

New Women's Writing in Russia,
Central and Eastern Europe

New Women's Writing in Russia,
Central and Eastern Europe:
Gender, Generation and Identities

Edited by

Rosalind Marsh

**CAMBRIDGE
SCHOLARS**

P U B L I S H I N G

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Gender, Generation and Identities,
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To my father, Ernest Marsh, to the memory of my mother, Joyce Marsh,
and to all my contributors

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I am very grateful to all the contributors for their patience and assistance. Some of these papers were first given at the conference in Bath in 2005, and the contributors have allowed me to edit and update their texts over quite a long period. It has proved a difficult book to edit, because of the number of translations required and the many different nationalities of the contributors.

I have used my privilege as editor to include three articles of my own, mainly to give a more comprehensive picture of a little-known subject. In particular, the essays in Part V, "Overviews of Post-Soviet Prose Fiction," including my own second essay, have been commissioned since the conference in order to trace the history of Russian women's fiction up to the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century.

Translations are by the author or translator, unless otherwise stated. In the main text and the Index, Library of Congress transliteration without diacritics has been used for proper names, except that names ending in 'yi' or 'ii' have been rendered in 'y,' and some well-known names such as Yeltsin have been transliterated in their more familiar, rather than their strictly accurate forms. In the notes and bibliography, however, Library of Congress transliteration including soft and hard signs has been used, in order to help future researchers.

In the bibliographies, when works by the same author can be easily dated, they have been listed in chronological, rather than alphabetical order, as it is often important to trace the development of a writer's work through different periods of cultural history.

For help on specific points, I should like to thank Ekaterina Rozhdestvenskaia, Olga Tabachnikova and Joanne Shelton, and, for comparisons with Western Europe, Adalgisa Giorgio. For translations from German I am grateful to Ernest Marsh, and, from French, to Raya Corry-Fitton. For technical advice and help, I am indebted, as always, to James Davenport.

EDITOR'S NOTE IN PRESS

This book has been a long time in the making, and there are several new books I would have wished to add to our analysis. The welcome appearance of *No Men, No Cry*, an anthology of contemporary Lithuanian women's writing published by the International Cultural Programme Centre in 2011, and of *Herstories: An Anthology of New Ukrainian Women Prose Writers*, translated and edited by Michael M. Naydan (London, Glagoslav, 2012) testify to the continuing vitality of women's writing in Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. The volume edited by Helena Goscilo and Vlad Strukov, *Celebrity and Glamour in Contemporary Russia: Shocking Chic* (London: Routledge, 2011) would also have added to my analysis in Chapter Twenty-Four of Oksana Robski and the 'glamour' phenomenon which proliferated in Russia in the first decade of the twenty-first century.

Most of my own judgements from this period still stand, although my earlier view expressed in the Introduction and Chapter 19 that third-wave feminism does not seem to have exerted much influence in Russia has been overtaken by events. It has now become evident that third-wave feminism in its performative aspects designed to issue a deliberately political statement and 'shock the bourgeoisie' has been embraced by the 'Pussy Riot' punk girl band, formed in September 2011. Three members of 'Pussy Riot,' Maria Alekhina, Nadezhda Tolokonnikova and Ekaterina Samutsevich, were sentenced to two years' imprisonment in August 2012 for singing the song 'Virgin Mary, Chase Putin Out' in Moscow's Christ the Saviour cathedral, dressed in brightly-coloured balaclavas.

In an interview, one of the band members, 'Serafima,' claimed that her influences included the brave suffragist actions of Emmeline Pankhurst, feminist writings from Simone de Beauvoir to radical feminists of the second wave such as Andrea Dworkin, Kate Millett and Shulamith Firestone, and such contemporary thinkers as Rosi Braidotti and Judith Butler, along with western punk bands such as Riot grrrrl. Their song attacking the Orthodox Church's support for Putin is a scathing attack on the neglect of women's rights and human rights by both Church and state in Russia. Their actions differ greatly from the two waves of Russian feminism represented in this book: Natalia Malakhovskaia, who was forced into exile in 1980, and Nadia Azhgikhina and Elena Trofimova who

rose to prominence during the 'second wave' of feminist scholarship in the 1990s. Although they are stigmatized as dangerous 'feminists' in the Russian press, 'Pussy Riot' are no closer to ordinary 'feminists,' in the western sense, than Madonna and Lady Gaga are to the average western woman.

Unfortunately, the decision of 'Pussy Riot' to perform their anti-Putin song in a cathedral, while winning maximum publicity for their cause, has also antagonized many sincere religious believers and to some extent played into the hands of Putin, who is using their sentence as an excuse to continue severe anti-dissident harassment. Although they have aroused the sympathy of opposition groups in Russia and advocates of freedom of speech around the world, they may have done some disservice to the concept of 'feminism' in Russia, which is already deeply controversial. However, their experience suggests that the preferred cultural forms of feminists and dissidents in the twenty-first century may well be poetry and song, internet blogs, websites and performance art, which deserve greater discussion than can be provided in this book.

INTRODUCTION

WOMEN, LITERATURE AND GENDER IN CONTEMPORARY RUSSIA, CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

ROSALIND MARSH

The aim of this book is to analyse women's writings in contemporary Russia, Central and Eastern Europe¹ since the collapse of communism, endeavouring to address some of the lacunae in literature and debate that exist in relation to women's writing of the post-Soviet period and to make a contribution to the literary history of women's writing in the region.²

Relatively little has been written on contemporary women writers in Russia and Central and Eastern Europe in comparison with those in the UK, the USA, and Western Europe, so there is ample scope for new research in this area. Moreover, feminist research on Russian, Central and Eastern European literature is itself a comparatively recent development,

¹ After much reflection, I have decided not to use the fashionable locution "East-Central Europe" in my contributions to this book, since Poles, Czechs and Romanians now see themselves as belonging to "Central Europe," while Lithuania, despite its historic links with Poland, can be seen geographically as part of "Eastern Europe," and Bosnia, along with other states that have emerged from the former Yugoslavia, is part of South-Eastern Europe. For a powerful restatement of the historical and political differences between Central and Eastern Europe, see Neumann, "Europe's post-Cold War remembrance of Russia: *cui bono?*"; on the literary distinctiveness of Central Europe, see Tihanov, "Why Did Modern Literary Theory Originate in Central and Eastern Europe?"

² The majority of examples in this Introduction will be taken from Russia, as that is my main area of expertise.

originating only in the late 1980s.³ There are far more works by social scientists focusing on women and gender in Central and Eastern Europe, Russia, and the former Soviet Union since the revolution of 1989–91 than books and articles on women writers in the region.⁴

This book was originally conceived as a companion volume to *Women's Writing in Western Europe: Gender, Generation and Legacy*, edited by Adalgisa Giorgio and Julia Waters (2007). Earlier versions of some of the papers included in this volume were originally given at the international conference "Contemporary European Women Writers: Gender and Generation" at the University of Bath in 2005, and others were presented at the "Contemporary Russian Women Writers" conference held at the same time. However, although the subject of gender and generation still features as one of the significant themes of this collection, the original conception has expanded into a wider study of women's writing in post-Soviet Russia, Central and Eastern Europe, and some chapters have been specially commissioned for this book.

Review of previous literature

Since the late 1980s, there has been an explosion of women's writing in Russia, Central and Eastern Europe greater than in any other cultural period. Whereas the emergence of new women writers during the Gorbachev period (1985–91) has been the subject of serious scholarly attention,⁵ no study currently exists devoted specifically to Russian, Central and Eastern European women writers in the post-socialist period. Invaluable previous works, such as Catriona Kelly's *History of Russian*

³ Pioneering works included Heldt, *Terrible Perfection*; Andrew, *Women in Russian Literature*; Ledkovsky, Rosenthal and Zirin, *Dictionary of Russian Women Writers*.

⁴ Some important works that deal with the position of women in several post-socialist countries are: Funk and Mueller, *Gender Politics and Post-Communism: Reflections from Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union*; Buckley, *Post-Soviet Women: from the Baltic to Central Asia*; Renne, *Ana's Land: Sisterhood in Eastern Europe*; Rueschemeyer, *Women in the Politics of Postcommunist Eastern Europe*; Gal and Kligman, *The Politics of Gender After Socialism*; Johnson and Robinson, *Living Gender After Communism*; Kay, *Gender, Equality and Difference During and After State Socialism*.

⁵ See Kelly, *A History of Russian Women's Writing*, 372–442, which focuses mainly on poetry; on prose, see Goscilo, "Paradigm Lost? Contemporary Women's Fiction"; Goscilo, "Perestroika and post-Soviet prose."

Women Writers, *The Dictionary of Russian Women Writers* (Ledkovsky, Rosenthal and Zirin), and *A History of Women's Writing in Russia* (Barker and Gheith), only cover the periods up to 1992, 1994, and 1997 respectively. In relation to women writers in Central and Eastern Europe, scholarly works in English are even less numerous and, as Schwartz and von Flotow suggest, "A writing of women's literary history still has a long way to go."⁶ Although a few studies of Central European women's writing in English also encompass the period up to 1995, they are hardly plentiful.⁷ Recently, however, some interesting anthologies of women's writing in the Czech Republic and Central and Eastern Europe have appeared in English translation.⁸

In 2005, Carol Adlam, one of the contributors to this volume, published a perceptive study of four Russian prose writers who rose to prominence in the late 1980s and early 1990s—Tatiana Tolstaia (b.1951), Liudmila Petrushevskaia (b.1938), Nina Sadur (b.1950) and Valeriia Narbikova (b.1958)—and discussed the relationship between contemporary women's writing and the new trend of "alternative literature" in Russia that emerged in the late 1980s, but her analysis mainly covers the period up to 1995.⁹ A useful bibliography of Russian women's prose writing

⁶ Schwartz and von Flotow, "Editors' Introduction: Women's Space and Women's Writing in Post-Communist Europe," xviii.

⁷ On literature in Central and Eastern Europe, see Hawkesworth, *Voices in the Shadows*; Hawkesworth, *A History of Central European Women's Writing*; Hron, "'Word Made Flesh': Czech Women's Writing from Communism to Post-Communism." Chester and Forrester, *Engendering Slavic Literatures* is an excellent comparative study of literature in various Slavic countries, but contains only two chapters partially devoted to contemporary women's literature: Stephanie Sandler's study of the poet Inna Lisnianskaia (b.1928) in "Mother, daughter, Self, and Other," 201–22; and Jasmina Lukić, "Women-centred Narratives in Contemporary Serbian and Croatian Literatures," 223–43. There is also an interesting recent comparative treatment of the theme of masquerade in Russian and Polish literature: Chowanec, Phillips, and Rytkönen, *Masquerade and Femininity. Essays on Polish and Russian Women Writers*, but this book contains studies of only three contemporary writers (Olga Tokarczuk in Poland, Vera Pavlova and Katia Metelitsa in Russia).

⁸ See, for example, Schwartz and von Flotow, *The Third Shore: Women's Fiction from Central and Eastern Europe*; Büchler, *Allskin and Other Tales by Contemporary Czech Women*.

⁹ Adlam, *Women in Russian Literature after Glasnost: Female Alternatives*. The book by another contributor, Benjamin Sutcliffe, *The Prose of Life: Russian Women Writers from Khrushchev to Putin* (2009) appeared too late to be taken

compiled by the German scholars Christina Parnell and Carolin Heyder also stops in 1995.¹⁰ Only a few full-length studies of certain individual Russian writers comparatively well known in the West, such as Tatiana Tolstaia, Liudmila Petrushevskaja, and Nina Sadur, have hitherto appeared.¹¹

There has also been little attempt to analyse women's writings in post-socialist Russia, Central and Eastern Europe in relation to political, social, cultural and philosophical change,¹² although women in this region have experienced more cataclysmic transformations in their lives than most of their contemporaries in Western Europe. Now, in the new millennium, it is timely to reassess how women writers have responded to the collapse of communism and have been searching for new values and forms of post-totalitarian identity. There have been even fewer attempts to explore comparisons and contrasts between contemporary women writers from Russia and other countries, except for some interesting dialogues between émigré Russian and American women writers.¹³ Moreover, no previous studies exist of the relationship between different generations of women writers in Russia and the post-socialist countries of Central and Eastern Europe.

In view of the current climate of opinion in the West, it now seems necessary to justify the separate treatment of women writers, since the study of gender and of masculinities has become more prevalent and fashionable in the twenty-first century than a specific focus on women's writing. Furthermore, the decision to concentrate entirely on women's writing contradicts the approach I adopted in my earlier books *Gender and*

fully into account in this study, but although it covers a longer period (from 1960 to the early 2000s), it concentrates on the particular genre of *byt* literature ("everyday prose").

¹⁰ Parnell and Heyder, *Russische Prosaautorinnen 1975–1995*.

¹¹ Goscilo, *The Explosive World of Tatyana N. Tolstaya's Fiction*; Dalton-Brown, *Voices from the void: the genres of Liudmila Petrushevskaja*; Sarsenov, *Passion Embracing Death: A Reading of Nina Sadur's Novel "The Garden."*

¹² One exception is the study of women's autobiographical writings by another contributor to this volume, Marja Rytönen, *About the Self and the Time. On the Autobiographical Texts by E. Gerštejn, T. Petkevič, E. Bonner, M. Pliseckaja and M. Arbatova*. However, she focuses mainly on women's writings about the Soviet period.

¹³ Aiken et al., *Dialogues/Diologi: Literary and Cultural Exchanges Between (Ex) Soviet and American Women*.

Russian Literature and Women and Russian Culture, which is cited approvingly by Alla Bolshakova in Chapter Two below.¹⁴

Such a comparative strategy is, however, not suited to the present book; it has been considered necessary to single out women writers in contemporary Russia, Central and Eastern Europe because relatively little has hitherto been written on this subject, especially by Anglophone scholars. Although it is hoped that contemporary women's writing will ultimately be incorporated into general literary histories of the different countries, there is an enduring need to separate women's writing from men's because the normative still tends to be represented by men's texts and the non-normative by women's writings. This is even more typical of Russia and Central and Eastern Europe than of Western Europe and the USA (although even in the West women writers still face patriarchal criticism).¹⁵ The comparative study of gender relations in literature by men and women would, however, be an interesting research area to develop in the future in relation to many of the countries represented in this book.

Contemporary women writers from Russia and Central and Eastern Europe are relatively little known in the West, and often under-represented in general anthologies,¹⁶ so it is still important to emphasize women writers' achievements, especially in view of the resurgent patriarchy of the post-Soviet period and the "post-feminist" mythology now prevalent in the West.¹⁷ In Russia, Central and Eastern Europe, the literary canon is still frequently measured by the standards of a male-dominated establishment, and the value of contemporary women's writing or a special critical approach to it have by no means been established.

With the exception of a minority of feminist critics (including some represented in this book), many male and female critics in Russia, Central

¹⁴ Marsh, "Introduction: new perspectives on women and gender in Russian literature," 1; and on the value of such a comparative approach, see Kolodny, "Some notes on defining a 'feminist literary criticism'," 78.

¹⁵ See Giorgio and Waters, *Women's Writing in Western Europe*. This was a point made ruefully by writers such as Michèle Roberts and the Spanish author Laura Freixas at the "Gender and Generation" conference at Bath in 2005.

¹⁶ See, for example, Erofeev, *Russkie tsvety zla. Rodnaia proza kontsa XX veka*, translated as Erofeyev and Reynolds, *The Penguin Book of New Russian Writing: Russia's Fleurs du Mal*.

¹⁷ The existence and nature of "post-feminism" continues to be a highly debatable subject in the West. For a sympathetic view, see Genz and Brabon, *Postfeminism*; for a more critical approach, see Coppock, Haydon and Richter, *The Illusions of "Post-Feminism."*

and Eastern Europe consider they are expressing “neutral” or “universal” views when these are actually androcentric and culturally specific. In Poland, for example, as Elwira Grossman has shown in relation to playwrights,¹⁸ contemporary women writers have often been under-represented, marginalized or ignored by male critics, as they have been in Russia and other Central and Eastern European cultures. Sometimes a woman writer has to be “blessed” by a prominent male writer before she is taken seriously, as occurred with the drama and poetry of Anna Świrszczyńska (1909–84), which was praised by the 1980 Nobel Prize winner Czesław Miłosz who translated two volumes of her poetry.¹⁹

In Russia, where the concept of “women’s literature” is still subjected to considerable criticism and denigration as “second-rate,”²⁰ an approach to literature which encompasses gender is still relatively rare in the mainstream journals and newspapers. By the twenty-first century, however, the prevailing anti-feminist attitudes in society, the media and literary criticism have been challenged by collections of “new women’s prose” by authors who have no objections to identifying themselves as “women writers,”²¹ greater scholarly awareness of sexism and “gender censorship” in the media,²² and serious sociopolitical studies written from

¹⁸ See, for example, the study of Polish women playwrights by Grossman, “Who’s Afraid of Gender and Sexuality? Plays by Women.”

¹⁹ Świrszczyńska, *Happy as a Dog’s Tail; Talking to my Body*. See also Smith, Chapter Fourteen, on the 1987 Nobel Prize winner Joseph Brodskii’s role in “canonizing” Akhmatova and Tsvetaeva. See Brodsky’s translations into English of two 1916 poems by Tsvetaeva: “I will win you away from every earth, from every sky,” and “To Osip Mandelstam,” in Brodsky, *Collected Poems in English*, 497–8; and of Wisława Szymborska’s “End and Beginning,” *ibid.*, 502–3. Akhmatova’s male disciples, apart from Brodsky, included the poets Evgenii Rein (b. 1935), Anatolii Naiman (b. 1936), and Dmitrii Bobyshev (b. 1936).

²⁰ For further discussion, see, in particular, Nadezhda Azhgikhina, Chapter One; and Erin Collopy, Chapter Seventeen.

²¹ See, for example, the collections *Novye amazonki* (1991); *Chego khochet zhenshchina...* (1993); and *Bryzgi shampanskogo* (2002). For further discussion, see Azhgikhina, Chapter One; and Marsh, Chapter Nineteen.

²² For further discussion, see Azhgikhina, *Gendernaia tsenzura kak element kul’tury*, especially Azhgikhina’s own illuminating article, “Gendernye stereotipy v sovremennykh mass-media,” in *ibid.*, 8–22. At the end of this article she refers to the even more retrogressive gender stereotypes in the media of other former Soviet states, such as Lithuania, Azerbaidzhan, Kyrgyzstan and other Central Asian republics.

a feminist perspective.²³ It is, however, difficult to disagree with Carol Adlam's analysis that feminism in Russia (and one might add, in many other countries of Central and Eastern Europe), still occupies "a tiny and counter-cultural corner of the overall cultural narrative."²⁴

Although in the twenty-first century some writers and critics (and especially publishers) are less hostile to the concept of "women's literature" than they used to be, these new approaches have by no means gained total acceptance by the literary and cultural establishment. In the 1990s the terms "women's literature" and "women's prose" were often used by critics to refer not simply to all texts written by women, but specifically to female-authored commercial genres such as the romance and the detective story—an unfortunate phraseology that blurs the distinction between elite and popular literature written by women.²⁵

Objectives and research questions

The book will attempt to address the following questions:

- Why has women's writing become so prominent in the post-socialist countries under discussion (Russia, Poland, the Czech Republic, Lithuania, Bosnia and Romania)?
- How is the concept of "women's literature" regarded in these different socio-cultural contexts?
- Have attitudes towards feminism changed since 1989, and has there been any development of feminist writings?
- Do women writers engage with the worsening position of women, and, in some cases, the return to traditional patriarchal values in their societies since the collapse of communism?
- Can we speak of any "feminine tradition" in post-socialist cultures?²⁶ What is the debt of contemporary women writers to their own literary "mothers" and, if relevant, to their feminist precursors?

²³ See, for example, Posadskaya, *Women in Russia: a New Era in Russian Feminism*; Zdravomyslova and Temkina, *V poiskakh seksual'nosti*; Voronina, *Feminizm i gendernoe ravenstvo*.

²⁴ Adlam, "Feminism, Untranslated," 160.

²⁵ See, among many examples, Aleksandrov and Odesskii, "V ozhidanii eposa. Roman i povest' v 1995 godu," 98–9.

²⁶ Except in direct quotations, I adopt in my contributions to this book the established practice in feminist criticism that I used in my previous edited volume *Gender and Russian Literature: New Perspectives*, whereby the word "female" is

- In what narrative forms and stylistic techniques is writers' engagement with the key issues of gender, generation and identities manifested?
- What new literary genres, themes, characters and imagery have become prominent in contemporary women's writing in the region?

The historical and political background

As many scholars have emphasized, former communist Europe was not a unified political and regional entity, but an area of significant historical and cultural divergences. Nevertheless, one factor that unites these countries was that, apart from Russia, the colonial power, they shared a long history of several centuries of foreign rule.

Although they were governed for almost fifty years by Soviet communist ideology, the operations of communism in each Central and Eastern European country were different. While the year 1989 brought liberation from Soviet controls to most of communist Europe, former Yugoslavia descended into a cruel civil war, and so did parts of the old Soviet empire (notably Chechnia, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Trans-Dniester). With regard to the specific countries represented in this book, women in the Czech Republic grew up in a society that had been industrialized before the Second World War, while Romania was a largely rural country where women had moved into the public sphere only during communist rule. Russia and Lithuania were part of the former USSR (as the colonial power and a colonized power respectively), whereas other countries simply belonged to the Eastern bloc. The Czech Republic had actually experienced armed invasion in 1968, marking the end of hopes for "socialism with a human face," whereas Poland had by the 1980s developed its own alternative, more democratic socialist model ("Solidarnoc").

used to mean women's biological sex, whereas "feminine" is used to refer to social and cultural constructs of womanhood. However, I have not imposed this terminology on any of the other contributors, especially since usage in the contributors' many native languages may differ considerably. I am also aware of the problem that the words "feminine" and "femininity" in English have a very different meaning in common parlance. I and other contributors use it in this conventional sense when discussing women's interest in romance, fashion, glamour and beauty.

Nevertheless, despite numerous differences, it has been persuasively argued by Rebecca Kay²⁷ that a certain “gender order”²⁸ was established in the Soviet bloc, and during state socialism certain common elements existed in the different countries: state control of “women’s issues,” including ideology, employment and reproduction (often presented as associated with “demographic problems”); “the double burden” or even “triple burden” based on essentialist views of male and female roles at work and at home (with men regarded as the main breadwinners, active outside the home in politics and public life, and women as mothers and “carers” responsible for most of the domestic duties).

While the years 1989 and 1991 brought significant changes to Central and Eastern Europe, by no means all of these were positive for women.²⁹ The collapse of the Soviet bloc in 1989–91 left the patriarchal system of power largely intact, and even strengthened it in some countries, since state socialism had at least paid lip-service to equality and women’s liberation. Many (even relatively liberal) politicians in the region, such as Gorbachev and Havel, espoused a “back to the hearth” mentality,³⁰ pornography began to flourish (though it is less prevalent now than in the early 1990s), poverty among women has become widespread, while prostitution and the sexual trafficking of women from the former USSR and Central and Eastern Europe have reached alarming proportions.

Post-communist “transformations” have, partially or wholly, dismantled the gender order that existed during the period of the communist “double burden,”³¹ leading to greater difficulty for women in obtaining full-time employment, the absence of free day care for children, job security during maternity leave and support for single mothers. In

²⁷ Kay, “Introduction: Gender, Equality and the State from ‘Socialism’ to ‘Democracy’.”

²⁸ This term was first used in Connell, *Gender and Power: Society, the Person, and Sexual Politics*, 98–9. It refers to the independent power of gender as a form of social organization defining masculinities and femininities and the power relations between them.

²⁹ Rueschemeyer, “Difficulties and Opportunities in the Transition Period. Concluding Observations.”

³⁰ For Gorbachev’s views, see his *Perestroika: New Thinking for Our Country and the World*, 116–18; on Havel’s more virulent anti-feminism, see Eisenstein, “Eastern European Male Democracies: A Problem of Unequal Equality,” 304, 312–14.

³¹ For a comparative study of the position of women in different countries of the Soviet bloc, see Corrin, *Superwomen and the Double Burden*.

other words, this has meant the end of all the positive developments for women that had formerly been associated with the communist state, such as full employment, job security, and free child-care facilities. The somewhat artificial quotas for women's representation in political and decision-making positions have also been abandoned, so women generally play a more marginal role in public life than they did in the communist era (although they are more prominent at local than at national levels). Women in the region have complained about the new "masculine democracies,"³² while Nanette Funk has argued that the situation in Central and Eastern Europe is much worse than the anti-feminist "backlash" that has affected the USA and UK,³³ displaying "the context of a fully elaborated and sometimes hegemonic antifeminist ideology—an antifeminism preceding feminism."³⁴

It is, however, necessary to emphasize certain significant divergences between the situation of women in different countries of post-socialist Central and Eastern Europe, and the variations in women's assessments of this period within each country. The later years of communist rule and what in the early 1990s was called "the transition" cannot simply be seen as "a single process with a few minor variations."³⁵ Case studies have indicated a certain divergence between official discourse, which is still predominantly patriarchal, and the actual practice of gender relations within families, which may be more flexible. In some post-socialist countries, there have been slow but definite changes in the relations between men and women; in the Czech Republic, for example, young women are not averse to the idea of allowing their husbands to play the major role in child care and domestic tasks, although in practice the main barrier to such arrangements tends to be money.³⁶

³² See, for example, Watson, "The rise of masculinism in Eastern Europe"; Posadskaia, "The feminine dimension of social reform," 298; Attwood, "The post-Soviet woman in the move to the market: a return to domesticity and dependence?"

³³ Faludi, *Backlash*.

³⁴ Funk, "Introduction: Women and Post-Communism," 2.

³⁵ Rueschemeyer, "Introduction," 4. The term "transition" initially used by western scholars over-optimistically assumed that all post-socialist countries were on the path to western-style democracy and a functioning market economy.

³⁶ Heitlinger and Trnka, *Young Women of Prague*, 162–4. See also Anne White, "Gender roles in contemporary Russia," a study of changing attitudes among male and female students at the University of Voronezh; and Christina Parnell's reference in Chapter Seven to the occasional reversal of gender roles, largely for financial reasons, among Russian emigrants in Israel. Case studies of several

The general trend in post-socialist states, however, has been to create a more conservative society for women, allied to the withdrawal of state funding and the resurgence of the Church, whether Catholic or Russian Orthodox. As Halina Filipowicz has commented in relation to Poland, “What emerged from the Quiet Revolution of 1989 [...] was a highly traditional culture, rooted in religious fundamentalism, nationalist ideology and patriarchal practices.”³⁷ Nationalist movements in many post-socialist countries have embraced “theories of procreation that privilege men as genitors of the nation’s eternal spirit while women provide merely its vessel.”³⁸

The most striking example of the backlash against women’s rights in Central and Eastern Europe after the collapse of communism has been the new limitations on abortion in several countries, especially in Poland, Lithuania, Croatia and Russia,³⁹ even though, admittedly, the free or relatively free access to abortion formerly permitted in many countries of the Soviet bloc (with the notable exception of Romania)⁴⁰ was often introduced as a means of compensating for an absence of contraception and adequate public sex education. The abortion laws were toughened in Poland in 1993, although some attempts were made to liberalize them in 1996 and subsequent years.⁴¹ It has been suggested that Polish women’s own real attitudes to abortion have been hidden by successive opinion

countries and regions of Central and Eastern Europe in papers presented at BASEES, AAASS and ICCEES conferences in 2007–10 have also referred to the renegotiation of gender roles within the family, with some changing attitudes observable among younger and more educated couples.

³⁷ Filipowicz, “Taboo topics in Polish and Polish/Jewish Cultural Studies,” 4.

³⁸ Verdery, *What Was Socialism and What Comes Next?*, 233–4.

³⁹ Watson, “The rise of masculinism in Eastern Europe.” Azhgikhina, “Gendernye stereotypy v sovremennykh mass-media,” 22, states that “to this day it is impossible to publish any materials about abortion (except sharp criticism) in any democratic newspaper.”

⁴⁰ Verdery, *What Was Socialism and What Comes Next?*, 61–82; Kligman, “The Politics of Reproduction in Ceaușescu’s Romania.” Since the collapse of communism, this issue has been treated most frankly in Cristian Mungiu’s powerful film, “4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days” (2007), which is set in the 1980s when abortion was illegal in Romania.

⁴¹ On the abortion debate in Poland since the fall of communism, see Fuszara, “Abortion and the Formation of the Public Sphere in Poland,” 241–52; Nowicka, “Ban on Abortion in Poland. Why?”

polls that make no reference to gender,⁴² but in general, the post-socialist states do not appear to be very interested in identifying women's opinions, and still less, in meeting their needs, unless they coincide with the perceived strategies of the state. Although Central and Eastern European states have had to comply with legal requirements on gender equality and welfare in order to join the European Union, there is little evidence that these provisions have been fully implemented in practice.

In several countries, women's sexuality has also been controlled by the return to national and sexual essentialism, most notably during the civil war in former Yugoslavia. In Russia too, there has been a return to a more patriarchal society, accompanied by a rediscovery of the Russian classical heritage and its literary, cultural, moral, and religious traditions.⁴³ In the twenty-first century, Russian politicians still express the hope that the demographic problems caused by high male mortality and low birth rates will be solved by exhorting women to have children, just as occurred in the Brezhnev period. President Putin's demographic policies, for example, differ little from those outlined in the late 1970s. In 2006, in an address to the Federation Council (the Russian Parliament's Upper House), Putin expressed his concerns about Russia's low birth rate, the difficulties experienced by women trying to combine motherhood and employment outside the home, and the need for new measures of state support for mothers and children.⁴⁴ In Russia, however, considerable ambivalence and confusion still remains in the position of women, since there are competing discourses about gender in culture and society; some women have greater choices about their employment and lifestyle than before; and certain formerly taboo issues have been addressed in the media since glasnost, such as domestic violence, rape, and sexual trafficking (despite continuing deficiencies in the treatment of these issues).

Many of the traditional myths and essentialist assumptions about womanhood and manhood frequently evoked by nationalist ideologists have now spread to the media and the speeches of mainstream politicians in Russia and Central and Eastern Europe. The nationalist revival has also meant a return to old half-Christian, half-pagan images of the mother

⁴² Kramer, "The Abortion Debate in Poland: Opinion Polls, Ideological Politics, Citizenship, and the Erasure of Gender as a Category of Analysis."

⁴³ Marsh, *Literature, History and Identity in Post-Soviet Russia*; Kon, *Seksual'naia kul'tura v Rossii*.

⁴⁴ Putin, "Poslanie Federal'nomu Sobraniuu Rossiiskoi Federatsii."

country, such as “Mother Russia,”⁴⁵ Berehynia, the protectress of the Ukrainian nation and guardian of the hearth,⁴⁶ and “Matka-Polka” (Mother Pole), a term “used to describe a certain model of woman propagated both by the government under communism and, currently, more vehemently by the Polish Catholic Church.”⁴⁷ Other writers have adapted such traditional feminine images to express their own unusual views on the new relations between Eastern and Western Europe.⁴⁸

Many policy makers and ordinary men and women in these new states harbour deeply entrenched attitudes toward gender and pervasive essentialist assumptions about innate male and female differences, abilities, interests and skills. It will take a long time to change such traditional views, and perhaps they will never change. Such ideas and assumptions thus inevitably feature in many literary works by women from Russia, Central and Eastern Europe (although in this book exceptional and subversive texts will be given greater emphasis than more conventional works).

The liberalization of literature in post-socialist societies has not, as was hoped by feminists in the West, necessarily led writers to adopt a more liberal approach to women’s issues. In Poland, for example, there has been a notable dearth of literary works dealing with the consequences of the anti-abortion legislation,⁴⁹ although this subject has featured prominently in works by feminist scholars and activists. In 2004, for example, the literary historian, literary critic and television personality Kazimiera Szczuka (b.1966) published the controversial book *Milczenie owieczek* (Silence of the Flock, 2004) which passionately defends the right to abortion and adopts certain radical feminist positions.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ See, for example, Hubbs, *Mother Russia: The Feminine Myth in Russian Culture*; Riabov, “*Matusha-Rus’*.”

⁴⁶ Rubchak, “Christian virgin or pagan goddess,” 319–20.

⁴⁷ Grigar, “The Gendered Body as Raw Material for Women Artists,” 84.

⁴⁸ See, for example, Dubravka Ugrešić’s depiction of Western and Eastern Europe as two sisters, one beautiful and affluent, the other with “a neglected complexion, cheap make-up, an expression of condescension and defiance on its face [...] I see in its eyes a glint of simultaneous despair and cunning, I see a panic-stricken need to stop being a second-class citizen and become someone. My sister, my sad Eastern Europe.” See Ugrešić, *Have a Nice Day*, 22–3.

⁴⁹ Grossman, “Who’s Afraid of Gender and Sexuality? Plays by Women,” 114, notes the absence of this theme in contemporary Polish women’s drama.

⁵⁰ Other recent feminist books in Poland include those by the Polish social scientist, publicist and women’s and human rights activist Agnieszka Graff (b.1970), *Świat bez kobiet* (*World without Women*) (Warsaw, 2001) and *Rykoszetem. Recz o płci, seksualność i narodzie* (*Ricochet: on gender, sexuality and nation*)

Female authors of fiction, except for those few prepared to call themselves “feminist,” rarely challenge the current “gender order” in Russia or Central and Eastern European countries. A direct confrontation with the patriarchal system and the treatment of “women’s issues” in post-socialist societies do not appear to constitute significant themes in contemporary women’s fiction except in overtly feminist and journalistic writings, such as the works of Mariia Arbatova in Russia, and of the Croatian writer Slavenka Drakulić, who frankly exposed the discrimination against women in former Yugoslavia.⁵¹

Since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Soviet Union, women in the region have been subjected to many contradictory sociopolitical and historical influences: the emergence of radical feminist ideas and democratic values, along with the resurgence of traditionalist nationalist and religious views. This means that it is very difficult to generalize about the political views expressed in women’s writings. In Bosnia, for example, the war in former Yugoslavia has inspired both nationalist writings by women and remarkable anti-war poetry, while in Russia, “democratic” works such as those of Arbatova and Ulitskaia have coexisted with extreme nationalist fiction such as Elena Chudinova’s *Mechet’ Parizhskoi Bogomateri: 2048 god* (The Mosque of Notre Dame de Paris: 2048, 2005). There is, of course, no reason why women writers should necessarily treat sociopolitical themes at all, and relatively few of them choose to do so (in general, far fewer than male writers), perhaps as a reaction against the previous compulsion to raise such topics in the Soviet era. Nevertheless, this book will investigate whether as a result of the renewed control over the media and increasing suppression of democratic freedoms in Russia, women writers in the twenty-first century have been more prepared to raise political issues in their fiction, or even to become directly involved in politics themselves. One striking example of this new phenomenon has been the fascinating correspondence of 2008–9 between the imprisoned oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky and the prominent writer Liudmila Ulitskaia.⁵²

(Warsaw, 2008), which frankly expose discrimination against women in Poland. Graff has also translated Virginia Woolf’s classic essay “A Room of One’s Own” into Polish.

⁵¹ This was especially true of Drakulić’s early work, *The Mortal Sins of Feminism*. On the feminist writings of Drakulić and other Croatian women, see Lukić, “Women-Centered Narratives.”

⁵² Liudmila Ulitskaia, Mikhail Khodorkovskii, “Dialogi.” First published by *Novaia gazeta*, subsequently in *Znamia*, 10 (2009): 123–42. English translation

In Poland, as is clear from some literary texts, many women continue to be believers first, and citizens second. It is thus hardly surprising that since the collapse of communism many Polish women have been reluctant to challenge the dominant nationalist and religious discourse and the less overt taboos of gender discrimination. Nevertheless, as the contemporary art historian Paweł Leskiewicz has argued, if writers, artists and activists were more prepared to confront “the problem of sexual difference,” this could have a subversive and even revolutionary potential in Poland.⁵³

New approaches to women’s issues and women’s writings

The collapse of communism has led to new scholarly approaches to the analysis of gender issues in the region. Previous approaches tended to be more centralized, focusing predominantly on state policies and media discourses, whereas since the late 1990s there has been a multiplicity of specific case studies of certain regions,⁵⁴ cities,⁵⁵ ethnic groups (such as Roma),⁵⁶ women and men of different professions or sexual orientations (including trafficked women,⁵⁷ gays and lesbians⁵⁸), or particular topics that affect women and men in different countries (abortion in Poland; survival strategies in certain regions), women’s attitude to beauty,⁵⁹

available at <http://www.opendemocracy.net/article/Russia-theme/the-khodorkovsky-ulitskaya-correspondence>

⁵³ Cited in Grimstad and Phillips, *Gender and Sexuality in Ethical Context: Ten Essays on Polish Prose*, 7. On some Polish women artists’ attempts to address this problem, see Grigar, “The Gendered Body as Raw Material for Women Artists.”

⁵⁴ Prominent examples include: Bridger and Pine, *Surviving Post-socialism: local strategies and regional responses in eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union*; Bridger, Kay and Pinnick, *No More Heroines? Russia, Women and the Market*; Ashwin, *Gender, State and Society in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia*; Brubaker *et al.*, *Nationalist Politics and Everyday Ethnicity in a Transylvanian Town*.

⁵⁵ White, *Small-town Russia: postcommunist livelihoods and identities: a portrait of the intelligentsia in Achit, Bednodemyanovsk and Zubtsov, 1999–2000*.

⁵⁶ Kligman, “On the Social Construction of ‘Otherness’: Identifying ‘The Roma’ in Post-Socialist Communities.”

⁵⁷ See, for example, Buckley, “Press Images of Human Trafficking from Russia: Myths and Interpretations.”

⁵⁸ Essig, *Queer in Russia*; Stella, “The Right to be Different?”

⁵⁹ Gradska, “‘We were very upset if we didn’t look fashionable’.”

women's organizations,⁶⁰ the role of women in politics,⁶¹ domestic violence,⁶² and many other specialized studies.

Similarly, in the post-Soviet period it is very difficult to make generalizations in relation to women's literature in the region (or indeed literature as a whole in these countries). As this book shows, there is a great diversity of women's writing in any one country, not to mention throughout the region, so contributors can only focus on certain individual themes, writers and texts. A further complicating factor has been the migration of many women writers to Western Europe and the USA during the communist period, and the emigration to Israel of Russian Jewish writers such as Dina Rubina and Elena Makarova.

Another major development has been the opening up of eastern borders to the West, especially for the "accession countries" of the European Union, which has led to a new questioning of identities: gender identities along with ethnic, national and regional identities (which have been in the forefront of public attention because they concern men as well as women). At the same time, feminist, post-structuralist, and post-colonial scholarship has challenged the notion of any fixed identity that can be applied to "women" and "men" as a whole.

Yet although to some degree this book presents a multitude of "micro-studies," it also hopes to show that certain aspects of women's writing sometimes considered specific to Russia or to different countries of Central and Eastern Europe are not exclusive to a particular culture or region, but include certain elements that are comparable with contemporary women's writing in other countries too.

What is women's literature?

The terms "women's writing" and "women writers" have been used throughout this book in a neutral, purely factual way, to mean "writings by women" and "women who write," although these phrases are highly problematic in the context of Russia and Central and Eastern Europe. In this region, "women's literature" has often been regarded in a derogatory light as inferior writings solely concerned with allegedly trivial themes,

⁶⁰ *Encyclopedia of Russian Women's Movements*; Sperling, *Organizing Women in Contemporary Russia*.

⁶¹ Salmenniemi, *Democracy and gender in contemporary Russia*.

⁶² Johnson, *Gender violence in Russia*.