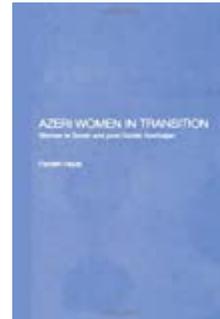




**Farideh Heyat.** *Azeri Women in Transition: Women in Soviet and Post-Soviet Azerbaijan.* London and New York: Routledge, 2002. 224 pp. \$90.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7007-1662-3.



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## Politicization of Women's Bodies

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For decades the notion of the “double burden” has been near axiomatic in scholarship on the lives of Soviet women. Active in almost every Soviet workplace, women were doubly expected to maintain all the full time responsibilities of house and family. But not all Soviet women were Slavs, Farideh Heyat reminds us, and not all brought the same expectations of family, home, and social structure to the Soviet experiment. Heyat, an Iranian Azeri who emigrated to the United Kingdom and who began work on this book for her doctorate in anthropology at SOAS, profitably shifts the frames of the standard Sovietological text by emphasizing the contrasts with her own Iranian background. “Here was an alternative society,” she writes of the early idealism that drew her to the former Soviet republic, “with official principles of equality [where] entirely different rules and attitudes governed women’s lives” (p. 1). Between 1992 and 2000, Heyat conducted several research stays in the capital of the newly independent Azerbaijan.

At the core of her text are twenty life histories she collected from urban women, most of them academics,

intellectuals, or researchers. “Within a single lifetime,” Heyat observes, the oldest of these women shared a world where “early capitalism, public adherence to Islam, Russian colonial rule and close ties with Iran and Turkey were superseded by decades of socialist indoctrination, Russification, and state-imposed estrangement from their neighbours” (p. 10).

What emerges is an engaging portrait where Heyat finds that “the pattern and mode of modernisation in Azerbaijan and its impact on women was quite different from that of either the West or the Muslim Middle East” (p. 40). She elaborates on this in at least three ways. First, she suggests how the burden upon Azeri women was alleviated, to a degree, by the belief that it was unseemly for women to be too active in street life. As a result, “shopping, taking things for repair, even taking the garbage out” were confined to the male domain. “A number of my widowed informants,” Heyat writes, “told me that until their husbands died they had never bought bread” (p. 117). Second, she notes how these well-educated, professional women had little access to paid domestic help. Those who sought it had to go to

elaborate lengths to avoid the censure of neighbors and government officials alert to unwelcome class exploitation. Third, she tracks how, beginning with Lenin and intensifying from WWII onwards, Soviet officials obliged women to renounce the veil. Here many Azeris found themselves trading one piety for another in the adoption of Bolshevik social codes. In the “fashion denunciation”–feared by Soviet women whose co-workers could levy class consciousness against them based on a noticeably foreign-made pair of boots (p.154)–Heyat finds an all too common politicization of women’s bodies as spectacle, this time with a communist twist.

Scholars of Central Asia and the Caucasus will find particular value in Heyat’s correctives to long-held canonic assumptions about gender politics in the region. It is now a given that while socialism did not guarantee the kind of sexual equality initially promised, it went a long way to ameliorating the harsher social codes that held women back. But not all Azeri women, Heyat is right to remark, were waiting for emancipation on the eve of Soviet power. “The oil boom of Baku, its cosmopolitan population, and oil-related industrialisation,” she writes, “had already led to significant changes in important areas of material culture, consumption, dress code, and the education of women” (p. 58). Contrary, then, to the position advanced by Gregory Massell in his influential *The Surrogate Proletariat* (Princeton, 1972), Heyat shows how fledgling Soviet Azerbaijan was able to call on a significant contingent of Muslim women to organize the new republic.[1] One result was an unexpected generational twist. In contrast to the proverbial march of liberalisation and emancipation across the twentieth century, Heyat shows how Azeris who came of age in the days of social experimentation, guided by Leninism, were often more outgoing than their daughters, educated under the more conservative dictates of post-war Stalinism.

This chronicle of Azeri women’s lives is the first book-length project of its kind in English. Well organized and accessibly written, I would speculate that it may be the best book on gender in Azerbaijan rendered in any language. The style, happily, bears no traces of the dissertation genre from which it took shape. Indeed, if this is the author’s inaugural project, then scholars of the Caucasus should have much to look forward to in work to come.

Surely the most tedious reviews now move on to what the author did not discuss, where the reviewer cheerfully brushes aside how the author has taken pains to circum-

scribe his or her topic, and has made choices along the way. So let me repeat that Heyat met her goals ably, elegantly, and with dispatch. Yet I am struck in reading this work by a remarkably consistent pattern in the study of gender in the former Soviet Union—with a strong drive towards urban centers, the present tense, and ethnopolitical categories of analysis. It is a pattern that leans heavily on the post-Soviet setting, where research, as in so many countries, works on the unstable ground between design and circumstance. Heyat’s main fieldwork took place in 1994 and 1995 when Armenia and Azerbaijan were moving toward an uneasy truce in the catastrophic war over Nagorno-Karabagh. One can certainly expect that this makes questions of mobility and access political, as much as intellectual choices. Yet I would suggest that gender studies from across the former Soviet world, in peace and in war, are remarkably consistent in their content. In the remainder of this review, I reflect, then, on some of the key absences, and choose the most notable: regional and social diversities (or alternately, internal difference), archival research, and the problem of the nation-state.

The terrain Heyat covers in this text has not previously been mapped in such an accessible fashion, but it is the case that similar sociological works on women of the urban intelligentsia abound in post-Soviet scholarship. Countless World Bank studies, NGO reports, and scholarly articles reprise the stuff that Heyat has transformed here into an elegant volume. With the rare exception of researchers like Mary Matossian and Georgia, whose work were formative texts for a generation, the security constraints of the Soviet period afforded little encouragement for foreign researchers to venture mentally or physically beyond republican capitals. Yet in the ten years that have followed the collapse of the USSR, we find remarkably little interest, among almost all recent texts on Azerbaijan, for example, in the two-thirds of Azeri society living outside of Baku. To be sure, the subjects of Heyat’s study are more than worthy, since elite women are a considerable social force in Muslim societies, as Yemen scholar Anne Meneley illustrated so vividly in her ethnography. In her project, Heyat expressly works to move beyond divides of public and private, advocating “a more fluid system of thought and action in which values and cultural norms arising from an ethnic Azeri origin also permeated the social domain guided by officialdom, and vice versa” (p. 6). As such, one would expect the same plasticity in tracking the diversity of Azeri experience, not least in rural life, where the domains of public and private are configured so very differently, with

women working alongside men in field and garden. The risk for those of us who employ fieldwork methods, seeking out subjects who are effectively “most like us” (as the historian Ron Suny has contended in so much of his own work on the Caucasus), is to somehow equate nation with urban intelligentsia.

Heyat’s study emphasises that her fieldwork experience “called for a far more historically oriented approach than is common practice in social anthropology,” especially when “[h]istory has in fact been at the centre of politics in Soviet Azerbaijan” (p. 10). Despite these healthy nods, a strange presentism runs through this work, as it does through much recent work on Soviet-area gender politics. Leila Ahmed’s *Women and Gender in Islam* (Kazi, 1996) makes clear the difficulty of piecing together histories of actors long excluded from public discourse.[4] But it also underscores how much is at stake.

Working from published accounts of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, Heyat walks us through familiar territory introduced in earlier English-language works by Ayse Rorlich, Dragadze, and Nayerreh Tohidi. Yet Baku and its regional archives contain a myriad of documents—most of them in the Azeri language and as yet untapped by Soviet-area scholars trained in Russian—on unveiling campaigns, the *Zhenotdel* (Women’s Bureau), and cultural re-education programs that would help us assign a more human face to the lives of men and women who lived through the frequently violent transitions from Russian imperial control (1813-1917) to Transcaucasian Federation (1918) to fledgling independent state (1918-1920) to Soviet republic (1920-1991). As a result of the absence of these sources, we know a great deal about the phenomenon of gender bias but far less about the specific mechanisms by which it evolved and was exercised.

The concept of nationality, with its mutually constitutive vectors of inclusion and exclusion, not only governs global politics, but much of the market for the books we read and write. Certainly, in the book at hand, the focus on Azeri women productively takes us beyond the generalized Slavs of Sovietology, or the generalized Muslims of Islamica. “Unlike much of the literature on gender in the Muslim world that does not probe into the impact of ethnicity (except for South Asia),” Heyat writes, “this study discusses the role of ethnic relations and competition in determining the pre-Soviet elite styles, and highlights the role of ethnicity” (p. 6). But can this go too far?

The Azeri setting chosen by Heyat begs this question

most keenly. For centuries the Caucasus have been famous as a dense conglomeration of religions, languages and peoples imperfectly drawn together around changing allegiances of empire, Silk Road trade, and communism. Yet this very plurality of social orders has also long made the mountain region a daunting site for ethnologists and historians. Many have side-stepped this prolix diversity by taking refuge in one of the area’s seemingly bounded ethnic groups; yet the boundaries are rarely as clear as most texts make them out to be, if they are ever clear at all. Overestimating the boundedness of local groupings risks losing sight of the dynamic, multi-sited dimensions of religious and economic ties in the region; at its most problematic, it feeds a political stance that lends academic credibility to the kinds of nationalist isolationism creating such havoc in the Caucasus today. One book does not change this wave, but many books might.

At the outset, Heyat emphasises that Baku was distinctive as a “highly cosmopolitan centre with an international industrial workforce, where in the later Soviet era there was a considerable social mingling among members of various ethnic groups” (p. 3). Indeed, until the recent wave of ethnic cleansings across the Caucasus, Baku was, by most markers, the single most cosmopolitan city in the entire USSR, achieving a slim Azeri majority population only by 1970. Russian, Armenian, Georgian, Persian, and Daghestani women, among others, were the most prominent non-Azeris joining, if not leading, the professional circles described in this book. What, then, came of this cultural mixing and borrowing?

Anthropology rewards the study of highly circumscribed communities, where the boundaries of the nation-state are as virtuous as any in the delineation of old and new cosmologies. But the relative absence of non-Azeris in this text—by way of reference or context—questions the price we all pay for this scholarly convenience. The question is far from an esoteric one in the Caucasus, so famously saturated ethnically, religiously, linguistically, and politically. It is easy to understand why any of us would embrace the idiom of the nation-state to organize our studies, but perhaps it is too easy. Maybe we should all make this choice more difficult, so that new work not only generates better understanding of the difficult pluralisms forged behind us, but perhaps to guide new pluralisms ahead.

#### Notes

[1]. Gregory Massell, *The Surrogate Proletariat: Moslem women and Revolutionary Strategies in Soviet Cen-*

*tral Asia, 1919-1929* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972).

[2]. Mary Matossian, *The Impact of Soviet Policies in Armenia* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1962); and, Tamara Dragadze, *Rural Families in Soviet Georgia: A Case Study in Ratcha Province* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988).

[3]. Anne Meneley, *Tournaments of Value: Sociability and Hierarchy in a Yemeni Town* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996).

[4]. Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

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