



**Sheila Fitzpatrick, Yuri Slezkine, eds.** *In the Shadow of Revolution: Life Stories of Russian Women from 1917 to the Second World War.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000. ix + 443 pp. \$32.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-691-01949-9; \$80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-01948-2.

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## Out of the Shadows: Russian Women in a Revolutionary Era

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“Great is the gulf between the life of a woman in a Communist State and in a capitalist civilization,” began a 1932 article in *The New York Times Magazine* by photojournalist Margaret Bourke-White after a visit to the Soviet Union. Despite the pressure to contribute to the Five Year Plan and to conform to “the New Order of Things,” Bourke-White continued, “the Russian woman responds to the trimmings of life in precisely the same manner as her sister” in France, England, or the United States: “In her longing for fashionable clothes, for adornment, for attention, she is wholly feminine.” Based on a recent visit to the Soviet Union, Bourke-White explained, the Russian woman did not see her job “as an escape from domesticity, or as an attempt to assert herself in a world of men,” nor was she ever “conscious of a conflict between her career and her personal life.” Yet in spite of her determination to make all necessary sacrifices to fulfill the economic plans, Bourke-White concluded that “the factory girl in Moscow is just as eager to enhance her attractiveness as is the lady of Park Avenue.” Based on her travels in Moscow, Bourke-White then described the efforts made by Russian women to acquire materials and patterns for more stylish clothing as well as other “feminine accessories” designed to improve appearances; she concluded with a humorous account of how her “simplest sort of tweed suit” became an impromptu model for an enthusiastic dress designer. In her final paragraph,

Bourke-White declared that the Soviet state’s desire to allow women to acquire “beautiful things” demonstrated that whether in Moscow or New York, Leningrad or Paris, “Fundamentally woman and fashion are the same in all of them.” [1]

Bourke-White’s perspective on the experiences of women in a different culture poses a familiar dilemma for scholars and students. In this article, “the Russian woman” is presented as a specimen for analysis, with particular attention to actions and intentions related to her appearance. The observer is drawn to those aspects of such behavior which are strikingly different, such as the expectation that all women would hold paid employment, or which are reassuringly familiar, such as the Russian girls poring over foreign fashion magazines. In both cases, however, the behavior of Soviet women is recorded, reported, and evaluated in terms of the degree of divergence from or conformity to externally defined normative categories of behavior, attitudes, and interactions. The observations made on the streets of Moscow and in the offices of the “Institute for Research on Women’s Styles” serve only to confirm claims made at the beginning and the end about the fundamental continuities in the lives of women in communist and capitalist societies. These reports by a woman who became a pioneer in the masculine world of photojournalism about a society known to the outside world primarily for its self-proclaimed campaign to reject “bourgeois culture” thus served to underscore a more familiar message about es-

sential, universal, and immutable qualities of all women.

Yet this perspective leaves out so much that is in fact essential to understanding the position, behaviors, and attitudes of Russian women in the decades after the revolution. Rather than interpreting Russian women in terms of their variation from or resemblance to Western normative models, we could ask what meanings did these women themselves attach to their experiences, values, and aspirations? While the observer's eye (and camera, in the case of Bourke-White) may have been drawn to familiar patterns, so many aspects of Russian women's lives were invisible to an outsider unfamiliar with the daily routines and extraordinary context of this period. Most importantly, the voices of Russian women were heard in this article only to the extent that they illustrated the dichotomy of similarity and difference: a woman who offered an American visitor the equivalent of twenty dollars for a beret made in Paris, or the pleas of a factory worker for "a little perfume" from a Western traveller. In a pattern repeated throughout the twentieth century, Westerners would "find" in the Soviet Union, and especially in the behavior, statements, and even appearance of Russian women, primarily a reflection of what they believed about their own societies.[2]

This rich and significant dialogue of Soviet women is elaborately illustrated in the document collection *In the Shadow of Revolution: Life Stories of Russian Women from 1917 to the Second World War*. Edited by Sheila Fitzpatrick of the University of Chicago and Yuri Slezkine of the University of California at Berkeley, this collection of excerpts from memoirs, interviews, and autobiographical articles provides a fascinating set of source materials for understanding the experiences of Russian women from the revolution through the second world war. The forty-five women contributors reflect a broad range of political affiliations, social backgrounds, and regional contexts, while the three-part division of the selections allows for a sense of chronological development: Civil War as a Way of Life (1917-1920), Toward "New Forms of Life" (the 1920s), and "Life Has Become Merrier" (the 1930s). As the following discussion will illustrate, the major themes covered in these selections and the editors' contributions make this document collection an excellent resource for studying the lives of Russian women. *In the Shadow of Revolution* is thus appropriate reading for courses in modern Russian/Soviet history and European women's history, as well as any course that examines cross-cultural and historical development of gender roles, women's political engagement, or the formation of identities.[3] In addition to filling a significant gap

in available source materials, this collection is an important contribution to the ongoing efforts of Soviet historians to reinterpret and represent the twentieth century in the light of new sources and emerging perspectives on everyday experiences.

A defining feature of all these accounts, as the editors state explicitly, is the tremendous influence of public events on the lives of these women. As Fitzpatrick argues in her introductory essay, "Lives and Times," Russian women thought and wrote about the turning points in their lives in terms of great public events rather than personal moments: "almost all our autobiographical narrators told their life stories as part of the story of their times" (p. 15). The significant moments in these accounts, in other words, were the revolutions of 1917, the civil war that followed and lasted until 1921, the collectivization, dekulakization, and industrialization of the first Five Year Plan era, the waves of emigration and exile, and the terror that ran continuously if unevenly throughout the 1930s. Events of a more personal or familial nature, such as marriage, childbirth, divorce, or the loss of a relative, tend to be described less as turning points and more as illustrations of the great influence of public events. These accounts thus reflect both the extraordinary experiences of Soviet life as well as a distinctive form of fashioning personal narratives about lives in a time of turmoil.

This sense in which personal stories are interpreted in terms of public events can be seen in a number of accounts where the revolution and the establishment of Soviet power become defining moments. These transformations were recorded by both supporters and opponents of the regime. For Zinaida Zhemchuzhnaia, a teacher who supported the anti-Bolshevik forces in the civil war, the experience of having her home searched and valuables confiscated was remembered as "my Soviet baptism" because at that moment she had the following realization: "My life and property were no longer mine" (p. 105). Other women made the contrary argument that the revolution offered the possibility of a brand new life. For Agrippina Korevanova, "A stern, cheerless, lonely path in life" before the revolution had finally given way to "this straight and bright road of ours" (p. 169). Evdokia Maslennikova, a textile worker who became a Communist Party member, referred to the establishment of Soviet power as the moment "when the second half of my biography begins" (p. 392), while A. N. Vinogradova, a weaver, stated in 1936 that although she was forty-five years old, her new life began at the time of the revolution: "I have been truly alive for only eighteen years" (p. 334).

According to Z. S. Budagian, a wartime orphan who became an agricultural brigade leader, the revolution meant that “Soviet power, the [communist] party, and Comrade Stalin took the place of my father” (p. 336). Yet the full implications of the ways that public processes not only shaped, but displaced and even transformed, individual and familial influences could be seen in the strikingly contrary example of an elderly woman who responded to the mounting wave of arrests in the late 1930s by rewriting her diaries to add praise of Stalin, with the hope that if their home were ever searched, “when they read this, they will realize how loyal our family is” (p. 410).

Other aspects of women’s lives reveal a similar range of experiences and perceptions. Almost all the accounts reveal a sharp divide along political lines. Opponents of the Soviet system present their experiences in terms of processes of oppression, betrayal, and alienation. In these stories, the personal and political are inseparable, as the hopes that followed the fall of Tsarism give way to discouraging and ultimately destructive processes in public and private worlds. Supporters of the Soviet system, by contrast, depict a contradictory path as the darkness of the pre-revolutionary world yields to the bright promises of the new socialist future. The context within which the pieces were written directly influenced their structure. Excerpts taken from memoirs written and published in emigration, for example, convey a far more distinctive personal voice, and provide richer discussion of familial relationships, than do the speeches, articles, and interviews prepared for publication in the Stalinist 1930s. As argued quite effectively by Slezkine’s introductory discussion of these “artfully arranged compositions” (p. 18), each account reflected the range of narrative frameworks available to those seeking to fashion their lives in accordance with a time that inspired fear as well as enthusiasm.

Even as they traverse familiar lines, however, these stories provide ample grounds for a critical reading of these intersections of public and private worlds. The same metaphors are used to describe seemingly contradictory experiences, while the same historical processes are described in sharply contradictory ways. The early stages of the Soviet period were experienced by “enthusiastic young people” like Paraskeva Ivanova as a time of great promise, when they clamored to be given some opportunity to help build socialism (p. 213). For Sofia Volkonskaia, however, a member of the pre-revolutionary nobility who returned to Russia in 1919 to search for her husband, the experience of living under Soviet authorities involved an increasingly bitter process

of alienation which ultimately led to a second emigration a few years later. Once again, her fate was presented and evaluated in terms of the response of others: “Never in all my life have I seen such fierce envy as that which burned in the eyes of the friends to whom I said good-bye before going abroad” (p. 161).

A similar dichotomy was evident in the “great break” associated with the onset of Stalinism. For Soviet activists, such as Antonina Solovieva, the collectivization of agriculture was a heroic campaign, in which the bravery, dedication, and comradeship of youth were forged in the face of “enemy” retaliation that led to the “mysterious” disappearance of her friend Marusia Kashina (pp. 238-240). Describing the exact same process, Nenila Bazileva and Praskovia Dorozhinskaia described dekulakization as a time when agents came at night to search homes and “you had everything taken away from you” (pp. 241-242). Other women saw “sick, hungry people everywhere,” but only later came to understand the significance of these victims (p. 326). In a similar way, narratives by Inna Shikheeva-Gaister, Valentina Bogdan, and Ekaterina Olitskaia describe the devastating effects of the terror of the late 1930s, when they and many of their friends, neighbors, and family members faced mass arrests by the secret police (pp. 376-386, 400-402, 424-434). Yet the removal of elite women prompted a very different response from a cleaning woman who worked in the same building as the engineer Bogdan. Told that a local official had been arrested and his wife, “a big Communist, too,” had committed suicide, this cleaning woman offered this seemingly straightforward response: “Then she got what she deserved!” (p. 408). Left unstated, however, was whether this response to her death was an expression of dissatisfaction with the elitist aspirations of the communist bosses or a protest against the repressive measures taken by these bosses. In any case, this range of responses is essential for any interpretation of women’s experiences during the terror.

Family roles are not absent in these accounts, but they are transformed by the context. Children most often appear as symbols of broader processes. The commitment of the young women building the new city of Komsomolsk in the Far East was demonstrated by the fact that, in the words of Alla Kiparenko, “Not a single one even asked for a lighter assignment because of pregnancy or sickness, although they had the right to do so” (p. 279). The brighter future promised by Soviet ideology is now promised to the younger generation, as in this statement by a factory worker recognized by Soviet officials as a Stakhanovite in the mid 1930s: “Now I look at my daugh-

ter Tamara, and my heart fills with joy. Like all the children in our wonderful country, she was born under the bright sun of socialism. She knows the true happiness of childhood” (p. 391). Writing about the same time period, however, Nenila Bazeleva refers, almost in passing at the end of a brief account, to having lost five of her ten children after her husband was arrested during the great terror (p. 241).

Yet more familiar patterns are also evident in these narratives. While Anna Balashova was giving birth to a child in 1927, her husband left her and took much of the property in their home, which was regained only by pressing grievances through the courts (p. 250). For a young friend of engineer Bogdan at work in a prison camp in the far north, having a child was different than raising a child. When asked “What about your daughter, aren’t you going to take her with you at some point?” she replied, “Only when she’s capable of taking care of herself and helping me” (pp. 404-405). In the words of Olitskaia, the birth of a daughter in a time of revolutionary turmoil meant that “she complicated our life while also enriching it” (p. 212).

At times, the force of circumstances tore at the very fabric of basic human relationships. Anna Andzhievskaiia, a dedicated communist, asked her brother to look after her baby while Red forces fled from White forces in the North Caucasus. When Andzhievskaiia returned, she looked through piles of bodies for her own child, but without success. When she finally located her brother, more than a year later, he explained that he had left the girl with a nurse who promised to bring her to her mother, but instead left her with a local woman with a newborn baby of her own. When Andzhievskaiia finally located this woman, she was told that her daughter had died just a few weeks later (coincidentally, on the same day Andzhievskaiia’s husband was executed by occupying British forces in Baku). Andzhievskaiia was suspicious, however, that her own child was being held by the woman, but she was helpless to do anything: “I cried at the grave of that child, not knowing whether it was mine or someone else’s” (pp. 78-81).

The pain of lost children cut across political lines, however, as was evident in further examples from the 1930s. In 1937, as the neighbors and friends of Bogdan were being arrested, she took the precautionary measure of asking her mother to come take away her daughter Natasha: “I was afraid that if we were arrested, she would be sent to an orphanage and get lost there” (p. 409).

Fruma Treivas had taken a similar precaution, so her son was not present when the secret police came to arrest her husband in the summer of 1937, and then returned to arrest her a few months later. She was four months pregnant, however, and so was imprisoned in “a special place for sick and pregnant women.” She gave birth and nursed her baby in prison, and ended up sharing a room with ten other women, each with her own children. In an oral narrative recorded more than fifty years later, she recalled: “conditions were decent ... sheets were old and torn, but clean ... we bathed our children every day ... meals consisted of gruel and cereal made of shredded grain, and sometimes boiled fish.” Early in 1938, Treivas was sentenced to eight years in a labor camp, at which point she learned that her husband had probably been executed soon after his arrest. Her son Seva remained in this camp for more than a year, but health conditions were so bad that Treivas was forced to ask her sister, who already was taking care of her other child, for assistance: “my baby was dying” (pp. 325-330). In a cell occupied by Olitskaia, however, a woman prisoner who had also spent time in “a mother’s camp” described the loss of her own child: “they took him away, literally tore him right out of my arms.” Her two older boys were placed in an orphanage, while her youngest child “ended up in a camp nursery somewhere,” and she wondered if she would ever see him again (p. 427).

These same experiences are also revealed from a child’s perspective in an interview conducted much later in the Soviet period. In the early 1930s, Maria Belskaia’s family was forced to leave their village after they were called kulaks and had their property confiscated. While her family wandered in a desperate search for shelter and food, this eight-year-old girl and her two younger siblings were abandoned on the road, because their mother believed that they were better off separated from their “kulak” family: “Mother left little Ira and me on the porch of an orphanage. When they saw someone come get us, Mother and the other kids went on their way.” Rather than being taken in right away, however, Maria and her sister Ira spent a month “camped out by the wall of a two-story wooden house where the local officials worked,” while the latter checked out Maria’s fictitious claims of being an orphan. When these two little girls were allowed into an orphanage, they were finally spared the anguish of having to beg for food on the streets: “Oh, how happy we were! They liked little Ira and me there, and we loved them, too, with all our hearts.” It was only some six months later that their parents were able to locate all three children, and bring them back to the collec-

tive farm, where their lives finally started to improve (pp. 230-234).

These materials provide an excellent resource for teaching Russian/Soviet and women's history as well as for comparative research projects on women's lives and the gendering of identities. *In the Shadow of Revolution* is especially well-suited for courses on modern Russian history or European women's history in the early twentieth century. The selections are quite substantial, and would require a considerable investment of student time. But the rewards are immense, because the rich texture of the women's narratives will enable students to identify with particular subjects while also exploring the complexities of this era of Soviet history. The chronological division of sections facilitates the assignment of materials, while the range of genres could allow for discussion of the differences between narratives written for a Soviet public and those produced in emigration, or between accounts produced within a particular context and those generated years or even decades later.

Materials from *In the Shadow of Revolution* coordinate effectively with the most readily available accounts of women's experiences in the revolutionary and Stalinist periods. The sections on Russian/Soviet women in *Changing Lives* by Bonnie Smith and the chapter by Richard Stites in *Becoming Visible*, for example, introduce a number of issues that could be more fully explored through the women's accounts in this collection.[4] Whereas historians have examined changing views of love, marriage, and maternity primarily from the perspective of leading Bolshevik activists, such as Alexandra Kollontai, students reading *In the Shadow of Revolution* would be able to understand how women across the social spectrum dealt with the tensions between such personal issues and the broader context of political conflict and social mobilization.[5] In a similar manner, the broad changes associated with this period, such as economic modernization, political consolidation, or ideological transformation, acquire more complex meanings when they can be seen as part of the context within which women of varied ages, social backgrounds, and political persuasions were living their lives.

These materials also supplement the available published materials by and about Russian/Soviet women, including interviews and memoir accounts, the documents collected in European, Soviet, and modern world history readers, and my online translation project.[6] Finally, these materials provide a welcome balance to the first-hand accounts by Western travelers, such as the ar-

ticle by Margaret Bourke-White cited above, whose preconceptions about Russia and socialism tended to predetermine their observations and evaluations of women's voices and experiences.[7] While the latter are still useful for students to read, especially when they are able to assess critically the perspective of the author, this collection provides an opportunity for a more textured view of women's attitudes and experiences in the midst of these remarkable changes.

Yet the value of *In the Shadow of Revolution* is not limited to instructional uses. Drawing on unprecedented access to archival materials and building on social theories regarding the formation of subjectivities in comparative contexts, historians of the early Soviet period have become increasingly interested in issues of identity on both individual and collective levels. While Soviet historians have long recognized that the power of the Soviet state depended upon the imposition of categories upon the population, only recently has there been a sustained effort to understand the extent to which this process involved a creative and constructive process of collaboration. As historian Fitzpatrick has argued in another context, the new arguments that Soviet historians are making about processes of constructing and contesting identities "deserve to be carefully pondered theorists and comparative historians as well as by Russianists." [8] The personal accounts in this collection offer direct evidence of both the complexity and significance of these questions in the Soviet context.[9]

This collection of women's narratives vividly illustrates this process of negotiating new identities in a time of crisis. For students interested in the complexities of Soviet experiences in the interwar period, for scholars examining cross-cultural patterns of women's narratives, and for Russian historians exploring the processes of constructing Soviet identities, this collection will become essential, and extremely enjoyable, reading. The selections are long enough to become engrossing in themselves, but also varied enough to avoid a sense of repetition. The appearance of such a volume is to be welcomed by historians interested in the intersections of Russian/Soviet and women's/gender history. It can only be hoped that such an anthology will inspire further efforts along similar lines.

#### Notes

[1]. Margaret Bourke-White, "Silk Stockings in the Five-Year Plan," *The New York Times Magazine*, 14 February 1932, pp. 4-5. For a similar report from a year earlier, see Robin Kinkead, "Drab Clothes of the Russian Girl,"