Gender historians have been working since at least the 1970s to center sources and stories about women and their marriages, homes, families, labor, and lived experiences, and to situate these histories within a broader theoretical framework of gender as a pivotal category by which power operates. In imperial Russian and Soviet history, Barbara Alpern Engel has proven a leading voice in gender history for decades. Her new book demonstrates once again how valuable gender history has been in providing new ways to disrupt supposedly standard narratives. The book troubles the deeply held scholarly contours of Russian history to place at the center women, marriage, and family life rather than state policies and institutions. Its underlying argument emerges from there: that the household in Russian history in fact cannot be separated from the history of politics. This method and argument might not be new, per se, but Engel’s ability to sustain it through ten chapters covering three centuries makes the sharpest case yet for placing gender and culture at the center of the narrative and watching the effects ripple outward. With the book running just over two hundred pages plus endnotes, including a preface and short concluding thoughts within the final chapter, Engel does not waste a word. She argues that the meanings of her three central concepts—marriage, household, and home—changed over the centuries as a variety of political actors and ordinary people sought to shape them and that “policy and experience often remained in tension” (p. x). The ensuing chapters use sources from everyday experiences as well as institutional records and draw on a rich historiography of each era to highlight these tensions.

Chapter 1, “The Petrine Revolution at Home,” sets the groundwork for the definition of marriage in the early eighteenth century, the purpose of marriage, and the role of the church in policing it. As in much of Europe, marriage at this time was an economic rather than an emotional transaction. Further, Engel shows how every facet of Russian society, urban and rural, was built around the husband-wife unit—from merchant households who shared labor and sales work to peasants whose duties in the field were allotted by married team. Chapter 2, “The Culture of Sensibility, 1761-1855,” introduces readers to diaries as a key source base, which appear in most upcoming chapters, and uses them well in showing how people in the newly literate middling classes felt...
about marriage and family life. Engel also continues a pattern established in the first chapter of beginning with ordinary people’s experiences and moving to the tsars only in the latter part of the chapter, usually to analyze their own experiences with love, marriage, and the concept of home. Here, Nicholas I’s “scenario of power,” she writes, borrowing Richard Wortman’s iconic term, was one of “sentimentalized patriarchy,” casting himself as a loving husband and father (p. 32).

Chapters 3 and 4 cover most of the nineteenth century in the villages and among progressive intellectuals, finding a diversity of experiences with marriage in the countryside and among religious sects like the Old Believers. Engel brings the village to life with her descriptions of wedding rituals, feasting, conjugal rules regarding public and private sex, and more, developing a deeply nuanced and complex portrait of marriage and the household among peasants and serfs before emancipation. In the era of the Great Reforms, Engel finds that a persistent intelligentsia critique of authoritarian politics at the national level was disguised as critique of the patriarchal family unit. Diaries prove a very useful source again here, including some rare finds like that of the merchant Pyotr Vasilievich Medvedev in the 1850s and ’60s, who detailed his sexual life with men and women outside an unhappy marriage. Chapter 5, “The Politics of Personal Life: 1881-1914,” discusses a tumultuous time period with ease, capturing the roiling combination of women’s increased education, “ideals of romantic love and personal choice” dominating the arts at the time, and the 1905-6 revolution and Stolypin reforms that disrupted land claims and brought more married women to the cities (p. 84).

Moving into the era of the Soviet Union, which requires synthesizing a greater amount of historiography and sources than earlier chapters, Engel again succeeds in centering issues of marriage, household, and home as the driving forces in this history through the revolution, Stalinism, the Second World War, late socialism, and the postsocialist transformation. Along with chapter 3 on village life, chapter 6, “War, Revolution, and Postrevolutionary Change,” is the book’s strongest, providing a crystal clear argument for focusing on women, families, and households in this history—just as early Bolshevik utopianism did. Over several pages early in the chapter, Engel expertly mimics a wide-ranging series of Bolshevik questions after 1917 about how government and society would work—and virtually all prioritized issues of household, home, and family. Engel asks, “In the socialist future, would marriage be an enduring, long-term arrangement, as Vladimir Lenin believed? Or would it disappear?” (p. 110). “And what would become of domestic life?” (p. 111). “Would the family ‘wither away,’ or would it assume new forms?” Engel concludes, “Such questions regarding marriage, household, and home had profoundly political implications,” because an improperly socialized home—the place where future revolutionaries would be brought up—could risk the success of the entire enterprise (p. 112). The information and argumentation in this chapter is not necessarily new, and Engel herself was among many historians who pioneered research into the gendered implications of the Bolsheviks’ political goals and strategies, but it has not been so deftly collected and crisply defined as it is here.

Chapter 7, “Revolution at Work; Counterrevolution at Home,” turns to early Stalinism and frames collectivization and dekulakization as a war on peasant households in particular. While we are familiar by now with Lynne Viola’s pioneering work on the bab’i bunti, women’s riots that helped center gender analysis of collectivization in the 1990s, Engel draws our attention to the less-studied generational strife that Joseph Stalin’s agents cultivated.[1] For example, the senior man of the household, the bol’shak, empowered for centuries in the community, was often singled out for state punishment, destroying peasant authority and support networks in ways even tsarist-era
conscription or emancipation never did. This chapter also weaves through the cities and the Terror, drawing on newer research on fatherhood, everyday life, and informant culture in damaging communal households and apartment blocks. Chapter 8, “Defending the Home(land): World War II and After,” offers the book’s only investigation of war and its disruptions to gender and family; earlier wars like the Napoleonic invasion and the Crimean War are not mentioned, and World War I earns only a passing note. While these omissions might be unusual, the implicit argument that these conflicts lose significance when the central lens turns to households is intriguing. In contrast, Engel’s discussion of the Nazi invasion and catastrophic ensuing war makes its significance clear. Rather than repeat state narratives about the importance of fighting for the Motherland, though, Engel emphasizes the tension between these adages and people’s lived experiences—something she does throughout the book but feels particularly poignant in this chapter. She focuses on the women left to run villages and cities who try to organize food distribution, women facing sexual violence for serving in the Red Army, the decimation of marital fidelity, and more. Then, just as she unpacks the new 1918 Bolshevik family law code in chapter 6, Engel details the major provisions of the new code in 1944, providing instructors and students an indispensable guide when reading these sources in the classroom.

Chapters 9 and 10, on the postwar era through the 2010s, have the unenviable task of pulling several disparate strands together and creating a narrative arc where none really fits, at least not as neatly as “sentimentality” does for the late eighteenth century or “personal life” for the turn of the twentieth. Here, Engel gives voice to occupants of postwar communal apartments seeking privacy, overworked mothers and grandmothers in need of help, and the government’s quiet comment on its fears and priorities about the new domesticity through Krokodil, the popular satirical magazine. Some coverage choices in chapter 10 are puzzling, such as the truncated discussion of the end of socialism in the USSR. While choices certainly had to be made to fit such a sweeping three-hundred-year history into two hundred pages, discussing women’s activism in late socialism against conscripting their sons for service in Afghanistan, for example, or the effects of Mikhail Gorbachev’s anti-alcohol efforts on families and households would have fit well with like themes in previous chapters.

The book has many strengths. Engel collects and distills complex history and historiography into accessibly written chapters without watering down any of the nuance. The significance of her project of decentering laws, policies, and governance in favor of lived experiences is clear and convincing. The construction of each chapter is also carefully done to maximize her argument about the persistent tension between policy and experience. They begin with a fascinating and historically meaningful vignette from her sources describing an ordinary person’s experience and what it might mean for Russia writ large; only at the end of the chapter does Engel fill in the legal frameworks of the time or discuss the tsar, empress, or Soviet leadership’s role in trying to influence marriage and family life.

My quibbles are very few. It is a bit odd that the title references a time period bookended by the tenure of two male leaders, Peter the Great and Vladimir Putin, when the contents explicitly challenge this kind of periodization. Moreover, Putin only appears in the last three pages of the final chapter, which is mostly devoted to the massive social upheavals of the 1990s. Engel is very clear on the first page that the book will focus on the Russian-speaking center of the empire, owing to space and her own expertise, but one might hope for a companion volume or future edition that brings in newer research on marriage, household, and home in the borderlands. The intersectionality of gender and colonialism would surely
disrupt the center in this history even further and in important ways.

A variety of audiences should find this book valuable: the writing is perfectly accessible to undergraduate students; it offers graduate students and scholars not trained in gender history a straightforward way to appreciate the significance of this category of analysis; gender historians in other geographic fields will find much to compare here for Russia; and finally, the book provides gender historians of Russia a compact teaching tool as well as a model of how gender analysis of the longue durée can disrupt historical conventions. It is a masterful achievement that will become the go-to book on the topic for many years to come.

Note


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