



"The 1990s Wasn't Just a Time of Bandits; We Feminists Were Also Making Mischief!"

Celebrating Twenty Years of Feminist Enlightenment Projects in Tver'

Julie Hemment and Valentina Uspenskaya

ABSTRACT

In this forum, we reflect on the genesis and history of the Tver' Center for Women's History and Gender Studies—its inspiration and the qualities that have enabled it to flourish and survive the political changes of the last twenty years, as well as the unique project of women educating women it represents. Inspired by historical feminist forebears, it remains a hub of intergenerational connection, inspiring young women via exposure to lost histories of women's struggle for emancipation during the prerevolutionary and socialist periods, as well as the recent postsocialist past. Using an ethnographic account of the center's twentieth anniversary conference as a starting point, we discuss some of its most salient and distinguishing features, as well as the unique educational project it represents and undertakes: the center's origins in exchange and mutual feminist enlightenment; its historical orientation (women educating [wo]men in emancipation history); and its commitment to the postsocialist feminist "East-West" exchange.

KEYWORDS: collaborative research, feminism, Russia, women's emancipation



Tver', Russia, 21 May 2019: The Ethnographer's Account

The hallway was milling with people. A student usher smilingly greeted me and handed me a program, indicating the way. Impressively, my colleagues had scored the university's Assembly Hall, usually reserved for high-prestige events and rarely granted to social scientists, let alone feminist ones! Slightly bewildered by the formal surroundings, I walked up the stairs to the hall, past a large poster that read, "International conference: Gender relations in the world of globalization: challenges and prospects." As I entered the auditorium, I saw it was



packed with undergraduate and graduate students and faculty. Among them, I saw some faces I knew, including my colleague Valentina, who waved me over to the book exhibit at the front of the room. There were books by Russian and foreign feminist scholars, among them my own, and a banner where participants were invited to write messages. After taking my seat next to Valentina, I scanned the program, noting the university administrators present to honor the event as well as the keynote speakers—feminist scholars from other cities I was eager to hear, including Olga Voronina, former director of the Moscow Center for Gender Studies. The afternoon sessions were devoted to student presentations and listed enticing-sounding topics from suffragism to “fourth-wave” feminism and digital activism in Russia. As the four members of the orgkomitet [organizing committee]—Valentina, one of her colleagues, and two students, wearing specially designed T-shirts—stood to deliver their welcoming remarks, I reflected on what made this special: intergenerational connection, and a student-run event.

We were gathered that day to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of the Center for Women’s History and Gender Studies at Tver’ State University. As keynote speaker feminist scholar Olga Voronina noted, the first gender studies centers appeared in Russia in the early 1990s, associated with the independent women’s movement. However, few remain. Conditions have grown steadily less conducive to feminist organizing and scholarship over the last twenty years. Many (including the Moscow Center for Gender Studies she cofounded) have been forced to shut down in recent years due to this inhospitable political climate. The Tver’ center is one of the few survivors. At a time when feminism is disparaged in Russia—almost “dissident,” as Valentina puts it—the Tver’ center remains a rare feminist space and an “oasis” of lively, critical discussion and democratic relations. Indeed, the conference drew students from other cities as well, who embraced the opportunity to present at a feminist-oriented event.

In this forum, we reflect on the genesis and history of the Tver’ Center for Women’s History and Gender Studies—its inspiration and the qualities that have enabled it to flourish and survive political changes, as well as the unique project of women educating women it represents. Inspired by historical feminist forebears, it remains a hub of intergenerational connection, stimulating young women (and young men—several of whom presented that day) via exposure to gender studies and lost histories of women’s struggle for emancipation. We write reflexively of our own

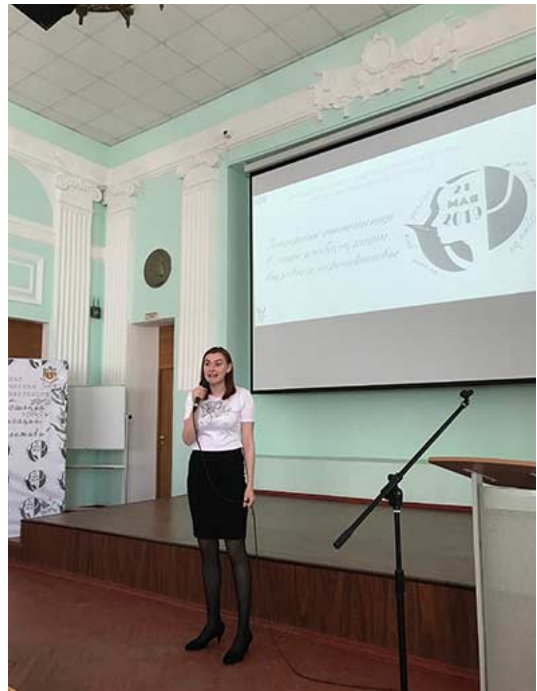


Figure 1. Student organizer Liudmila Babiy introducing the conference.

Photo by Julie Hemment.



Figure 2. The coauthors and students at the Tver' Center for Women's History and Gender Studies.

Photo by Nataly Beliakova; used with permission.

entanglements and mutual education projects also. We, coauthors, are differently positioned: Valentina Uspenskaya, director and founder of the center, and Julie Hemment, her US-based feminist anthropologist colleague, mentee, and friend. Since we first met in 1995 when Hemment was a doctoral student, we have undertaken several collaborative research projects; our relationship has been one of mutual enlightenment, or "mutual taming," as we have referred to it, borrowing from St. Exupery¹—women educating each other.

A Brief History of the Center

The Tver' Center for Women's History and Gender Studies was established at the end of the 1990s and was formally registered in 1999. It is a marginal yet grudgingly respected space that against considerable odds has weathered unfavorable conditions in the university—the trend to corporatization and standardization (Russia's rendition of the Bologna Accord, the European Union's higher educational initiative), as well as the "academic nationalism" that prevails in Russian institutions of higher education. It has not fallen prey to the 2012 foreign agents law² that has brought other gender

studies centers (as well as other liberal-oriented academic units) down either—partly because it flies under the radar. University-based, it is no longer an independently registered organization. Until 2002, it had dual institutional status as a civic organization and as a scholarly-educational unit incorporated into Tver' State University. Today, although it continues to collaborate with local community groups, it exists as a university program, affiliated with the Political Science Department.³ Neither does it receive suspicion-triggering (and jealousy-inducing) foreign grants or funding. While the Ford Foundation provided crucial seed money for the project and early center projects were supported by the Open Society Institute and other agencies,⁴ since 2006 Valentina has not sought external funding, neither from foreign agencies nor from the Russian state. The work of the center is a labor of love undertaken without remuneration by Valentina, her colleagues, and students. It runs on a shoestring, without a staff or budget and with minimal resources.⁵ This status, combined with the respect Valentina has among colleagues and in the city more broadly, explains its survival.

For the center has a deeper history. It has its origins in a community-based project—the feminist-oriented women's club, *Zhenskii Svet* (Women's light), founded by Valentina and a group of acquaintances, colleagues, and students in the first wave of independent organizing in Russia during the late Perestroika era (1991). *Zhenskii Svet* was an unusual project. Inspired both by Western European and Russian histories of feminism, its primary orientation was toward education and consciousness raising. Although university-based, it was open to the public. Its participants were not only students and teachers but also doctors, engineers, schoolteachers, journalists, and unemployed and nonworking women, those who had been laid off during the dislocations of the early postsocialist period. In addition to its feminist educational work, the group ran a number of socially oriented projects for women over the years: free health consultations, free computing courses for unemployed women, legal and psychological consultations. Between 1997 and 2007 it operated an evening school in gender studies that was open to the public. Over time, these projects morphed and changed. Some took institutional form—such as the crisis center *Hortensia*, for women survivors of domestic and gender violence, founded in 1999, and the Center for Women's History and Gender Studies itself. Between 1999 and 2004 the center worked in collaboration with the crisis center in a form of university-community partnership. Students worked at the crisis center as volunteer interns, gaining valuable experience; several sociology students wrote undergraduate theses on domestic violence, offering useful research to the city and the center. And the traffic moved in both directions: crisis center staff gave lectures at the center on domestic violence, and some of the counselors entered the university to undertake graduate-level research based on their applied work.

Tolerated, if not actively supported, for now the Center for Women's History and Gender Studies remains secure. Indeed, it occupies an interesting profile in the city. *Zhenskii Svet* was a "corridor," as Valentina likes to describe it, through which many local women passed. Many now occupy positions of influence in the city, as administrators, journalists, or professors. But it is the quality of the educational project and the relations it facilitated that matter most. Congratulatory Facebook posts provide testimony of this—warm endorsements from former students and women who were involved in *Zhenskii Svet*, fondly remembering their participation. (One tribute read:

“A feminist education is a very useful thing in life. My participation in the women’s movement in Tver during the 1990s really helped me!”; another [former student] wrote: “Valentina Ivanovna, thank you for these events. I remember every conference and roundtable. You gave us the opportunity to do real social scientific work and also gender research enhances my family life!”) Using the anniversary conference as a starting point, we now turn to discuss some of the center’s most salient distinguishing features, as well as the unique educational project it represents and undertakes, presenting our discussion in the form of an interview Q and A.

The Center and Its Origins in Exchange and Mutual Feminist Enlightenment

Julie: Part of the uniqueness of the anniversary conference was its student-run status. It was not only student-run, but initiated by your students, wasn’t it?

Valentina: Yes, that’s right. A group of them came to me and suggested that we do this. I must admit I was surprised that it grew in this way. They did such good work!

Julie: So, it had this kind of grassroots quality, insofar as it was based on student self-organization. That’s rather rare, and departs from the norm in the university as I understand it. Several student participants from other departments remarked upon this and expressed their surprise (and delight) at the supportive atmosphere and democratic environment they encountered. In this way, the conference really embodied the ethos you are committed to and that drew me to you first of all—the commitment to exchange, mutual feminist enlightenment, and young women’s empowerment. Can you talk a little bit about this vision and its origins in Zhenskii Svet?

Valentina: Zhenskii Svet had its origins in my interest in feminism and my wish to share my knowledge with others. This goal is manifest in the name itself—Zhenskii Svet. You see, our idea is linked to the two meanings of the word *svet*: globe/world and light—Zhenskii Svet is above all a “project of enlightenment” (*prosvetitelnyi proekt*). Later, I saw gender education as an important part of civic education; I wanted to “cultivate” a gender-literate new generation that is able to realize its position and recognize gender roles as socially defined and thus changeable.

Julie: It was my interest in feminist and participatory action research methodologies that brought us into dialogue in the first place [in 1995, when I was seeking a site for my dissertation research]. What you were doing was so interesting to me, and the educational project I encountered in Zhenskii Svet was deeply inspiring. Many of the first gender studies centers in Russia were linked to social movements and embraced social change agendas, of course,⁶ but Zhenskii Svet was unusual on two counts. It was remarkable, I think, in that it engaged women from different walks of life—not just academics—and brought them into dialogue with each other. Second, it granted young women—students, your mentees, or other women—the opportunity to engage in leadership. There was explicit encouragement of people to undertake their own projects and direction. You referred to Zhenskii Svet as a “corridor” to signal your

skepticism about formalization and hierarchical modes of learning. Your vision was always that Zhenskii Svet would be a "roundtable of equals," where members brought their own themes to discussion, and where leadership was rotating. Can you talk about some of these early 1990s-era projects? This was a confusing time, right, when people experienced a sense of great promise and excitement about the future, but also many challenges associated with the so-called transition, as has been well documented.

Valentina: In the 1990s many women came—not only to learn about women's studies and women's history, but to learn how to apply this knowledge to their lives. Yes, some of them undertook concrete projects. Some of the early ones were projects such as computers, health, legal and psychological consultations, "Know your rights and how to defend them," the founding of a crisis center for women survivors of domestic and sexual violence. Another young woman took an artistic direction—she's now a well-known artist in the city.

Julie: The evening school in gender studies, founded in 1997, is a fascinating early Zhenskii Svet project. It was an informal space—one that used the resources (space) of the university, but was independent and ran sessions outside of any curriculum on a volunteer basis. Again, it was open not only to students, but also to members of the public. This too was a site where young women, your former students, took on leadership roles to try themselves out as teachers and undertake organizational work.

Valentina: That's right. The evening school was a second step of women's activism, like the crisis center. It was our answer to the question—how to improve our everyday life? By educating women. It included different courses, including one on "the liquidation of economic illiteracy," legal rights, human rights, and first of all—history. It answered the call for a more systematic approach and avenue to share expertise. We brought in feminist scholars and experts, including professors and doctoral students from other universities (e.g., Irina Iukina, Anna Temkina, and Elena Zdravomyslova visited from St. Petersburg; Natalia Rimashevskaya and Nadezhda Azhghina from Moscow; Olga Shnyrova from Ivanovo) and other countries: Isabelle Marcus came regularly, and Shana Penn. We were sure that gender education in the context of transforming Russian society would be useful to help women overcome gender biases and archaic gender stereotypes. We hoped that gender education could be an important part of civic education and a good means of preparing women for political leadership—we ran regular seminars on the topic of women's leadership. As our surveys of the school's graduates showed, women believed that their participation in our gender education programs greatly helped them cope with and overcome crises and stressful situations. For example, one young woman lost her job in an instance of sexual harassment. She "remembered the lessons at the school," filed a lawsuit about her illegal dismissal, and won. Another woman, a software engineer, finding herself out of work, came to the evening school, and soon became a trainer in our program for women, "I'm not afraid of computers."

Julie: The evening school ran regularly between 1997 and 2007. But it was recently revived, right?



Figure 3. #Fem_school2018 poster by Nataly Beliakova.

Photo by Julie Hemment.

the university, including journalism, history, law, sociology, politics, geography, psychology, as well as from the Technical Institute. My MA student Nataly Beliakova was the “manager.” She did a terrific job and I admire the work she did, as well as how the other students responded to it. It was a great professional training opportunity for them. The apotheosis was our annual student conference in April. And from this came the initiative to organize the twentieth anniversary conference.

Julie: Publishing has always been an important component of your educational work and project—publishing primary materials, as well as original research, and encouraging your students to publish their own work also. You’ve put out numerous texts and volumes over the last twenty years, via the Feminist Press that you founded at the university—with the blessing of Florence Howe, the founder of the original (New York-based) Feminist Press, who you met in New York City in the late 1990s.

Valentina: Yes, I have a couple of publishing projects in motion that actively engage my students at the moment. The first is a reader project. I’m encouraging my students to create a reader in gender studies, asking them to consider which texts to include for future students. The foundation will be Olga Voronina’s text *Gender Culture in Russia*;⁷

Valentina: Yes, four years ago one of my students and her team asked me about our evening school project and if we could re-establish it. Okay, was my answer—but you will need to take the lead. I have been so impressed to see the work that’s been done. They called it #Fem_school2018 and organized sessions around the topic of women’s civil leadership. They gave it their own stamp, bringing in a theatrical and artistic element to sessions—for example, they ran one session on blogging and graphic design.

In the spring of 2019, this group organized a kind of study group on the topic of feminism, to share their sources and knowledge with other students. The topic was “Feminism: From the Idea of Women’s Rights to Gender Equality Policies.” They held several sessions, inviting other students to come—students came from different departments of the

beyond that, I'm inviting them to contribute the texts they think most important. I want them to see how all this knowledge, all they've learned, can realize itself and become a resource for other students. A second project is a biographical project. I've developed a methodology and framework; I'll then invite students to select a woman intellectual from different historical periods and write their biography. Then, we'll publish.

Julie: Another thing I love about your pedagogy is its guerilla quality. Wherever you go, you spread seeds, either by talking to people, or by distributing the texts you publish and produce. One of my favorite stories you shared with me was the time you read drafts of your gender studies lecture to the young people who had gathered and who were partying noisily in the hallway outside your apartment. They loved it, right, and were really interested—and promised to keep the noise down! You not only got them interested in the subject, but were able to steer this potentially confrontational interaction around into something different—a moment of connection.

Valentina: Yes! Just yesterday I was surrounded by young sales assistants in Mango [the popular chain clothing store], asking me about the evening school! It turns out they saw me on the internet and they were really interested in women's history. They saw me talking about our 8 March 2019 roundtable event on VKontakte [the Russian online social media and social networking service]—I playfully called it, "100 Years of Women's Emancipation: The Cat by the Tail," speaking back to the antifeminist mood. I organized the roundtable, because there was no official recognition of this anniversary in the city!

Julie: That story raises another quality of your pedagogy and practice—its "public engagement" element. You have run frequent roundtables over the years on social justice issues pertaining to women's rights, to which you have invited not only members of the community, but journalists, members of the local administration, and elected officials as well. This defies expectations of state-societal relations in Russia and it has pushed me to confront the limitations of my own practice. This is something I can only aspire to! We talk so much about the desirability of public or community engagement on US campuses, yet it's terribly difficult to accomplish (I might mention some of the contradictions we confront—"audit culture," precarization, as well as the right-wing culture war and its impact on some universities). Our dialogue has sustained me and energized my teaching so much over the years, and I've brought the playful energy of our discussions and research collaboration into the classroom. It's also pushed me to think creatively about what "engagement" can be. We've both adjusted our approach, I think, in line with the (geo)political conditions we face. At the moment, we practice this by putting our [UMass and TGU] students into dialogue in an attempt to disrupt current hostilities between our countries. Our annual undergraduate Skype conference is a [horizontal feminist] version of the late Cold War-era US-Soviet *telemost* [TV bridge]—the experimental broadcasts that put US and Soviet citizens into dialogue during the 1980s—and has proven to facilitate a powerful kind of citizen diplomacy.

Women Educating (Wo)men in Emancipation History

Julie: Another distinguishing feature of the center and the unique women's educational projects it undertakes is its historical orientation: acknowledging feminist forebears, including European and US first-wave women's movements, as well as the work of early Bolshevik feminist Alexandra Kollontai. This has always been central to the educational projects you have run.

Valentina: Yes, the founding principle of Zhenskii Svet was to educate people in women's history and gender issues, in the belief that knowledge of women's history is an important component of women's empowerment.

Julie: What inspired or stimulated you to take this path?

Valentina: I was always interested in history. But I was also interested in social studies and had something of an interdisciplinary orientation and interest. The [official] Soviet history we read was a list of war, revolution, and battles and the social part of history was absent. These questions were very interesting to me. Even within feminist problematics, I always thought it was necessary to understand the historical background—for example, I wanted to understand what was behind the word “feminism.” I was interested in the historical context: the story of emancipation, women's civic activity, and the question of how women became citizens. If you remember, one of our first publications was the volume *Women in the Social History of Russia* (1997).

I was inspired by wonderful teachers at school and at the university—those who encouraged independent thinking and who tolerated my crazy questions—but one real historical source of inspiration was Alexandra Kollontai. My interest in Kollontai is connected to my early childhood, when I was ill and confined to bed. There was one play that I listened to a lot on the radio, “Ambassador of the USSR,” about a woman diplomat (later, in the 1970s, it was made into a film). Yulia Koltsova, the heroine, became my guiding star: I wanted world peace and friendship between peoples. I loved the play and I was convinced that this was not a made-up story and that there was such a person. It turned out I was right! Alexandra Kollontai was celebrated during my Soviet childhood as a heroic woman of the proletarian revolution, who became an ambassador of the Soviet Union—the first woman ambassador in the world. Together with my childish pride in the country, I had a strong desire to learn more about her life. I collected information and copied it down from newspapers and magazines I found in the library of our small town, taking clippings from the newspaper *Komsomolskaya Pravda* (Young Communist truth), extracts from *Oktiabr* (October) magazine. I liked it when I later learned she wasn't just a propagandist of the Communist Party, and I wanted to collect her work on women's emancipation. Later, when I moved to the city [Tver'], I was able to gather material from prerevolutionary and postrevolutionary journals housed in the university library, as well as from the few books I managed to buy as a student. One of them was the book *Selected Articles and Speeches*, published on the one hundredth anniversary of Kollontai's birth (1972). Kollontai inspired me to want to be a diplomat. Who knows, if my life had gone differently, perhaps I would have taken that path. But it was extremely difficult to enter this career—they chose

candidates mostly from Moscow and it required two years of work experience (*rabochyi stazh*). I could have accomplished this by working for two years on a Komsomol construction project, but my father cleverly talked me out of it by joking that I'd find a husband there and come back married! I didn't want to get married and so I changed my mind!

I realized there were no publications where Alexandra Kollontai's ideas about women's emancipation were laid out. I myself needed such a book, so I wanted to compile and publish it in order to make these texts available for those studying the history of women's emancipation and the theory of feminism. My colleagues and I ultimately did this—the volume was published as *Marxist Feminism of Alexandra Kollontai* (2003).⁸

Julie: There's an institutional dimension to this also, isn't there? You have written about the history of Tver' State University and its prerevolutionary collections.

Valentina: Yes! Our library at Tver' State University was another source of inspiration for me. The university was founded on the basis of the Women Teachers' School (Zhenskaia Uchitelskaia Shkola), an institution of higher education for girls that was established in 1870. And this school had a wonderful library that the university inherited.

The school graduated about forty students annually; over the forty-eight years of its existence, it trained twelve hundred teachers. This is not so much, but in terms of education, in ideological orientation, and progressiveness, the school was compared only with the celebrated St. Petersburg Zemstvo Teacher's School. After the 1917 February Revolution, the school was reorganized to become the Tver' Teacher's Institute, later renamed the Kalinin Pedagogical Institute, and in 1971, one hundred years after the founding of the Women Teachers' School, it became Kalinin State University (since 1991 known as Tver' State University). The school had a large library, which its founder began to collect from the very beginning for its pupils and their teachers (it is known that in 1914 the library totaled eighteen thousand volumes).

There was a special archive at the library that held late nineteenth and early twentieth century journals with materials about women's emancipation, prerevolutionary material on the women's movement—for example, *Vestnik Evropy* (Herald of Europe). This library was a terrific resource—these were real primary sources—to form the basis of a new understanding of history! It was there, reading old magazines in search of materials for a course on the history of social ideas in the nineteenth century, that I first came across the terms "women's issues" and "feminism."

This archive opened when I was a student, but it was impossible to study these topics at that time. You could write about the Decembrists, or about other movements that were sanctioned as politically correct, but not about bourgeois women's movements. So, my project was to discover women's history, in the area of emancipation—and to disseminate it also. For us, it was new. I later learned that Bervi-Kaydanova, the director of the prerevolutionary Women Teachers' School, led a discussion group (*kruzhok*) on women's equal rights in 1906. Maybe the "virus" of feminism was waiting for me in the old walls of the library, where I spent almost all of my time as a student? In any case, it was in that very building where our feminist-oriented group Zhenskii Svet first met in the early 1990s.

In the 1990s, when we [Zhenskii Svet] held conferences, we always held exhibitions in that library. Some colleagues from other cities came especially to our conferences because they were interested in the exhibitions and the opportunity to get to know the old journals. I encouraged some of my students to undertake projects there and to create catalogs, and annotations.

The first exhibition we organized was in 1996, "Women in the Social History of Russia." The city mayor gave us financial support to hold a conference on this theme and publish a book—before there were any grants! A lot of people were interested and requested copies, even from Israel. We organized an exhibition for this conference, and then later, repeated it. For example, we co-organized a conference in 2007 with Swedish colleagues—a three-day gender studies conference, "Gender Equality and Gender Studies: Russia and Sweden." Lots of people came—including [Russian writer and journalist] Masha Arbatova and [St. Petersburg-based feminist activist] Olga Lipovskaya.

I like this historical connection with the women's teaching school, with the library they created for these girls—the Center for Women's History and Gender Studies is like a continuation of this tradition, of interest in the "woman question," as they then called it in Russia. Perhaps that's a bit romantic. But . . . but still, who knew that in 2018 my girls [students] would come along and say, "Let's re-establish the evening school in gender studies!"

Women Educating Women across Borders: Postsocialist "East-West" Exchange

Julie: Another theme that's clearly resonant here is the importance of transnational feminist connections, or the so-called postsocialist East-West feminist exchange, the early horizontal feminist connections that facilitated our own relationship.⁹ This exchange wasn't without its challenges, as has been well documented in feminist literature—yet still, it was a tremendous learning experience to so many of us. The value of what Elena Zdravomyslova and Anna Temkina call this "perspective from outside" has been so rich;¹⁰ I know that I would never have become the scholar I became without my own experience in your "school" and the education I received in Russia and via my participation in this exchange.

Valentina: Yes, my acquaintance with US-based and Western European feminist scholars in the 1990s was such an important inspiration—my contact with feminist scholar-activists Ann Snitow, Isabelle Marcus, and Shana Penn. Some of them came to Tver' and delivered lectures for us. The Network of East-West Women played a big role. I saw how you can do things in practice and was inspired by this. Our meeting in 1995 was another turning point. You renewed my early interest in [cultural] anthropology—I had been exposed to it as an undergraduate and you inspired me to do women's studies as (personal) politics! I was compelled by the participatory research and engaged pedagogy you were exploring and we began to talk about it. My study trip (*stazhirovka*) to the US (to Cornell) in 1998 was another important moment, as it enabled me to learn more about women's studies centers and departments.¹¹ Later, I

visited a number of US- and Europe-based women's studies centers and universities—such as the Central European University, Budapest, the University of Edinburgh, Kent State University, Harvard University, and Helsinki University—and was invited to teach at some of them. We did collaborative research and teaching projects with some of them.¹² All of these connections and experiences exposed me to a distinctive way of being—a different mode of education and a different way of interacting with students. To talk to students like grown-ups—to this day, this is not the Russian norm. It's the same as how the state interacts with citizens—as if they are children. This is something I wanted to interrupt. There was a lot of enthusiasm at this time, a lot! Students and teachers were excited to engage in civil society. And the first [Ford Foundation-sponsored] Summer School in Gender Studies that I codirected in 1996, when Olga Voronina was involved, was also a school for myself—I learned so much from it.¹³ And after this, the Tver' evening school in gender studies followed [in 1997].

Julie: Why do you think your center has survived, when so many others have shut down?

Valentina: First, because we are part of the university structure. I made this decision in 1999. At that time, I felt it was important to involve the university in our activities. I described it as a "strategy of involvement" aimed at strengthening the sustainability of the Center for Women's History and Gender Studies; it was a strategy of engaging university officials in our work. But later, it proved to be the right strategy. In the early 2000s so many centers and crisis centers (independently registered) began to shut down. I don't know how I came up with this idea, that we needed to be university-based. I think it's connected with my love of the university, universities! And also, because I'd seen how other gender studies centers worked—how they accumulate interesting people!

Julie: One theme that I noted in my dissertation research was your reluctance to formalize Zhenskii Svet by registering it as a societal organization (*obshchestvennaia organizatsiia*). This was partly due to your reluctance to professionalize your activism, or "NGO-ize" it, but there were strategic benefits to this, of course (I just read an interesting analysis by Finnish scholar Inna Perheentupa, who identifies nonregistration as a distinctive spatial tactic of Russian feminist activists past and present¹⁴). Of course, then, it was not so clear what would transpire politically, but it clearly served you well. Everything you've described ends up being a kind of invisible, under the radar activism. Not loud enough to bother people, but . . .

Valentina: Yes, exactly—not loud. It's this that helps us—yes, I like that! We're not so visible, not loud. But all the same—"step by step" we get things done. Another reason we survive is because the topic is so interesting to students. Students are sincerely interested in women's emancipation history and gender issues and they are prepared to contribute their energies—this is *genuine* volunteer work! Because of this, perhaps university administrators even think that the gender studies center is profitable for them! But there's another reason too: the politicization of gender [issues] from above stimulates and intensifies this interest. It seems that the new wave of interest in feminism is a reaction to this, to the ways in which the state has politicized gender, e.g., via

the decriminalization of violence against women.¹⁵ And also, the issue of international activity plays a role in the university. Almost all international visitors to the university come to visit the center! I think perhaps the administrators are aware of this. It's something they have to check off on their lists—maybe because of this, they won't throw Uspenskaya aside just yet! I don't know. But it's like everything at the moment in our country—we don't know what's going to happen. But we are still alive, and we are still laughing! [laughs]

Julie: As a young scholar during the late Soviet period, you were inspired to examine the “lost histories” of women's struggles for emancipation. Now in 2019, there are other “lost histories” to traverse—including the easily dismissed stories of socialist successes, or strivings, or experiments, as well as civic organizing of the 1990s. There's been a turn in recent scholarship to re-examine the socialist past, and its potential to reignite political projects and imaginaries, prompted by the discontents of the present—unregulated capitalism, violent dislocations we experience globally (recent examples that come to mind are Kristen Ghodsee's recent work, and work by Larisa Kurtovic¹⁶). Of course, your scholarship on Kollontai is really pertinent, and I know your students are deeply interested in that historical attempt to “solve” the woman question. But in



Figure 4. Valentina with a display of newspaper clippings.

Photo by Julie Hemment.

so many ways, the early postsocialist period is somewhat analogous. The 1990s are a highly contested decade in Russia today. Dominant pro-state representations frame the decade as *likhie devianostye*, a time of wild bandits, confusion, and collective trauma for the population. Political scientist Gulnaz Sharafutdino describes this framing as one of the political leadership's “most potent strategies for harnessing group emotions in the pursuit of its political aims.”¹⁷ You and your students (both women and men) bring a very different perspective and are interested in acknowledging and exploring this period. This was very apparent at the anniversary conference. Several student presentations focused on Russian women's activism of the 1990s. When we moved to the center in the afternoon for the student sessions, I saw they had decorated the space with old newspaper cuttings about *Zhenskii Svet*, your work, and the early years of the center. They

shared with me the lovely photo albums they had compiled dedicated to those years. It was a wonderful tribute!

Valentina: The theme of 1990s women's organizing is a really important one—I'm collecting materials about all that we did during the 1990s. It wasn't just a time of bandits; we feminists were also making mischief (*khuliganili*) at this time, also . . . ! Our students know about the political reforms of that period; they have read texts in the classes they take with my political science colleagues—we have a good team here and they are very progressive people. Several students are doing research on this topic. My student Nataly Beliakova is writing her MA thesis on the topic of "The Trajectory of Russian Women's Activism at the End of the 20th Century and Early 21st Century." Others have worked on civic activism of the 1990s.

Julie: This disrupts the trend we know to be true—Olga Voronina observed in her remarks, and as others have noted, there's a lamentable generational gap in Russia's feminist community, where younger feminist activists appear to be largely unaware of (and seemingly uninterested in) their 1990s-era predecessors.¹⁸ Perhaps it isn't so much a lack of interest, so much as a lack of awareness . . . ?

Valentina: Yes, this is true. One of our students reported that many of her friends believe feminism is a new youth phenomenon, or a twenty-first-century subculture, and that "adult feminists" do not exist!¹⁹ As gender studies centers shut down, this history and research isn't available to young people. My students are very interested in this period—partly because it is an element of their political science education. They want to learn about our experience in the city. But there's a general increase of interest in women's history and gender studies, because they find the topic and materials so relevant to them. One thing I notice is how much my students enjoy Betty Friedan's *Female Mystique* and Simone de Beauvoir's work. De Beauvoir, of course, nobody has ever written about women's issues so well as she—but Betty Friedan's discussion hits a chord because it so perfectly captures the conditions they confront today. The ideal of womanhood—the 1950s housewife—this is exactly what's appearing in Russia today, fifty years later, and after the Soviet period! Suddenly, girls in Russia are receiving the same message that women in the United States and the United Kingdom experienced in the aftermath of the Second World War—that is, "Girls, go home and do your domestic work!" Recently, a woman deputy [elected official] announced that girls should have three children by the time they are twenty, and then get an education. That "girls" [*devushki*] should give birth as early as possible! I think young women understand it—they are not stupid. Maybe they aren't consciously aware of it, but they intuitively feel that this tendency is dangerous. I worry very much about this antifeminist current. It's very prevalent, very urgent. And we have to contend with it. I have only one weapon—*prosveshchenie*—enlightenment. Just what Zhenskii Svet did! I think a lot of our experience from the 1990s is just as important now as it was then—I mean the work of education/enlightenment (*prosvetitel'skaia rabota*).

Julie: What do you think the prospects are for the future of the center? What directions do you see it taking in the future, and what role might the next generation play? So

much of the success of your work is a product of your charismatic leadership and the unique personal connections and ties you've assembled . . .

Valentina: That's a good question—and of course, it's hard to say. But it seems to me that feminism and feminist education projects of the future may take different forms. I discussed this recently with my students, actually. We focused our discussion on the role of the internet and the potential of digital activism, as well as the challenges of this moment—the strengthening of paternalistic and patriarchal authority, as well as the hostility of internet discussions toward women. They noted that traditional gender norms and stereotypes, sexism, and even aggression carry over to the virtual world. At the same time, though, they noted that a new wave of feminist activism manifests itself on the internet: there are lively discussions about women's rights, LGBTQ rights, discrimination, and equality, and diverse feminist communities have been thriving on social networks for several years. They agreed with Olga Voronina's conclusions: that digital activism has great potential, but that it's too soon to know how it will play out.²⁰ Some of them are stepping up to do this work! One student who participated in our evening school, noting that many young bloggers write and talk about feminism without any historical background or knowledge of earlier movements, has initiated her own blog about feminism and women's activism to counter this lack of awareness. When I heard Olga Voronina's keynote at our conference about the uncertainties of the moment, I was drawn to think of Ann Snitow's book, *The Feminism of Uncertainty*.²¹ She embraced "uncertainty" as a watchword for knowing that feminism was always evolving, but not knowing what it might become. Hers was a hopeful message. We see now what terrible perils we face in the twenty-first century. Following Ann, and listening to my students, I believe that feminism needs to be a continual "shape changer," capable of responding to new conditions and expectations.²² How can feminism contribute to creating a culture of peace? Concerning the future prospects for our center—my new students will prepare our next conference around this feminist topic. In my opinion, the development of a culture of peace can be fueled by gender-equality policies and feminist foreign policy, challenging our androcentric culture.

◆ About the Authors

Julie Hemment is a Professor in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. Her research interests include gender, youth and post-socialism, NGOs and global civil society, social welfare and citizenship, and feminist, participatory, and collaborative methodologies. She is the author of *Empowering Women in Russia: Aid, NGOs and Activism* (Indiana University Press, 2007) and *Youth Politics in Putin's Russia: Producing Patriots and Entrepreneurs* (Indiana University Press, 2015). Her ethnographic research is based in Russia, and she has undertaken a number of collaborative projects with Tver'-based civic activists, scholars, and students since the mid-1990s. Her most recent writing focuses on satire in US-Russian political communication.

Valentina Uspenskaya is Associate Professor of Political Science at Tver' State University and Head of the Center for Women's History and Gender Studies, which she

founded in 1999. Her research and teaching interests include feminism and the politics of gender equality, women and politics in Russia, women's political thought, women's peace movements, civil society, comparative world politics, and political anthropology. In 1996, she was a codirector of the First All-Russian Summer School in Women's and Gender Studies. In 2000–2002, she was a member of the Steering Committee of the Network of East-West Women (NEWW). She is an author of several international articles and coeditor of *Women and Transformation in Russia* (Routledge, 2013). In Russia, Uspenskaya has published extensively on women's/feminist history, women's political thought, gender equality policies, and particularly on Alexandra Kollontai's contributions to women's emancipation theory.

◆ Notes

We are grateful to Beth Holmgren for inviting us to contribute this piece and for her encouragement and helpful feedback. We would like to express our gratitude to our colleagues and students at the Tver' Center for Women's History and Gender Studies: Natalia Kozlova, Ilya Chalov, student conference organizers Nataly Beliakova, Ludmila Babiy, as well as Dmitry Nikolaev and Elena Korotkina, who supported its realization. We dedicate this forum to the memory of Ann Snitow, who was such an inspiration to us both.

1. Julie Hemment, *Empowering Women in Russia: Activism, Aid and NGOs* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007).

2. New legislation enacted in the spring of 2012 required the Russian recipients of foreign funds (NGO workers and scholars) working on "political" issues to register themselves as "foreign agents" (*inostrannye agenty*)—a term strongly associated with Cold War-era espionage. Although it was intended for NGOs, research institutions and individual researchers who had received foreign funding were caught in the crosshairs. During the spring of 2013 some Russian scholars and research centers came under investigation and scrutiny as the new legislation was enforced. See, e.g., Elena L. Omel'chenko and Anna Zhelnina, "Sociology under Threat? . . . Or Who Is on the Lookout for New Enemies of Russia, and Why," MYPLACE (blog), 6 November 2012, <https://myplacep7.wordpress.com/2012/11/06/sociology-under-threat-or-who-is-on-the-lookout-for-new-enemies-of-russia-and-why/> (accessed 8 November 2019).

3. All civic organizations were required to re-register at that time, but the center did not do that, preferring to sidestep the formal relationship with the state and the obligations this entailed. For an excellent analysis of the Tver' Center for Women's History and Gender Studies' strategies at this time, see Suvi Salmenniemi, *Democratization and Gender in Contemporary Russia* (London: Routledge, 2008), 89–130.

4. The CWHGS received funding from the Ford Foundation (1999–2006) in support of its gender education projects, including the evening school in gender studies, as well as small grants from the Open Society Institute and a Canadian foundation.

5. Center space is modest; it occupies one large room with a library, comprising books collected by Valentina herself, obtained with the support of earlier grants and funding, as well as via the donations of visiting feminist scholars.

6. Anna Temkina and Elena Zdravomyslova, "Gender's Crooked Path: Feminism Confronts Russian Patriarchy." *Current Sociology* 62, no. 2 (2014): 253–270.

7. Olga Voronina, *Gender Culture in Russia: Traditions and Innovations* (Moscow: Institut Filosofii RAN, 2018).

8. Valentina Uspenskaia, *Aleksandra Kollontai: Teoriia zhenskoi emansipatsii v kontekste rossiiskoi gendernoi politiki* [Alexandra Kollontai: The theory of women's emancipation in the context of Russian gender policies] (Tver: Zolotaia bukva, 2003).

9. We found each other via the Washington DC-based Network of East-West Women (NEWW). NEWW was founded in 1991 by a group of Eastern European and US-based scholars (including Ann Snitow and Shana Penn) and activists to support the nascent women's movement in postsocialist states. NEWW projects played a vital role in facilitating connections and stimulating networks—for example, via the NEWW On-Line Project, an electronic communications network that connected grassroots women's organizations, NGOs, and individuals in the formerly socialist states of the East bloc and the United States. Zhenskii Svet was the grateful recipient of one of these early grants.

10. Temkina and Zdravolmyslova, "Gender's Crooked Path," 255.

11. Valentina traveled as recipient of an individual grant from the Ford Foundation.

12. This includes projects on topics such as violence against women, women's reproductive rights, political leadership, gender equality policies, and women's citizen activism.

13. Valentina cofounded and directed the first all-Russian Summer School in Gender Studies (with Zoia Khotkina and other colleagues from the Moscow Center for Gender Studies), held in Tver' in 1996 with the support of the Ford Foundation.

14. Inna Perheentupa, "Feminist Politics in Neoconservative Russia" (PhD diss., University of Turku, 2019).

15. Controversial legislation passed in 2017 partially decriminalized domestic violence, by making "moderate" violence within the family an administrative rather than criminal offense. The bill's authors claimed their intent was to "strengthen the family."

16. Kristen Ghodsee's recent book explores the forgotten contributions of socialist women to international feminism and feminist networks between the Second and Third Worlds during the Cold War era: *Second World, Second Sex: Socialist Women's Activism and Global Solidarity During the Cold War* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019). Larisa Kurtović has recently drawn attention to historical preservation work underway in the former Yugoslavia, where activists create archives of socialist projects: "An Archive to Build a Future: The Recovery and Rediscovery of the History of Socialist Associations in Contemporary Bosnia-Herzegovina," *History and Anthropology* 30, no. 1 (2019): 20–46.

17. Gulnaz Sharafutdinova, "Russia's Struggle over the Meaning of the 1990s and the Keys to Kremlin Power," PONARS policy memo, 2019, <http://www.ponarseurasia.org/memo/rusias-struggle-over-meaning-1990s-and-keys-kremlin-power> (accessed 25 July 2019).

18. See also Valerie Sperling, *Sex, Politics and Putin: Political Legitimacy in Russia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

19. Interview with Nataly Beliakova, April 2019.

20. Voronina, *Gender Culture in Russia*.

21. Ann Snitow, *The Feminism of Uncertainty: A Gender Diary* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).

22. Snitow, *The Feminism of Uncertainty*, 330.