Introduction

Holidays and History

In spring 1992 I was invited to attend a private celebration of International Women's Day in Moscow. The winter had been a particularly onerous one even by Russian standards and I marveled that my hosts, given their antipathy to the vanishing Soviet Union, intoned the greetings of Women's Day and handed me the obligatory bouquet of mimosa. The intended irony was not lost on me. As a historian I had had long disputations with Russians both about Soviet history and my political beliefs. And as a self-proclaimed *feministka*, it was no doubt fitting that I sat at a table demurely consuming a meal prepared by women while the men raised their glasses in archaic toasts to "extraordinary women, beautiful women, and how impossible it is to live with them!"

I was attracted to this project primarily because of the incongruous pairing of women and celebrations in Soviet discourse. Why did the Soviets celebrate women? Why were women held up, if only temporarily, as examples, honored in verse and song on that one day? Which women were deemed worthy of celebration and which ones were damned by the silences that interspersed the praise? Finally, how had International Women's Day changed over time from the initial celebration in the prerevolutionary past to the onset of the Second World War?

In this book I address three major issues: the development of Soviet holiday rituals, the strategies of narration and emplotment used in Soviet propaganda for women, and the evolution of the problematic morphology of the New Soviet Woman. On a more specific level, in an attempt to

integrate the above themes, I trace the development of International Women's Day in Russia and the Soviet Union from 1910 to 1939. Analyzing the multiple discourses inherent in the rituals, images, and stories produced during this holiday, I outline the changing content of Bolshevik ideology as it pertains to the construction of the public identity of Soviet women and their history.

In prerevolutionary Russia, the term *woman* carried a heavy burden of meaning, derived from the various misogynist pronouncements of the Orthodox Church and peasant folk belief. In the nineteenth century, the notion of woman as seductress and harbinger of doom was overladen with romantic ideas of woman as the incarnation of virtues, the poetic muse, and the wronged victim. Eager reformers marked women as sites for inscription of modernity, as modern mothers, companionate wives, and independent wage earners. Women, through their own activities, whether as *dames de salon*, feminists, or terrorists, contributed prodigiously to the complicated gender mythology. Finally, male intellectuals and professionals compared the weakness of the nascent Russian civil society and their emasculation under autocracy to the subordination of women under patriarchy. By the early twentieth century, the category "woman" had become an overdetermined concept, freighted with contradictory ascriptions from both high and low culture.[1]

Social Democratic writings on the "woman question" were similarly complex and contained a curious compound of radical individualism and communitarian utopianism. True to the pronouncements of scientific and utopian socialism, they believed that women were doubly oppressed under capitalism, first as purveyors of sex and labor in the capitalist market and the family, and second as victims of bourgeois morality and legal structures that perpetuated their subordination to men and limited their right to engage freely in the public domain. Social Democrats unthinkingly reiterated the socialist-utopian belief that only the abolition of private property would lead to the true liberation of women.[2] Viewing women's association with domesticity as the key to the particularity of "women" as opposed to the universality of the category "man," they advocated that women be freed from household responsibilities. They hoped that the establishment of institutions such as child-care centers, dining halls, and laundries would enable

women to participate in the state-sponsored production process. Finally, Social Democrats wanted to educate Russian women, reconstruct their daily lives along perceived modern/urban lines, and ensure their participation in the affairs of the community and the state.

Despite being heirs to one of most the ambitious programs for women's liberation in history, in reality Bolsheviks invested little time and effort in attracting women to their revolutionary circles.[3] The most important Bolshevik initiative in the prerevolutionary years was the International Women's Day celebrations of 1913 and 1914. In 1910 at the women's conference of the Second International held in Copenhagen, the delegates decided to annually commemorate International Women's Day to further the cause of women's emancipation. Although the holiday was celebrated in Germany and Sweden by Social Democrats thereafter, it was not until 1913 that the Bolsheviks decided to use Women's Day to popularize their political program among factory women in Russia. The holiday was celebrated sporadically in the next few years, but after the revolution in 1917, Women's Day joined May Day and the anniversary of the October Revolution as one of the more important events on the Soviet calendar.

In the modern era, beginning with the French Revolution, revolutionary festivals and holidays have played an important role in legitimizing new states that succeeded the *ancien regimes*.[4] Since participation in festive rituals creates a sense of belonging in the newly imagined community, revolutionaries used mass rituals to inculcate new values and beliefs among the populace.[5] Although women's needs occupied a subordinate position and were routinely ignored by the Communist Party, during the month of March, especially around Women's Day, issues relating to women took on a spurious urgency in the press, party circles, trade unions, women's departments in various ministries, workers clubs, and schools. As organizers assumed that women would be bored at purely political meetings, it was hoped that the ludic elements of the holiday, theatrical shows, community dances, children's performances, and free meals would attract women to public festivities where they would be exposed to party ideas and programs.

But Soviet ritual was more than just an effective tool for cultural management. Holidays served to temporarily empower the participants by

drawing them into the network of Soviet existence. On Women's Day, women sang revolutionary songs, acted in plays, wrote articles for wall newspapers, and retold their lives at public venues. At mass meetings and demonstrations the achievements of exemplary women were held up to public acclaim. Newspapers and journals carried lengthy articles about the status of women in the Soviet Union and abroad. Both the rituals and ideological content of Women's Day changed over time but the celebration itself and the rhetoric associated with it served as the chief locus for the articulation of state discourses for and about women. As a result, each year International Women's Day generated a considerable body of propaganda in the shape of speeches, policy pronouncements, reports, and various genres of fiction such as plays, poems, cartoons, short stories, and biographical sketches of notable women. While the Marxist program for women's liberation marked the outer parameters of this field of propaganda, the policies of the regime violated the ideological integrity of these principles. At the same time, the proliferation of celebration discourses multiplied the points and means of dissemination, further stretching the boundaries of orthodox Marxism. Often during International Women's Day the party and the Zhenotdel (Women's Section of the Communist Party) published slogans that were directly inimical to each other. What remained constant in the propaganda, however, were the motifs of change, transformation, and the female ability to survive, improvise, and prevail above all odds.

Public literature converted Soviet women from object to subject, stripped them of an ahistorical passivity, and endowed them with a formidable capacity for action. Women's lives were narrated synchronically and encoded the transformation of both domestic and public space. While the development of the female character through revolutionary time and space constituted the main organizing principle, men were often represented as a hindrance that disrupted the social intercourse of the state and politically conscious women. Women's stories from the 1920s and 1930s were replete with the symbolic erasure of men and the arbitrary silencing of their voices. While Soviet heroines grew stronger, husbands and fathers displayed a distressing capacity for moral and ideological degeneration. The symbolic demise of the consanguinal male was often paralleled by the growing veneration of male political leaders.

Celebration propaganda inserted women at the critical junctures of the Soviet past such as the February Revolution and the first Five-Year Plan, even though their contributions were often represented ambiguously. In Soviet propaganda women could no longer exist at the forgotten margins of history, as various literary devices forced them to confront the challenge of new opportunities. Simultaneously, narratives about women domesticated the grand drama of violent change and rapid transformation that lay at the center of Soviet history. In public discourse as the New Soviet Woman improvised and even triumphed through the dislocations of war, civil war, and collectivization, cataclysmic state policies were rendered mundane and endurable. At the same time the existence of these extraordinary heroines in these tumultuous times validated the Soviet system in comparison to the staid bourgeois order. Finally, in various forms of propaganda the Russian woman was transformed from a feudal symbol of Russia's backwardness and oppression into a cultural marker that broadcast the progressiveness and modernity of the Soviet Union to the world.

But the celebratory discourse did not preclude a persistent harping on the negative qualities of Russian women. There was a widespread consensus in Bolshevik circles that women were the most backward section of the proletariat and therefore innately counter-revolutionary.[6] The subtext of Russian female backwardness was omnipresent in Women's Day propaganda but it would be facile to dismiss it as a mere reflection of Bolshevik misogyny. Rather, it served as a counterpoint to illustrate the achievements of Soviet women. In fact, the epithet of backwardness was essential if only to prove the magnitude of the Soviet achievement and the progressive nature of the October Revolution. Just as tsarist feudalism served as a convenient counterfoil to Soviet narratives of modernization, the backwardness of Russian women valorized the Soviet women and served as a temporal reminder of the impressive speed with which the Soviet Union had been able to achieve its goals.

The yearly production of material for Women's Day, intended primarily for female consumption, constituted a distinctively Soviet practice that was innovative in the context of early twentieth-century politics. Thus, rather than counterpose the "real" to the "ideological" or try to situate Bolshevik ideology in the quotidian, I view these holiday discourses as an

integral aspect of Soviet politics that deserves investigation as a historical phenomenon. Women's Day celebrations were not merely symbolic—camouflage for the exercise of power—but were a strategic form of cultural practice that marked the distinctiveness of Soviet civilization, legitimized the Soviet mission for women, and articulated the Soviet construction of gender.[7]

In a recent monograph, Nancy Ries has claimed that while some cultures locate value in distinctive consumerism, or ritual participation, Russians privilege language above all other things and see it as one of their most valuable resources.[8] Western historians have blamed the Soviets for failing to solve the "woman question" and criticized the misogyny and patriarchal attitudes that lay beneath the revolutionary rhetoric about gender equality.[9] But the precise noncorrespondence of ideology and reality constituted an important element of the Soviet experience. Propaganda for women was characterized by a literary style that was marked by excess, distortion, and outright falsification. Our liberal orientation may lead us to denounce a style of political narration that lacks material accountability, but one should not discount the importance of changes at the ideological and linguistic level. The capacity to articulate scenarios of radical change in women's lives was not merely a substitute for concrete action, but was in itself a form of political practice. Soviet women, unlike the vast majority of their counterparts in the Third World, were given the opportunity to imagine alternative lives and rethink their relationships to family, community, and state. Not all the new visions were progressive or even desirable, but Soviet women were forced to confront change at an unprecedented rate and negotiate public identities accordingly.

The word *public* constitutes the keynote of this book, and there is little here that deals with the popular, the private, and the authentic. I am primarily interested in the published languages that the state used in its correspondence with the imaginary Soviet woman and the way she was constructed and reconstructed by competing public discourses. While Marxist theorists predicted that the liberal distinction between the public realm and private would collapse with the advent of socialism, a new public sphere emerged in the Soviet Union[10] that was markedly distinct from the public realm of liberal imagination. This new public sphere was the cre-

ation of the state rather than an arena for critical-rational discourse of an informed citizenry.[11]

The price of admission to this space was the exposure to a body of hyperbolic and extravagant ideas known as propaganda that was loosely based on certain themes of Marxist ideology. Although propaganda presented itself as a series of rational constructs, it relied heavily on symbolic forms of expression such as narratives, rituals, and images. Participation in Soviet holidays, demonstrations, and public parades; reading newspapers and journals, watching plays and sport displays, listening to the radio, all entailed an engagement in the public sphere for both the representatives of the state and the citizens. In the interplay of languages and discursive practices, new identities were created. Some historians have argued that people resisted the totalitarian dictates of Stalinism; others have claimed that private individuals either learned to "speak Bolshevik" or used elements from the vocabulary of official pronouncements to fashion their identity.[12] While the question of how people perceived and reacted to the discourses of the state is a very important one, it presupposes that we know what the state was actually saying. This, I believe, is far from the case, and I will read the artifacts of Soviet propaganda to understand the various messages being communicated to women and to analyze how the narrative strategies and literary forms of propaganda influenced the content.[13]

Chapter 1 begins with an analysis of selected themes from Marxist writings on the "woman question" which formed the staple of Bolshevik propaganda from prerevolutionary days to the 1930s. The public identity of Soviet women was constructed around certain key issues such as citizenship, the welfare state, women's labor and reproductive obligations, and the relationship between the sexes. I explore the concept of Women's Day and the reasons for its centrality to Soviet women's history.

The second chapter treats Women's Day in 1917 when women in Petrograd chose to protest against widespread food shortages. Although women played a key role in the February Revolution and helped to define the agenda and the strategies of revolt, their militant participation has been minimized in Soviet accounts. At the same time, by dating the February Revolution from International Women's Day, the Bolsheviks claimed authorship of an event in which they played a very limited role. Analyzing the

ambiguous representation of women's actions during that critical period, I present a re-reading of the February Revolution.

During the 1920s, the subject of chapter three, the effects of the civil war forced the Bolshevik Party to institute a policy of half-hearted cooperation with market forces. Similarly, propaganda for women was redesigned to fit the new circumstances. In the early years of NEP, the Zhenotdel engaged in a prolonged battle with the party to define the agenda for a woman's movement. Women's Day propaganda often reflected the disagreements between the party discourse and the Zhenotdel pronouncements. During this period certain Bolsheviks questioned the very existence of International Women's Day. In this chapter, I look at the various sources of popular opposition to and popular support for Women's Day.

Massive female unemployment during the 1920s created what often seemed an unbridgeable distance between the state agencies and women. Often, Women's Day celebrations functioned as the sole points of contact between them. Given this context, the Zhenotdel and the Agitprop section of the Party disseminated propaganda on women's issues on a wide scale. My analysis of the propaganda literature of this period focuses on two outstanding themes—namely, the juxtaposition of the Lenin cult and the "woman question," and the construction of the international significance of Women's Day.

Chapter 4 analyzes the texts of Women's Day theater from the 1920s to look at the new popular discourse created around the key concepts of masculinity/femininity, state/community, centralization/voluntarism, and revolution/power. In this chapter I also examine the various personae that the New Soviet Woman assumed in theatrical propaganda as Bolsheviks made an effort to ground their ideas in the popular idiom.

Chapter 5 takes up the first Five-Year Plan beginning in 1928, which once again necessitated a reworking of the concept of women's emancipation. During this period, as an offshoot of the cultural revolution, the Zhenotdel used International Women's Day to launch a campaign called the *kul'turno-bytovoi pokhod* (campaign for the reconstruction of daily life) in 1929. This was superseded by the new "Campaign to Introduce Women into Production" in 1930. In this chapter I examine the different gender representations used in the two campaigns and argue that the Five-Year

Plan marked the beginning of the use of a particularly Stalinist discourse for women.

The 1930s, the subject of chapter 6, witnessed the unprecedented elevation and celebration of selected Soviet heroines in the public sphere. The state needed examples of heroic and modern Soviet women for propaganda purposes, and the discourse on Soviet heroines was manipulated to justify Stalinist policies of industrialization and collectivization. Between 1934 and 1939, Women's Day, a hitherto insignificant holiday, was transformed into a national holiday. At state-sponsored receptions throughout the country, eminent women from various professions were publicly commended by party officials for their services to the state and were asked to recount their life histories. These accounts reveal a depth of information on the construction of a modern female identity in the 1930s. Using these transcripts in conjunction with "official" biographies of women, I analyze the creation of a female public identity in the 1930s in relation to concepts of family, community, state, and patriarchy, and show how the revolutionary chronology was reordered in public memory.