

Russia: Where the “Motherland” Calls: From Gender Mythology to Political Action

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What roles were traditionally assigned to women in times of war and political turmoil? How could we turn patriarchal myths against the dominant gender and political order? Feminist and researcher Asya Neverova on the history of the question and the re-appropriation strategy

The gender agenda, like many social phenomena in the modern world, moves on the principle of “[one step forward, two steps back.](#)” In recent decades, feminist demands have grown louder and have even been welcomed favorably by capital, which is developing a market for women’s emancipation and representation. However, as any [postcolonial analysis](#) would suggest, the gender equality of the center, achieved, among other things, at the cost of capital flows, is economically ensured by many peripheral areas, in which the problem of gender inequality becomes particularly acute. This can be observed not only in the countries of the Middle East, Pakistan, and Russia, but also in numerous class, racial, and national ghettos within relatively prosperous countries. Against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine, it is clear that the poor female populations of both countries, who have been victims of military aggression, are engaged in the struggle for a new gendered future.

Every patriarchal system needs gendered images and meanings: the “basis” of reproduction and physical violence, which hangs over women like the sword of Damocles, is legitimized by a complex mythological and psychological “superstructure.” At first glance, it is intended to guarantee the peaceful coexistence of the sexes, not just in one society but also under one roof. That is why there are far more songs about sex and gender relations than, say, about the relations of workers and bourgeois or colonialists and subalterns. Starting with the High Middle Ages, women have been offered more and more cultural roles allowing the threats associated with reproductive burdens to be given social significance. Such cultural roles, or myths, inevitably emerge in the translation of the personal into the public.

In political mythology, images of wife, mother, and sister are exploited. This is characteristic of revolutionary movements (Louise Michel wrote in her recollections of the women of the Paris Commune: “Gaul itself seemed to awaken in them”) and of state propaganda (“The Motherland Calls”). These myths are being constructed right now, against the backdrop of Russian military aggression in Ukraine. Further, we will try to retrace the logic of this construction by referring to the history of the emergence of some quintessential and extremely consistent feminine politicized roles. It can be assumed that some of them, in one form or another, will once again become part of a living and timely popular mythology, gaining unexpected political meaning and power. How we dispose of them politically will depend, among other things, on ourselves. This includes a discussion of the images that represent and signify the mother-son relationship—one of the strongest and most ambiguous types of social relations exploited during the war.

In a situation of incessant military action, gendered expressions appear with regularity in the language of official authority. Here, for example, Vladimir Putin's message to Ukraine on February 7 is illustrative: ["Like it or not, be patient, my beauty."](#) This caveat allows us to recall that the social contract of men in the early Modern era guaranteed men not only the illusion of security, but also complete power over women's bodies. The social contract of men — analogous to the right to conquer a woman's body — would subsequently enable the new modern states to establish colonial power and capital over natural resources. This logic can also be seen in the process of strengthening Putin's "vertical of power," which was accompanied by a sharp patriarchal turn; the refusal of the Russian authorities to pass a law on domestic violence was, in effect, a deal with the patriarchal multitude of men.

Military actions in Ukraine and the partial mobilization of the population brought the foundation of this deal into question; security is no longer provided or guaranteed for anyone and the male population has been reduced to cannon fodder. At the same time, the general biopolitical requirements of the state in wartime also apply to women: whether to give birth to them, whether to work, whether to be sexually and physically abused, etc. Gender polarization, formerly tolerable, is intensifying and giving rise to a variety of risks associated with militarization. Let us list some of them, considering the different trajectories for the development of the political situation.

No matter what occurs on the frontlines and in international relations, the general increase in state interference in the family and sexual lives of citizens and the forcible deployment of men to war and women to maternity wards will at a certain point lead to the exacerbation of gender disparities. Here you can recall the first decades after World War II; for example, in the Soviet Union this was the new contract of the ["Mother-heroine,"](#) and in the United States it was the isolation of the home as a safe space where, behind tightly closed doors, men channeled their trauma into domestic violence. All this will be accompanied by an additional burden and economic oppression; the shattered economy would demand more female labor, paying more and more modestly. At the same time, the state may try to compensate for the [demographic collapse](#) with repressive biopolitics, forcibly [returning women to their families](#).

In the case of a military defeat of Russia and a possible coup, a new political regime somehow oriented to the United States and Europe could be established with the values of "liberal democracy." Then the wave of women's demands would be intercepted at the level of ideological struggle. The political culture developed in societies of advanced capitalism is rather characterized by the constant replacement of a response to political demands with beautiful representation, petty concessions at the level of representative democracy and official discourses. The liberal wing of the Russian opposition often avoided direct articulation of the feminist agenda, or even treated it with open disdain. Therefore, the liberal version of the "beautiful Russia of the future" may confine itself only to cosmetic measures, shifting the emphasis from demands for gender equality to "general democratic" values. The Russian woman will be Westernized from above and from outside, as was the case with the women of Yugoslavia and Afghanistan, and we will face the already familiar contradiction between social progress and the methods of its realization.

It is extremely revealing that the announcement of an open mobilization was immediately followed by a wave of women's protests. Women took to the streets in Chechnya, Buryatia, Yakutia, Tuva, and most of all [in Dagestan](#). Furthermore, women inside and outside Russia began to help men, who did not want to fight in the war, leave the country or avoid the draft. The women's "compassionate" protest appears to be an alternative to a world of patriarchal violence, the only question is whether it will at one point become the bridge to an alternative political project. The symbolic structure of this protest contains gender myths that are closely linked to women gaining a place in the political world. The separation between the "personal" and the "political" persists, but a state of emergency that breaks political normalcy comes into everyone's home, and then gendered, familial language

spills out: citizens refer to each other as “fathers,” “sons,” “mothers,” and “wives,” with all the connotations that go with it. “Mother” and “wife” now appear as political identities which are embedded in existing pro-government or protest discourses. However, “woman-mother” and “[woman-heroine](#)” are cultural roles which can have a subjective dimension as well as an alien dimension, imposed from the outside. By associating with them in this way, Russian women can reappropriate their right to be active participants in politics and protest, or they can adopt the laws of external representation and perform in yet another gendered spectacle.

Historically, women’s emancipation has unfolded in two directions. On the one hand, women militantly seized “masculine” positions and practices; on the other, they reassigned traditional roles associated with the patriarchal order, including when the patriarchy mutated, obeying the demands of humanism, liberalism, economic or political conjuncture, etc. However, each political “foray” of the feminist movement was followed not only by a reaction, but also by a redistribution of symbolic roles. Particularly in the context of the U.S. War of Independence and especially over the course of the French Revolution, women asserted themselves and their right to political agency. The famous women’s march on Versailles, like the bread riots of 1793, was, among other things, a response to the devastation of the treasury, depleted by the war (indirectly in the case of France). Women became a dangerous force, and demands for rights and freedom from domestic slavery followed one after another. In 1791 French women received the right to inheritance and property. But their participation in politics was too assertive (including Charlotte Corday, known above all for the murder of Marat and executed for that murder), and in 1793 the Jacobin government banned all women’s clubs and societies. Olympia de Gouges, who in ‘91 wrote the text of the “Declaration of the Rights of Woman and Citizen,” was also beheaded.

The surge of women’s political consciousness needed to be channeled in a safer direction. Thus Louis-Marie Prudhomme, editor of the newspaper *Paris Revolutions*, concluded that the father of the household was called upon to ensure peace and quiet in the civil world, while the mother must maintain peaceful rule in the home. It was around that time that the image of the “[Republican Mother](#),” prepared by the Enlightenment, took shape in America. The fascination with ancient Sparta in contrast to pampered Athens, which arose under the influence of Rousseau, galvanized the idea of the Spartan mother rigorously preparing very young boys for future sacrifices for the good of the polis.

In late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Russia, the vision of the woman, or more precisely the myth of the woman-mother, was shaped by two notable factors. First, the veneration of the Virgin Mary as the intercessor of people before God, and second, by virtue that during the Enlightenment era, the empire was ruled by women: it was the Elizabethan court poets who introduced descriptions of “motherland” in female form, as opposed to “fatherland.” The image of maternal power was especially pronounced in the Catherine era. Interestingly, the ban by Catherine II on the publication of Rousseau’s *Emile* was due to the fact that the author denied matrilineal authority, including in the family, suggesting that men be engaged in the raising of their wives and children, and mothers devote themselves to domestic care—this clearly contradicted the Russian cult of the “mother-sovereign.” After 1812, when the rise of patriotism and civic sentiments pervaded the court circles and beyond, the homeland received its invariant republican mother. A classic example is Fyodor Tolstoy’s 1814 medal “People’s Militia,” depicting Russia in the costume of a Roman woman handing swords to her sons (the composition repeats the “Oath of Horace” by Jacques Louis David, but instead of the father — the mother).

Later, Nikolai Nekrasov’s civil lyrics anchor the image of “Motherland” in a revolutionary-democratic context. The gender issue is gradually entering a mandatory set of republican values of the Russian citizen. It is noteworthy that at the end of one of his most famous poems, “Who is happy in Russia?” the liberation of a woman takes place through the liberation of her sons: “You are still a

slave in the family, // But the mother of a free son already!"

Maxim Gorky's novel *Mother*, later recognized as a benchmark of socialist realist literature, represents the story of how a mother's feeling for her son turns into sympathy for all the "hungry and enslaved." Developing the intuitions of Christian socialism, Gorky supplements the cult of the Virgin with the idea of "maternal" sovereignty. In turn, Gorky's mother, "nurtured" by her son, hands people proclamations instead of swords. Subsequently, the woman-mother, embodied in the image of the Soviet Motherland, would herald a return to romantic aesthetics, replacing the "proletarian woman," whose image was widespread immediately after the revolution. It is precisely the romantic image of the mother that presents itself in Sergei Gerasimov's post-war painting *Mother of a Partisan* or in the sculptures by Yevgeny Vuchetich, who has created one of the most formidable and frightening monuments, *Motherland*, one in Volgograd and the other in Kyiv. Her figure seems to hover in the space between the public (class, economic, political) and the private (emotional, family, archaic).

The mother figure is thus politically ambivalent. On the one hand, she serves as a nurturer whose "emptiness" must be filled with power. Here we can even draw an analogy between the culturally enshrined passivity of women and the passivity of the speechless people in the symbolic structures of gender politics: It was this "ancient, sturdy," and "wood-hutted" Russia that the revolutionary soldiers from Alexander Blok's poem "12" were aiming at. On the other hand, the mother figure finds herself in a field of public and civic motherhood (obligation, duty, gendered destiny).

There are many versions of this kind of patriotic motherhood, but the mother figure always has power over her son; she can send him off to war, curse him for his cowardice, and encourage his valor. As Friedrich Dürrenmatt said in his play *Romulus the Great* (1948), "when the state begins to kill people, it always calls itself the motherland." So behind the actions of the mother figure (encouragement, curses, etc.) turns out to be the state, which determines the educational policy. However, the separation of the private and the public, the "kitchen" and the "square," leads to the fact that the kitchen may at some point become a place where a son, including at his mother's will, can slip away from the state. Patriarchal culture despises those who are pinned to their mother's skirt but orders them to obey their mother, and this contradiction leaves ample room for interpretation. On the one hand, the patriotic media [replicate](#) the enthusiastic speech of the mother of a paratrooper who died in Ukraine; on the other, the anti-war media and activists turn to the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers and their experience of organizational and human rights work.

Why exactly do mothers of adult sons, i.e. independent and capable citizens, protect their civil rights? One answer was offered almost 20 years ago by Elena Zdravomyslova in her article ["Soldiers' Mothers": the mobilization of traditional femininity](#): such is the "playing along" with traditional gender myths that can nevertheless confuse the sovereign with its biopolitical demand to procreate/die. How can playing along with the traditional order defeat the guardians of that order, mislead them, and gain political power? First, the socially approved gender role ascribes to women a particular ("feminine") view of the world, to which corresponds an overwhelming desire to fight for children. Secondly, political actions can be similar to traditional women's practices of care and religious rituals, and sometimes essentially merge with them (this was recently observed in Yakutsk, where women danced the traditional dance of *obuokhai* "to bring back their husbands and sons alive"). Thirdly, a vivid image of the mother and the particular way of exploiting it that is able to evoke an emotional response, to attract, to "mobilize" people. Such is the gap between the realm of law and the informalized (informal) "rights" of mothers to behave in one way or another. Due to this gap, even military law retreats before the gendered pressure of women, because the state sets itself two conflicting goals: to ensure the reproduction of the labor force (that which rests on the shoulders and bodies of women), and to maintain the war machine which destroys that labor force.

Gender polarization also leads to the fetishization of women as mouthpieces of a special kind of sacrificial heroism. Such is the role of the “female comrade-in-arms” who is remembered during historical times of adversity. The half-naked Marianne from Eugène Delacroix’s painting ([Freedom Leading the People](#)) is an allegory of freedom. However, this freedom is embodied by the woman as the ideal mirror for the male Ego: by her deed, she legitimizes the one for whom she makes these sacrifices. If we have such women (glorious, beautiful, and other evaluative epithets) fighting for us, that means we are glorious men. Radical feminist criticism has always opposed the use of women as instruments of male recognition and activity. And yet an instrument that has too much hope in her work has a tendency to get out of hand and dictate her own terms.

Svetlana Alexievich [accounts](#) the memories of participants in the Great Patriotic War, in which a woman often appears in a romanticized image of the Sisters of Mercy who, among other things, are engaged in the emotional service of the soldier: “I smiled all through the war, I thought I should smile as often as possible, that a woman should shine. Before we were sent to the front, the old professor told us so: ‘You must tell every wounded man that you love him. Your strongest medicine is love. Love preserves, gives strength to survive.’” It is interesting that the first advances in women’s education in the Russian Empire coincided with the Crimean War, and the first nursing courses were organized by Nikolai Pirogov, the founder of military field surgery. Thus Pirogov, advocating the emancipation of women, urged them toward accomplishing “the majestic feat of self-sacrifice,” linking together war and sisterly tenderness.

The idea that a warring woman should inspire soldiers was first explored in Russia during World War I, when the Provisional Government used women’s battalions for patriotic propaganda. Pro-Ukrainian media are spreading feminized images of battling cities with similar aims — gender mythology is used on both sides of the front. In times of war a woman is allowed to enter the political world on the basis of a state of emergency, but when it is over, the need for female militancy and strength may become obsolete.

The Russian women’s movement at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century also heroized women, and to a far greater extent than men. Vera Zasulich, Vera Figner, and other revolutionary women consciously sacrificed themselves for the sake of the movement, reproducing in politics the maternal self-sacrifice that was observed in the family. It is possible to see in such behavior biblical motives (Jesus was not only a revolutionary, but also a woman, i.e. he chose the crown of thorns for his neighbor’s sake), it is possible that this behavior is derived from a patriarchal order in which the girl’s life does not belong to her. Sacrificial heroics still possess exceptional power today, assigning a moral dimension to women’s resistance that is exploited in today’s media. Nevertheless, the revolutionary protest of Zasulich and others like her was simultaneously maternal (sacrificial) and anti-maternal (violent), because it redefined the boundaries of the family as a construct and politicized it: the main offspring of revolutionary women became the nation or the future revolution.

Appeal to morality is an essential part of political practice, no matter how we feel about replacing politics with moralization. Morality in the socio-political sense involves raising not only the question of justice in social relations and the political order, but also the question of responsibility. Women are traditionally ascribed to certain areas and types of responsibility (protecting the family, maintaining the home, taking care of children, etc.), and this responsibility may also extend to the city, the country, and even the planet. No wonder such figures as Svetlana Tikhonovskaya, who claimed (and still claims) to be the president of Belarus, [appeared in politics](#), appealing to the “family” values of trust and justice: her recognition was based on moral convention, not force.

It is possible that the state has a monopoly on violence, but it does not have a monopoly on power. As discussed above, state sovereignty is based on the “contract of men,” the affects of which are

displaced onto the “lower world” of the feminine side of the house. When women in the patriarchal system were forced to take on emotional work, they also received the authority of emotional character, that is, the legitimate ability to manifest these emotions. This is why the bureaucracy is so wary of “women’s tantrums” and why boys are so wary of women’s ridicule. In this sense, “hysterical” and “scandalized” are not just words that the patriarchal world has painted with negative connotations, but figures of insubordination and dissent, and gossiping in lines is a form of political discussion not accepted in decent (male) society: emotions cannot always be contained by authoritative discursive practices.

In this sense, it is worth emphasizing once again that the “mother-figure” — for all its conservative and traditionalist associations—can take on different political meanings in specific circumstances. For the Putin administration, it is the “mother-official” who promises that her sons “[will fulfill the tasks assigned by the command](#).” The liberation tradition, despite attempts to “disenchant” the world, enchants the feminine agent into ancient gender myths dating back to Christian tradition or to the narcissistic neuroses of the modern man. As Virginia Woolf [put it](#), “women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size.” Even in his struggles, such a modern man needs to look in the “mirror.”

Left feminism sees sex and gender structures as the mechanisms by which the market and the apparatuses of the state transform biological reproduction (as well as caring practices) into a surplus product and a system of subordination, respectively. The blow to the gender “baseline” could be extremely painful. Thus, for example, “female power” could be used for a so-called sexual and emotional strike—a complete refusal of emotional and sexual service to any accomplices of militarization (up to divorce and separation), so long as institutional politicization is not possible. This sounds counterintuitive in an already depoliticized and atomized society, but after all, boycott for some is the foundation for consolidation and solidarity for others. Therefore, parallel with separation, they may form new unions—tighter than marital and family — which are often motivated by the need for survival. In this sense, too, the seizure of moral authority can have a militant character, for there have been episodes in the history of women’s emancipation where the gender issue has been linked to the question of the source and nature of power, which begins in the family. The proliferation of all the agreements once made during the formation of modern Russian statehood will also mean a crisis of the gender system, but its outcome has not yet been defined.

A woman’s weakness and a woman’s strength can switch places. When it comes political power, not private oedipal fantasies, the role attributed to women in the symbolic structures of society (including a rather patriarchal society) can take on a new dimension. State propaganda insists that the traditional female role in Russia is to be a mother, and the same role has been problematized in democratic and liberation projects. So the mother’s desire to save her son must be accompanied by the son’s desire to free his mother — as Nekrasov and Gorky thought of it. Emotional and moral power, which today can be “traditionally” claimed by the mother in the Russian family, can become a powerful instrument of nonviolent protest. Who knows, perhaps a grassroots politicization of this role and this power will allow for a change in the order of things — a new “social contract” that includes men and women on equal terms.

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