
Women and Dissent in the USSR

The Leningrad Feminists

BY RUTH FISHER

The independent women's movement in the Soviet Union was a fairly short-lived phenomenon — it came on the scene with the publication of the underground journal *Zhenshchina i Rossiia* (Woman and Russia) in September 1979 and fizzled out in the early 1980s in the face of KGB repression.

The movement had its origins among the intelligentsia in Leningrad. In 1975, Tat'iana Mamonova, an artist and poet who became involved in the movement of non-conformist painters in 1972 and a feminist since the 1960s, suggested founding a feminist journal to Iuliia Voznesenskaia, a poet, literary critic and human rights activist since the late 1960s. Voznesenskaia rejected the idea because she did not wish to separate women out from the human rights movement:

One must say that all of us women who were engaged in creative work had come across such an attitude [mistrust of women's capabilities on the part of male colleagues]. Tatyana Goricheva, a talented philosopher, was praised for her "masculine" mind. I was praised for my "masculine" verse. Need one add that such "compliments" were dubious to us? However, Tatyana Goricheva and I had no desire to make the mistrust of women's capabilities a central problem in our activities: these men were our friends and companions, we shared a common aim and suffered the same repression for "independent thought" from the authorities.¹

However, as Voznesenskaia noted in retrospect, what she needed was to spend time in women's camps and prisons to convince herself that the position of women in the Soviet Union demanded special attention. In December 1976, because of her activities in the Second Culture movement in Leningrad, Voznesenskaia was sentenced under Article 190-1 (the preparation and circulation of works which defame the Soviet state and social system), to five years of internal exile. In July 1977, she was sentenced to two years in the camps for making an unauthorized trip to Leningrad.

In August 1979, Mamonova, in a renewed attempt to solicit support for the journal, approached Tat'iana Goricheva, a phi-

losopher, editor of '37,' an underground journal of religious culture, and a member of the Christian Seminar. Mamonova envisaged a journal designed for publication in the West. Goricheva liked the idea of a women's journal, but wanted it to be produced in the Soviet Union. This suggestion was adopted and three more women joined the editorial board of *Zhenshchina i Rossiia*: Natalia Malakhovskaia, Sofia Sokolova and Natalia Maltseva.

The first edition of *Zhenshchina i Rossiia* appeared in September 1979. Ten typed copies were circulated. Contributors to the journal were also from Archangel (on the White Sea), Tallin (the capital of Estonia), and Nizhyn in the Ukraine. It covered such topics as the double burden, abortion, the plight of single mothers, the conditions in maternity homes, nurseries, and kindergartens, and the situation in women's camps and prisons. Goricheva contributed an article which dealt with her synthesis of feminism and religion.

The reaction within the dissident community was mixed. According to Voznesenskaia:

The publication of the almanac in the samizdat press was like an explosion. While it was met by the Second Culture movement with a great deal of sympathy and was read like mad, in dissident circles it was welcomed mainly by men, while women met it with bewilderment and even mockery.²

Mamonova, on the other hand, gave the opposite impression. The men seemed very threatened, whereas the response from women was overwhelmingly positive. Generally speaking, however, until the journal had 'proven itself,' that is, provoked the interest of the KGB and met with success in the West, it was not taken seriously. It was charged that "the journal was not interesting and a women's movement in Russia was impossible and unnecessary."³

The KGB reacted quickly. In November, Mamonova and Sokolova were summoned and warned against further involvement in *Zhenshchina i Rossiia*. They were summoned again in December, along with Voznesenskaia, and in February the KGB searched Sokolova's and Voznesenskaia's apartments. During

the search at the latter's home, Goricheva dropped by and documents were taken from her as well.

In March 1980, the first issue of *Mariia* was published. This journal was the by-product of a schism in late 1979 and early 1980, in the group centering around *Zhenshchina i Rossiia*. The women who had religion as the basis of their feminism — Goricheva, Voznesenskaia, Malakhovskaia and Sokolova — founded *Mariia*. Mamonova and Maltseva, with their secular outlook, intended to resume publication of *Zhenshchina i Rossiia*, but were forced to discontinue under KGB pressure. The material which had been earmarked for a second issue was used to publish a miscellany entitled *Rossiianka* (Russian Woman).

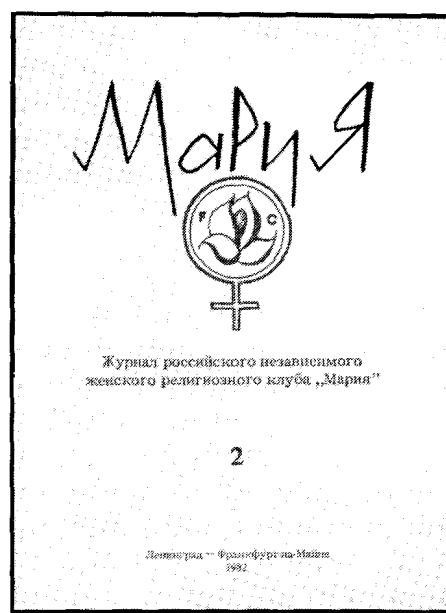
The publication of *Mariia* was coupled with the formation of the Club Mariia whose inaugural conference took place on March 1, 1980. There were at least half a dozen issues of *Mariia* published. The topics which *Mariia* dealt with were similar to those of *Zhenshchina i Rossiia*, but there was, apart from the emphasis on religion, an added dimension — articles dealing with international issues, for example, Afghanistan and Poland.

KGB reaction was more stringent this time for three reasons. First, the women had not heeded the warnings against further publication of a feminist journal. Second, *Mariia* and the Club Mariia were dabbling in sensitive political issues. Third, the repression of the women's movement was part of a wider policy to clamp down on dissent during 1979-1980. Thus, in April, Sokolova was detained by the KGB and her apartment searched several times; in May, Voznesenskaia was deported; in July, Mamonova, Goricheva and Malakhovskaia were also deported; in September, Club member Natalia Lazarova was arrested and sentenced under Article 190-1 to ten months in the camps; in March 1982, Lazarova was rearrested and sentenced under Article 70 (anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda), to four years in a strict regime labour camp and two years internal exile.

In addition to these arrests, the movement continued to splinter. In the summer

and fall of 1980, another schism occurred. Those women, among them Sokolova (she has since been forced to emigrate), who wanted to see emphasis less on religion and more on social and literary issues, founded the journal *Dalekie-blizkie* (Those Far Away and Those Near). Only one issue appears to have been published. This second schism was not as divisive as the first since the *Dalekie-blizkie* group continued to participate in the Club Mariia's conferences and joint meetings were held bimonthly. The Club Mariia spread to Moscow and a branch was set up by the emigre representatives in Frankfurt.

What conclusions can be drawn from the women's movement? The leading



figures were drawn from the intelligentsia. Despite Mamonova's optimism — "I think feminism may start from the intellectuals but turns to women of all classes. That's why I wanted the *samizdat* to be a forum for all kinds of thought, even a Party woman may have positive statements on feminism."⁴ — it seems very likely that working and peasant women were scarcely aware of the movement. As far as its acceptance in the human rights movement is concerned, an interesting, if unintended, evaluation of its significance can be found in Liudmila Alekseeva's *History of Dissent in the USSR*. She devoted one paragraph to the Club Mariia and its journal and mentions *Zhenshchina i Rossiia* only in passing.⁵ This would seem to lend credence to the notion that feminism

is generally regarded by the dissident movement as a luxury.

Be that as it may, the women's movement is significant for two reasons. First, it provided a forum, in the days before *glasnost*, for women to discuss their problems and disillusionment with their treatment. Indeed, the difference between the repression of an independent women's movement during the Brezhnev years and the growth in the number of women's groups since Gorbachev came to power is striking.⁶ Second, it alerted feminists in the West, in a very immediate way, to the situation of their Soviet sisters.

¹Yuliya Voznesenskaya, "The Independent Women's Movement in Russia," *Religion in Communist Lands* (vol. 10, no. 3), pp. 333-34.

²Iu. Voznesenskaia, "Zhenskoe dvizhenie v Rossii", *Posev* (no. 4, 1981), p. 41.

³*Ibid.*

⁴Robin Morgan, "The First Feminist Exiles from the USSR", *Ms.* (November 1980), p. 107.

⁵Liudmila Alekseeva, *Istoriia Inakomyслиia* (Benson, Vermont: Khronika Press, 1984), p. 200.

⁶See Nina Belyaeva, "Feminism in the USSR," p. 17.

Several issues of the secular feminist journals have been translated into English and French.

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