Perestroika

and Soviet Women

EDITED BY MARY BUCKLEY

PERESTROIKA AND SOVIET WOMEN

edited by

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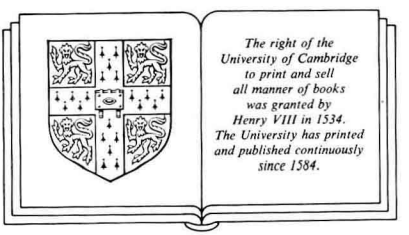

Cambridge University Press

Cambridge New York Port Chester
Melbourne Sydney

Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011–4211, USA
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Victoria 3166, Australia

First published 1992

Printed in Great Britain at the University Press, Cambridge

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress cataloguing in publication data

Perestroika and Soviet women / edited by Mary Buckley.
p. cm.
Includes index.
ISBN 0 521 41443 1 (hardback) ISBN 0 521 42738 X (paperback)
1. Women – Soviet Union – Social conditions. 2. Feminism – Soviet Union. 3. Soviet Union – Politics and government – 1985 –
4. Perestroïka. I. Buckley, Mary, 1951 –.
HQ1662.P39 1992
305.42'0947–dc20 91–31920 CIP

ISBN 0 521 41443 1 hardback
ISBN 0 521 427 38 X paperback

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Preface

The chapters which follow were all written before the failed coup of August 1991. The processes of change which subsequently ensued were even faster than those witnessed from 1987 to 1991. This makes some of the issues discussed here more salient.

Bolder commitment to a transition to a market economy, for instance, is likely to quicken the pace of unemployment. Already, on 1 August 1991, the Soviet television news programme *Vremia*, had informed viewers that most of the workers recently laid off were women. The month before, the newspaper *Moskovskii Komsomolets* reported that unemployment had officially reached 8 million and might soon be 32 million. How women respond to unemployment, whether new unemployment benefits will be adequate, and how fast the economy can offer new opportunities in an expanded service sector, will be immediate issues. In this context, the notion of an 'adequate male wage' may become more popular. It already enjoys a resonance in some social groups.

In politics, immediate independence for the Baltic states, with other republics soon to follow suit, makes the relationship between feminism and nationalism more timely. And heightened discredit for the Communist Party creates more pressing questions about the character of the developing 'male democracy', as some Russian feminists dub it. The request that women withdraw from the Russian Parliament, during the coup, and leave its defence to men, is just one tiny aspect of a much broader and complex problem of woman's place in society.

The instabilities, tensions and disputes of economy, polity and society are unlikely to abate in the 1990s. Although, in many respects, women and men will experience common predicaments, problems and hopes, women will, nonetheless, endure many difficulties that are specific to them. Moreover, different categories of women, divided by

nationality, education, occupation, political views, age, religion and geographic location across a huge land mass, will enjoy different advantages and suffer various constraints.

September 1991 Mary Buckley

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Introduction: women and perestroika

Mary Buckley

Moscow, 1990
Shopper: Give me 200 grammes of cheese, please
Shop assistant: You go and bring me some cheese, then I'll cut off 200 grammes

By 1990, an update of past research into the position of women in the USSR felt long overdue. The fate of perestroika carried serious implications for women's economic, political and social roles and the adoption of glasnost had already radically changed the nature of discussion about women's lives.

Economic reforms were bound to affect women because they made up 51 per cent of industrial labour and office workers and over 40 per cent of agricultural workers. Rationalisation of the labour force, greater mechanisation and efficiency, if successful, could result in higher rates of unemployment for women than men. Land reform would alter how women in the countryside worked. What the economy supplied, or failed to distribute, hit women as consumers, as did rationing from 1989 and sharp price increases in April 1991.

Political reform affected women as voters, as potential candidates in elections, as members of new informal political groups, as instigators of women-only groups, movements and parties and as activists in the more establishment zhensovety, or women's councils, and as employees in the Soviet Women's Committee. The policies of freshly elected soviets affected women as citizens. Nationalist developments and moves towards political decentralisation prompted questions about the relationship between nationalism and feminism and about what women's rights republic-level legislation might try to take away, such as abortion, or what fresh opportunities it might offer.

Changes in society, particularly the use of glasnost in the media, influenced discussions about a host of women's issues, such as prostitution, abortion, contraception and the self-immolation of Muslim women, topics which previously had been taboo. Articles exposed the

existence of prostitution, deplored the horrific conditions of abortion clinics, lamented the lack of contraception and expressed shame at female suicides. In 1987 'moral panic' over new revelations gripped society. Regular media coverage of increases in crime, for instance, sometimes with lurid details of brutality, made women anxious, afraid and appalled. They felt vulnerable to mugging, theft and gang rape. In response, *Rabotnitsa* (Working Woman) in 1990 and in 1991 carried articles on self-defence for women.[1]

Due to glasnost, some democratisation and an end to the monopoly of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), a range of views about policy could be voiced. For example, opponents of abortion in 1991 tried, through the newspaper *Moskovskii Komsomolets*, to encourage readers to sign a petition to the European Parliament expressing the opinion that abortion was an 'act of violence and murder of a tiny being' and also 'violence against the body and against the dignity of woman'. Abortion was a 'crime against humanity' and a 'sin before God'.[2] Supporters of the right to choose, including members of the Radical Party, The Free Association of Feminist Organisations (SAFO), and the Anarchist-radical Union of Youth, demonstrated soon after outside the newspaper's editorial offices carrying placards which read 'No to sexism' and 'No to Vatican officialdom'.[3] The spread of pornography provoked similarly heated arguments about the difference between it and erotica and the popularity of beauty contests, supported by women's magazines, left puzzled opponents outnumbered.

This book sets out to assess the implications of the main aspects of perestroika and glasnost for women, whilst not duplicating the fresh literature that is already in print, or going to press, on prostitution, new women's issues and new women's groups.[4] It does not claim to be exhaustive, merely to evaluate key policy areas with a view to closing a gap which has developed in the literature. The contributors to this anthology do not necessarily share common views about the significance of reform in the Soviet transition period for state, citizen, economy, polity, nationality, gender, generation, society and literature. The aim here is not to present united interpretations, but to prompt debates across a range of issues.

The main findings of past research

Over the past two decades, a substantial literature on Soviet women's economic, political and social roles has been published in the USSR, USA and UK. Research has shown that in the workforce, female labour

needs to be analysed as a distinct category, due to a segmentation according to gender. Women are concentrated in low-paid, low-skilled and often manual work and, on average, earn significantly less than men.[5] In politics, women are largely absent from top posts. For the entire history of the Soviet state there has been an inverse correlation between women and power. The weaker the political institution, the higher the percentage of women active in it.[6] And in home life, women continue to perform a huge share of domestic work – queuing for food, cooking, cleaning, washing clothes, caring for children and sewing.[7]

Since most women of working age are employed outside the home, or involved in full-time study, their stressful domestic shifts, not much eased by the spotty participation of Soviet men, mean that they suffer what Soviet social science dubs a 'double burden' or 'double shift'. Women sleep less than men due to the extent of their chores, relax less with friends, and visit the cinema, theatre and parks less frequently. Moreover, many still believe that this division of domestic labour according to gender is appropriate. Young Muscovite professional men in the early 1990s could still be heard claiming that '100 per cent men do not cook' and 'women are only half women if they do not have children'. Children's books socialise youngsters into traditional gender roles and pedagogical literature reinforces gender-role stereotypes.[8]

The nature of discussion about women's roles has varied according to historical context.[9] In the revolutionary situation of 1917 and after, debates took place around a host of issues, although lines stiffened after 1925. The meaning of socialism for women's liberation and what the latter meant for the former were among the topics discussed in the ebullient 1920s. Under Stalin, a rigid ideological straitjacket declared that the woman question was 'solved'. No more analysis was necessary since women were now emancipated and equal with men. During the relatively brief Khrushchev years, the silence began to thaw, befitting the policy of democratisation. But it was not until Brezhnev's claim that the USSR was in a state of 'developed socialism' characterised by many 'non-antagonistic contradictions' which still had to be solved down the long path to communism, that 'problems' in women's lives could be officially recognised. In a context of labour shortages and falling birthrates in the late 1960s and 1970s, economists, demographers and sociologists engaged in a lively debate about the significance of the female 'double burden'. But, although women's economic and social roles came onto the agenda, particularly their relevance to production and reproduction, many issues remained

untouched. Not until the adoption of glasnost, particularly after 1987, did a range of 'new' issues enter the media and political debate.[10]

What is perestroika?

Perestroika – which translates as 'restructuring' or 'reconstruction' – began as a very general, if undefined, vision of change 'from above' in a highly authoritarian political system. Gorbachev was committed to developing an efficient economy within a 'socialist' system, as he understood the term, which could provide citizens with a much higher standard of living and an improved quality of consumer goods. How precisely to do this, was the problem. Back in 1985, Gorbachev clearly did not envisage that the process he was setting in motion would result in the loss of Eastern Europe, demands from Soviet republics for independence, the rise of new political parties, domestic political chaos and moves towards a free-market economy.

Gorbachev in 1986 described perestroika as a revolutionary process of interrelated changes in economy, politics and society. In the economy, he intended to transform the command administrative system of planning by drastically reducing the number of detailed commands sent down from above to factory managers and farm directors. He wished to give managers greater freedom in decision-making and space in which to take initiative. A policy of *khozraschet*, or cost-accounting, coupled with *samofinansirovanie*, or self-financing, were means to this end. A cooperative sector was also established, encouraging individual and entrepreneurial labour, but it was beset by bureaucratic problems concerning registration and taxes.[11] Land reform was referred to in 1986, but early opposition meant that it was something to be defined later. Taken together, the early economic reforms were intended to accelerate economic growth. By the early 1980s, it had already been acknowledged by economists that economic growth had drastically fallen (according to Abel Aganbegian to zero growth), that problems of supply and distribution were chronic, corruption was widespread and that radical change was therefore imperative.

One serious problem, however, was that the well-established structures and mechanisms of the planning system resisted change. Although, for instance, the Law on State Enterprise of 1987 encouraged ministries to interfere less in the way in which enterprises, or factories, were run, in practice little changed. Laws alone could not transform the system since, quite frequently, they were not imple-

mented. Moreover, resistance to economic reform meant that its opponents would do all they could to counter it.

Thus political reform became pressing. Gorbachev may have had a hazy picture of what he meant by political reform in 1986 but, by 1988, he realised that critics of 'new thinking' had to be shaken out of their powerful positions. The fate of economic reform seemed to depend upon a renewal or revitalisation of political structures. If ministers could be made accountable to popularly elected people's deputies working in more powerful legislatures, then perhaps economic reform could move forward. The especially convened 19th Party Conference of June 1988 debated political reform and laid the groundwork for a new electoral system. The Supreme Soviet in December 1988 approved plans for that system and effectively voted itself, in its old form, out of existence. Henceforth, it would play a more active role in politics and be less of a rubber-stamp for decisions made elsewhere.

The process of *demokratizatsiia* went beyond electoral reform. Citizens were encouraged to elect their own factory directors and rectors of institutes. New emphasis was given to choice, and to reflection upon how best to choose. Gorbachev called upon citizens to develop a 'new psychology', 'new ways', 'new thinking' and to take initiative and responsibility. These characteristics were essential to successful economic reform. The people should no longer be passive cogs, recipients of decisions coming from elsewhere for which they would not take responsibility. New informal political groups were also encouraged to form, independent of the CPSU. Hesitant in 1987, and initially wary of interference from the KGB, in 1988 and 1989 they mushroomed in number and strengthened in confidence. Nationalist movements like Sajudis in Lithuania and Rukh in the Ukraine soon clashed with Moscow, demanding independence. In 1990, Article 6 of the 1977 Soviet Constitution was qualified, thereby ending the leading and guiding role of the CPSU and making way for new political parties. These parties lacked money, large memberships, experience, buildings and inter-republic networks, but political space for them now existed. Democrats, socialists, social-democrats, christian-democrats, protestants, monarchists, anarchists, anarcho-syndicalists, greens, workers, peasants, patriots, nationalists and fascists flourished in various groups, movements and parties, which formed, split and regrouped.

Before the 28th Party Congress convened in 1990, rumours of crisis in the CPSU, impending splits, and the need for new directions circulated. Resistance to the market and to the idea of private property

brought those on the 'right' of the party together, as they called for 'more socialism'. Those on the 'left', such as Boris Yel'tsin, in favour of market solutions and more radical change, walked out of the CPSU, thereby earning popular support among the population. By 1991, striking miners saw 'the market' as the only way forward. Transition to a market economy, serious reductions in government subsidies and price increases became the issues of 1991. Looming on the horizon was the possible convertibility of the rouble, and a law permitting easier exit and entrance to the USSR. In the space of seven years, the undisputed control of the CPSU over economy, polity and society had been shattered. Its ideology was despised, and attacked, by millions. Yet it remained the strongest political party in membership, assets and experience. Its grip on power and policy was diluted, but remained, despite the election of democrats in Moscow, Leningrad and Sverdlovsk. Notwithstanding biting critics, communist values still appealed to many, for a range of ideological, moral, careerist and economic reasons. Moreover, the KGB remained a 'weapon' of the CPSU despite the development of various views within the secret service.[12]

Women's responses to perestroika

Soviet women have responded to perestroika in various ways. Some speeches delivered in January 1987 at the All-Union Conference of Women in Moscow linked women's futures to its fate. The general consensus seemed to be: 'who suffers most in society from the negative aspects of our life? Women. And because of this we shall indeed be the main strength of perestroika – we have a vital interest in it.'[13] But soon after, in 1988, journalist Larisa Kuznetsova caustically dismissed 'male perestroika eloquence', noting that 'Soviet women pinned great hopes on perestroika. But we still see the same queues in shops, the undeclared but disgraceful runaway prices, the terrible poverty of our ill-stocked chemists' shops and the spread of night shift work for women though it is forbidden by law'.[14] The initial hope that perestroika would ease women's lives was quickly met with scepticism. Although many women were pleased that glasnost meant that many problems which were previously ignored, such as the lack of contraception, were now discussed, all the talk had not improved their lives. As Larisa Vasil'eva put it in 1989:

> Freed from many outdated ideas and inaccurate knowledge, glasnost blossomed. But daily life was subjected to new directions when sugar was rationed, and salt, matches, soap and washing powder were in short supply. Women

stood for longer in queues. At work there is the chaos of transition to economic accountability. At home, a woman's husband – a worker or employee – is annoyed about the success of cooperatives. Or if he is a cooperative worker, he is irritated by the tax system and by his precarious position. But most worrying of all, school children, not believing what they hear, are visibly sceptical.[15]

Talk of economic reform had given hope of improved life-styles. But, by 1989, to many women daily life seemed harder than ever before. Glasnost had exposed many problems in need of analysis, but it had not improved the supply of contraceptives nor ended the horrific conditions of abortion clinics. It had revealed, condemned and deplored, but it had not delivered. It had created 'moral panic' about crime, homelessness and violence, but problems still existed. And crucial for the future of the USSR, Soviet youth was alienated from the system and from the reform process, reluctant to 'take initiative' in the ways in which Gorbachev wanted. Support for perestroika seemed to come from intellectuals over forty. At best, it was a revolution of the middle-aged.

Many women, worn out by the pressures of daily life, remained indifferent to new discussions of gender roles. Nevertheless, male domination of society, politics and economics was finally aired by glasnost, albeit in limited arenas, such as women's magazines, the occasional article in academic journals, in the discussions of the Soviet Women's Committee and in the meetings and conferences of new women's groups. Women's studies, too, began to develop, albeit with resistance from many Academicians. As an academic discipline, it was alien to the USSR, notwithstanding the huge outpouring in the 1970s of candidate degree dissertations on the position of women in the USSR. The idea of 'women's studies' had always smacked of 'bourgeois feminism,' and had thus been ideologically unsound.

One of the most intractable and painful results of democratisation for women was animosity among different nationalities. In the Caucasus, this took on violent and cruel forms. In despair, one woman wrote to the Central Committee of the CPSU:

My mother is Russian, my father is Azerbaidzhani and my husband is Armenian. Now my family is incensed. I must stay in Baku, but my husband and two sons have been driven out of the house. Where they are now wandering, I do not know. Of what are my children guilty? For what should I be blamed? How should we live now? I am no longer young. I raised the children with difficulty and thought that now we could just live. Who will answer for all of this?[16]