A COMPANION TO GENDER HISTORY

Edited by

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This chapter must begin with a question: Why should Eastern Europe be considered separately from the western part of the continent? The answer seems relatively straightforward. Eastern Europe is a region that has long been set apart by geography, religion (Orthodox Christianity is strong there), and linkages to the Byzantine and later the Ottoman Empires. The differences between it and the rest of Europe grew in the nineteenth century, as industrialization and urbanization transformed the northwestern part of the continent and then slowly and very unevenly moved eastward. In the mid-twentieth century, the Soviet Union imposed governments and economic systems in Eastern Europe that were modeled on its own, thereby further dividing the region from Western Europe, with manifold political and economic consequences that continue to be influential in the twenty-first century.

Eastern Europe’s distinctiveness is problematic, however, particularly in an essay on gender ideas and practices. First, it is difficult even to define the region geographically. Most educated Western Europeans and North Americans would probably say “eastern Europe” refers to the lands east of Germany, Austria and Italy. That is the working definition used here: Eastern Europe, for purposes of this analysis, consists of Poland, the Czech and Slovak Republics, and Hungary in the north; the nations of the Balkans to the south, and the successor states to the Soviet Union in the east. But there are many Poles and Czechs who consider that Eastern Europe begins on their eastern and southern borders. They want to be considered “Western” because the very term “Eastern” is freighted with notions of backwardness, isolation, and inferiority, while “Western” is associated with political and economic success.

The negative nuances that are attached to the concept of Eastern Europe, nuances that were heightened by the Cold War but pre-existed it by hundreds of years, have produced exaggerated conceptions of the differences of that region from central and Western Europe. The differences that do exist are real and significant, but they should not obscure the considerable commonalities that tie together all the peoples of Europe. Those peoples have always been connected to one another by shared culture and history, and they have always, even in their most divided periods, maintained lively patterns of trade, migration, and communication.
Finally, lumping all of Eastern Europe under one set of generalizations can lead to minimizing the important cultural, political, religious, economic, and ethnic differences within the area itself. The Balkans, for example, is populated by Greeks, Romanians, Romani (gypsies), Albanians, Turks, and various groups of Slavs. These peoples speak different languages; some are Catholics, many are Orthodox; Jews inhabit the region, as do more than a few Muslims. Russia contains an even larger array of ethnicities, and it, like the rest of Eastern Europe, is also characterized by significant differences between urban and rural people. Millions of Eastern Europeans live in modern cities, but there are many villages in the countryside that lack indoor toilets and paved streets. To generalize about this enormous variety is a perilous undertaking. It is possible to make suggestive observations about the gender ideas of the region, but one must do so without losing sight of the risks of vastly oversimplifying what is in fact a very complex part of Europe.

With these caveats in mind, we will sketch in broad outline the common characteristics of Eastern European gender ideas and arrangements before the twentieth century, discuss the development of the Soviet Union and the export of Soviet ideas westward, and conclude by considering the collapse of the Soviet system in the late 1980s and the early stages of constructing new systems thereafter.

**Eastern Europe in the Nineteenth Century**

Before industrialization and urbanization transformed Western Europe, Eastern Europe was very similar in its basic economic and political structures to the rest of the continent. The peasantry comprised the great majority of the population; political power lay with a small, politically conservative landowning aristocracy. By the end of the nineteenth century that elite was increasingly being challenged by the middle and working classes that were growing in the cities as economic changes and new ideas seeped in from the west. The political situation was further complicated by the fact that Eastern Europe in the nineteenth century was ruled by aging empires, the Ottoman Turkish in the Balkans, the Austro-Hungarian at the center, and the Russian in the north.

Eastern European gender ideas were not much different from those that had prevailed in Western Europe for centuries, and this is hardly surprising, since Eastern Europe was also predominantly Christian culturally and had been very similar to the rest of Europe in its living patterns and political arrangements since Roman times. Women and men were seen as God’s creations, flawed but redeemable. Men’s virtues were considered to include honesty, courage, physical strength, diligence, piety, and submission to the will of superiors (peasants were to obey nobles, nobles were to obey higher-ranking nobles, everyone was to obey the king and submit as well to the authority of the Church). A man’s primary family duties were to provide for the welfare of his dependents and obey senior family members, most especially fathers but also mothers, aunts and uncles, grandparents, even more distant relations upon occasion. In short, men were to be responsible, cooperative members of the various intersecting communities into which they were born.

And so were women. Europeans thought both genders should strive to be loyal, honest, diligent, pious, and obedient. Women were not expected to be as physically assertive as men, but they were to guard their chastity more closely. With women
there was also heightened stress on obedience, in keeping with beliefs that women had been created by God to be men’s dependent helpers, and hence had been made less rational and more emotional. Women were consequently suited to taking care of children, the old, and the sick and to working hard in the family’s service, but they required governing by men. These notions were leavened with considerations of social position; class-rank and age granted power, following the logic that the upper classes and the old were morally and intellectually superior to the poor and young. Consequently a noblewoman’s gender might require her to obey her husband, but her class gave her considerable power over the male peasants who farmed her estates and her seniority in her family made her a power to be reckoned with in the lives of her daughters, daughters-in-law, and sons.

These traditional notions came under fire in the nineteenth century as democratic ideas spread from west to east in Europe. Feminism called for more egalitarian family relations and the entry of women into the public world of education, employment, and politics. Adult sons disputed the power of parents to control their choices of brides, of work, and of ideas. Trade unions, professional organizations, mainstream political parties and revolutionaries throughout Eastern Europe attempted to undermine the power of entrenched elites and imperial governments. These disparate groups all professed democratic individualism, the proposition that each person’s autonomy and well-being should be fostered by society, rather than subordinated to the greater good of family, community, class, church or state. Socialists put more stress on class solidarity and the collective welfare of the poor than did liberals, but socialists also dreamed of a society of free individuals living in voluntary cooperatives. Within the constellation of gender ideas, obedience was beginning its slide into a distinctly inferior position. Of course, we are talking about values being contested here, not vanquished. The contest is in fact still ongoing, and its history reveals that gender ideas change very slowly. Nonetheless, the challenging of traditional conceptions about women and men began throughout Eastern Europe in the nineteenth century.

The Early Twentieth Century – the Fall of Empires and Rise of the Soviet Union

Europe’s twentieth century began in bloodshed: first small wars in distant lands such as South Africa and China, and then the great cataclysm of World War I (1914–18). That conflict killed millions of young men in Eastern Europe and it also destroyed the three empires, the Austro-Hungarian, Russian, and Ottoman, that had governed much of the region. The collapse of the imperial governments brought independence to most of the nations of Eastern Europe, from Poland in the north to a newly created Yugoslavia in the south. It also set off the Russian Revolution, an upheaval that began as a revolt against Tsar Nicholas II in February 1917 and led to the rise to power of a small group of revolutionaries who called themselves the Bolsheviks. The Bolsheviks were Marxists committed to abolishing Russia’s traditions root and branch so as to build a new society where humankind would be freed from all forms of oppression, including the oppression of gender ideas and practices. It was their experiment that Stalin exported westward as the Soviet Union established control over much of the rest of Eastern Europe in the aftermath of World War II, so the study of gender change in Eastern Europe in the twentieth century must perforce pay rather a lot of
attention to what was going on at the easternmost edge of the region, in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.

The Communist Party had to win a vicious civil war to assure its control over Russia, and when it had defeated its enemies in the early 1920s, the leaders turned their attention to what they referred to as “socialist construction.” “Socialist construction” required building up heavy industry and developing agriculture, but it also included a comprehensive program for changing gender ideas. The communists were particularly interested in freeing women from traditional discrimination. Following Marx and Engels, they argued that women must be enabled to enter the public world as men’s equals. That meant full access to education and employment. It also meant the establishment of social services – maternity care, daycare, public catering, laundries – that would eliminate housework. Lenin declared in 1920, “The domestic life of the woman is a daily sacrifice of self to a thousand insignificant trifles” (1975: 115). Those trifles needed to be transferred to publicly funded institutions so that women could become productively involved in socialist construction. Reluctantly, the government also legalized abortion in 1920 so as to prevent the harm done by back-street abortionists. The communists, particularly the party leaders who had been well schooled in Marxist feminism, paid some attention as well to the necessity of re-educating men to treat women as equals in the workplace and in the family.

The Soviet Communist Party in the 1920s was unquestionably the most open-minded government in Europe on matters of women’s emancipation. No other regime thought so carefully about the sources of gender discrimination or did so much to promote women’s involvement in the public sphere. But there were critical limits to the communists’ ideology and practices. The party itself was a predominantly male organization knit together by ties of patronage and clientage between men; the top leaders were all men, while women, who made up less than 10 percent of the membership, served mainly in the lower ranks. The communists never said openly that women did not belong in politics, for officially they were committed to quite the opposite proposition, but neither did they make serious efforts to promote women into the leadership. In fact, male communists often spoke as though they saw emancipation as a gift men bestowed on women, who had helped out with the Revolution. This was not an interpretation approved by the thousands of female communists who had worked in the party before the revolution, nor was it popular with the tens of thousands who staffed the party’s Woman’s Department (Zhenotdel) in the 1920s, but these feminist women, always a tiny minority of the membership, could not alter the party’s masculinist political culture. Consequently it was mainly men who made the decisions about and controlled the funding of programs beneficial to women. The belief that men should lead in politics, an ancient one in Europe, was challenged in print in Soviet Russia, but not in practice.

The Communist Party crafted its ideas about men – how they were and, more importantly, how they should be – from conceptions floating around in the Russian revolutionary movement. The founding generation of party leaders – Lenin, Trotsky, and Stalin, for example – believed that the ideal man was a revolutionary fighter, totally committed to the cause and to his fellow revolutionaries, educated in Marxism, disciplined, courageous, and hardy. He followed orders but he could also be an innovator and free agent when necessity required. How he lived his family life they rarely discussed because they did not consider the domestic world politically significant and
perhaps also because the Western European middle classes, which the Bolsheviks despised, put such stress on the importance of being a family man. The first generation of Russian communists tended to believe that a man’s domestic life was at best an irrelevancy, at worst a hindrance to his work for the cause.

These conceptions that ideal women and men were stalwart revolutionaries and equal comrades, living lives totally devoted to the cause, did not find widespread acceptance among the Soviet people. Most citizens of the world’s first socialist state in the 1920s were peasants still living in the countryside. Millions of peasant men became communists and learned the party’s gender ideas, but millions more remained fairly conservative in their beliefs about the inferiority of women and the rightful authority of senior men. Although the powers of the patriarchs in peasant families had been under challenge for more than a generation, there still were fathers in rural Russia who demanded unquestioning obedience from their adult sons in the 1920s. By comparison with the peasants, the urban working class and the tiny middle class were closer in their gender ideas to the communist leadership, but they too were less radical than the party elite, more like the bourgeoisie and working classes of Western and Central Europe in their notions about family life and women’s emancipation. Widespread among the city population were beliefs in the importance of domestic life to people’s well-being; urban people generally favored a nuclear family composed of a bread-winning, considerate father, a nurturing, home-making mother, and a small number of well-cared for children.

The Stalinist Synthesis

The Stalinist dictatorship that came to power in the late 1920s blended the gender utopianism of the founders of Soviet communism with ideas and practices that were more acceptable to ordinary folk, urban and rural. This syncretism reflected the influence of the party rank and file, most of whom had joined the party since 1917 and were less radical than the founders. It also served the regime’s interests and priorities. The principal goals of the government headed by Stalin were building up heavy industry (steel, mining, railroads, tractors, and military equipment), establishing central control over agriculture (collectivization), and managing the entire society so as to mobilize everyone to heroic efforts and ruthlessly eliminate any opposition.

Much of the previously developed program of women’s emancipation harmonized quite neatly with this agenda. The push to industrialize actually strengthened the party’s ideological commitment to women entering the paid labor force and so recruitment and training programs were established across the Soviet Union in the early 1930s to get women working in the factories and fields, as well as offices and shops. The labor force swelled in that decade largely because of the entry of women into it. Girls and young women also poured into the schools, so that by the end of the decade the literacy rate of urban women had risen to over 90 percent, a 15 percent increase in a little over ten years. Rural women lagged behind, but they too made substantial gains (Clements, 1994: 145, chart 2).

At the same time the regime endorsed conceptions of marriage and motherhood that were similar to those widely accepted among Russia’s urban population and throughout Europe. In the 1920s, the party’s founders had given little consideration to women’s family lives, beyond arguing for the socialization of housework. A few
prominent communists had believed that the traditional family should be abolished altogether, replaced by communes in which residents shared parenting. The Stalinist leadership, which contained very few utopians in the top ranks, continued to affirm in the 1930s that women should work full time and be equal citizens of the new socialist nation, but they also began to declare that women should also devote a lot of their energies to rearing their children and taking care of their husbands. Galina Shtange, the wife of an engineering professor, wrote the following summary of a talk in 1937 given by L. M. Kaganovich, Commissar of Transport and a close associate of Stalin’s, to a meeting of faculty wives:

L. M. reminds us and emphasizes that our first thoughts and concerns must always be for our husbands. The work our husbands are doing is difficult and crucial, and we must make our homes into a place where they can truly rest from their labors, we must create peace, comfort and joy for our families. (Garros et al., 1995: 186)

“Creating peace, comfort, and joy” required women to do a lot of housework and to take care of the children. Such notions made economic sense (resources were insufficient to build up industry at a breakneck pace and also fund social services that would replace housework). But the new stress on domesticity also bespoke an ongoing syncretism between party and popular values. The woman who sustained a comfortable home for her family in the industrializing city was an ideal in capitalist nations as well, in no small part because modern cities were unsettled and unsettling places. Traditions and customs that had knit village communities together no longer held in a Moscow where most people were recent arrivals. The political oppression of the Stalin regime produced a pervasive fear of the authorities’ arbitrary persecutions and had a chilling effect on relations between co-workers and friends. It is not surprising that Soviet people of all walks of life, facing such an unstable, demanding world, would cling to consoling conceptions of women as caregivers and the family home as a refuge.

The consequences of the creation of this ideal, this New Soviet Woman, have been well documented. Urban women coped with what they came to call the “double shift,” that is, they worked all day and then went home to spend the evenings on domestic chores. The load made it difficult for many married women (and the great majority of Soviet women did marry and have at least one child) to take advantage of the opportunities for advancement in the workplace. “I’ll just have to divide my time between family and work,” Galina Shtange wrote in her diary in 1937, “which is what I’m doing at the present time. It’s putting a lot of stress on me, I’m becoming exhausted and irritable” (Garros et al., 1995: 178). Furthermore, the persistence of traditional ideas about women’s natural ability to nurture meant that they tended to work in fields associated with the feminine (education, medicine, the arts, child-care, retail sales, and clerical), fields that were poorly paid. The continuing strength of beliefs in men’s natural leadership skills meant that women inhabited mostly the lower ranks within the professions and continued as well to be absent from the upper and middle ranks of the political leadership.

Ideals of the New Soviet Woman were partnered with those describing a New Soviet Man, and he too had been modified as the revolutionary ethos gave way to the more conventional gender norms of the Stalin period. The New Soviet Man was
usually pictured as a young, well-muscled, square-jawed worker. His characteristics were diligence, competence, commitment to building the system, submission to authorities, and a striving to better himself. Gone was the revolutionary rebel, contemptuous of all social conventions. In his place was an ambitious organization man. Ambition was not loudly trumpeted as a virtue, because it was too difficult to reconcile with the collectivist ethics of Stalinist socialism, so the regime sent out a somewhat muffled message that a young man who followed all its prescriptions would rise in the system and might even become a party leader lauded in the press. Leonid Potyomkin, a young man from the countryside who earned a scholarship to an engineering institute in Moscow, was one of the millions who got the message quite clearly. He enthused in his diary in 1935:

Now for the first time in my life I have squared my shoulders freely, boldly, fervently, and maybe even audaciously and can look at people with triumphant self-confidence. I am in the front ranks of those who are mastering the technology of production. I am not only a member of a production brigade; I am an assistant brigade leader. I am the first to grasp new things and to pass them on to my comrades.

(Garros et al., 1995: 270)

There is a strong resemblance between the ethic of hard work and character development preached to young men in Stalin’s USSR and the prescriptions for success widely publicized in the capitalist West in the nineteenth century. This similarity, as well as that between notions of women’s domestic roles in Stalin’s Russia and Queen Victoria’s Britain, are perhaps not so strange as they may seem at first glance. The simplest explanation is that Soviet people and party leaders had been exposed to Victorian ideals, for they circulated widely in Russia before the Revolution. But those ideals resonated with communists in the 1930s also because there were fundamental similarities between the Soviet situation and that of the industrializing British or Americans. Both nineteenth-century capitalism and communist revolution shook up established social hierarchies, created huge, fearsome, energizing cities, and opened up new opportunities for ambitious young men. There was less explicit praise for individual advancement in the 1930s Soviet Union than in the 1880s United States, but opinion makers east and west promised that the man who developed good work habits and a healthy lifestyle could become one of the pioneering leaders of a vibrant economy that was revolutionizing human life for the better. Women were to help out, at work and at home, while the men blazed new trails. These notions did not square too readily with Soviet proclamations of women’s emancipation, but this did not diminish the enthusiasm with which they were promulgated. Very little was said about the New Soviet Man’s family life, but it was suggested that he should be kind to children and considerate of women. The government also rewarded men who rose in the system with higher wages and special access to scarce goods and services, thus reinforcing ancient beliefs that a successful man was a good provider.

There is another significant similarity between notions about men promulgated in the capitalist West and in the Soviet Union: they were part of efforts to make-over the working-class and peasantry. Protestant ministers and communist party leaders alike decried the unruliness of lower-class men, their drunkenness, their poor work habits, their irresponsibility toward wives and children. For their part, Soviet men brought with them to the cities a peasant culture that valued camaraderie and sharing
(the party approved), but also physical aggression and lots of socializing lubricated by prodigious quantities of alcohol (the party did not approve). Molding these rough-hewn country boys into New Soviet Men was one of the chief goals of the Stalinist regime. Working men resisted, sometimes getting rowdy at sporting events, often carousing with their mates and taking a slap-dash attitude toward work. This tension between the desire of the leadership to create cadres of disciplined supporters and the refusal of men to give up cherished habits persisted throughout the twentieth century, and indeed was present in the capitalist West as well.

The System in Eastern Europe During the Cold War

The Stalinist package of gender ideas, economic priorities, and dictatorship was exported to the rest of Eastern Europe after World War II. For women throughout the eastern bloc the consequences were quite similar to those in the Soviet Union. Eastern European governments sought full female employment because of their ideological commitment to it, because of labor shortages caused by the war, and because of a push to industrialize on the Soviet model. They also promulgated Soviet notions of the importance of women’s domestic roles, a process facilitated by the fact that those ideas were as readily accepted in their countries as in the USSR. The governments of Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, and Yugoslavia did establish social services (daycare, maternity care, public catering), but did not fund them sufficiently to meet public needs. And so women worked the double shift and held lower-ranking, lower-paying jobs. Data from Poland suggest that in the early 1980s women’s wages were 20 to 40 percent lower than those of men even when they were doing the same work. (Marody and Giza-Poleszczuk, 2000: 155). Men held most leadership positions and better-paying jobs.

Urban and rural women all over Eastern Europe therefore carried a considerable burden, one made heavier by the fact that throughout the Cold War era communist governments did not manage to provide the amenities that eased life for women elsewhere. Rural people suffered from a lack of indoor plumbing as well as chronic shortages of medical care, consumer goods, and mechanized equipment. In cities, there were few laundries, electric service and phone systems were unreliable, tap water was undrinkable without boiling, and most households could not afford refrigerators until the 1970s. The supply of heating and hot water was often disrupted. Milk came from the store unpasteurized, so it had to be carefully cooked before it could be used. Because of scarcities, women had to shop often and then carry their purchases home on trams or buses.

By the 1970s many Eastern European women, particularly those in the cities, were defining their situation according to an interpretation that has been dubbed “the emancipated woman/brave victim” by Polish sociologists Mira Marody and Anna Giza-Poleszczuk (Marody and Giza-Poleszczuk, 2000). Women in blue- and white-collar occupations considered their jobs and the social services that assisted them as valuable improvements in their lives, particularly in view of the far more traditional norms that had governed their societies before the communists came to power. They liked being “emancipated women.” But they also understood that the promises of full equality had not been met, with the consequence that they were not men’s equals in workplace or home and had ended up with a huge workload. Furthermore, many
women perceived men as lazy and self-indulgent, demanding lots of attention while contributing very little to family welfare. “A husband in the home is just another child, only greedier,” declares a character in *Women’s Decameron*, by Russian novelist Julia Voznesenskaya (1985: 12). Believing themselves to be burdened by dependent children and selfish husbands, women saw themselves as “brave victims,” sacrificing their personal happiness to their families’ welfare. These notions were a way of coping that valorized women’s unending labor and preserved the value women had long attached to sustaining family life. The prevalence of these ideas suggests that many women agreed with the government’s conceptions of their contributions to society, while remaining critical of the burdensome consequences. And the “brave victim” notion spoke to certain developments in the lives of men as well.

There was some truth in the widespread complaints about lazy husbands. Men’s lassitude seems to have been a response to the increasing failures of eastern-bloc socialism. Studies of conceptions of masculinity in Eastern Europe are in their infancy as yet, so what follows here is offered as a very preliminary analysis of a crisis of masculinity that occurred in the region in the 1970s and 1980s. Earlier, in the years immediately following World War II, conceptions of the New Soviet Man came from the Soviet Union into the newly communist states, where they appealed to party members, especially the highly placed ones. Working-class men were praised as the bedrock of the system and there was a good deal of stress on camaraderie and upward striving. Many men from the pre-war lower classes enjoyed great opportunities for advancement, especially in the 1950s and 1960s. All these developments are of course very similar to what had happened in the USSR before World War II.

Then, in the 1970s and 1980s, many men began to find that the rosy predictions of limitless futures became less persuasive. The state socialism of the post-Stalin era was not as tyrannical as its predecessor, but it proved far better at rebuilding war damage and constructing heavy industry than at delivering a high standard of living. Unmet consumer demand and notoriously poor public services bore witness to economies that were stagnating by the late 1970s, even while the capitalist West flourished. At the same time the emergence of a new elite composed of party members, their relatives, and children limited social mobility. Gaps between the lifestyles of the privileged and the poor widened. Paradoxically, women were actually less financially dependent on men than they had been in the past because they had their own incomes and could rely on publicly funded medical services and childcare. The consequence of women’s new economic situation and the generally low level of all wages meant that few men could pride themselves on being successful providers for their families.

In short, by the late 1970s, there were many reasons for Eastern European men, from Warsaw to Sofia, in countryside and city, to feel dispirited. A few became involved in resistance movements, the largest of which appeared in Poland in 1970 and 1979–81. Most resorted to an ethic of coping that stressed resourcefulness and endurance, comradeship with male friends, and emotional ties to family, but held out little hope for personal advancement. This was not as satisfactory an adaptation as women’s emphasis on service to family, because the latter fit very easily with long-established notions about woman as suffering servant. Eastern European men at the middle and lower ranks of their societies, having imbibed the widespread ideas that individual success and providing for one’s family were central measures of men’s worth, found their resigned submission galling. That their governments and
economies were controlled by the Soviet regime was only another sign of their general powerlessness. Some men expressed their sense of failure in excessive consumption of tobacco and alcohol; others withdrew from family obligations, thus giving rise to the common lament from women that their husbands were behaving like demanding children. There may also have been increases in domestic violence; definitive data are not available.

The End of Communism and the Launching of New Worlds
This crisis of masculinity, which afflicted Soviet men as well in the 1970s and 1980s, may have helped to bring about the collapse of the eastern bloc itself. It is certain that discontent with economic stagnation led Mikhail Gorbachev and a new generation of leaders in the USSR to launch political reforms in the 1980s and then refuse to shore up tottering communist governments in Eastern Europe. Those governments fell with astonishing swiftness in 1989; the Soviet Union itself disintegrated soon after. Since then changes once unimaginable have followed: democratic parliaments, civil liberties and free press, mixed economies with free markets and foreign investment, far more contacts with the rest of Europe. The countries that have benefited the most economically from this enormous transformation are those that were best connected to the economies of the capitalist West before 1989, that is, Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary.

Those individuals who have prospered are primarily women and men with marketable skills and access to the new opportunities. Someone without such connections may still succeed in business or rise to the top of a new political party, but the odds favor the young and well educated or the older and well-positioned. For the poor of Eastern Europe, especially rural people but also the workers who labored in the enormous, outmoded factories, plant closures and inflation have brought poverty, displacement, and demoralization. One’s social position may be as important as gender in determining the effects of all this, but gender ideas and practices have affected and been affected by the revolutionary changes.

Most noticeably, women are just as absent from the ranks of the political leadership as they were under communism. This fact should be put in perspective: women make up roughly the same percentages of parliamentary representatives and government officials today in Eastern as in Western Europe. But feminists in the East and West are disappointed that the establishment of democracy in a region long plagued by political oppression did not call into question the proposition that politics should be led by men. When asked what rights women have gained since the fall of communism, one Romanian woman sardonically replied, “The right to speak without being listened to” (Grunberg, 2000: 319).

The political stage is not solely occupied by male actors, however. Women, mostly professionals, are active in new organizations that engage in a wide variety of voluntary activities, from rape-crisis centers to historical preservation, and promote the career development of their members, as well as facilitate people’s adjustment to the new economic and political situation. Such widespread civic involvement is new to Eastern Europe, and it has the potential to enlarge women’s participation in public life and promote a grassroots activism that may contribute directly to the development of democratic institutions and habits.
The dismantling of socialist economies has had serious effects on women and men, as unemployment has risen and new jobs have become available only to those able to learn new skills. Government income has fallen drastically, forcing cuts in social services such as medical care. Costs of everything from transportation to utilities have increased. In most of the nations of Eastern Europe, women have been more likely to lose jobs than men and more likely as well to resort to very insecure part-time employment in the emerging private service sector. Differentials between women’s and men’s wages have persisted and in some countries and types of work they have worsened.

The effects of these widespread changes on ideas about gender vary from nation to nation, according to the heritage and particular conditions of each. In Yugoslavia, a region where masculine codes have long put enormous stress on preserving individual and family honor, political instability led to civil war. The rising hostilities were expressed in violence against women; as part of “ethnic cleansing,” Serbian soldiers repeatedly raped captive Islamic women in Bosnia. But even in peaceful areas of Eastern Europe (and they are the great majority), the building of new economies and polities has created a great deal of stress, because it has broken up familiar social arrangements and called ideals into question for both women and men.

Thus far there has been considerably more discussion of the appropriate roles of women than of men in the new societies. That is in keeping with the practice in communist days, when women’s public and domestic roles were seen to require extensive elucidation, perhaps because they conflicted with one another, perhaps because women were thought, by party leaders and ordinary folk alike, to play a more important part than men in preserving the family. It was to be expected, therefore, that the enormous political and economic changes that ensued after the fall of communism would give rise to a discussion of women’s public and family lives.

Notions about women today in Eastern Europe can be grouped into three broad categories. Particularly popular among the well-educated is a feminist egalitarianism that criticizes existing inequalities and argues for women to be fully equal to men in the public world and in the family. By contrast, maternalist ideas emphasize the importance of woman’s role as child-rearer and argue that her nature is essentially different from men’s. Maternalism is easily adopted by nationalists, who declare that women have a duty to preserve the spirit of the people by nurturing national values in their children. These ideas have been mobilized to support efforts to outlaw abortion in Poland, Slovakia, and Germany.

Feminism and maternalism are variations on themes present in the discourse of the communist period. Far newer to the region is a consumerist individualism that praises women for being successful in the new economy. Individualism takes as its icon the ambitious career woman, who is prosperous, beautifully dressed, sexually active, and unburdened by inept husband or needy children. This super-achiever, often featured in advertisements for expensive imports and magazine articles aimed at the middle class, is devoted to her own self-development and her own pleasure.

“The most popular [women],” declares a recent contributor to the Polish magazine Your Style, “are those who are newly employed – but not those who work in the telephone unit or with the photocopier. . . . The women most sought after are not only attractive and fashionably dressed, but they have a high IQ, know how to make brilliant conversation, and have a sense of humor” (Marody and Giza-Poleszczuk, 2000: 565).
There are very few such privileged women in Eastern Europe (or in Western, for that matter), but the glitzy images that decorate billboards and TV commercials appeal to people who would like, at long last, to be modern and rich, like the French and the Germans. Many older women see the chic young career woman as a sign that the new society no longer values their sacrifices and even is beginning to question the notion that a woman’s highest expression of self lies in devotion to her family.

For men the new ideal is the aggressive entrepreneur. He is quite like the individualistic career woman, but harder, more competitive. His defining characteristics are a delight in risk-taking, competence in the new economy and politics, financial success, ease in international circles, and often youth. With his independence, his willingness to seize opportunities, and his savoir-faire the New Post-Soviet Man repudiates the passivity, provincialism, and ineptitude ascribed to the Soviet man. Some hint of negativity hangs round this swashbuckling wheeler-dealer, however, because business success is still regarded in Eastern Europe as a sign that one is corrupt. These are ancient ideas that can be traced back to the agrarian past when merchants were believed to be swindlers who gulled the peasants out of their hard-earned cash. It is also true that in the newly established businesses of Eastern Europe, bribes and special access are routine practices. Both admired and despised, the entrepreneurial man remains as remote from the experiences and opportunities of most Eastern European men as does the footloose career woman from the reality of women’s lives. Ideas about him are powerful, however, in shaping the aspirations of the young and feeding the bitterness of those members of the older generation who felt marginalized in the Soviet order and now feel equally marginalized in a world of Mercedes Benzes and Rolexes.

One should be wary of predicting how the ongoing transformation in Eastern Europe will play out, but it is possible to draw some very general conclusions from our broad-brush examination of twentieth-century developments. First, gender ideas and practices will figure prominently in the change process in the East, shaping perceptions and behavior. Secondly, alterations in gender ideas and practices will often be perceived by contemporaries as more revolutionary than they actually are. Just as long-established ideas from the pre-Soviet period affected Soviet people, so too will ideas from the Soviet period continue to be powerful. And interactions with the rest of Europe will also have an impact, as they have for hundreds of years. The long historical view teaches that gender ideas do change, but slowly, so the core beliefs about women and men that have been accepted in Europe for centuries will continue to exercise a persistent influence, even as they are modified to suit new circumstances.

NOTES

1 I have not included Greece in this essay, because it is substantially different from its northern neighbors. It is more closely allied to the Latin cultures of the Mediterranean than to the Slavic peoples to its north and it was also not a part of the eastern bloc during the Cold War. The broad generalizations about gender ideas and practices that describe Europe as a whole do apply in Greece, of course.

2 In the 1918 the Bolshevik organization adopted the title Russian Communist Party. By the 1920s members were commonly known as communists and the term “Bolshevik” became an honorific reserved for people who had been members of the organization before 1917.
BIBLIOGRAPHY AND FURTHER READING


