

## GENDER IN RUSSIAN HISTORY

**Early Russian patterns** Though there is a long history of Slavic settlements in various parts of Eastern Europe, Russian history proper begins in the postclassical period, with the formation of a monarchy and, after 988, the conversion to Orthodox Christianity. Gender arrangements at this point were highly patriarchal, though the greatest male-female differentiation occurred in the upper classes. Marriages were arranged, under the father's guidance; often bride and groom met only after the deal had been concluded. At least in the upper classes, the marriage ceremony usually included a clear power ritual in which a small whip was given from father to groom, symbolizing the transfer of male control over the bride. "Should you not behave as you ought to toward you husband, he in my stead will admonish you with this whip." A mid-16<sup>th</sup> century treatise explicitly urged husbands to beat disobedient wives, though preferably not in anger. Women were typically committed to marriage at a young age, often 12 or even under. A revealing and vivid Russian custom saw women gather before a wedding to lament the loss of girlhood and the burdens a marriage might bring – a distinctive custom that survived until after the 1917 Revolution. Upper-class women were often secluded in parts of the home called the *terem*; when in public, they were often veiled. Great emphasis was placed on virginity before marriage, then sexual fidelity. Women's revolved around motherhood and domestic service, and Russian men took deep offense at any insult that implied they were feminine. It is not clear that Russian imitation of Byzantine patterns had much to do with gender – the Byzantine empire itself was highly patriarchal, but some individual women gained education and wielded political power in ways that seem absent from Russia at this point. Christianity did bring the establishment of convents for religious women – new conventual orders were established from this point through the later 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, Russian convents did not produce the kind of female spiritual leadership that occurred occasionally in Western Europe. Further, they were often used to punish women, with wives, daughters or sisters obliged to take the veil because of power disputes within the family. Russian Christianity allowed a man, twice in his life, to send an unsatisfactory wife to a convent, where she would become dead to the world – and the man could remarry.

**Early modern reforms** Significant change began to take shape from the late 17<sup>th</sup> century onward, initially with the reforms of Peter the Great. Upper-class women benefited disproportionately, but there were some wider shifts; for example, the average age of marriage for women began to rise gradually. Tsar Peter realized that forcing the aristocracy to change habits was a good way to exercise greater control, while also giving mothers new opportunities to shape the education of their sons in constructive ways. And he sought to make Russian culture more Western, at the upper-class levels, to reduce impressions of backwardness. In this vein he encouraged upper-class women to attend public concerts and dances, as they did in the West. They also gained access to more fashionable, Western-style, clothing. More substantively, he ended the wedding practice of exchanging whips (replacing this with a kiss between bride and groom), and officially abolished arranged marriage. A decree of 1702 insisted that marriage decisions should be voluntary and that a couple should meet at least six weeks before a ceremony. Upper-class daughters began to gain some opportunities for education, under tutors, including reading Western languages. Two major empresses in the 18<sup>th</sup> century continued the process of change – particularly, Catherine the Great (ruled 1762-96). New, though vigorously disputed, laws began to allow women to own property and control inheritance – particularly important for aristocratic and merchant wives. Catherine also established a few schools, at one point urging an end to different training for boys and girls but then falling back to the idea that female education should "consist most of all in making good homemakers. Faithful wives and caring mothers." Still, a basis had been set for further developments.

**The nineteenth century** While this was not a decisive period in Russian gender history, there were some interesting shifts. Throughout the century individual women, aware of developments in Western Europe, wrote treatises urging greater equality and attacking the subordination of wives. During the reform period after 1855, a number of women gained advanced degrees in law and medicine. During the 1870s the governments opened medical courses to women and finally authorized a woman's university. Men and women alike wrote widely about the need for further reforms, around what was now termed the

“woman question”. Various feminist organizations took shape, and women also participated in anarchist movements (where their ability to conceal bombs was valued). Other changes included growing participation in urban consumer culture, including patronizing the new department stores that began to open after the 1850s. Rapid urbanization and changes in the countryside shook up established sexual practices, with a rise in premarital sexual activity. And here too, laws changed: a 1903 edict reduced the number of sexual activities regarded as illegal.

**The communist revolution** The Russian Revolution of 1917 introduced major changes into gender relations in Russia, along with growing urbanization and industrialization. Communist leaders boasted of the advances for women, compared to predominant housewives in the West, but while there was indeed some differentiation reality proved more complicated. The vote was immediately extended to women. Education was a key area of change. School requirements and opportunities for both genders rapidly expanded, including access to secondary and tertiary education. The early 1920s saw eager discussion about alternative family arrangements and other measures that might benefit women, but then under Stalin more traditional family structures were emphasized. Women did take on new work roles, however, usually combining them with demanding household tasks; shopping, particularly, could take time under Soviet conditions. Participation in fields like medicine expanded, though usually at rates of pay well below those of male counterparts. By the later 20<sup>th</sup> century over 40% of engineers were women. Birth rates began to fall rapidly, despite some government efforts to maintain them. Particularly after World War II women’s athletics gained new attention, with world-class efforts in the Olympics and other sports. Women also participated in the space program early on. The 1977 constitution emphasized both women’s equality and their special responsibility to contribute to society while raising the next generation of Soviet citizens. Consumer opportunities for most women were somewhat limited in the Soviet system, though Western critics tended to exaggerate. It was also true that women did not rise to the top levels of political leadership. Overall, the Soviet system was a mix of some standard modern features – like education and a low birth rate; an unusual range of professional opportunities; and some lingering limitations.

**Since 1989** The fall of communism did not bring massive change, though there was a shift in tone. Educational and work levels largely persisted – along with exclusion from top leadership ranks. By the 21<sup>st</sup> century over 50% of all university students were female – 57% at the peak, but then with slight decline in the technical fields. Some religious life resumed, including reopening some convents. The drop in the birth rate accelerated. Consumer opportunities increased for some, including new opportunities for travel outside the country. After 2000, under President Vladimir Putin, problems like sexual harassment at work – though almost certainly not new – became more visible. The legal code was revised to make prosecution for domestic abuse considerably more difficult. The regime also tried to crack down on gay culture, both male and female, with a series of arrests. A number of feminist and gay leaders, including members of the music group Pussy Riot, were subjected to jail sentences. After the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, emphasis on military virtues in the schools, with women in a supporting role as wives and mothers, added yet another element.

### **Study questions**

- 1, What were the most striking features of the Russian version of the patriarchal family?
2. What reforms occurred from Peter the Great onward, and what were their limitations?
3. What was the impact of the Russian Revolution on gender? Did a distinctive version of modern gender relations emerge in the Soviet Union?

### **Further reading**

Barbara Engel, *A History of Women in Russia, from earliest times to the present* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012).

Barbara Clemens, Barbara Engel and Christine Worobec, eds., *Russia’s Women: accommodation, resistance, transformation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

Barbara Engel, *Breaking the Ties That Bound: the politics of marital strife in late imperial Russia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011).

Melanie Ilic, *Soviet Women – Everyday Lives* (New York: Routledge, 2020).