

# Women in Russia

EDITED BY DOROTHY ATKINSON,  
ALEXANDER DALLIN &  
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and Gail Warshofsky Lapidus



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## Preface

THIS VOLUME grew out of a conference, held on the Stanford University campus May 29–June 1, 1975, under the title, “Women in Russia: Changing Realities and Changing Perceptions.” The three editors constituted the organizing committee of the conference. The interest which it aroused, the wide participation, and the scholarly discussions which preceded and followed, all underscore the importance—and heretofore, the relative neglect—of the subject.

The status of women in the Soviet Union may be considered a topic in its own right (or rather, a complex of topics related to society, politics, history, culture, and economy). It may also be viewed as one more approach to an understanding and assessment of the Soviet experience. And it may be treated as a case—a major and important case—in the comparative study of women in modern and modernizing societies.

An examination of sex roles and attitudes over time highlights both change and continuity in Russian society and culture. A review of past and promise, expectation and achievement, and of the varying priorities and strategies of Soviet development as they have affected the position of women, bears on the elusive balance of successes and failures since 1917, on the gap between rhetoric and reality, on doctrine, adaptation, and the unintended consequences of official behavior. To any reader of the issues raised by feminists in the West a study of the Soviet record is bound to suggest both striking similarities and elements of distinctiveness.

We would not pretend that this book offers definitive answers. It presents the results of recent research and reflection by a number of scholars—historians, political scientists, sociologists, anthropologists, and economists. Many of them expect to pursue their work on these and related topics further in the future. We hope that this book, and the conference on which

it is based, will help stimulate wider and more active interest in and research on the problems here raised. Nor (as the careful reader will discover) do all the contributors agree among themselves: this is how it should be, and as editors we have not sought to impose any single viewpoint on our group of contributors. The particular interpretations offered here are those of the several authors.

Much to our regret, not all the papers presented at our conference could be included in this volume. Difficult choices were made largely on the basis of topical coherence. We have encouraged other participants to publish their contributions in the form of articles or as parts of their own larger monographs and wherever possible we have cited their work.

One can readily think of various topics of investigation which have been entirely by-passed. In particular, the cultural and literary aspects, from folklore and church to contemporary belles-lettres, deserve further systematic study; fortunately, work on some of these questions has been and continues to be done. The study of Russian social history invites innumerable further investigations beyond the survey offered here. Demographic trends, as they affect the status of women, are receiving the attention of specialists, both in the Soviet Union and abroad. Inevitably the most elusive target is that of private attitudes and informal behavior, especially in an area as veiled in myths, stereotypes, and prejudices as that of women and sex: we have not done justice to this dimension.

It is only natural that scholars often pursue topics on which sources are relatively more accessible and plentiful. In our case this has meant the urban and more modern sectors of Soviet life rather than the more traditional strata and especially rural society, which remains less thoroughly surveyed. Even more important—given the complexities, varieties, and multiplicities of conditions attaching to the ethnic diversity of the USSR, and the difficulties in dealing with the cultural, social, and linguistic backgrounds of the Soviet nationalities—we have limited ourselves to the ethnically (Great) Russian population, except for occasional references intended to round out or amplify the coverage. Studies of women in other parts of the Soviet Union remain to be done.

In addition to the authors represented in this collection, whose cooperation we gratefully acknowledge, we wish to express our sincere thanks to all who took part in the conference and particularly to the following participants:

Jeremy R. Azrael, University of Chicago  
Reinhard Bendix, University of California, Berkeley  
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 Reginald E. Zelnik, University of California, Berkeley.

Although it was not possible to reproduce the valuable comments of the discussants, their observations contributed greatly to the final version of the papers here presented.

We are most grateful to those colleagues who chaired the sessions of our conference, notably Richard A. Brody, Stanford University; Rita Ricardo Campbell, Hoover Institution; Jing Lyman, Stanford University; Eleanor M. Maccoby, Stanford University; Wayne S. Vucinich, Stanford University; and Karl-Eugen Wädekin, University of Giessen.

An expression of enduring gratitude is due those organizations, foundations, and agencies whose financial support made possible the conference and the preparation of the papers. The conference was sponsored by the Center for Russian and East European Studies, Stanford University, and the Committee on Research and Development of the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies. It was supported also by the Center for Research in International Studies, the Center for Research on Women, and the Hoover Institution on War, Revolution and Peace, all at Stanford University; and by the Johnson Foundation, of Racine, Wisconsin; the National Science Foundation; and the Office of External Research, U.S. Department of State. The assistance of all the above and the helpful attitude

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We also wish to acknowledge the willingness of the International Research and Exchanges Board, New York, to provide the funds to make possible the participation of six Soviet scholars and specialists to whom invitations were extended but who, much to our regret, were unable to attend.

Finally, mention must be made of the unsung helpers whose assistance with a variety of matters, large and small, was essential in making possible, first, the conference and then, this book: Paul Carpenter, Constantine Galskoy, Betty J. Herring, Elise Johnson, and above all, the conference coordinator, George A. McMillan. Finally the editors would like to thank *their* editor, Peter J. Kahn, for his conscientious efforts, good sense, and good spirits throughout the long process of manuscript preparation. It has been a pleasure for all of us to work through him with the Stanford University Press, whose first consideration at all times has been the standard of scholarly excellence.

D.A.  
A.D.  
G.W.L.

# Contents

Contributors	xi
PART ONE: THE HISTORICAL HERITAGE	
Society and the Sexes in the Russian Past DOROTHY ATKINSON	3
Women and the Russian Intelligentsia: Three Perspectives RICHARD STITES	39
The Russian Factory Woman, 1880-1914 ROSE L. GLICKMAN	63
Marxism and the Women's Movement ALFRED G. MEYER	85
PART TWO: SEX ROLES AND SOCIAL CHANGE	
Sexual Equality in Soviet Policy: A Developmental Perspective GAIL WARSHOFSKY LAPIDUS	115
Bolshevik Alternatives and the Soviet Family: The 1926 Marriage Law Debate BEATRICE BRODSKY FARNSWORTH	139
Russian Rural Women ETHEL DUNN	167



Women in the Industrial Labor Force	189
-------------------------------------	-----

MICHAEL PAUL SACKS

Women in the Professions	205
--------------------------	-----

NORTON T. DODGE

Equal Pay for Equal Work?	225
---------------------------	-----

JANET G. CHAPMAN

### PART THREE: WOMEN, SOCIETY, AND POLITICS

Women and Sex in Soviet Law	243
-----------------------------	-----

PETER H. JUVILER

Educational Policies and Attainment	267
-------------------------------------	-----

RICHARD B. DOBSON

Images of Male and Female in Children's Readers	293
---	-----

MOLLIE SCHWARTZ ROSENHAN

Social Services for Women: Problems and Priorities	307
--	-----

BERNICE MADISON

Women in Political Roles	333
--------------------------	-----

JOEL C. MOSES

Women and Women's Issues in Soviet Policy Debates	355
---	-----

JERRY F. HOUGH

The Individual and the Collective	375
-----------------------------------	-----

COLETTE SHULMAN

Conclusions	385
-------------	-----

ALEXANDER DALLIN

Index	401
-------	-----

## PART ONE

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# The Historical Heritage



## Society and the Sexes in the Russian Past

THE EARLIEST historical references to women in Russia are not to Russian women. They deal with the Amazons, a legendary society of women thought to be located in the region of present-day southern Russia between the Don (the Tanais River of the ancients) and the Caucasus Mountains. Ancient accounts link the Amazons with the Scythians and the Sarmatians, who successively dominated the south of Russia for a millennium extending back to the seventh century B.C. The descendants of these peoples were absorbed by the Slavs who came to be known as Russians.<sup>1</sup>

The Amazons depicted in early Greek texts were an independent community of women at war with the masculine world. Except for seasonal sexual consort, they lived apart from men; and they reared only their female children. Described as skilled horsewomen and fighters, they were credited also with a lively intelligence. Herodotus reports that they easily learned the language of the Scythians, although the Scythian men were unable to master the Amazon tongue. Their law, he relates, required an Amazon to kill a man before she could mate, which led the Scythians to call them the "man-slayers" (*oiorpata*; *oior* = Greek *aner*, "man").<sup>2</sup> The word "Amazon" is of uncertain origin, but it has been claimed that this name—used historically to describe societies of or dominated by females—is a later Greek corruption of the old Slavic name for the Amazons, *Omuzhony*, "masculine women."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>The Amazons are discussed by Homer, Pindar, Herodotus, Lysias, Plato, Isocrates, Plutarch, and Arrian; Strabo alone of early writers is said to have questioned their historical existence. For an exhaustive review of the literature on the Amazons to the twentieth century, see M. O. Kosven, "Amazonki: istoriia legendy," *Sovetskaia etnografiia*, 1947, nos. 2 and 3.

<sup>2</sup>Herodotus, *The Persian Wars*, Book IV, chaps. 110–17.

<sup>3</sup>V. K. Tred'iakovskii, *Sochineniia* (SPb, 1849), vol. 3, p. 351. Some of Tred'iakovskii's derivations appear to be the product of a venturesome imagination.

The reports about Amazons have some claim to the attention of those tracing sex roles and attitudes toward the sexes in societies: as social fantasy, Amazon lore may reveal something of the anxieties, aspirations, or aggressions of the sexes. There is also the possibility that something akin to what was described by the earliest historians actually existed. Modern ethnographers have found sexually segregated communities among the Circassians in the Caucasus where men and women lived apart from one another by long-standing tradition. This custom may have been influenced by a pastoral economy that kept the herdsmen away from home much of the time.<sup>4</sup>

None of the early accounts about Amazons offers an explanation of how or why such a social system might have arisen. Some modern writers, however, have suggested that the legend represents traces of a folk memory of an earlier matriarchal structure of society. The existence of matrilineal social bonding in some primitive societies is well established, and the explanation for it is fairly obvious: the tie between mother and child is apparent at birth whereas the relationship of father to child must be learned. Yet evidence for the historical existence of matriarchy is scant in general, and this holds true in the Slavic/Russian record.<sup>5</sup>

Various early accounts describe Slavic women as warriors and hunters. Byzantine historians claimed that women among the Slavs dressed in masculine attire and fought alongside their men, and a smattering of archeological findings adds some substance to these reports. A number of excavations have revealed weapons in ancient female graves in southern Russia. Some modern historians have contended that women enjoyed high status in ancient Slavic society; but this conjecture is based on inferential and controversial evidence. For example, the old Slavic custom of marrying bachelors posthumously has been taken to indicate a belief that men needed female companions to gain entry to paradise.<sup>6</sup> But the assignment of relative status on such grounds might well be debated, since Western, Byzantine, and

<sup>4</sup> Still another possibility is suggested by modern discoveries about sex chromosomes. Females lacking one of the two typical X chromosomes have been described in recent scientific literature as "masculine women." Although this "XO condition" renders most women sterile, the possibility that genetic aberrations could be related to unsuccessful mutations in the evolution of society remains to be explored along with other questions in the expanding field of sociobiology. See Christopher Ounsted and David Taylor, eds., *Gender Differences: Their Ontogeny and Significance* (London, 1972), esp. pp. 27-28, 41.

<sup>5</sup> Joan Bamberger, "The Myth of Matriarchy: Why Men Rule in Primitive Societies," in Michelle Z. Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere, eds., *Women, Culture, and Society* (Stanford, Calif., 1974), pp. 263-80. M. F. Vladimirovskii-Budanov, *Obzor istorii russkogo prava* (Kiev, 1886), pp. 87-88, denies historical evidence of matriarchy among the Slavs; however, the eminent prehistorian Tadeusz Sulimirski states (in *The Sarmatians* [New York, 1970], p. 34) that Sarmatian graves are considered evidence of a matriarchal social order in southern Russia; and George Vernadsky accepts the Amazon legend as evidence of matriarchy in the area (*Ancient Russia* [New Haven, Conn., 1943], pp. 54, 113; *Kievan Russia* [New Haven, Conn., 1948], p. 155).

<sup>6</sup> Sergei Solov'ev, *Istoriia Rossii s drevneishikh vremen* (M., 1962), vol. 1, p. 288, n. 68.

Arab writers reported that wives (and slaves) in some Slavic tribes were consigned to the funeral pyre along with deceased males.<sup>7</sup>

Further discoveries in Soviet archeology and in prehistory may help to resolve many questions about the social relations of the sexes in the distant Russian past. Yet the few and fragmentary shadows of real women and men reaching from the past, even in distorted form, take on particular interest because of the relatively late appearance of a written form of Slavic and thus of Russian historical records. The social attitudes and values of the previous era, transmitted through custom and oral tradition, are unlikely to have disappeared without leaving cultural traces. But whatever the matrix from which Russian society evolved, by the time its autobiographical record begins in the ninth century it was solidly patriarchal—a society organized along tribal/clan lines with social units under the authority of males.

The sections that follow will survey aspects of the relations between the sexes—particularly with respect to marriage, legal status, and social attitudes—in successive stages of the Russian past: the Kievan, medieval, and Imperial eras.

#### KIEVAN RUSSIA

Sources that provide information about the society of Kievan Russia (ninth to thirteenth centuries) are limited, yet certain features emerge from them with reasonable clarity. One of the first things to become evident about the sexes is the social significance of the words identifying them. In ancient Russia the words for “woman” and “man” were the same as those used then and now for “wife” and “husband” (*zhena* and *muzh*). Sexual identity was derived not just from biological differentiation, but from social relationship as well. The modern words for “woman” (*zhenshchina*) and “man” (*muzhchina*) are simply extended forms of the older terms. The word for “wife” was used until fairly recently to designate any woman regardless of her actual marital status.<sup>8</sup> But although the term for “husband” once similarly described any adult male, this form of homonymic confusion was neither as extensive nor as enduring as the conceptual fusion of “woman” with “wife.”

Women make their first appearance in the earliest Russian annals—the *Primary Chronicle*—in a discussion of marriage customs. The reputed practices of various societies, including the Amazons, are described along with the mating habits of the different Slavic tribes. Among the latter, the

<sup>7</sup>A. A. Kotliarevskii, *O pogrebal'nykh obychaiakh iazycheskikh slavian* (M., 1868), pp. 46–62.

<sup>8</sup>I. Zabelin, *Opyty izucheniia russkikh drevnostei i istorii* (M., 1872), vol. 1, p. 147. *Zhena* is linked etymologically with a group of words having to do with marriage; there is no such association with *muzh*. See F. Miklosich, *Radices linguae Slovenicae* (The Hague, 1970), pp. 28, 55. The linguistic fusion of “woman” with “wife” and of “man” with “husband” is not peculiar to premodern Russia but occurs also in other early Indo-European-speaking societies.

Christian chronicler reports the existence of such "pagan" customs as polygyny and interclan raiding to capture women for brides. With evident disapproval, he describes festivals among the villages where men and women gathered for games, dancing, and other "devilish amusements." "On these occasions," complained the monk, "the men carried off wives for themselves and each took any woman with whom he had arrived at an understanding."<sup>9</sup>

According to modern Russian legal historians, such arrangements, and prearranged "abductions," amounted to contractual marriage despite the chronicler's refusal to recognize them as such. The contract was sealed (and interclan hostilities averted) by the man's payment of a bride-price, the *veno*, to the woman's family or clan. Though the custom of paying bride-prices has often been said to show that women were considered chattels,<sup>10</sup> it may have affected social evaluation of females positively: an Arab writer reported that, among the Russians, "whoever has two or three daughters is made rich, while two or three sons make a man poor."<sup>11</sup>

In time, the practice of raiding for brides faded away, leaving only symbolic rites retained in folk weddings; but the bride-price remained a part of the marriage agreement. The contract imposed obligations on the woman's family as well as on the man's. Because a woman left her own clan on marriage, she was provided with a dowry (*pridanoe*), in the form of movable or immovable property, to help improve her position in the alien clan.<sup>12</sup> The dowry remained her personal property throughout the marriage, and she was free to dispose of it or to bequeath it at will.

Both the bride-price and the dowry are subject to dual interpretation. They can be cited as evidence of the value placed on women and of the family's concern for the welfare of its daughters. Yet if bride-price meant that women were treated as property, the dowry may indicate that the property was not well maintained. The numerous Russian folk songs of all periods lamenting the unhappy fate of the bride in the household of her in-laws suggest that the dowry may have filled psychic as well as economic needs. It linked a woman palpably with her own childhood and with the future of her children and heirs, and it shielded her from total dependency on her husband's family.

According to an eleventh-century church charter, the consent of the woman was required for marriage. Parents were fined if they prevented daughters from marrying at all and were ordered not to force them into unwelcome unions. If suicide resulted from such coercion, they were warned that they would "answer to the Metropolitan for this."<sup>13</sup> The Pri-

<sup>9</sup>Samuel H. Cross and O. P. Sherbowitz-Wetzor, trans. and eds., *The Russian Primary Chronicle. Laurentian Text* (Cambridge, Mass., 1953), p. 56.

<sup>10</sup>The term *veno* derives from the verb *veniti* (Latin *vendere*), "to sell" (Miklosich, p. 14).

<sup>11</sup>Kazvini, cited by Vladimirovskii-Budanov, p. 90.

<sup>12</sup>Solov'ev, vol. 1, pp. 106-7.

<sup>13</sup>Ia. N. Shchapov, "Brak i sem'ia v drevnei Rusi," *Voprosy istorii*, 1970, no. 10, p. 218.

*mary Chronicle* relates the tale of the Prince of Polotsk's daughter, Rogneda, who rejected a marriage proposal from Prince Vladimir (later Vladimir I, Grand Prince of Kiev, r. ca. 980–1015). Although Vladimir's rank was high, his mother had been a slave and Rogneda declined to "take off the boots of a slave's son." Her reply referred to a part of the marriage ceremony that called for the bride to remove the groom's footwear in token of her submission to him. The account of Rogneda's rejection of Vladimir is often cited as evidence that at least some women had a say in the choice of their marriage partner.<sup>14</sup> But the boot ceremony (a form of which was still retained in some areas in the nineteenth century) shows clearly that a wife was expected to play a subservient role in marriage.<sup>15</sup>

Another revealing ceremonial custom involved the transfer of a whip from the bride's father to her husband. One legal historian, emphasizing the positive aspects of the position of women in ancient Russia, contrasted this symbol of authority with the sword used in German weddings: the sword symbolized the German husband's power of life and death over his wife, whereas the whip showed that the Russian husband had only the right to punish.<sup>16</sup>

The case of Vladimir and Rogneda was exceptional, but it raises the question of parental transmission of social status. The earliest surviving Russian legal code, the *Pravda Russkaia*, stated that children of a free man by his slave were to be freed (along with their mother) after his death, though they did not share the inheritance rights of his other children.<sup>17</sup> In defining slave status in Russia, there was no recognition of the Roman principle of *partus sequitur ventrem*, whereby the child of a free man and a female slave inherited the mother's status.<sup>18</sup> In this strongly patriarchal society, paternal lineage was ordinarily all-important.

Since a woman's identity was a functional derivative of her role as wife, and since wives were subject to husbands, it follows that women were hardly equal to men in Kievan society. Thanks to the *Pravda*, the degree of inequality can be established with some precision. The first article of the

<sup>14</sup>It may clarify the historical picture without necessarily weakening that argument to point out that Rogneda's refusal led to an attack by the rejected suitor, to the devastation of Polotsk, to the death of her father and brothers, and to her marriage by force to Vladimir—who was, incidentally, said to have six wives and 800 concubines. Cross, p. 91.

<sup>15</sup>V. I. Sergeevich, *Lektsii po istorii russkogo prava* (SPb, 1890), p. 564. Sergeevich states that the ceremony symbolized the status of the wife as a slave of her husband.

<sup>16</sup>Vladimirskii-Budanov, p. 91. The transfer of a whip from the bride's father to the groom was still a part of the wedding customs observed in Kostroma at the end of the nineteenth century. Sergeevich, p. 564.

<sup>17</sup>Variant texts, commentaries, and facsimiles of the *Pravda* are available in B. D. Grekov, ed., *Pravda Russkaia v trekh tomakh* (M-L, 1940–63). In different texts, article 98 refers either to the freeing of the children after their father's death or to their emancipation with their mother. E. I. Kolycheva, in *Kholopstvo i krepostnichestvo (konets XV–XVI vv.)* (M, 1971), pp. 235–36, concludes that both variants reflect actual practice still observed in Russia in the sixteenth century.

<sup>18</sup>*Expanded Pravda*, article 98. For a comparative perspective on the transmission of slavery through maternal lines, see David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (New York, 1966), pp. 38, 40, 277–80.



earliest *Pravda*, which dates from the eleventh century, authorized males to avenge the murder of their brothers, fathers, sons, and uncles. Where there was no capable avenger, the law stipulated that the murderer must pay a fine, which remained the same whoever the victim. Provisions that were added later in the century outlawed personal vengeance and established a system of fines scaled to the social status of the man killed: for example, the murder of one of the prince's officials was fourteen times more costly than that of a peasant. Not until the twelfth century was the value of female life considered in the law. "If anyone kills a woman," stated article 88 of the *Expanded Pravda*, "he is tried in the same way as if he killed a man. If he is found guilty, [he shall pay] one half of the fine."

The rate applied to all social categories. A woman shared her husband's social position but was valued in the law at only half his social worth. Yet in a few places at the very bottom of the social scale the system of fines placed a higher value on women than on men: in several instances the loss of a female slave elicited a slightly higher fine than the loss of a male slave. This apparently reflected the greater economic value of the women as potential producers of more slaves. In addition, female slaves were often trained in handicrafts and may have been more valuable as skilled workers.

Marriage to female slaves was a cause of enslavement in the Kievan era. When a man married another man's slave, he became a slave of her owner unless a specific agreement to the contrary was concluded in advance. This was a major consequence of a refusal to abandon, even in part, the principle of paternally derived social status. Reconciliation of this principle with that of property rights in slavery was achieved legally by depriving of his freedom any man marrying another's slave. Since children assumed their father's status, slave owners would otherwise have lost their rights to the offspring of female slaves. Yet though men were enslaved through marriage, the law said nothing about free women marrying slaves and there is said to be no case recorded in Kievan legal or literary records of a woman losing her freedom through such a marriage.<sup>19</sup> Although marriages between members of different social strata were not prohibited, the corporate character of society appears to have made them rare.

Vladimir Monomakh (1053–1125), the ruler who was responsible for the first legal recognition of the value of female life, left a widely quoted testament in which he urged his sons to love their wives but also warned them to "grant them no power over you."<sup>20</sup> The advice would seem to imply that some women had power, or perhaps that all women had some potential power.

Anthropologists have described at length a "fear of women" that is appar-

<sup>19</sup> B. A. Romanov, *Liudi i nrauy drevnei Rusi* (M-L, 1966), p. 64. Kolycheva argues (p. 29) that the absence of a statement in the *Pravda* on the enslavement of women through marriage was not accidental and reflected social practice.

<sup>20</sup> "The Testament of Vladimir Monomakh," in Cross, pp. 210–11.