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Book Review: *Soviet Women: Walking the Tightrope*

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ingly little effect on an academic consensus that veered off in the direction of the above mentioned panglossian sociological interpretations based on the indices of modernization. Now that the serried ranks of witnesses have stepped forth, the memoirs have been published, and the mass graves have been opened, Conquest's interpretation has gained new force. In characteristic B Team fashion, it emphasizes the terror implicit in the Communist program from the outset, the peculiar nature of the historical circumstances, and the character of Stalin and his associates. How has this been received among the living victims of Soviet Communism? When Conquest recently visited Moscow, he was lionized by the new intellectuals and carried off in triumph to deliver an extemporaneous university lecture.

In one or two details the original The Great Terror is better than the Reassessment. For example, the author has removed from the preface his comments on the profound philosophic issues raised by his researches. This is a loss, because it made clear to the reader the strength of a historical method which did not seek to delete the moral content of the sources in the name of some sort of abstract social science. And Conquest no longer apologizes for harboring "the prejudices...of most civilized men." But perhaps the human cost of Soviet Communism, now obvious to all, has rendered apologies of this sort unnecessary.

EDWARD COLE


For hundreds of years visitors to Russia have returned home with tales both wondrous and bizarre. However diverse the accounts, they all dwell on the curiousities of life in Rus', Muscovy, Russia, or the Soviet Union. Most often travelers stress the negative aspects of the country, for these unfortunately tend to dominate. Such an atmosphere has produced within Russia a long tradition of fine social satire, most of which official censorship quickly suppressed. In the mid-eighteenth century, Alexander Sumarokov wrote a satirical song, "Chorus to a Topsy-Turvy World," in which a bird who has flown abroad returns to Russia to tell of strange lands where people are moral, straightforward, rational, pious, discreet, educated, respectful, industrious; where "drunken men do not roam the streets" (Segel, The Literature of Eighteenth-Century Russia, I, 246)

A century later the greatest of Russia's "civic" poets, Nikolai Nekrasov, explored the sufferings of the Russians, especially the peasants with what one critic calls "social compassion" (Mirsky, A History of Russian Literature, 229). In order to settle an argument among themselves, several peasants wander around the country asking people of various classes the question of Nekrasov's masterpiece, Who is happy in Russia? They are "told tales of extraordinary moral achievements, heroism, and crime and the poem ends on a note of joyful confidence in the future of the people with the help of the new democratic intelligentsia" (Mirsky, 234)

Mirsky's description of Nekrasov's poem could also apply to Francine du Plessix Gray's excellent endeavor to portray glasnost, perestroika, and their ramifications in the lives of the common man. The book follows the travels from the Great Russian Revolutions to the current situation of glasnost, and is an account of last year's travels from the Communist to the Soviet Union, and includes an essay on the current situation of glasnost, and the latest veils of repression, women and men, family and marriage, education and careers; exploring the realm of the women, family and marriage, education and careers. Almost no one can fail to be impressed by the latest events in the world of Russia, and the Russian grandmothers' magical accomplishments abroad. The last chapter is perhaps the most startling of the book, when the phrase 'We have come through the window and on the way back home' is repeated. The woman was determined to stay at home and create a world where children would grow up clean and nice clothes, and to stay at home and create a world where children would grow up clean and nice clothes, and where women would enjoy the results of their labors with the help of the new democratic intelligentsia.
Women: An Historical Approach to Russia and the Soviet Union

Visitors to Russia are often struck by the diverse curiosities of the Soviet Union, where the atmosphere is charged with a sense of unease and hope, and the people's anxiety is expressed. This atmosphere is long familiar to the Russian people, who have lived through centuries of oppression. In his poem "Chorus to a Bird," Alexander Sumarokov writes: "Like a bird who has flown from Russia to tell of what is moral, pious, industrious; what are their needs, dreams, desires."

The book reveals much more; this slim volume ably and perceptively, succinctly and elegantly provides a brief history of the short-lived women's liberation movement in the Soviet Union, analyzes stereotypes of Soviet men and women, looks for causes of the current sad state of loveless Soviet marriages; explores women's attitudes toward men, family and work; destroys old myths and creates new ones. Along the way du Plessix Gray answers Sumarokov's question: Almost no one is truly happy or lives well in the latest version of Sumarokov's topsy-turvy world.

Like most visitors to Russia and the Soviet Union, du Plessix Gray (herself raised by Russian women—her mother and grandmother) falls under the spell of this magical country where contradictions abound. This is a country where the women began "to use the ironic phrase 'We have too much equality'" (p. 37) as a result of their work loads both at home and on the job. She discovers that in opposition to her Western sisters, the Soviet women want to have time and opportunity to stay at home to take care of their mother and children, to be able to shop in leisure, clean house, cook nourishing meals, find nice clothes, dress well and feel "feminine." Even the most radical of the very few feministic (feminists) who do exist in the Soviet Union do not want to lose their womanliness, their zhenstvennost. They want to be good mothers, but not necessarily good wives.

For most Russian women, Russian men have become a joke. The women marry only because they want children. The husband becomes a necessary encumbrance. The women complain because the men drink, do not help with the children or the housework; however, they take pride in being overworked and feel reluctant to give up both the "overburdening" (peregruzhennost) and the power of being in control.

Russian women have learned to be aggressive, to be in control for a number of reasons, not the least of which is that they are taught to be assertive in the schools. Also because of the war, women took control in many areas of Soviet life and now are either unable or unwilling to give it up. The Soviet system, many argue, robbed men of initiative, individuality and ambition. One Latvian editor, a woman, sees perestroika as a way to wake "up the lichnosti, the individualism, in our men so that they cease feeling superfluous... It is about creating a society of less aggressive females who can at last regain their womanliness" (49). In many ways during her investigations, travels, meetings, and conversations, du Plessix Gray became an advocate for "men's liberation." On one level her book about Soviet women really explains Soviet men.

In spite of their emphasis on home life and children, Soviet women place all of their hopes and dreams on their liubimaya rabota, their "beloved work." Usually their place of work, rather than their homes, becomes the focus of their lives. Only at work do they feel fulfilled, only among colleagues...
might they find the friendships which sustain them, only here do they remedy the loneliness and lack of intimacy in their marriages. But even on the job they become frustrated because most administrative jobs go to men. However, du Plessix Gray did find instances of "reverse discrimination" where the women are in charge and hire a "token male," but do not trust him with important tasks. Francine du Plessix Gray comes to her insights after having interviewed scores of men and women in extended stays in the Soviet Union. Through them she learned of the major problems plaguing women there: lack of sex education, abysmal health care, no real birth control except for abortion, substandard day-care facilities, no leisure time. What brightens the bleak situation du Plessix Gray discovers are some of the extraordinary people she comes to know. Her portraits of these Soviet citizens form the core of the book. With the great skill and feeling of a consummate storyteller, she takes us into the homes and workplaces of unforgettable people who represent all levels of Soviet society. What strikes me most about her sketches of these people is their truth. While reading them I hear my own Russian friends speak and recall my own experiences with Soviet bureaucrats and officials. All of us who have lived in the Soviet Union for prolonged periods recognize the people du Plessix Gray introduces to her readers. The anecdotes they tell, the lives they share, the complaints they voice substantiate du Plessix Gray's conclusions about Soviet society.

One fallacy, however, runs through her book. Although she entitled her work Soviet Women and interviewed women from various republics, du Plessix Gray tends to refer to them as Russian women and identifies with them because of her own Russian background. Perhaps, though, she has inadvertently hit upon a truth. In spite of all our protests over the past seventy-four years that "Russian" and "Soviet" are not interchangeable, maybe they are. Is it possible that Russification and not "Sovietization" has been going on in the Soviet Union for over seven decades? This question rises out of, not in, this provocative book.

While concentrating on Soviet women, du Plessix Gray reveals much about life in general in the Soviet Union today. She hears the people bemoan the decline of courtesy, the lack of good manners, the loss of beauty; she feels their nostalgia for the past and senses a new religiosity, which she finds more developed in men than in women. She also looks beyond the mere words perestroika and glasnost to see what they really mean to Soviets now and promise for the future.

In answer to the question "how she conceives her ideal life ten, fifteen years from now," a certain Elena states that she does not want any more material objects, but above all, "throughout my life I want to maintain close bonds with my daughter and my mother—my grandmother and my mother were very close and lived together, and that's how it should remain from generation to generation, mother-and-daughter bonds must remain intact" (153).

Du Plessix Gray likens this eternal chain to a matryoshka, a set of nested dolls. Here she has devised the central metaphor for how Russian women view themselves; she has also found an apt metaphor for her book.

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