



# BOOK REVIEWS

## RUSSIAN WOMEN'S STUDIES: Essays on Sexism in Soviet Culture.

Tatyana Mamonova (with the assistance of Margaret Maxwell). Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1989.

### Heather Jon Maroney

Tatyana Mamonova's objective in publishing this collection of essays written between 1984 and 1987 is to make Russian women's history and situation better known in the west. By this means, she hopes to further links between women's movements inside and outside the USSR and to advance Soviet "neofeminism."

Its broad range — with sections on women in history, the arts and sciences, classical Russian authors, recent developments, and the cold war and peace — serves the first purpose well. While specialists may find much of the material familiar, there are fascinating flashes of insider knowledge. For me, an interesting reflection on exile emerged.

Historically, we learn of a close intellectual, emotional and political relationship between "the two Catherines" — Catherine the Great, who seized power from her husband in 1762 to reign as Autocrat until her death in 1796, and "Catherine the Little" Dashkova, who was rewarded for her loyalty to her sovereign with the directorships of the Academies of both Arts and Sciences. Self-educated in Enlightenment authors, the aristocrat Dashkova travelled to Europe where she favourably impressed Voltaire and Diderot (the latter thought she should be prime minister!), investigated university education and discovered Angelica Kaufman's painting for Russian audiences.

In the nineteenth and twentieth cen-

turies other upper class women, activists like Alexandra Kollontai, and artists like print-maker Anna Ostroumova, sought knowledge, freedom or feminist allies in Europe. But there is also another western journey that Russian women, like Mamonova and some other editors of the first feminist *samizdat*, *Woman and Russia*, have made: that of exile.

Some emigrée dilemmas endure, like the "francisation" of Russian speech, described by humourist Teffi, in essays from the late 1920s. In other ways, these change. Today, according to Mamonova, unfamiliar forms of bureaucracy, unemployment, scarce housing and high living costs give rise to depoliticising involution. As a result, the emigrée community is dominated by sexism, homophobia and a "narrow framework of anti-socialism" that favours religious revival and defends freedom of expression by promoting verses in "mat" (a sexist form of swearing denounced by authors as diverse as Dostoyevsky and Trotsky) as authentic, anti-

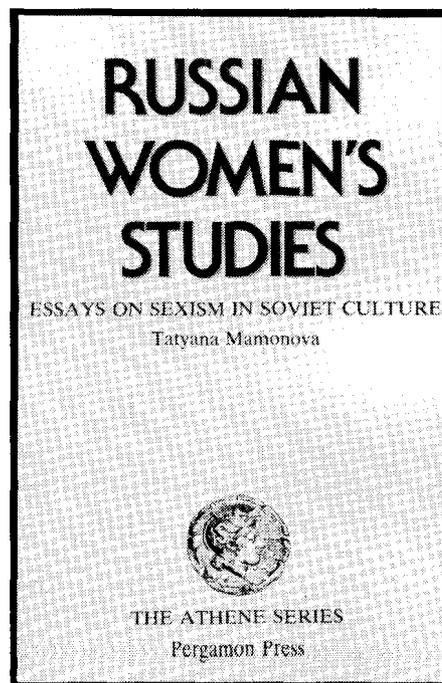
communist folk-culture.

Tracing the careers in exile of her former co-editors, Mamonova argues that their unrealized expectations of "special treatment" and precarious economic situations have led to dependence on the Russian language press and an abandonment of feminism.

To her credit, Mamonova has done neither. She consistently supports democracy, pluralism, peace and "love," while denouncing sexism, lust and "pornographic language." Nor is she an anti-socialist crusader. She resents assessments of the *samizdat* writings as old-fashioned, asking in one place if there are fashions in humanism, while in another showing precisely that new meanings have been historically attributed to it. While she claims an unobtrusive role as a publicist, Mamonova is herself front and centre, in essays overwhelmingly beginning with "I." It is fair to ask, then, what kind of feminism she represents.

Two problems impede analysis. The translations are often awkward and the production a scandal. Misspellings, missing quotation marks, unsupplied first names, errors of syntax, grammar and logic, all muddied and annoy. And, because these pieces are short (two to twelve pages) and seem to have been given as talks in various cities, where new audiences absorb the same information and a rousing peroration can substitute for analysis, there is much repetition but little logical development or theoretical reflection, even in areas of cultural production where Mamonova has previously situated herself as an artist.

Perhaps surprisingly, components of Soviet Marxism mark her thought. The first is an exaltation of woman-as-mother. For Mamonova, the object is *Woman*: a morally superior natural altruist, the giver and preserver of life. She praises unreservedly Gorky's "Tales of Italy" ("Gorky



knew woman"), even though Italian and other feminists have pointed out the costs of essentialist ideologies of maternity. She also approves his calls for female pacifism before WWII, without noting that these views were in line with Stalinist policies so costly to women in the USSR and western communist parties.

The second component emerges most clearly in her discussion of the theories of nineteenth century biologist, Lydia Kochetkova. For Kochetkova, sexual reproduction was merely a stage on the way to parthenogenesis and nature would inevitably progress toward the higher female form. Outdoing Mary Elman's later version of the adventurous ovum's wild flight into the unknown through the fallopian tube, Kochetkova sees the ovum, richly complete with nutrients, as a last refuge for the impoverished sperm's weaker life force. With "reproduction and development in contradiction," the effective reduction of "the procreation [sic] instinct" allows the new women to restore their "concentrated universal energy" with the result that "the sensitivity and responsiveness of the nervous system increases." In turn, according to Mamonova, as a result of the fine tuning of the nervous system, "feelings of sympathy occupy an ever larger place in the person's soul." Part of the problem here is language, part western feminism's rejection of motherhood. But, there is also a peculiar willingness to try to find direct material causes for "spiritual" effects unmediated by social relations, and a corresponding tendency to reductionism.

In these respects, her outlook is uncongenial to much of western socialist-feminism. And indeed, Mamonova hints at her difficulties with collectivist styles of work and loudly denounces her exclusion from UNESCO forums, her misrepresentation in the mass media, and her inability to fund her project of printing and smuggling feminist books into the USSR. But despite an unfortunate reputation as being difficult to work with, the Mamonova who emerges in these essays is nonetheless a committed feminist, driven by a project, albeit beset by the contradictions of exile and cut off from whatever possibilities for feminist mobilization that new political conditions in the USSR — which, after all, produced this issue of *CWS/cf* — may provide.

## TERRIBLE PERFECTION: Women and Russian Literature

Barbara Heldt. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987.

### *Diana Greene*

The publication of Barbara Heldt's *Terrible Perfection: Women and Russian Literature* is something of an event. Heldt has given us the first application of feminist theory to the history of Russian literature.

Of course, such studies already exist for other literatures, but here as in most aspects, the women's movement of the 1970s has been slower to reach U.S. Slavic Studies than other academic fields. For example, the Modern Language Association — from which Slavicists are noticeably absent — established a Commission on the Status of Women as early as 1969 and a Women's Caucus in 1970. Not surprisingly, at the same time feminist literary criticism within the organization began to flourish and became probably the most fertile and vital approach to Western literature. In classrooms, on conference panels, in articles, and in books feminist scholars began to look at how men and women writers portray women in their works, and to what effect; how the historical differences between being a woman and a man writer might have affected authors' works and audiences' perceptions of them; and why the many excellent women writers being rediscovered had been "forgotten," i.e. who determines literary canons and on what basis. Clearly for these scholars there could be no separation between changing the form of academic life — improving the status of women in the profession — and changing its content — incorporating more than a few token women writers into the canon and legitimizing women's issues as subjects of scholarship and discussion.

The picture in Slavic studies during this time was quite different. In my generally excellent graduate education during the 1970s I never read anything about feminist criticism or Russian women's history. I was very surprised to discover, some years after graduating, that there had been two separate nineteenth-century

Russian women's movements and that one could even see their effects in familiar works by Tolstoi, Dostoevskii, Turgenev and some of the Russian symbolists. While more recently a few brave souls in various universities have been offering courses on women in Russian history and Russian literature, as yet feminist criticism rarely appears in Slavic journals. Up to now, at conferences one has been lucky to find as many as two panels on women's issues, although in an apparent concession to the women's movement the program of one recent conference listed the men chairing panels as "chairmen" while carefully designating all the women as "chairpersons."

Recently, however, Slavic studies have begun to change. Two years ago the two largest American Slavic organizations — AATSEEL and AAASS — formed women's caucuses and AAASS established a Commission on the Status of Women. Around the same time, Barbara Heldt's book appeared.

Heldt is a pioneer in the field of Russian feminist studies. In 1978 she became the first to translate into English *A Double Life* (1848), the unconventional novel by the nineteenth-century poet Karolina Pavlova. Heldt's introductory essay put Pavlova's life into a feminist perspective, something totally new in Russian literary criticism.

In *Terrible Perfection* Heldt looks at the history of Russian literature as a whole and presents an intriguing thesis: she notes that unlike other European literatures in which women novelists have a prominent place, in Russian literature men traditionally have dominated prose fiction, including fiction depicting women's most intimate thoughts and feelings. The images of women created by men in Russian prose fiction appear to be very positive, if not idolatrous; Russian literature is famous for its strong women characters such as Tatiana in Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, Natasha in Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, Nataliia in Turgenev's *Rudin*, characters often depicted as being too good for the weak male characters who court them. Indeed, Russian men even promoted women's liberation by writing the most famous Russian nineteenth-century feminist novels (Chernyshevskii's *What Is to Be Done?* Herzen's *Who Is to Blame?* Druzhinin's *Polin'ka Saks*).

Heldt argues that the flood of such