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Jane McDermid, Anna Hillyar. *Women and Work in Russia 1880-1930: A Study in Continuity through Change.* London and New York: Longman, 1998. x + 236 pp. $49.60 (textbook), ISBN 978-0-582-27986-5; $139.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-582-27987-2.

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Women and Work in Russia is the third title in Longman's new *Women and Men in History* series, a series aimed at "students, scholars, and interested general readers" that is intended to "both synthesize and shape future developments in gender studies." The work comes at a perfect time, as historians of Russia are in the midst of shifting their attention from "women's history" to "gender history" more broadly. The first generation of scholars of Russian women focused, quite naturally given their backgrounds in social history and their affiliation with the "left," on women of the revolutionary movement, discussions of the "woman question" itself, and on woman workers. In recent years, in conjuction with broader trends in the history profession, Russian historians have turned toward examining gender as a "useful category of historical analysis." That trend promises to continue, as Russian area studies conventions are now packed with papers examining gender and social identity, visions of the body, and masculinities as well as femininities. McDermid and Hillyar, therefore, had the chance to "synthesize" the earlier literature on women in Russia and simultaneously to "shape future developments in gender studies."

Unfortunately, *Women and Work in Russia* turns out to be the wrong book at the right time. McDermid and Hillyar stumbled at the outset of their project by adopting an ineffective research and narrative strategy. Claiming that they would NOT "use documents, including statistics, to build up a general picture of working women," they instead sought to write a series of brief biographical studies "within the context of economic and political developments." The problem with this method, as they acknowledge, is that "in a situation of widespread female illiteracy, the existence of a woman worker's memoir or recorded reminiscences shows that she was exceptional." The somewhat natural result of their chosen method, it would seem, would be a set of biographical sketches of a variety of unusual women. McDermid and Hillyar, though, believed that they could still tell a story about ordinary women through their vignettes on extraordinary women. "[B]y placing her [the extraordinary woman] within the wider context of information about women workers, we can not only establish how typical her story was, but also throw light on the lives of the 'silent' majority" (p. 3).

The authors thus resolved to place their individual stories within a wider context that they declined, at least in part, to "build up." Straw men and vague impressions were quite often made to stand in for historical context. The very first sentence of the book set the vague tone: "Alexandra Kollontai (1872-1953) is GENERALLY accepted, AT LEAST IN THE WEST, as a, IF NOT THE, central figure in the movement for the liberation of women in Russia and in the development of Marxist theory on sexual relations." (p. 1, emphasis added) Later on, McDermid and Hillyar are forced to build the flimsiest of straw men in order even to articulate their main thesis. They cite Belinsky and Dobroliubov, two mid-19th century social critics, to the effect that women were not recognized as individuals in their own right, and that therefore "[t]he enduring impression of Russian womanhood is one of abject passivity and selflessness within a patriarchal peasant system which survived urbanisation, industrialisation, war and revolution." (p. 9) This maneuver, unfortunately, is the equivalent of citing Harriet Beecher Stowe as an authority on 20th century American views about blacks.

They had to make this rhetorical move because their major thesis, that "Russian women were strong though in a subordinate position" (p. 217), derives whatever vitality it has from the premise that the currently dominant impression of Russian women is that they were "abjectly" passive. But whose impression is this? Certainly not undergraduates, most of whom come into our classes with no impression of Russian womanhood at all, much less an "enduring" impression. Nor can we say that graduate students or scholars of Russian women themselves

have an "enduring" impression of abject passivity, since the entire literature of the past twenty years has painted quite a different picture.

That literature, unfortunately, is haphazardly represented in *Women and Work in Russia.* When McDermid and Hillyar decide to use existing scholarship to provide historical context, they rely heavily on a few favored sources, most of which were published in the 1980s. Much of the most influential work of the 1990s is correspondingly given short shrift. They cite Laura Engelstein's 1986 *Representations* article on syphilis twice, but include her pathbreaking 1992 book on sex and modernity in Russia only in the bibliography. [1] They follow the same pattern with the important work of Wendy Goldman on early Bolshevik family policy, citing a 1991 article but including an appraisal of her more systematic 1993 book-length argument only in the bibliography. [2] In neither case are the full arguments of these authors assessed or even addressed. Goldman, for instance, is cited in the section on women in the mid-1920s, but she is ignored in the section on the crisis of the family during the Civil War. Other scholars are completely ignored, such as Adele Lindenmeyr, whose 1996 book on charity (and women's role in charitable institutions) is surely crucial for any assessment of women's work and political activity in imperial Russia. [3]

McDermid and Hillyar's approach has positive results as well as negative ones. They are sympathetic and sensitive biographers, and the women whose lives are described in the pages of *Women and Work in Russia* are sure to remain in the front and back of the reader's mind long after the book is finished. The jacket blurb, however, is not completely accurate when it trumpets that attention is paid "to women from all social classes." Indeed, the authors themselves admit that they "cannot claim to present a fully comprehensive picture of Russian women at work in this period." (p. 6) Women on the left are overrepresented, both in chapters one and two (on women in economy and society before World War I) and, more strikingly, in chapter three (on women in politics before World War I). Given the provenance of their sources, this is neither surprising nor particularly damning.

But McDermid and Hillyar appear to have internalized the outlook of their primary subjects, and this does pose a problem. Politics, for McDermid and Hillyar, is directly correlated to participation in the revolutionary movement. Using old, and now usually suspect, Marxist terms like "consciousness," "backward," and "political awakening," they align political action along a progressive line from "'small deeds' to revolution." (p. 98) Thus, in their discussion of women in politics between the 1905 Revolution and World War I, they spend ten pages detailing the brave attempts of "conscious" social-democratic women to organize "backward" women workers, before turning brief attention to the Union of Women's Equality, which, in the one page devoted to it, is disparaged for attracting "very few factory and peasant women" and seeking gains only for the educated. (p. 127) Brief mention of the Mutual Philanthropic Society and the Women's Progressive Party reconfirms the general line that the 'small deeds' of zemstvo participation, fights for civil equality, and leadership in charitable organizations were important only so far as they led women along a trajectory to revolutionary activity.

This focus on revolution hindered McDermid and Hillyar from offering what might have been a fresh contribution to the literature. The field of Russian history is split so radically across the 1917 divide that few authors take on the ambitious task of analyzing both the pre-revolutionary and post-revolutionary periods. McDermid and Hillyar, to their credit, did so. Chapter four, on World War I and the Revolution, was the best of the book. In that chapter, they were on the verge of demonstrating that it was war, not revolution, that was the watershed moment for Russian women. They demonstrated that women were drawn into public life by the war, were drawn into different employment situations, and eventually were politicized. By February 1917, they argued, women had reached such a level of political activity and fortitude that it was "women who took action, and men who hesitated. Despite bloodshed and beatings by the cossacks and police, the women refused the military's call to disperse, responding that they were not to be dismissed as babas (old biddies), for they were sisters and wives of soldiers at the front." (p. 155). This was an argument that might have been enriched by reference to the impressive literature on gender and the Great War in other belligerent countries, but it nevertheless could have served as a point from which a new appraisal of Bolshevik gender politics in the 1920s might have sprung.

Unfortunately, the too short section on World War I was quickly forgotten by the authors in the concluding chapter of the book, which examined women and work from 1918-1930. Their discussions of the impact of labor militarization and of changing sexual mores are placed wholly within the context of the Russian Civil War (1918-1921) and Marxist ideology. The rest of their narrative is concerned with elaborating on their main thesis. That thesis, as noted above, is that women labored under the oppression both of the state and of a patriarchal social system both before and after the revolution,

but that some women refused to passively submit. By painting this picture in such broad strokes (patriarchy, for example, is defined simply as male domination over women), they miss many of the fascinating changes of the gender order during Russia's second "Time of Troubles," as fraternity came to dominate political imagery and as a largely male revolutionary elite tried to balance their genuinely emancipatory intentions with their own gendered preconceptions and the severe restraints on their ability to act. As a result, their thesis is essentially correct, but it is also completely uncontroversial for their intended audience. It is hard to see how it will "shape future developments" in gender studies, as the series editors promise.

Women and Work in Russia does not fulfill the goal of producing a solid, interpretive synthesis of the existing literature, nor does it promise to shape future work in the field. The book does, however, serve as a very useful collation of existing works and as a fine collection of biographical vignettes. The authors have located dozens of little-used sources, and their notes and bibliography serve as a convenient (though not comprehensive) guide to the existing literature. It is therefore a useful reference work, but it does not have a place either on undergraduate syllabi or on graduate reading lists for comprehensive exams. We still await the synthesis that will anchor both of those lists.

Notes:

[1]. Laura Engelstein, *The Keys to Happiness: Sex and the Search for Modernity in Fin-de Sicle Russia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992).

[2]. Wendy Z. Goldman, *Women, the State, and Revolution : Soviet Family Policy and Social Life, 1917-1936* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

[3]. Adele Lindenmeyr, *Poverty is Not a Vice: Charity, Society, and the State in Imperial Russia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

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