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Beauty and maternity – inherent features of Soviet womanhood?

Yulia Gradskova, *Soviet people with female bodies: performing beauty and maternity in Soviet Russia in the mid 1930–1960s*, Stockholm studies in history 89, Stockholm: Acta Universitatis Stockholmiensis, 2007. 337 pp.

Yulia Gradskova's doctoral dissertation sets out to analyse the ways in which Soviet women practised beauty and maternity in the "middle period" of the Soviet era, from 1930 to the 1960s. This was the era in which, as cultural historian Victoria Semenova has put it, "the only real Soviet generation" was coming of age (quoted by Gradskova, p. 23).

To this reader, beauty and maternity initially seemed a strange combination. However, Gradskova offers convincing explanations for bringing them together. Both beauty and maternity, she argues, constitute important aspects of the construction of femininity. They are both seen in the Russian context as synonymous with "goodness". They are symbolic concepts as well as real practices. They are both to a large extent biological and gender specific. Finally, they both continue to be seen as inherent features of femininity in post-Soviet Russia. Although they remain separate issues, then, they are very much interconnected.

Gradskova also offers persuasive arguments as to why the project is important. She points out that in the Gorbachev era there were high expectations both of the development of a woman's movement, and of improvements in women's lives, yet neither of these expectations was fulfilled. A women's movement did emerge, but most Russians, female as well as male, seemed indifferent to its aims. When women did get involved in independent organisations they tended to choose those which "were guided by a rhetoric of traditions and returning women to the home, ethnic and religious revivalism, motherhood as a woman's main predestination or even the restoration of the Soviet regime" (p. 10). Previous attempts to explain this phenomenon have linked it to the transition to the market and a rejection of anything reminiscent of communism, including the supposed emancipation of women. This, Gradskova argues, is too simplistic. Her own exploration of the lives of individual women and their "everyday practices of femininity" poses what she sees as more searching questions and arrives at more complex answers. Gradskova is particularly concerned to determine what kinds of norms, values and constructions of femininity were essential for self-identity; why, when and how they changed; and which of the Soviet norms of female personality and behaviour have survived into present day Russia.

Gradskova sees her study as a contribution to the development of a female

perspective on Soviet history which Western feminist researchers began in the 1970s, joined by their Russian counterparts from the mid-1990s. She hopes that her study will contribute to this body of research by offering a more nuanced understanding of the construction of the Soviet woman, and by identifying ways in which women were able to subvert the image of womanhood imposed on them by the state.

In short, Gradskova sees her thesis as constituting a re-examination of the construction of the Soviet woman. This, she argues, is necessary for a number of reasons. Firstly, a rather monolithic image of the Soviet woman still holds sway, based on the notion of a "gender contract" and focusing on working mothers. This understanding of the Soviet woman obscures very real differences between women from a wide range of ethnic groups, social backgrounds and generations. Secondly, this monolithic approach implies that there is strong pressure from the state to avoid change; but in the 1990s there was a huge reduction in the extent of state coercion which led neither to great changes in what she terms the "gender contract", nor to a marked growth in feminist consciousness. Thirdly, Soviet history is now being used for political purposes. Gradskova argues that the simplistic construction of the Soviet woman as a largely involuntary worker who was coerced into placing her children in state childcare institutions, and whose femininity was compromised both because of her excessive work load and because of shortages of consumer goods, is being used by the current ruling elite as a means of suppressing protest and demands for greater equality on the part of women.

In her conclusion to the thesis, Gradskova emphasises the importance of studies aimed at "remembering the Soviet past" (p. 275). There is a tendency amongst researchers, she explains, including those in Russia itself, to relegate Soviet history to the category of "other" and to fail to understand how an analysis of the past is crucial to understanding the ways in which a new Russian identity is being defined and a new agenda for the women's movement created. Studying Soviet discourses on maternity and beauty and analysing memories of the "tactics of everyday life" is a way "of dealing with the Soviet legacy of a contradictory gender experiment" (p. 276), and will provide us with insights into post-Soviet gender practices and their possible effects.

Gradskova uses a theoretical approach based primarily on gender theory and theories of everyday life. She draws in particular on the work of Michel Foucault and the feminist research which has developed out of this, and that of cultural theorists such as Michel de Certeau and Pierre Bourdieu. She has also made use of Nina Lykke's concept of intersectionality, which refers to the ways in which social categories interact with one another and, in the process of doing so, reconstruct and transform each other. She has also applied critical discourse analysis to her study; this, she explains, aims to apply a critical approach to knowledge that is normally taken for granted, to distinguish between the linguistic features

of texts and discursive practices (that is, the process relating to the production and consumption of texts), and to wider social practices such as the ways in which the messages in these texts were applied, adapted and subverted. She points out that "routines at hospitals, hairdresser salons, shops or maternity clinics had their own unwritten rules, norms and logic that somehow coexisted with, adjusted to, and at the same time contradicted the dominance of the Soviet order of discourse" (p. 25). Gradskova is particularly interested in "resistance to dominant Soviet discourses through [the] everyday practices of beauty and maternity" (p. 26), but points out that this "everyday resistance" should not be confused with a political resistance to the Soviet regime (p. 30).

Gradskova's research methods are a combination of textual analysis and interviews. She draws on a wide range of written and visual sources, including advice books, pamphlets, and films. She also interviewed 21 women who were aged in their twenties to fifties at the end of the period under study. She explains that she was particularly concerned about reflecting the ethnic diversity of the Soviet Union and the impact ethnicity had on women's experiences of beauty and motherhood, and accordingly she conducted interviews with women of different ethnic groups in three very different parts of Russia: Moscow, Saratov and Ufa. While she acknowledges that interviews can be problematic sources of information, particularly in repressive societies, and that there is a danger that informants might try to retell history "as it ought to be" rather than as it was, she points out that they offer a very different perspective from other source materials such as archives and published materials, and this subjective viewpoint cannot be rejected if we want to understand what living in Soviet Russia was really like.

On the basis of her research, Gradskova identifies the ways in which motherhood and beauty (which she explores in that order, despite the dissertation's sub-title) were perceived and performed in the Soviet Union. Motherhood, she points out, was seen as a normal, unquestionable stage of a woman's life, a uniquely female source of happiness. A "normal" woman was expected to care for her children and ensure their survival, but during the period under study, in order for a woman to perform her combination of roles successfully, this route to "female happiness" had to be limited by means of contraception and abortion.

Motherhood was seen primarily as the result of love and marriage, and "normative" femininity required that the body's capacity for pregnancy and birth be demonstrated as soon as possible after marriage, regardless of the woman's material circumstances or her situation regarding work and study. In the turbulent 1930s and 1940s, many people did not actually register their relationships, so they were not officially married; but a love relationship was still seen as an important prerequisite of motherhood. Breastfeeding was taken as an indication of "normal" femininity, demonstrating – and symbolising – the woman's capacity to feed and care for her baby.

A Soviet mother, or a visibly pregnant woman, had a distinctly social role: she was displaying her body's ability to provide new citizens for the Soviet state, and in doing so, she raised her own status in the eyes of her family and in society as a whole. Some women used their biological capability and the status it gave them to try to acquire improved living conditions, such as better housing. The state, she argues, saw this as justifiable, even if the woman did not actually receive these benefits. In other words: the state felt that motherhood gave a woman the right to seek improved conditions, even if it was not in a position to provide them.

While producing the child was unavoidably the role of the mother herself, the activities of other care-givers such as grandmothers to ensure the survival and well-being of the child was also a significant feature of mothering. If grandmothers were not available, child care could be performed by the state or by privately hired nannies.

The relationship between the child's mother and father was an important aspect of the way in which motherhood was perceived and practiced. The child was part of the feminine sphere from which, in normal circumstances, the father was largely excluded; indeed, getting too involved in child care would compromise his masculinity. However, in exceptional circumstances this changed and it was accepted that he could do everything, including help with delivery.

Last but not least, the relationship between motherhood and work outside the home was a crucial part of the motherhood role. Gradskova points out that having a child was not considered reason enough for a woman to give up work or study, but she still had to display "normal femininity" through continued acts of care for the child throughout its youth, such as cooking, sewing, caring for its health, monitoring its progress at school, and so on.

Gradskova then outlines a series of what she terms "Beauty Scenarios", although this reader felt they might be better termed "Ways of performing beauty". She discusses the link between beauty and happiness: how looking good made women happy, and preserving their good looks into maturity was a source of pride. She explores the link between the aesthetic ideal, naturalness, and what was considered appropriate and decent. Women had to display their bodies "properly", which included being neatly dressed at all times, looking good without drawing excessive attention to themselves, and dressing appropriately for their age and circumstances. Failure to observe such norms constituted "deviant" femininity. There was clearly a tightrope to be walked here, though: too much concern over her appearance, or dressing inappropriately for her age and circumstances, would be taken as a sign of vanity and *meshchanstvo* (philistinism).

Women had to be capable of engaging in female handicrafts such as sewing and knitting, but in addition they had to be willing to suffer and to fight for beauty. Practising beauty required a huge amount of money and effort, and many women

took on extra paid work and made use of informal connections, speculation, and the black market to gain access to beauty aids.

In the post-war period, women were able to follow international fashion and style in through foreign publications and films, war booty, and, from late 1950s, through East European and Baltic magazines. However, changing technology and more rapid changes in fashion made it harder to keep up, and made differences in wealth and position more visible.

There was a strong link, Gradskova argues, between female appearance and social status. Having a "normal" female biography required a normal body. Abnormalities such as the inability to have children, or a physical defect (she gives the example of a humpback), made it impossible for the woman to "perform" beauty. Women with such "problematic bodies" were "confined to the margins of social normality" (p. 273).

Gradskova concludes that "normal" femininity was considered both innate *and* something that had to be worked at; and that it differed at different times of a woman's life, and in accordance with geography, ethnicity, religion and social status. It was also a combination of prescription and common-sense. Women used and misused the dominant discourses, interpreted them in a variety of ways, adapted them to their own circumstances, and found subtle ways of subverting them. In this way they managed to preserve an "individual self", and this resulted in differences in the construction of femininity.

Throughout her study, Gradskova draws attention to the contradictions between policy and practice. For example, she explores Bolshevik and Marxist ideas on the one hand, and the ways in which they were translated into real life on the other. She also looks at the contradiction between Soviet policies and the ways in which the past is actually remembered by former Soviet citizens.

The interviews conducted by Gradskova were, to this reader, the most interesting aspect of the research. One of the most fascinating findings to emerge from these interviews was that "practicing beauty" was deemed so important by these women that they were willing to commit to it almost inconceivable amounts of time and effort. This is particularly surprising given that according to the official discourse Soviet woman enjoyed natural beauty (p. 183) and so did not need to do much to enhance it. This is clearly not what they thought themselves. Making their own clothes was unavoidable, given the paucity of ready-to-wear fashions. However, hair-care surely did not need to be so complicated. Older respondents had their hair permed at the hairdressers' two or three times a year, while the younger women had their hair styled professionally around once a month; but the real work went into everyday maintenance, which involved complicated routines and equipment that required enormous efforts to procure. Acquiring beauty was virtually a job – the "beauty shift", as Gradskova describes it – which started at the end of a day which had already been taken up with paid work and housework.

The result was "sleep deprivation and reduced leisure time" (p. 183). Achieving the desired appearance was also very costly; for example, one of Gradskova's interviewees told her that she had once paid half her monthly salary to buy a pair of shoes (p. 179). In fact, a woman's official salary could not meet such expenses, and the need to be beautiful made it necessary to find additional sources of income.

Coming from the West, where a massive industry has always been available to assist women in "performing beauty", but which I, and many other women, at least of my generation, have not felt much need to avail ourselves of, I found it difficult to understand why there was such a strong need amongst Soviet women to pour so much effort into "performing beauty" in the face of such enormous difficulties. I would have liked Gradskova to have given more space to explaining this phenomenon. She does talk of women's desire to attract and retain a man, which must have been of particular importance in the post-war period because of the demographic situation. However, this is clearly only part of the story, and a more detailed and systematic discussion of the subject would have been welcome.

A few other issues and aspects of the work would have benefited from more attention or more careful explication. For example, Gradskova talks of the Soviet Union promoting an "androgynous ideal" for women (p. 15). I would argue this is a more complex issue than she implies. Certainly women were expected to work alongside men in social production in the period covered by the study, but they were also expected to go home after their shift, change into feminine dress and be traditional women. Although there was a lack of clarity, particularly in the Stalin era, as to what constituted the ideal appearance for a Soviet woman, androgyny was only actively promoted in the 1920s.

Gradskova also holds that women were in a worse position than men in the Soviet Union (p. 10). This is, again, a bit more complex. A number of scholars have suggested that in some respects women had more freedom than men because the home, which remained a largely female domain, came under less state scrutiny and control than the public space. As Nanette Funk has suggested, "women also used their commitments to the family as a strategy to sidestep participation in the discredited political system".[1]

I felt that some of Gradskova's claims needed more substantiation. For example, she provides no figures, examples or references to back up her argument that when it became possible to join independent organisations, women usually chose those which promoted rather than challenged traditional understandings of women's roles and capabilities (p. 10).

1. Nanette Funk, "Feminism East and West', in Nanette Funk & Magda Mueller (eds.), *Gender politics and post-communism: reflections from Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union*, New York & London 1993, p. 323.

Another claim I had problems with was that the women's magazine *Rabotnitsa* "was focused specifically on the communist indoctrination of women" (p. 39), and that it required "nothing short of ideological correctness" from its contributors (p. 82). Having also used this magazine as source material, I would argue that the situation was, again, rather more complex. Certainly *Rabotnitsa* did put forward an "official" view of the role of Soviet women; which changed throughout Soviet history in accordance with changes in leadership and ideology; and there were also some extremely didactic articles and stories. However, it is likely that the content of articles was influenced as much or more by self-censorship as official stricture. (This was certainly the view put forward by two journalists I interviewed once who had written for *Sovetskaya Zhenshchina*, "The Soviet Woman"). Furthermore, some real challenges to Soviet orthodoxy can be found in the magazine. Most notably, the articles by Elena Kononenko, who wrote for *Rabotnitsa* in the Stalin and Khrushchev eras but whose work receives no mention in Graedskova's thesis, posed a very real challenge to "ideological correctness"; far from trying to indoctrinate women, Kononenko was determined to get them to stand up for themselves.

Gradskova goes on to argue that "the discourse [on maternity as women's predestination] was only slightly disturbed by the industrialisation policies" (p. 83). If I have understood her correctly, she is suggesting that maternity was presented as women's primary function, despite the fact that they had been drawn into the work force en masse as part of the industrialisation drive. I would posit there were actually two contradictory approaches to women's roles running through the Soviet literature, and that if Gradskova had chosen to focus on women and work rather than women and maternity she might have reached a rather different conclusion.

My main criticism of the thesis concerns its presentation: it is, unfortunately, riddled with spelling mistakes, typing mistakes and grammatical errors. These are at the very least distracting, at times they actually distort what Gradskova is trying to say. A lot of care has evidently gone into the research, and such careless presentation does not do it justice.

In the final analysis, however, the merits of the thesis far outweigh its shortcomings. This is a worthwhile study which is well researched, well documented and usually well explained. It is enlivened by a series of appendices which include illustrations from the magazines Gradskova has drawn on, photographs from the personal albums of the women she interviewed, and full transcripts of two of the interviews she conducted. It offers a fascinating look at Soviet women from an unusual angle, and as such it constitutes a valuable contribution to Russian gender studies.

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