 1920s, and designed and implemented policies to ensure that women served the causes of national political consolidation, economic construction, and, later, the war effort. Even with the post-Stalinist thaw in Soviet society and policies in important areas affecting women, no one in the government fundamentally questioned the state's right to establish priorities and to define women's role in them. Despite the opening up of the political system under Gorbachev and in the post-Soviet period, the legacy of the state's manipulation of women for its own purposes continued to shape the discussion about women's rights and position in Russian society and state policies affecting women, especially in labor, family, and reproduction.

### Debates

The leaders of the 1917 Revolution may have taken their philosophical bearings from Marx and Engels, and Lenin may have expressed interest in the plight of women's domestic work, but concerns about women and the family were not central issues to most Bolsheviks. The challenge of liberalism to Russian patriarchal institutions and attitudes, however, forced revolutionaries to pay closer attention to the incorporation of women into the state (Lapidus 1978). The well-known and lively debate about the ways in which to increase women's political participation, improve their status *vis-à-vis* traditional institutions, and achieve sexual equality came to be known as the 'woman question'. With the establishment of the *zhenotdel'* (women's department) in the Communist Party, Bolshevik activists hoped that women's interests would be represented and other women inspired to

take up the cause of the new communist state (see Stites (1991) for a discussion of the *zhenotdel'*). As a consequence, a series of laws on marriage, abortion, and property lifted restrictions on women's rights.

With the accession to power of Josef Stalin, the discussion shifted dramatically and feminist views were silenced entirely. Stalin eliminated the *zhenotdel'* in 1930, declaring the woman question 'solved'.<sup>5</sup> As a replacement for the *zhenotdel'*, *zhensektory* (women's sections) were established in the agitation and propaganda departments of the Communist Party. The mission of these short-lived organizations was simply to rededicate women to Stalin's economic program (Clements 1991: 268-70).

Women's position in Soviet society was re-examined, in limited fashion, in the Khrushchev era, prompted by the recognition that women had not assumed positions of political and economic leadership at a level comparable to men. In response, the Khrushchev regime created the *zhensovety* (women's councils); the goals of these councils were not generated by their members, however, but by the party or government organization with which they were associated.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, there was no attempt to overturn the Stalinist assertion that the woman question had been solved. Indeed, it was not until the Brezhnev era that the woman question was officially reopened, allowing the state to more candidly attack the problems of a faltering economy that demanded women's participation in the labor force and the demographic predicament of decreasing Russian birth rates (see Buckley 1989). Although reopened, the woman question was again being addressed in terms dictated by the policy needs of the state.

### Policies

In the early years of the Revolution, Bolshevik policy-makers had operated under the assumption that socialist economic and political transformation would produce women's emancipation, not that such transformations would reinforce women's secondary status. The Bolshevik regime passed important laws striking at some traditional patriarchal institutions and increasing women's rights both in the public and private spheres. Divorces could be attained without the consent of both parties, for example; marriage was made a civil rather than a religious institution, and legislation was passed to require that marriage be freely entered into by both parties. Furthermore, women were no longer required to follow their spouses to a new residence or to take their surnames. It became illegal to restrict one's spouse's property rights, and daughters were given inheritance rights equal to sons. Finally, in response to the problem of back-alley abortions, an abortion bill was passed in 1920, making free abortions available at Soviet hospitals. There were some suggestions even in the 1920s, however, that women's rights would be sacrificed to the needs of the state. As Elizabeth Waters puts it:

For all that women's rights were part of the Bolshevik program, they were seen as a secondary matter, subordinate to the political and economic struggles of the (male) working class. Bolshevik Marxism viewed change first and foremost in terms of production: the worker and the factory took the center of the revolutionary stage. By the same token domestic life was on the periphery: if home and family were transformed as a by-product of revolution, well and good; if not, there was no point in a special allocation of time and energy to their reform, as other issues took priority.

(Waters 1991: 232)

The Leninist state's image of woman as worker, was soon modified by the Stalinist regime to create a new 'superwoman' image that combined woman as worker with woman as mother. Because Stalin needed women to support the building of the centralized economy, heavy industrialization, and collectivization and to minimize the social disruption that Stalin's policies wrought, the regime decided to cultivate pre-revolutionary family values and the traditional nuclear family. 'Dead-beat' fathers were forced to provide support for their children through tough new child support legislation. Couples were encouraged to stay together by state regulations that made divorces more difficult to acquire, and abortion was once again made illegal in an effort to ensure a rising birth rate. The regime declared that in the Soviet Union women were equal to men, and assumed that women in the socialist state would provide the state with ever-increasing productivity at work and reproductivity at home.<sup>7</sup>

In the post-Stalinist thaw, there was reinstatement of some rights rescinded under Stalin: for example, abortion was once again legalized and divorces made easier to obtain. In addition, the state made available a wider range of social support services to assist women in balancing their arduous work and home lives. The system of daycare centers and summer camps was expanded, and subsidies were made available to mothers for support of their families.<sup>8</sup> The prevailing image continued to be that of the superwoman, and the myth of women's equality was faithfully promoted by the state.

#### *The production/reproduction dilemma*

From Stalin's time, the critical issue for the state was how to sustain and, if possible, to increase women's reproductive capacities while maintaining their presence in the workforce. Some early Bolsheviks, like Armand and Kollontai, were committed to improving women's position in the labor force as a means of attaining sexual equality, but there were no Armands or Kollontais under Stalin; economic productivity and the construction of the centrally planned economy became the state's primary consideration.

It was not until the Brezhnev era that the production/reproduction dilemma was addressed outright in the face of increasing economic deterioration. As economic and demographic pressures mounted in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the image of woman as worker-mother (superwoman) became more apparent. Birth rates in the Russian and European parts of the Soviet Union dipped to among the lowest in all Europe; Russia was facing a labor shortage and was having difficulty attracting workers from high-birth-rate areas (i.e. Soviet Central Asia). At the same time, policy-makers were faced with a stagnating economy in which women made up over half of the workforce. As the centrally planned economy disintegrated in the late 1980s and early 1990s and transition from state socialism, however limited, caused redundancies and displacement in the labor market, the production/reproduction dilemma still generated a new response from the regime. To quote Mikhail Gorbachev:

Over the years . . . we failed to pay attention to women's specific rights and needs arising from their role as mother and home-maker, and their indispensable educational function as regards children. Engaged in scientific research, working on construction sites, in production and in the services, and involved in creative activities, women no longer have enough time to perform their everyday duties at home – housework, the upbringing of children and the creation of a good family atmosphere. We have discovered that many of our problems – in children's and young people's behavior, in our morals, culture and in production – are partially caused by the weakening of family ties and slack attitude to family responsibilities. This is a paradoxical result of our sincere and politically justified desire to make women equal with men in everything. Now, in the course of perestroika, we have begun to overcome this shortcoming. That is why we are now holding heated debates in the press, in public organizations, at work and at home, about the question of what we should do to make it possible for women to return to their purely womanly mission.

(Gorbachev 1987: 103)

In the Gorbachev era and in post-Soviet Russia, therefore, the image of woman as worker-mother has been steadily replaced by an image of woman as wife, mother, and homemaker. That is, as the state no longer requires her labor in the economy, the Russian woman is being asked to return to the home to her 'traditional' duties and position in the family.

### The contemporary social, economic, and political context for women

I started working at the factory in 1975 and I've given it, or to be more precise, I've given the foundry shop, my whole life and my health. I fell in love there and got married. My husband went to school and worked. No matter how we tried, we couldn't get our own place to live. We had a tough time and he left. He found an easier life. We were left alone. We've been living in a dormitory since 1984. There are ten families on our floor, and each of them has two kids. Imagine the hell we have in the kitchen, in the bathroom, in the laundry room? Lord, how tired I am of living! I earn 250 rubles and the child support payments are paltry. My older son is fourteen years old already. . . . Believe me, I don't want to live anymore. But I feel sorry for my children - who needs them?! Our life is humiliating, poor and hungry.<sup>9</sup>

The arduous life of women in the former Soviet Union has been well documented: in a society with an almost 90 percent female labor participation rate, women also do almost all the housework, childcare, and family work (such as shopping) without much labor-saving technology. Since the 1980s, although women constitute more than half of the Soviet labor force (*Zhenshchiny v. SSSR* 1990: 3), they tend to be located in poorly paid sectors of the labor market (*Rimashevskaja* 1991: 41) and in the lower ranks of the workplace hierarchy.<sup>10</sup> In the public arenas of power (despite quota system representation), they were also virtually invisible in positions of political power. Indeed, women held only about 7 percent of the important secretary positions in the party at even the regional and district level (*Strukova* 1990: 15). The so-called woman's question was rarely seriously addressed and certainly was never answered within the political system (see *Buckley* 1989). In the important sphere of reproduction, as decent contraceptives such as birth control pills, diaphragms, and condoms that do not tear were (and are) widely unavailable, abortion is reported as the primary method of family planning.

Despite the persistent occupational segregation and economic stratification along gender lines, the Soviet state did provide benefits to women workers that supported their labor force participation: factories received subsidies from the state to support daycare, and some enterprises provided benefits (e.g. shopping services for certain goods) that often eased the work of consuming and managing a household. Government allowances were granted to the mother of the family. Under Gorbachev, however, state subsidies for such required benefits were cut back in the declining economic situation, and strapped enterprises began to view women as less desirable workers. Despite laws against sexual discrimination, enterprises found

ways to dismiss women workers. In the process of privatization, state enterprises have often been offered an opportunity to start up again as if they were new businesses, and, to reduce their own costs, many have closed down sectors that are disproportionately staffed by women or have opened again with a new all-male labor force. Defense industries that have been downsizing in the process of conversion have fired women in disproportionate numbers. And other state enterprises have reduced their staff by firing women for whom they could not find 'appropriate work'.<sup>11</sup> In 1992, economist Judith Shapiro estimated that the percentage of women unemployed due to economic restructuring will eventually be double that of men (1992: 33). According to official statistics, as of January 1993 women constituted 71.9 percent of the unemployed. Substantial numbers of these women are well-educated and experienced engineers and technicians in their late thirties and forties. Unfortunately for them, job advertisements in many of Moscow's newspapers reveal that the positions opening for women in new firms are regularly and heavily targeted at comely younger women, able to 'wear a mini-skirt'.

Despite the need to ameliorate the economic plight of women in the transition, the government has tended to center its attention not on women as independent, politically significant wage earners but as traditional wives, mothers, and supporters of the state. This is reflected in Boris Yel'tsin's comments made on the eve of the national women's holiday in Russia (8 March) in 1991: 'I consider that our women deserve the highest accolades. I should like, personally, on my own behalf, and on behalf of the Supreme Soviet, to thank all of you, dear women, for your great endurance, for your trust and support, and for your work, for the fact that you do not lose your optimism and remain feminine and beautiful.'<sup>12</sup> Within the Russian Supreme Soviet and the new Parliament, little attention has been paid to women in the economy; the more persistent refrain has been about the 'crisis of the Russian family' - the birth rate now stands lower than at any time since World War II, child mortality rates have increased, and politicians have returned to a powerful pronatal ideology. Initial drafts of the new Russian constitution excluded women except for family-based policies. Our own interviews with members of the Supreme Soviet's Joint Committee on Women's Affairs and Protection of the Family, Mother, and Child indicated a central concern with the demographic crisis and a readiness to view increasing crime and alcoholism as proof of a crisis of the Russian family requiring women's (and not men's) attention.<sup>13</sup> Interviews with prominent women deputies in the Supreme Soviet suggest that the refrain that women should return to family care and leave state business to men echoes throughout the Parliament.<sup>14</sup> The implications of such discrimination against women in the labor market and of efforts to return women to home labor are manifold. They reduce not only women's economic resources and labor force participation but also their access to such opportunities as

purchasing shares in co-ops undergoing privatization. Discrimination thus supports a tendency toward male monopolization of the privatization process.

Moreover, women's participation in national government has declined precipitously. "The nomination and election of Deputies to the new parliaments at all levels has proved catastrophic for women – their representation has sharply declined. . . . Preliminary data leave one dumbfounded: One republic parliament has one woman Deputy, another has three, a third has six, and so on."<sup>15</sup> Thus, prior to the December 1993 elections, only about 5.4 percent of the deputies in the Russian Parliament were women – comparable to the percentages in many Western democracies, but a large drop from the previous Soviet quota system.

Still, perestroika and glasnost did pave the way for a broader-based dialogue about women and women's equality in Soviet and Russian society. The new democratic efforts made possible a women's activism that is directed not by the party or the state but by women themselves. Shut out of the protected quota system, women have become increasingly aware of their truly marginal political status and have responded to it. Their success is uncertain. In December 1993 elections were held for the new parliament. In the Federal Council, women captured only nine of 178 seats (5 percent). Sixty women were elected to the 440-seat State Duma (13.6 percent). Twenty-one of the women in the Duma were candidates of the political block Women of Russia organized by Alevtina Fedulova, head of the Union of Women of Russia, and Ekaterina Lakhova, President Yel'tsin's adviser on children, family, and women's issues. Over 8 percent of the electorate voted for this block. Fedulova was subsequently named a deputy speaker of the State Duma (Shvedova 1994: 7).

A look at some of the leading movement organizations and activists in Russia illustrates both the emerging interpretive consensus on women's position and the obstacles to building a unified movement. By 1994, more than 300 women's organizations had registered with the Russian Ministry of Justice and many more operate without registration (Ershova *et al.* 1995). Groups focus on women in small business, mothers of soldiers, women in defense conversion, consciousness-raising, and psychological support. There are women's environmental groups, a soup kitchen movement, women's centers, family clubs, communist women's groups, and nationalist and religious groups of women. It is beyond our scope here to give a description and assessment of every women's organization that we have researched; therefore, we focus on a number of organizations that have been highly visible and influential nationally and on several more local organizations. These include the Soviet Women's Committee/Union of Women of Russia; two *zhensovety* (local women's councils); the Center for Gender Studies at the Institute for the Socioeconomic Study of Population of the Russian Academy of Sciences; the GAIA Women's Center; and the

Association of Small Towns. We believe these six groups are illustrative of the range and types of women's activism that are emerging, the problems and tensions that women activists are addressing, and the relations among women's organizations as they seek to develop the base for a national women's movement.

### The organization of activism

#### *Soviet Women's Committee/Union of Women of Russia*

Any discussion of women's activism in Russia must be situated in an understanding of the historical legacy and contemporary activities of the former Soviet Women's Committee, now the Union of Women of Russia, and of the *zhensovety* (women's councils) associated with it. As we noted earlier, the Soviet Women's Committee is the most long-lived and politically pervasive women's organization; until perestroika, it was concerned almost entirely with advocating peace as a women's issue and propagandizing how communism had solved the woman question. Its titular heads were heroine women like Valentina Grizodubova, a pilot, and Valentina Tereshkova, a cosmonaut, who were supposed to embody the Soviet official myth of the emancipated woman. The Soviet Women's Committee forged links with international women's organizations, attended international forums, and advocated world peace as a women's issue, but it did not focus on women's issues in the Soviet Union. The committee's willingness to embody Soviet propaganda about women's emancipation was evident. Public statements by Tereshkova exemplify that the Soviet Women's Committee shared the party's contradictory position on women, arguing simultaneously for women's equality in labor and for her primary social function as mother:

I would emphasize that we are given ideal work conditions. . . . When we began working in the service zone, medical science checked our physical condition constantly. Technical personnel are always trying to make our jobs easier. Music is played to lessen the effects of the noise of our looms. We wear headphones to protect our ears. . . . Soviet women do in fact enjoy fully equal rights. Female equality is stressed and guaranteed. Motherhood is regarded in our country as women's greatest social function. The state values motherhood and helps women to raise children.<sup>16</sup>

With perestroika, however, the Soviet Women's Committee did begin to turn its attention toward developing a national agenda. This was due in part to expanded political opportunities and responsibilities and to the recognition of the increasingly difficult position of women in Soviet society.

The organization was awarded seventy-five seats in Gorbachev's Congress of People's Deputies and became the predominant voice in any discussion of women's issues. It should be noted that during perestroika one-third of the seats in the Congress of People's Deputies were reserved for the Communist Party and official organizations. In 1990, this group was detached from the state and formally constituted as a voluntary union of women's councils and non-governmental organizations under the new name of the Union of Women of Russia.

Employing the powerful national and international connections forged during the communist era, the Women's Union conducts its work with support from foundations, international organizations, and individuals, as well as through fundraising and commercial projects. Not surprisingly, this group has also played a major role in educating Western feminists about the impact of the transition from communism on women. Nearly every international forum on women includes a representative from the Union of Women of Russia.

Its major work today, dramatically different from its central focus only eight years ago, is the support of women during the economic crisis. Alevtina Fedulova, president of the union, posits that the economic independence of women is crucial to change what she has come to believe is a patriarchal Russia. The union runs a number of projects designed to assist women in finding employment, retraining, and surviving unemployment. In interviews with us in July 1991, March and December 1992, and June and July 1993, the staff of the Union of Women of Russia reinforced again and again the dramatic shift that has taken place in their priorities as the Soviet Women's Committee and its successor heed the needs of Russian women. Fedulova emphasized that 'our main social basis is working women. No, it is not working women any longer; it is unemployed women. There are major problems; there is a major social crisis'.<sup>17</sup> In focusing on unemployed women, she points out that the union has developed a clear set of activities:

The first one is assistance to unemployed women. . . . Once a month we hold a job fair here in our building. We have already had five of them . . . over five thousand women came here. The next priority deals with the retraining of women. . . . The third priority is to give women a sense of social support: personal counselling, legal counselling, psychological counselling and educational counselling. Not only individual women but dozens and hundreds of women come here for help. . . . The people need us. On that account, we are really accumulating the pain people bring here.<sup>18</sup>

The Union of Women of Russia also engages in more explicitly political activity, particularly at the national level. For example, President Fedulova and her staff have been very active in critiquing draft legislation, conducting

public hearings, and submitting concrete proposals to the parliament. In fact, these activities have reinforced their belief that Russia is essentially patriarchal and that women must mobilize as women. As we pointed out earlier, in the December 1993 elections, the Union organized a political block, Women of Russia, that successfully collected the 100,000 signatures necessary to run candidates for election to the parliament. The block was organized and ran on a social welfare platform; it also explicitly denied being a feminist block. According to its pamphlet, 'Why I Vote for the Political Movement Women of Russia', the block stood for ten points:

1. Unified democratic Russia with common economic and cultural space, equal rights and opportunities for everyone;
2. state guarantees of education and public health care to all who need them without exceptions;
3. a state-run system of pre-school education of children; availability of day-care centers, and summer camps for children;
4. observance of human rights, observance of the constitution, and independent and strong courts providing fair solution of conflicts;
5. a strong army and state guarantees for decent life of families and servicemen;
6. powerful law enforcement bodies capable of fighting crime and guaranteeing safety to every citizen;
7. search for consent and consolidation in all spheres of life that would lead to civil peace and social stability;
8. development of those productive spheres that relate to basic needs of every family and every person;
9. prohibition of the propaganda of violence and pornography;
- and 10. cooperation with various countries of the world, resulting in worthy status of Russia in the world community.

Using their organizational infrastructure and contacts with women all over the country, they managed to elect twenty-one women to the State Duma. (Fedulova was one of their candidates, won a seat, and was subsequently named deputy speaker of the Duma.)

Like most of the other women we interviewed, the staff at the Union of Women of Russia emphasized the difficult task of mobilizing women – that is, of empowering women to take the initiative, to see themselves as active agents. Like many other women's groups, the union focuses on building women's confidence; theirs is a 'special (kind of) work to show women that they themselves can do a lot; that they can put their force and their energy and their minds into some concrete undertakings'.<sup>19</sup> But given the Soviet past and the notion that the state should take care of all its citizens, the task of building independence and agency requires an openness to many forms of mobilization and activism. Staff at the Union of Women of Russia recognized the value of the development of new women's organizations (though they seemed to be somewhat skeptical about the viability of many

of them and expressed a strong sense of the need for unity among women). As Fedulova put it,

A year ago, an organization would crop up here, another one would crop up there, still another one. And people felt free to speak about it. Some felt a woman's place was at home, some felt a woman's place was only at work. Some felt only women working in the same profession should act together. It takes time for women to understand that if we're speaking about some high priority issues like workplace discrimination, no one organization can address this in isolation. It is necessary to come together and promote coalitions and general strategy. As for tactics, everyone can work on their own. . . . Of course we would like to work in closer cooperation with other organizations . . . but we don't want to impose anything upon them. We understand [opposition to a unitary movement but] maybe it's not very good and we have to survive together. It's very sensitive.<sup>20</sup>

Fedulova and her staff recognized the historical legacy of the Soviet Women's Committee and the suspicion it engendered among some emerging activist groups. Fedulova also emphasized that the creation of the Union of Women of Russia was a clear break with the past and the Soviet Women's Committee.<sup>21</sup>

### Zhensovety

The work of the Union of Women of Russia, most notably its recent success in the parliamentary elections, needs to be viewed, however, in the context of its national network and its ability to build long-term coalitions. The *zhensovety*, first created under Khrushchev, were reactivated during perestroika and began to generate their own agendas. A party directive placed the *zhensovety* under the leadership of the Soviet Women's Committee and, as affiliates of an official organization that was able to send representatives to the newly established Congress of Peoples' Deputies, they were able to participate in the selection of delegates. Existing *zhensovety* were reinvigorated and the network of *zhensovety* was expanded (Browning 1992: 99-100).

Thus, the *zhensovety* were at once tied to the Soviet Women's Committee, whose role was growing in the late 1980s, and were given increased opportunities for activism and mobilization in their own right. Today, in contrast to the Soviet Women's Committee and its national political agenda, the *zhensovety* are highly varied in their politics. Some organizations continue to have too little social or political impact or voice; others, like the *zhensovety* of the Central Aerohydrodynamics Institute, led by Ol'ga Besolova, have

been politically active and have taken initiatives independent of the Soviet Women's Committee. Genia Browning reports, for example, that they nominated alternative candidates to the Congress of People's Deputies in opposition to the Moscow *zhensovety*, though unsuccessfully; 'in another example of independence, a workplace *zhensovety* in Dubna defied the town *zhensovety* by hosting the first independent women's forum' (1992: 103). Besolova and other women active in the Central Aerohydrodynamics *zhensovety* have made links with the League of Women Voters in the United States and are involved in developing strategies to educate Russian women about and in political activism. Besolova's belief is that only through educating women at the local level about the basics of political mobilization will women be able to have any effect on national politics. This belief in the centrality of political activity as a way to overcome women's passivity and sense of powerlessness infuses all of their activities, economic and social as well as political.

In contrast, other *zhensovety* have found their political voice in a focus on women, family, and community. The women's committee in Troitsk, a center for scientific work outside Moscow, illustrates this. Some of the women active in this group met through the local computer center for children, which is supported by the Troitsk Institute of Innovation and Thermonuclear Research (TRINITY), the main employer for the town. As a result of the computer center activities, a series of other projects grew out of TRINITY activities, including a 'People-to-People' diplomacy project with families in northern California. Exchanges produced a project that their American partners called the International Women's Trust - Women's Peace Trust. From this, the Troitsk women's committee was established, and organized an international women's conference, began to address problems of families in Troitsk, and sought to 'organize a women's movement in the community.'<sup>22</sup> The Troitsk Women's Committee is now engaged in providing support for invalids, handicapped children, and children in orphanages, relying heavily on American donations. Finally, it has forged a collaborative relationship with a group in Pennsylvania to develop a Junior Achievement program for youngsters in Troitsk.

Unlike Besolova's group, the Troitsk group is clearly a case in which women first came together as mothers and then developed an organization and aims that addressed broader women's issues. At our meeting with the members of the group, we learned that for many of them, their primary concern remained women in the family. As one member put it, 'It wasn't until perestroika that we were able to really look at and discuss problems of women, families, birth control, social violence in the family, marital rape, etc.' They saw one of their biggest tasks as 'convinc[ing] municipal authorities to take domestic violence seriously and to do something about it.' The women of Troitsk were also very concerned about the impact of perestroika and the transition to market economy on women's economic



potential. They agreed that 'back to the kitchen' pressure is very strong in Russia today, but they also emphasized that two main factors would keep women in the workforce: (1) financial constraints at home requiring a woman's salary, and (2) the desire of many women, particularly those who have worked for many years, to continue to work as a way to 'fulfill their personality'. They saw the problem of retraining for women as a critical one for their group to address, because they said it was much more difficult for women to change careers than it is for men - the problem being 'moral and psychological' as well as a matter of structural opportunities. They saw women's organization and mobilization as important not only for themselves as women but for the revitalization of their community as well.<sup>23</sup>

### *Center for Gender Studies*

Among the most direct and consistent critics of the legacy and central role of the Soviet Women's Committee has been the Center for Gender Studies at the Institute or the Socio-economic Study of Population of the Russian Academy of Sciences in Moscow. It was founded in April 1990 as the first center for women's studies and research in the country and, as a research center of the academy, is among the most prestigious organizations in Russia. The Center receives funding from the state as well as from international feminists and funding organizations.

Scholars at the Center for Gender Studies emphasized a number of themes as central to their concern with Russian women: the traumatic psychological effects of women's deteriorating economic situation, the difficulties scholars face in presenting feminist interpretations of this situation in public forums, and the need for a truly independent women's movement. These issues are deeply intertwined for the activists at the center. They believe that women are unable to respond actively to their deteriorating situation because of the dramatic shifts in public interpretations of their lives and in part because they have never been able to see themselves as independent actors. As Anastasia Posadskaya, director of the Center, put it, 'Women were constantly told by our propaganda that they are emancipated and have reached all the highest levels of society. . . . Now these women are told that their real place or natural place is in the home, that they will be given a pension from a very early age because the economy does not need their inefficient labor. So at a personal level, this is a terrible frustration; this is confusing.'<sup>24</sup>

Hence, the Center for Gender Studies sees itself as playing both an interpretive and an activist role, in which the bases of women's economic and political powerlessness are described, theorized, and challenged. In part because of its many international contacts and in part because of its very focus, the Center for Gender Studies has been central in the efforts to

conceptualize and articulate the distinctive meanings of feminism for Russian women. As Posadskaya states:

I have thought a lot about what would it mean to be a feminist in this country, about whom we can call feminist and whom we cannot. . . . One thing is that the woman who identifies herself as a feminist understands that women's issues are global and that what is happening here in this country to women and to her personally is an experience which has been shared by millions of women in the whole world. There might be things specific to us Russians, but the secondary position of women, women as a second sex . . . is what feminism recognizes. . . . For our country, I think it is especially important that the ideal of women's emancipation has been used in ways as a facade for non-emancipation, not only for women, but also non-emancipation of men. . . . So for women here it is very important to have their own voice, to speak independently. . . . This accent on independence is very crucial for understanding feminism.<sup>25</sup>

Among its most prominent activities, the Center was responsible for the organization of the first and second Independent Women's Forums in Dubna in March 1991 and November 1992. As the first all-Soviet independent women's meeting, Dubna I, 'Democracy Minus Women is No Democracy', was an important historical event. Two hundred women from forty-eight different women's groups, associations, and parties and twenty-five localities in the Soviet Union came together for three days. Twenty-five guests from Western countries, including Britain, Canada, Germany, Sweden, and the United States, also attended.

Panels and organizational meetings focused on the themes 'Women and Politics', 'Women and the Transition to the Market Economy', 'Feminist Critiques of the Totalitarian Culture', and 'Women and Violence'. Every woman we interviewed praised Dubna I for its conception and highly evaluated her experience of coming together with other women. Dubna I was uniformly seen as an empowering and politically significant event. One of its outcomes was the establishment of a Women's Network 'as a form of cooperation and information between different women's groups and individual women'.<sup>26</sup> Ambitious in its conception, this network has not yet fully realized these goals. Initially it served primarily to provide the planning committee for the organization of Dubna II that ended as a very small group of women, most of whom were at the Center for Gender Studies.

Dubna II, 'From Problems to Strategy', held in November 1992, attracted over 500 participants from Russia and the Independent States and numerous foreign participants. As Posadskaya put it, Dubna II was

necessary especially for 'women from remote areas'.<sup>27</sup> There was substantial foreign financial support of the conference. Panels focused on employment and the economy, politics, and a wide range of social dimensions of women's lives.<sup>28</sup> As will be evident in the next section, responses to this Dubna were more mixed, although a formal committee was established to organize a third forum. Posadskaya believes that Russia badly needs a coherent women's movement and that such events and organization are necessary or there will be 'no orientation, no possibility to know what's going on'. Women are afraid of organization, however. 'They don't want it, but now they are starting to see it as a resource, if it is nonhierarchical, and if all centers are equal and decide things equally.'<sup>29</sup>

The Center for Gender Studies and the Union of Women of Russia have been the organizations most visible to Westerners. Apparent differences between them have produced a dichotomizing view of women's activism as either independent or state sponsored. Differences between the two leaders, Fedulova, a former member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, and Posadskaya, who was never a party member, lend credence to this imagery. So too does the fact that the Center was never tied to the Communist Party. Like all organizations within the Russian Academy of Sciences, however, the Center is state sponsored, and some of its staff have in the past had ties to the Soviet Women's Committee. Given the wide range of women's organizing in Russia, facile polarizations of these two organizations oversimplify tensions in the emerging women's movement.

### GAIA

Another organization attests to the problem of dichotomizing the women's movement into a state-sponsored/independent motif. Although GAIA Women's Center is an independent organization, it began in 1990 with funds from a state-sponsored association, and both of its founders are well connected through their academic positions at the USA-Canada Institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences. The GAIA organization initially concentrated its resources and energies on several projects designed to directly help women in their daily lives and to empower women to ease the transition from communism. According to one of its leaders, Nadezhda Shvedova, 'GAIA's task is to create a psychological space for raising women's consciousness. . . . We hope to support women through practical tasks. So the total task is empowerment and raised consciousness.'<sup>30</sup> As Elena Ershova, GAIA's founder, points out, 'In the US, consciousness-raising was a middle- and upper-middle-class phenomenon - they had the time to discuss and ruminate. Our situation is more severe; it is necessary to survive. So it is necessary to raise consciousness through looking at ways of self-support, self-realization, survival.'<sup>31</sup> The activists who founded GAIA share an interpretation of Russia as a deeply patriarchal and

authoritarian society. Their goal is to empower women to become autonomous, self-confident, and strong voices in order to advance democracy, build a civil society, and dismantle patriarchal values and practices in Russia. They believe that empowerment can be realized only through women's active participation in grassroots economic, social, and political projects.

Like the Union of Women of Russia, the *zhensoveti*, and the Center for Gender Studies, GAIA attempts to cultivate relations with Western feminists and women's organizations. The director of GAIA, Elena Ershova, told us in a 1992 interview that women activists and organizations in Russia needed to develop international contacts for several reasons: (1) to provide material support; (2) to help share experiences of organizing and mobilizing in other countries; and (3) to keep Westerners informed about the status of women and about policies and laws affecting women in Russia so that they might help promote women's rights among Russian policy-makers. The GAIA organization has also tried to encourage international contacts between non-activist Russian women and others in concrete ways. For example, in September 1992 it organized and sponsored an international conference in Moscow on women in the free market economy; more than 400 women participated in the conference, which was designed to help foster business contacts and promote knowledge.

More recently, GAIA has been in the forefront of efforts to develop a political network to lobby the state on behalf of women. Government representatives were invited to attend and participate in the September conference, and indeed, a number of government officials including then Vice President Rutskoi did so. Ershova was an important force in the establishment of an advisory committee on women to the Higher Economic Council of the Supreme Soviet. In December 1992, GAIA took a leadership role in an initiative to create a network among women's organizations in Russia, the Women's League. Finally, although GAIA as an organization did not become involved in the 1993 parliamentary elections, names of some GAIA activists were placed on the candidacy list of the political block Homeland. Many of the signatures of the Homeland block petition, however, were rejected by electoral officials because they came from Russians outside Russia.<sup>32</sup> As a result, block candidates were not allowed to run for office.<sup>33</sup>

### Association of Small Towns

The Association of Small Towns stands in sharp contrast to the organizations discussed earlier. This organization results from the vision of a single woman, Tatiana Tsertsvadze, who started it when her physician sister was assigned to a clinic in Venev, a small town about 180 kilometers from Moscow. Venev, originally a wealthy merchant village, is an interesting

example of a particularly Soviet phenomenon. Under Soviet rule former prisoners who were not permitted to return to Moscow were assigned to Venev as workers in the nearby mines, and today approximately 50 percent of the town's population is composed of former prisoners, their families, and descendants. When her elderly mother moved to Venev, Tsertsvadze began to visit, to learn the myriad economic and social problems of the region, and to appreciate its historical significance to Russian culture.

Tsertsvadze developed the idea of retraining small-town residents for participation in a market economy through the production of crafts indigenous to the area. Although she began in Venev by contacting town authorities, organizing a public group of town intelligentsia, identifying potential leaders, and seeking workers to join on a project, the program extended to other areas as well.<sup>34</sup> After several years of negotiating and working closely with local authorities and professional women, she initiated a program of economic redevelopment. Some key projects include a small enterprise in which workers produce bath carpets and a shop for handicrafts, especially traditional wood carving. In her estimation, 'This is a very difficult challenge: to see young women who are brought up in an uncultured and inhuman condition, who think being oppressed, being unspiritual is normal; to be just a reproductive source - I can't bear this; I can't agree with this.'<sup>35</sup> But this passivity and fatalism are, she believes, variable throughout the region: 'All towns are so different. Every one has its own face. Some are very ugly. That is a fact. Others are a potentially very strong force.' In some small towns, she points out, there are 'a lot of woodworkers, artisans, and people who want to preserve traditions; there are villages where there is an absence of criminals and an openness to hearing ideas and suggestions, and people with great initiative and ideas.'<sup>36</sup> Tsertsvadze also developed similar programs for redevelopment among similarly sized towns in the general region outside of Moscow. These towns then joined together to form the Association of Small Towns. Although not conceived as a women's project, the Association and its supporters have been almost exclusively women. Problems of alcoholism among men and their seeming lack of interest in economic development have left this important work in the hands of women. Although not directly engaged in national politics, Tsertsvadze none the less understands her work as part of building a Russian women's movement. She attended Dubna I and a business training workshop sponsored by the Center for Gender Studies; she sustains links with members of GAIA and has been working to extend international contacts. Like virtually all the women we interviewed, Tsertsvadze emphasized that this is a period in which women are engaged in a process of self-reflection, self-discovery, and development of a sense of personal agency. Her voice, however, is less explicitly feminist and more religious than others we interviewed. Indeed, her view is that women are more spiritual, more community-minded, more concerned about culture

than men. What she shares with the other activists is a sense that if Russian society is to be reformed and rebuilt, women must be central to that process. And she recognizes that women have a secondary position in public life in Russia. In our interviews, Tsertsvadze emphasized the importance of her work as an independent part of a revival of Russian culture and religion, relying entirely on private support. At the same time she is dependent on elected government officials in Venev and other towns to support her work.

### Women's activism in contemporary Russia

Two major concerns emerged from our interviews and analysis of the organization of women's activism: the importance of the historical legacy of the Soviet state, and the competition for scarce resources - human, organizational, financial, domestic, and international. Both concerns compose an important part of the context and process of movements building in Russia. The director of GAIA, Elena Ershova, discussing the impact of the Soviet past on the women's movement, said, 'I tell you this so that you will understand the way we are passing now, how information is important to us, and how to think everything over critically again, to re-think our experiences.'<sup>37</sup> Any analysis that neglects or underestimates a legacy that still echoes strongly for contemporary women risks misinterpreting the dynamic process of movement-building in Russia.

The unique historical legacy of the Soviet state, however, cuts two ways. First, there is a distrust of the state and its apparatus that runs deep in virtually all the women activists whom we have interviewed. As we will discuss below, this distrust extends to organizations such as the former Soviet Women's Committee, which served as the state's mouthpiece on women's issues and helped promulgate the myth of sexual equality in the Soviet Union. There is also a recognition that the state has been (and will be until other institutions are created to supplement and/or replace it) chiefly responsible for addressing and solving social issues, including the rights of women. Although every woman activist we met certainly realized that Soviet legislation ensuring women equal rights had little to do with the realities of daily life, not one wished to abrogate or minimize those rights on paper, particularly at this time, as Russia struggles to build a law-based society. Furthermore, given that there have been no private sector institutions to turn to, there has been and continues to be a reliance on the state as problem-solver. This ambivalent attitude toward the state has important consequences for the development of the women's movement in Russia. The acute social upheaval wrought by the transition has also created a range of scarcities extreme even for Russia. These scarcities, combined with the ambivalence about how to use the state as a resource, affect the development of effective and coherent political mobilization.

*Legacy of the Soviet state*

Elvira Novikova, a scholar and a consultant to the Central Committee during perestroika, speaks eloquently of the legacy of the Soviet state for women's activism. She argues that 'foreign feminists . . . need to listen to us attentively. The central question for me is, who am I? Can I realize my potential? Am I an object of the state? Am I being manipulated by the state? Only in this way can we tell whether the situation of women has been changed.'<sup>38</sup> These concerns about the historical legacy of state manipulation of women's politics are most evident when we examine the position of the Union of Women of Russia. The new generation of feminists and women activists is sometimes quite suspicious of the Union of Women of Russia regardless of its current activities or membership. The degree of suspicion was evident in the development of the Independent Women's Democratic Initiative, NEZHDI (Do not wait), which was launched at a meeting in July 1990 and held its first forum in Dubna on 29–31 May 1991. Its statement on the social and political tasks for women contained a powerful attack on prominent women in the former party and state apparatuses (and so, implicitly, on the Soviet Women's Committee): "Puppet women" in representative organs of power and "iron ladies" in the director's chair, women elected by no one but appointed by one or other state institution, obedient to the will of the bosses and always ready to carry any directive issued on high – thus has a negative image been created of the woman director, the woman political leader.<sup>39</sup> A representative of the Soviet Women's Committee was present at the forum but apparently played no role in its development or its activities. In our own interviews with the Soviet Women's Committee in July 1991, we pressed them for an interpretation of the relationship between the Soviet Women's Committee and other groups. The committee members were clearly aware of the attack on them and its implications. According to Fedulova:

We don't see the Soviet Women's Committee as an umbrella organization, and we don't want centralization. Lenin said, 'Before unity, you should separate.' Many of the new organizations center around charismatic individuals who are opposed to centralization. Many have been set up without the help of the Soviet Women's Committee and many with our help. Some of them would like to unite with the Soviet Women's Committee but still maintain their identity. To those who argue that the Soviet Women's Committee should be disbanded, we say 'We shall work as long as women phone and call.' We think criticism is healthy because, as Andrew Carnegie said, 'You don't kick a dead dog.'<sup>40</sup>

Fedulova emphasized that the task of the Soviet Women's Committee is to change the policy of the state toward women and not to oppose other

organizations, clubs, trade unions, or associations should they not wish to work with the Soviet Women's Committee.

After becoming the Union of Women of Russia, this once-powerful committee has faced numerous external challenges to its survival. As a private organization it has had meager state funding, and its tenancy in its own building must now be paid for. One-third of the permanent staff has been fired due to lack of funding, and continued activities such as job training workshops rely very heavily on international support and funding. When we spoke with Fedulova in March 1992, the interview was interrupted briefly when she sought to cash payroll checks at a local state bank, where no money was available. Our sense remains that the Union of Women of Russia is relatively resource-rich (in experience, organizational networks, international contacts, and state connections) but that its history makes it suspect to new organizers and feminist activists.

From our perspective, this is not an organization to be discounted. Indeed, the electoral victory of the Women's Bloc attests to the significance of Fedulova and the Union of Women of Russia. First, because of its prominence, it is the organization to which ordinary women are most likely to turn during the crises generated by the transition. Despite staff cutbacks and fiscal contingencies of enormous impact, this organization has continued to offer workshops for job training; to provide information, referrals, and other support for unemployed women; to serve as a watchdog over political developments; and to sustain important connections with international women's organizations and the United Nations. Second, it is engaged in activities that empower women and appears committed to challenging state actions that would undermine efforts at such empowerment. In this sense, because it is able to take advantage of its historical connections to the state, the Union of Women of Russia is among the most influential organizations articulating women's concerns.

Nevertheless, the lingering suspicions about the role of the Soviet Women's Committee in the old regime prevent it from standing at the forefront of the emerging women's movement. Building trust between them and new reformers will take time. The development of new groups separate from the older organizations, as Ol'ga Besolova stressed, 'is an important process which is underway; each takes itself seriously, so the unification process should not be accelerated.'<sup>41</sup> While both groups of reformers appreciate the need for time and see long-term possibilities for shared work, we are not sanguine that the tensions and suspicions will be overcome in the near future.

On the other hand, everyone recognizes that the state remains a powerful influence in Russian society and that women must bring their own resources to bear in affecting its policies to benefit women. There are certainly organizations and women activists who have been lobbying the government to create and modify policies; the draft law on the family is one

example, as are the activities of the Union of Women of Russia and the Center for Gender Studies. Coordinated efforts also took place to establish a consultative body on women's issues to the Higher Economic Council and to develop an informational exchange network of women's organizations, the Women's League. Furthermore, local groups have often discovered they must learn to work with the government in order to achieve their goals and survive. The Association of Small Towns' collaboration with the local council in Venev is a good example of a women's group finding ways to enlist the cooperation of local authorities. Furthermore, the elections of 1993 proved that women were capable of organizing and mobilizing to elect women candidates into office. As Fedulova has asserted, 'If we don't influence politics our interests will be defeated. . . . Now it is men who make politics; they can't take into consideration the aspects of women.'<sup>42</sup>

The historical legacy, then, is a double-edged sword for the building of a women's movement in Russia. Although groups (however reformed) that are identified too closely with the old regime and the state may be considered suspect by newer groups of activists, the historical legacy also compels a certain coherence. Women activists seem to have a clear understanding of the necessity of women's influencing government in the transition. Yet, as the quotation from Novikova suggests, there is a powerful sense among the women activists whom we interviewed that women's mobilization in Russia must have as a primary goal the liberation of women from state control, as an experience distinct from but related to that of their male compatriots. It is a compelling motivator for movement-building, but it is also fraught with insecurity.

### *Resource scarcity*

Problems related to competition for scarce resources (most obviously financial, but also human and organizational) compound these complexities. In former times the Soviet Women's Committee, as the official women's organization in the country, received considerable support from the state. Now the Union of Women of Russia and the other fledgling organizations that are either institutionally based (e.g. the Center for Gender Studies) or free-standing (e.g. the Association of Small Towns) must finance themselves through donations, grants, contracts, or other money-making ventures. Many activists noted in our interviews that, although there is no shortage of ideas or projects, there is the problem of money.<sup>43</sup> And also, increasingly, there is a problem of space. New organizations like GAIA, the Association of Small Towns, and some *zhensovet* have difficulty in finding any space at all for their activities. Even the Union of Women of Russia, located in Pushkin's residence in central Moscow, now leases the space formerly provided to it by the state. The dire economic circumstances in Russia mean that women's groups are to some extent competing among

themselves for resources. This is particularly true, as it is in the West, with regard to support from international foundations and institutions. Dubna II came under harsh criticism from many activists who we spoke to, for instance, because of their perception that conference planners from the Center for Gender Studies were trying to limit interchange (and with it, possible collaboration) between other Russian women's organizations and Western participants.<sup>44</sup>

There is evidence of some competition for human and organizational resources as well. As the unhappiness with Dubna II brought to light, access to foreigners was motivated not simply by a desire to acquire externally generated financial support but also by an interest in acquiring information, expertise, and, to some extent, political visibility both at home and abroad. Furthermore, as organizations develop and seek greater influence, particularly on public policy-making at the national level, grassroots support and affiliation with the local groups become more essential. Thus, some at the Union of Women of Russia have charged that at Dubna II the Center for Gender Studies was attempting to pilfer the Union's extensive network of women's organizations in Russia.

It should not be surprising that competition for scarce resources, for political influence, and for visibility have tended to favor the larger, better-established women's organizations such as the Center for Gender Studies and the Union of Women of Russia, or that some small organizations fear domination by them. To a certain extent, these larger organizations might be seen as victims of their own success, especially given concerns about accumulated and centralized power in any organization. National and local groups have attempted to find bases for collaboration, however.<sup>45</sup> For example, the Center for Gender Studies has assisted smaller organizations and allowed them to have a say in the development of the second Dubna conference. The Troitsk Women's Committee and GAIA have been able to develop contacts in a way that does not portend domination of the smaller organization by the larger group in Moscow. The *zhensovet* at the Central Aerohydrodynamics Institute initiated and led efforts to do political education for women with support from the Union of Women of Russia. These initiatives and recent efforts by a range of organizations to develop an informational exchange network illustrate the possibilities for mutually beneficial cooperation.

### **Conclusion**

Resource competition and varying relations to the state will remain central features of women's organizational politics in Russia. They could generate a mode of interaction among women's groups that entrenches conflicts and distrust among activists, although it is as likely that they are simply outgrowths of the historical legacy and the contextual juncture in which

women's politics and mobilization in Russia are located today and that with time can be overcome. We hope that this last will be the case because we see powerful commonalities and ideas emerging from the practices of women activists. Virtually all the activists whom we have interviewed identify women's subordination as existing within a system of patriarchy; all have some conception of Russia as a deeply sexist society; all view their activism as a vehicle for exploring, defining, and understanding the meaning of personality and personal identity. All share the sense that the institutional 'protections' of women under the Soviet state were not 'good' for women; yet all resist the state's efforts to withdraw constitutional guarantees of sexual equality and reduce the (admittedly poor) system of social supports for women and their families. All groups want to transform the state into an arena for advancing women's interests and human rights. Many see their activities not only as benefiting women's interests but also as necessary for the development of a civil society that will be able to advance democracy and ensure that an authoritarian state will not re-emerge. And all believe that in important ways only women can ensure this development of a civil society; indeed, this is where some of the activists seem to embrace essentialist views of women. In the process of organizing, however, activists encounter political forces resentful of their activism, forces that see their activities not only as an unwelcome intrusion into the new politics of men but as a hindrance to the development of economic and governmental reform. Activists constantly face essentialist arguments about women that seek to limit Russian women's autonomy and power. In the process of countering the political essentialism that is so powerful today in Russia, many activists are beginning to share resources more readily and to work together in coordinated ways to combat these negative political and economic effects. Through this process, women may develop a common consciousness and come to articulate and advance a uniquely Russian feminism.

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#### NOTES

- 1 Ol'ga Besolova, *Zhensovet*, Central Aerohydrodynamics Institute, interview, Moscow, July 1991; and Anastasia Posadskaya, Center for Gender Studies, interview, Moscow, March 1992.
- 2 Specifically, we interviewed activists in the Soviet Women's Committee/ Union of Women of Russia, Center for Gender Studies at the Institute for the Socio-economic Study of Population of the Russian Academy of Sciences, at the Institute of Philosophy of the Academy of Sciences, and the Gender Sciences Workshop at the Foreign Policy Association (headed by Alexander Bessmertnykh). We also interviewed activists from GAIA Women's Center, from Women's Creativity Initiative, the Center for Women's Initiatives, the Association of Small Towns, and the Troitsk Women's Association; the Institute for International Entrepreneurial Development; the Congress of Soviet Women; and Family House, a mother's club associated with the Slavic Association. We met and interviewed women Members of Parliament (both before and after the fall) as well as deputies on several committees related to women; a member of the Higher Economic Committee of the Supreme Soviet; members of local Soviets; the editor and staff of *Sudarushka*, a newspaper for women; as well as a number of successful businesswomen and small businesswomen's group members.
- 3 See Clements (1991) and Farnsworth (1980) for discussion of Kollontai and other feminists.
- 4 We would like to acknowledge the influence of Mary Buckley on our own analysis of Soviet history. Her important book *Women and Ideology in the Soviet Union* (1989) has set a standard for subsequent scholarship.
- 5 See Buckley (1989) for an excellent discussion of the 'solving' of the woman question by Stalin.
- 6 *Zhensoveti* were often established at large workplaces; they were supposed to assist women in harmonizing home and work life in order to make advancement at work more likely.
- 7 However, the regime had difficulty increasing the birth rate substantially even in the Stalin years, as women refused 'to return to the childbearing practices of the patriarchal peasant family' (Goldman 1991: 266).
- 8 Clements, however, notes that despite the state's promises to expend more funds on social support services for women and their families, resources were not forthcoming and instead were directed at heavy industry and defense (1991: 276).
- 9 *Current Digest of the Soviet Press* 43, no. 43 (1991): 22.
- 10 For example, in the field of education, where almost 75 percent of the teachers are women, women make up less than 40 percent of directors of middle schools, and among those with higher and middle specialist training, women make up only about 7 percent of leading positions (Strukova 1990: 15).
- 11 *Current Digest of Soviet Press* 44, no. 11 (1992).

- 12 Foreign Broadcast Information Service-Soviet-91-046 (8 March 1991): 70.
- 13 Interview with several members of the Joint Committee on Women's Affairs and Protection of the Family, Mother, and Child, Moscow, March 1992.
- 14 Interviews with Valentina Lenkova, Moscow, December 1992, and with Maria Salliere, Moscow, July 1993.
- 15 *Current Digest of the Soviet Press* 43, no. 43 (1991): 23.
- 16 Comments by Valentina Tereshkova quoted in Danmarks Radio video production, *Soviet Women*, 1986.
- 17 Alevtina Fedulova, interview, Moscow, March 1992.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Vera Soboleva, interview, Moscow, March 1992.
- 20 Alevtina Fedulova, interview, Moscow, March 1992.
- 21 Alevtina Fedulova, interview, Moscow, July 1993.
- 22 Interview with members of the Troitsk Women's Committee, Troitsk, December 1992.
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 Anastasia Posadskaya, interview, Moscow, March 1992.
- 25 Ibid.
- 26 Center for Gender Studies, *Occasional Newsletter*, no. 2: 1.
- 27 Anastasia Posadskaya, interview, Moscow, December 1992.
- 28 Formal sections included panels addressing 'Women in Business', 'Women Starting Businesses', 'Women's Unemployment', 'Women's Organization in the Workplace', 'The Impact of Military Conversion on Women', 'Rural Women', 'Policy on Women', 'Nationalism and Ethnic Problems', 'Women and Electoral Campaigns', 'Women and Education', 'Women and Violence', 'Women and Health', 'Feminism and New Women's Movements', 'Women and Creativity', 'Women in Religion and Religion for Women', 'Girls Transition from Adolescence to Adulthood', 'Women's International Collaboration', 'Management of Nonprofit Organizations', 'Issues of Institutionalization of the Independent Women's Forum', 'Computers for Women', 'Traditional and Contemporary Families', and 'Women in Politics'. There were also some classes on studying a foreign language, assertiveness training, and 'Listening to Your Body'.
- 29 Anastasia Posadskaya, interview, Moscow, December 1992.
- 30 Nadezhda Shvedova, interview, Moscow, July 1991.
- 31 Elena Ershova, interview, Moscow, July 1991.
- 32 It should be emphasized that collecting signatures from Russians outside the state of Russia was not an attempt to pad the petition. It was not clear that those Russians, who were eligible to vote, could not sign petitions.
- 33 Nadezhda Shvedova, interview, Washington, DC, March 1994.
- 34 The process was not easy: some political resistance and rumors of Central Intelligence Agency connections came from local party officials; townspeople were passive and dependent on Tsertsvadze for the entire project. Only with the election of a new town authority in Venev did she secure much public support.
- 35 Tatiana Tsertsvadze, interview, Venev, December 1992.
- 36 Ibid.
- 37 Elena Ershova, interview, Moscow, July 1991.
- 38 Elvira Novikova, interview, Moscow, July 1991.
- 39 The statement was later published as 'Women in Action'.
- 40 Alevtina Fedulova, interview, Moscow, July 1991.
- 41 Ol'ga Besolova, interview, Moscow, July 1991.

- 42 Alevtina Fedulova, interview, Moscow, July 1991.
- 43 At one research institute we visited, we were asked what research we would like done and were told that it could be done well by them.
- 44 A second criticism was that the conference organizers were seeking to supplant the leadership role held by the Soviet Women's Committee for so many years. This perception was perhaps fortified by the proceedings at a panel at which one of the participants (who was also a member of the conference planning committee) proposed a hierarchical model for the Russian women's movement, a model which was seen by many present as curiously reminiscent of the structure of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Needless to say, the proposal was roundly critiqued by the gathering.
- 45 Indeed, women activists from the provinces and other areas outside Moscow were equally (and perhaps even more) interested in developing such contacts.

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## ELUDING THE FEMINIST, OVERTHROWING THE MODERN?

Transformations in twentieth-century Iran

Zohreh T. Sullivan

*The first chapter in this collection showed the centrality of 'modernity' to both anti-colonial and feminist movements; being modern often entailed accepting 'Western' styles and values, notably a secular or non-religious way of life. However, throughout the entire course of anti-colonial activism, alternate strategies such as pan-Arabism and the revival of Islam had developed. The reinvigoration of Islamic community envisioned the rule of Muslim clerics and the imposition of their teachings throughout society. In this way the Western identity - either capitalist or socialist - that had so shaped and, as many argued, oppressed colonized peoples could be thrown off for a more traditional, authentic one.*

*Islamic fundamentalism gained ground throughout North Africa and the Middle East, and nowhere more so than in Iran. In 1979 Islam-inspired forces overthrew the brutal and Western-allied government of the Pahlavi dynasty, which had come to power in the 1920s, and replaced it with a religious government. Under the rule of the Ayatollah Khomeini, the restoration of strict gender order and the subordination of women became a touchstone for de-Westernization and thus the basis for the restoration of true independence for Iranians. As Islamic fundamentalism spread in North Africa and the Middle East, feminism became seen as traitorous, and some women activists fled for their lives.*

*Simultaneously, however, as gender segregation and women's seclusion were restored, opportunities opened up for women. That is, if women were not supposed to have contact with unrelated men, then entire categories of services had to be staffed by women. Thus, women's presence in education, social welfare, and medicine, for example, became stronger. Nor did activism die out, as this chapter suggests. Instead, women found new ways to make their claims and even used old ones, sometimes with dire consequences. This chapter looks at novel forms of resistance and feminism where feminism is outlawed. It proposes that people must*