

Michelle Lamarche Marrese. *A Woman's Kingdom: Noblewomen and the Control of Property in Russia, 1700-1861.* Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2002. xiv + 276 pp. \$42.50, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8014-3911-7.



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Noblewomen and Property Rights in Imperial Russia

In 1806, Catherine Wilmot wrote to her sister from Russia: "You must know that every Woman has the right over her own Fortune totally independent of her Husband and he is as independent as his Wife* Marriage is therefore no Union of interests whatsoever" (p. 5). The patriarchal nature of Russian society is common knowledge, yet paradoxically, as Michelle Marrese reveals, Russian noblewomen exercised their right to dispose of both moveable and immoveable goods in the period 1700-1861 to a remarkable extent.

Marrese acknowledges that women's property rights in the pre-Petrine period laid the foundation for improvements in the eighteenth century, as daughters were guaranteed a share in family property (p. 16). At the same time, she places her carefully constructed argument about the development of female property rights within two significantly broader contexts. First, she sees the expansion of female property rights as inextricably linked to the efforts of the Russian nobility to secure property rights and corporate status within a

rational legal system. Second, she examines the relationship of Russian noblewomen to property in comparison with women's property rights in Europe.

A Woman's Kingdom details changes in women's property rights from Peter the Great's attempt to institute unigeniture to the emancipation of the serfs in 1861, an event that significantly altered the relationship of noble men and women to their property. What distinguished the Russian nobility from other estates (*sosloviia*) prior to emancipation was the right to own land and serfs. Like their European counterparts, there often existed a wide gap in wealth and status from one noble family to another. Consequently, this was not a monolithic economic class, but rather an estate or order united by a shared sense of identity largely based on property rights in a system undermined by a weak legal culture.

Drawing on an extraordinarily wide source base from Moscow and four provincial archives (Vladimir, Kashin, Tambov, and Kursk), Marrese has made judicial use of notarial records (*Krepostnye knigi*), records of the sale and purchase of

serfs and estates, wills, dowries, deeds of separation, and petitions for divorce, along with memoirs and contemporary literature. It is difficult to find any flaw in her meticulous research. If anything, it is overwhelming.

Marrese argues that prior to Emancipation, Russian women had a unique legal status that allowed them far greater rights to dispose of property than their European counterparts in the same period. Furthermore, she notes that the nobility's primary concern in the eighteenth century was to protect patrimonial property. This was the case for women as well as men. According to Marrese's convincing argument, the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries witnessed a struggle on the part of the nobility to clarify their property rights vis-a-vis the family and the state. Consequently, an examination of women's property rights fits into the broader conflict between the individual and the state in the eighteenth century. The gradual shift towards an emphasis on the individual's rights had, by logical extension, an impact on women.

The real purpose of separate estates for married couples was to protect family interests. A close analysis of property transactions indicates that men's and women's behavior in terms of the acquisition and disposal of property was remarkably similar. Marrese notes important transitional points in the history of property rights such as Peter the Great's Single Inheritance Law (1714), aimed at forcing the nobility to protect their estates through the practice of unigeniture. One of the consequences of this legislation was to make women legitimate heirs to patrimonial property. At the same time, subsequent conflicts over dowry rights lasted throughout the eighteenth century.

When Anna Ivanovna revoked the law in 1730, the dowry issues remained unresolved as noble families continued to try and circumvent legislation and/or traditional practices that appeared to challenge the family's interests. As Mar-

rese points out, the revocation of the Law of Single Inheritance failed to specify whether or not women were excluded from further inheritance if they had already received a dowry. In consequence, women used ambiguities in the law to sue family members for a greater share in patrimonial property.

Literature on European and American women indicates that women in the West shared a specifically female economic culture based on personalism and sentiment (p. 152), whereas Russian women's economic behavior mirrored that of men. The instability of property rights in the Imperial period translated into greater concern for noble rights over patrimonial property than gender distinctions.

Both men and women alike focused on preserving the patrimonial estate, while simultaneously attempting to divide property fairly among children. The only discernable difference between men's and women's economic behavior lay in the greater likelihood of noblewomen to make specific bequests to charity, religious institutions, and individual serfs: 49 percent of women but only 38 percent of men did so.

While Russian noblewomen tended to receive smaller portions than European women, they had greater rights over their property. Moreover, a Russian woman could inherit immovable property that reverted to her family, not her husband's, if she had no children. The gradual increase in women's property rights did meet with some resistance. Prince M. M. Shcherbatov argued that a decree of 1753 guaranteeing married women control of their property would loosen the bonds of matrimony, and allow women to leave their husbands at will, to ruin their children, and having left their husbands, to ruin themselves (p. 44). On the whole, though, it was not generally considered unnatural or unwomanly for a noblewoman to engage in property transactions and estate management in Russia.

Marrese appears to assume that women in the West did not engage in estate management or were not active in family business and financial matters to the degree that Russian women were. Certainly European women did not possess the same rights as Russian women, at least on paper. Nonetheless, Marrese states that there is an absence of any studies of female landownership in Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (p. 112). Certainly, there is a gap in research that needs to be addressed. However, recent scholarship on women in the West shows that many women went beyond the limits of the traditional understanding of women's economic activities, finding ways to get around the law in order to protect their economic interests. That being said, *A Woman's Kingdom* does reference a wide body of literature on European women that allows her to make a legitimate point: Russian women's juridical status in relation to property rights was highly unusual.

This is a serious monograph that could certainly be assigned to graduate students and perhaps upper-level undergraduates. *A Woman's Kingdom* is a significant contribution to the field for historians of Russia and Western Europe in the early modern period.

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