

Book Reviews

WOMEN IN RUSSIA: A NEW ERA IN RUSSIAN FEMINISM

Anastasia Posadskaya, ed., trans. Kate Clark. London: Verso, 1994.

by *Mary Allen*

This collection of essays by Russian feminists, which assesses *perestroika's* impact on women, had its origins in the First Independent Women's Forum held in Dubna in 1991. Several of the essays presented here represent more sophisticated versions of papers presented at the forum, with one important exception: the tone has changed. While the threatened closure of the forum due to rumours of the conference's lesbian agenda did not auger well for the evolution of an autonomous women's movement in 1991, three years of hindsight have clarified for feminists the democracy movement's position on women's issues. In this volume, the optimism which permeated the forum has been replaced with frustration over the resurgence of patriarchy under the guise of liberalism which has been unleashed by "democratic" restructuring.

In her introduction, Posadskaya concludes that *perestroika* was essentially a "male project," and that the democrats' entire program for women consisted of giving them "a rest from socialism." As Voronina points out, the historic identification of women with family interests was not reversed by the democrats, but rather intensified after Gorbachev's pronouncements on the need to resurrect the "purely womanly mission." In her view, this goal has served to justify widespread discrimination in the workplace, which in turn has effectively blocked women's access to po-

litical structures. While Konstantinova advocates increased political action, since the defeat of totalitarianism has presented new opportunities for female activism, the difficulties inherent in this approach are outlined in some detail in other essays on women in the economy. Khotkina, for example, documents growth of gender bias in the labour market and in career training, which has served to further marginalize rather than to integrate women into new capitalist structures. In her detailed critique of women's position during the transition to a market economy, Mezentseva explains that in the first stage, market reform equals female unemployment, and in the final stage, women's part-time employment equals inequality in socio-political roles. According to Mezentseva, this development is especially harmful to women, as state resources for social protection have been exhausted.

Other contributors examine the cultural causes and consequences of *perestroika's* policy on women. In the most academic piece, Klimenkova explains the recent consolidation of men's patriarchal control as a function of the deconstruction of modernist (Soviet) society by "fundamentalists" enamoured of traditionalist Russian culture. In reaction to the feminist critique of traditionalism, these fundamentalists have derided the woman question, and have replaced thoughtful discussion of gender issues with a form of sexual "freedom" that is degrading to women. Lipovskaya has identified this debasement of women in the mass media and in the public consciousness. While the intellectual woman has been equated with an asexual or manish *sovok* (former Soviet citizen) who sacrifices family responsibility at the altar of careerism, aggressive erotica or violence against women have been used as symbols of the

destruction of the totalitarian past. For Lipovskaya, the sexual "revolution" is anything but: phallogentric in approach, the objectification of women on a mass scale is premised on female passivism. According to Voronina, this "domesticated" woman remains an impossible goal since Russia's backward economy rests on the large-scale exploitation of cheap female labour. Paradoxically, women who strive to move beyond the domestic role have attributed to them a Freudian form of false or defective femininity. In the single essay on female sexuality, Zhuk reports that these new social constructions of femininity have precluded any recognition of lesbianism, despite its strong presence up to the late 1930s, when camp life introduced hierarchical and heterosexual roles. For Aivazova as well, this kind of stereotyping represents the greatest danger for women's cause. While hoping for an extension to women of the ideal of individual liberation developed by the democrats, she predicts that materialism and crude consumerism growing rampant in post-Soviet society will prove an overwhelming obstacle.

Despite these negative evaluations of the first three years of *perestroika*, in the concluding article Posadskaya recaptures some of the spirit of the Women's Forum. In her view, patriarchal resurgence has not defeated feminism, but rather stimulated its reemergence. In an exhortation for the future, she calls on women today to work towards the simultaneous "emancipation of the personality and emancipation of the sex" which alone will guarantee progress. Given the evidence presented in these essays and the ominous shift towards conservatism documented daily in the press, however, it is difficult to envision success on either front.