

Review

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Dalia Leinarte. *Adopting and Remembering Soviet Reality: Life Stories of Lithuanian Women, 1945-1970*. Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi, 2010.

During the Second World War and post-war period, the former Soviet Union seemed to be in the forefront in women's participation in the labor force. Women made significant contributions to all sectors of the Soviet economy. This widespread employment was perhaps made possible first and foremost through the application of Communist ideology. At the same time, Soviet women bore the "double burden" of wage labor and the lion's share of the household responsibilities or more accurately a "triple burden" acknowledging also Communist committee work.

Dalia Leinarte, in *Adopting and Remembering Soviet Reality*, explores life stories of Lithuanian women, specifically examining the Soviet indoctrination of women during the period of 1945-1970. The author contends that authoritarian and totalitarian regimes had – and still have – a deep interest in the indoctrination of women. In the case of the former Soviet Union, propaganda was directed towards abandoning "traditional" values and adopting new roles in public and domestic spheres, such as "workers and mothers" rather than "wives and mothers." Leinarte effectively argues that Soviet ideology permeated the everyday lives of women and dictated almost every feature of their existence, including women's understanding of family and work responsibilities, child-care, interpersonal relationships, romantic love, and friendships (3).

Published in 2010 by the International Publishing House Rodopi, *Adopting and Remembering Soviet Reality* is part of a book series "On the Boundary of Two Worlds: Identity, Freedom and Moral Imagination in the Baltics." This work contributes to a scholarly understanding of the politics and social existence of the Baltic countries located between the East and West "as if on the boundary of two worlds" (cover). Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany successively occupied the Baltic countries of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia during the Second World War in three separate invasions. Annexed to the Soviet Union as the Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic from the second Soviet occupation in 1945 until the reestablishment of independence in 1991, Lithuania experienced the terror of Stalinism, the "Khrushchev Thaw," and the "Brezhnev Stagnation Period." In spite of the terminology, Leinarte makes the case that women and their families endured the strongest indoctrination efforts during the so-called "Khrushchev Thaw" (3). The author indicates that many who lived under the regime may have hoped that private life would remain unaffected by

Soviet ideology and propaganda (1). Nevertheless the everyday existence of Lithuanian women was enormously influenced by Soviet party-line politics. Women who attempted to escape the direct control of Soviet dogma were the system's social outcasts (3). Leinarte maintains that, in contrast to women of other former Soviet Republics, whose narratives may contain elements of heroic pathos or pride, Lithuanian women usually self-identified with powerlessness and subjection as citizens of an occupied country. Although most Lithuanian women abided by the roles imposed by the government, "they remained in their hearts, mere observers rather than active participants in building socialism" (3).

This well written and insightful volume is comprised of two interpretive essays "Conducting Interviews in the Post-Soviet Space" and "Women, Work and Family in Soviet Lithuania," ten narratives spanning major categories of Lithuania women, and a conclusion. More than fifty oral history interviews as well as letters, diaries, newspaper articles, and secondary sources inform the initial chapters. The author conducted the interviews personally and spontaneously. She avoided using prepared questions in order to ensure that the conversations were not guided in a certain direction. Informants were asked to concentrate on the time between 1945 and 1970, and recall the most significant and poignant life events and emotional circumstances of their private lives (4).

Leinarte's discussion of "Silence as Testimony" is especially useful as an introduction. The author describes the narratives of Lithuanian women as "shaped during the Soviet era but recalled and reconsidered in the post-Communist period." As such they reveal not only the life experiences of Lithuanian women during the Soviet era, but also how women "created new identities and thereby reconstructed their relations with their past" (13). The author divides the life stories compiled and examined for this project roughly into three groups: those women who would evaluate the Soviet times positively, often in contrast to the majority of post-Communist Lithuanian society; those with painful and difficult experiences with Lithuania's incorporation into the Soviet Union, and finally those who expressed negative views of the Soviet era but whose memories were often incoherent and illogical. Leinarte explains that some women adopted party line ideology while others seemed less affected by official dogma. Notably, the testimonies that were less influenced by Communist propaganda did not necessarily belong to individuals who were the most outspoken against the Soviet regime. Frequently such interviews belonged to women who had been disregarded or marginalized by the Soviet system, because they were deemed as socially irrelevant (16).

As a gender historian currently focusing on the country of Latvia during the Second World War and post-war period, I found the chapter "Women, Work and Family in Soviet Lithuania" especially interesting. Leinarte explains that in the interwar years, during Lithuania's brief epoch of freedom, patriarchal gender

roles predominated (19). After the war and Soviet annexation, Lithuanian women who were mostly wives and daughters of pre-war farmers and who had relocated to cities and towns, were compelled to “adopt the identity of Soviet women and adapt to the new model of family and work” (20). The Soviet government disseminated and promoted the image of worker-mother-wife through propaganda and through the law. The government introduced state assistance for pregnant women, mothers of large families, and single mothers. It was believed that these laws would facilitate fertility in the former Baltic Republics as it had done in Russia. However, from the beginning the ruling clashed with Lithuanian demographic trends. In Estonia and Latvia fertility rates were even lower than in Lithuania (23). In Lithuania unmarried women with children were stigmatized by society. Day care was not established in Lithuania until the end of the 1970s (25). Plans for building pre-school institutions were never realized (26). Until the end of the 1960s the State did not provide for disabled children and their families (31). Women relied on their own initiative and ingenuity to reconcile work and family. Living conditions were often unfavorable to both children and adults. Families were forced to share housing (33). Women raising disabled children stayed home (31). Individuals worked two or three jobs (34). In the words of one informant, “We all began to realize that if you have unexpected children, you wouldn’t have anything” (34).

The life stories that the author has chosen to spotlight as complete narratives are powerful as representations of groups that are rarely given space in the writing of history. These ten moving testimonies personify history told from the perspective of women, some of whom created their own lives and identities even as they often found themselves marginalized in society. The informants include, among others: a deportee, the mother of a handicapped child, a rank-and-file Communist Party member and a wife of a Communist official, an accountant at a collective farm, a medical nurse, a waitress, and an adult who had grown up as an orphan. The book’s editing is careful to show the breadth and diversity of each woman’s experience and participation in society. Each life story is launched with a short introduction situating the narrative within the greater context of the author’s discussion. The photographs are a welcome supplement putting a human face to each testimonial. The extensive use of notations located at the back of the volume is helpful to the scholar of the Baltic States, perhaps vital to the reader unfamiliar with Lithuanian history and culture.

The volume under discussion here is a compelling work contributing to the disciplines of Baltic History and Eastern European Studies, Gender and Women’s Studies, and notably the scholarship of Memory and Oral History. Readers will find it solidly researched and well presented. Oral historians will appreciate its focus on personal narratives and life stories capturing the relationship between the individual and society. The book effectively

demonstrates that during the period of 1945-1970 Lithuanian women, as opposed to many women of other former Soviet Republics, found themselves “on the boundary of two worlds.” They were neither the model of the “New Soviet Woman” nor the ideal of the Lithuanian mistress of the home and homestead, even as Soviet ideology permeated their everyday lives and dictated almost every feature of their existence.