



Introduction¹

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Invariably invoked in gender studies, such fundamental terms and concepts as sexual difference, masculinity and femininity, fatherhood and motherhood, as well as patriarchy, teem with complexities and ambiguities. Gender as a category in feminist psychoanalytic discourse grew out of a series of debates about how and where to formulate the problem of cultural construction. Do cultural socialisation and the internalisation of norms determine gender? Is gender part of a linguistic network that precedes and structures the formation of the ego and the linguistic subject? After approximately four decades of feminist and gender scholarship, the competing answers outnumber the repeated questions in the lively multi-vocal debate that shows no sign of abating.

Unlike Slavic commentators, many of whom reject gender studies as an alien, often alienating, concept, and who generally gloss over any distinction between gender and sex in favour of an innate, biologically based, immutable femininity,² object relations theory, originating with the British psychoanalyst Melanie Klein, views gender as a set of roles and cultural meanings acquired in the course of ego formation in family structures. Significant changes in child rearing practices and kinship organisation, in other words, can alter the meaning of gender. Feminists reworking the Lacanian tradition, which, as Nancy Fraser has noted, posits a structuralist model, usually engage sexual difference – the primary form of linguistic differentiation that belongs to the Symbolic and conditions, regulates, and institutes the speaking subject. Whereas most theorists of gender presume a subject that acquires a gender in the course of its development (the ‘pragmatics model’, which takes discourse ‘as a historically specific social practice of communication’ into account), Lacanians insist that the subject itself is formed through subjection to sexual difference.³ Paradoxically, however, Lacanian theory suggests that sexual identity results from a process of construction rather than from a biological given; hence Fraser’s criticism of what she calls Lacanian ‘circularity’, which ultimately embraces ‘an apparently ironclad determinism’.⁴ Significantly, such theories have hardly impinged upon Slavic scholars – or, for that matter, upon most Russians – who, with rare exceptions, continue to conceive of womanhood in essentialist terms that proliferate their own set of paradoxes.⁵



Yet more than half a century ago, that classic of feminist theory, Simone de Beauvoir's *Le deuxième sexe* (1949, English translation 1952), clarified the crucial distinction between sex and gender in the memorable maxim 'One is not born, but rather becomes a woman'.⁶ Elaborating on that formulation in anthropological terms, Gayle Rubin explains the variable ways in which kinship organisations produce gendered beings out of sexed bodies: 'Every society has a sex/gender system – a set of arrangements by which the biological raw material of human sex and procreation is shaped by human, social intervention and satisfied in a conventional manner, no matter how bizarre some of the conventions may be....'⁷ Extraordinary conditions, which inevitably prevail during war time, exacerbated the anomalous nature of Eastern European 'conventions' during the early 1940s when an increasing number of countries entered the Second World War and state imperatives required that women fulfil simultaneously a number of incompatible functions.

The pressure upon women to fit into the state war machine in both the USSR and Poland lends weight to historian Michel Foucault's concept of sex as a political category, whereby 'woman' emerges from a discourse created by and for others in a context of exclusion and repression.⁸ It also lends credence to the polemical ideas of lesbian thinker/novelist Monique Wittig, who locates women's freedom and subjectivity solely in lesbianism, which bypasses what she calls the 'class' of heterosexual relations and equates with 'servitude'.⁹ Though Slavic women served courageously in the forces, the terms of their respective nations' gender disposition ensured that in the process they, as 'second-class citizens', 'served' men inasmuch as their cultures cast them into the role of men's 'helpers'.

Whether in its first radical formulation or as subsequently modified, Judith Butler's influential theory of gender *and* sex as performativity conceives of both gender and sex as being culturally constructed as a result of the iteration of stylised acts which, in turn, create the appearance of an essential ontological 'core' gender owing its existence to that repetition.¹⁰ This ontological core is precisely what representations of Eastern European women in the Second World War attempted to install as unassailable, biologically-ordained identity. In short, gender theory hardly suffers from a dearth of polemical perspectives on key definitions, several of which underpin the following cluster, providing a corrective to the unexamined packaging of gender as an immutable entity by Poland and the USSR at a time of historical devastation.

The following three articles on women's (self-)representation on the Eastern Front during the Second World War eloquently illustrate how gender serves the political imperatives and legislated presuppositions of both state and nation. They all implicitly engage de Beauvoir and Foucault in revealing the discursive instrumentalisation of 'women' and the pragmatically dictated shifts in 'feminine' images in the service of a 'larger cause'. Analysing the ways in which Poland and the Soviet Union utilised women and their cultural representations for propaganda, Susan Corbesero, Elena Baraban, and Beth Holmgren argue that, during the lethal turmoil of the Nazi invasion and occupation, both the USSR and Poland promulgated traditional yet internally conflicting paradigms of womanhood to unite the population in patriotic resistance against the enemy. The female images disseminated throughout the war reflected the gender definitions and dispositions institutionalised by age-old binary ideologies, which his-

torically have ministered to men, who are the agents overseeing their codification and reaping the attendant benefits. As the necessary antithetical Other complementing males (the primary category) and therefore subject to the arbitrary law of essentialist gender distinctions, females (the secondary category) were construed as that which man is not, and consequently identified with those emotions of nurturing, domesticity, and other overly familiar traits that firmly remove women from the arena of socio-political activity. Images congruent with this dyadic model – in Lacanian terms, the Symbolic and the Imaginary – dominated Soviet posters (Corbesero) and films (Baraban), as well as Polish audiences' reception of female performers (Holmgren). These imposed identities and their corollaries buttressed the reassuring antinomical model of invincible masculinity at a time of crisis, and women wholeheartedly assumed those prefabricated identities with patriotic fervour.

Such convenient dyads, however, are fraught with contradictions – instancing what Rubin calls 'bizarre' conventions.¹¹ The authors of this cluster deconstruct representational practices – in purportedly progressive socialist societies – that unwittingly reveal musty, discursively inconsistent attitudes towards women as virgins and whores, victims and villains, mothers and sex objects. In these double-bind constructions, the act of appropriation regularly transformed women from active participants in the war effort into (passive) supporters of men. As individuals, they simply disappeared. Above all, the rhetorical abstraction of women into the allegorical collective image of the Motherland reduced them to the level of a presiding trope that facilitated their comprehensive banishment from the empowering arena of empirical agency. Their 'exclusion' and 'repression' lend considerable ammunition to a Foucauldian reading of women's socio-political status as discursively configured within the framework of power relations.

All three articles complicate further the nature of female subjectivity and representation by implicitly questioning how and where we may locate women's authentic voices in images generated primarily by male members of a community. Without women's integration on equal terms into all spheres of society and culture, is it possible to hear them speak in their own words with their own gestures? Critical debates about the representations of gender minorities or oppressed alterities reveal two equally flawed attitudes, which Wendy Hesford identifies as 'the problem of the privileged speaking *for* rather than *with* the oppressed, thereby situating oneself as an authenticating presence, and the assumption that the subject can speak only for herself, a stance that ignores how rhetorical conventions and discursive systems shape the construction of subjectivity and agency'.¹² In short, what may appear as subjectivity too often proves to be internalised objectification. Compliance, not agency, rules.

Corbesero, in her analysis of Second World War posters, tackles the relationship between gender and sexual identity as she traces fluctuations in female iconography – an iconography strictly controlled by the state and dictated by its perception of developments on the battlefield. She notes the 'mixed messages' projected onto depictions of 'masculinised' women performing 'men's work' in factories and fields who nevertheless retained their roles as homemakers and feminine appendages to 'their' men. Vastly outnumbered by their male counterparts, female graphic artists such as Nina Vatolina, Tat'iana Eromina and Ol'ga Burova manifestly internalised officially

sanctioned gender conventions so that the iconography of their posters is indistinguishable from those of their better-known male colleagues.

Images of maternity dominated virtually all genres of cultural production during the war. They overran graphics, which, Baraban maintains, often inspired wartime cinema and likewise highlighted an allegorical motherhood that exhorted audiences to wreak 'just' vengeance against the enemy. Yet whereas posters excluded explicit depictions of sexuality, film included pointedly negative portrayals of the sexual female, consistently anathematising her as a barren and doomed collaborator, visually coded according to puritanical Soviet stereotypes, which equated heavy make-up, seductive clothing, and preference for luxury with political betrayal – an instantly recognisable mark that obtained throughout Eastern Europe. Within this dogmatic polarisation, celluloid Soviet mothers – devoid of cosmetics, coquetry, and suspect intentions – became mouthpieces for state propaganda, the psychological weight of their pronouncements deriving from their rhetorical status as symbols of the Motherland.

No less a mandated aspect of womanhood in wartime Poland, maternity proved an unlikely role for Ordonka, the era's national equivalent of Edith Piaf and Poland's modern romantic incarnation of feminine desirability. A performer and media star, Ordonka cultivated both sides of the dual mother/sex object identity culturally projected onto women from time immemorial. Carefully calibrating her sexual appeal and publicizing her vulnerability to 'love', on the one hand, Ordonka urged motherhood upon the Polish population, on the other, and set an example by embracing temporary surrogate maternity, thereby acting out the two traditional hypostases of womanhood. Holmgren examines how Ordonka's temperament, artistic talents, and pragmatism contributed to the (self-)construction of her public persona and its dual perception. If, as Holmgren suggests, Poland and its audiences, especially after 1980, appropriated Ordonka's image for current national needs, one wonders to what extent Ordonka consciously manipulated public perception, sensing its bifurcated expectations.

The cluster raises several issues. Did Ordonka's image – a hybrid of romance and mediated maternity – result from a coincidental intersection of her personality, the exigencies of war, and Poland's traditions, or was it the product of a more 'logical' process of cultural construction determined by patriarchal and nationalist values? What ultimately prompted Ordonka to 'perform [a] femininity' (Butler) traditionally embraced by her compatriots remains uncertain. One can only speculate in Kleinian terms, about what aspects of her adult behaviour and choices may be attributed to her identity formation as an only child in a poor working-class family. Similarly intriguing is the question of whether Soviet women who enthusiastically responded to the ideological call for their involvement in the war effort realised that their allotted role as supporters of their fathers, husbands, and sons perpetuated the validity and power of gendered cultural constructions reproduced in both war time posters and films.

The intricacies of Slavic (and other) women's contributions to the Second World War necessitate our recognition of the contradictory dialogical process of looking and being seen, of writing and reading practices. That process also locates viewers within historical and national communities. Studying graphic and celluloid images as well as performance allows viewers (male or female) to see themselves in the context of national priorities, to realise the extent to which the complex politics of representation

and war rhetoric manipulate viewers by limiting their scope of perception. By examining the politics of gendered representation during the Second World War, the cluster of articles by Corbesero, Baraban, and Holmgren extends that scope.

◆ About the Authors

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◆ Notes

1. The three articles in this section expand upon talks presented at a bi-partite international conference titled 'Women in War' organised by Yana Hashamova and Helena Goscilo at Ohio State University and the University of Pittsburgh in 2007.

2. While scholarship on gender by Western Slavists has gained acceptance and momentum in the last decade, in Russia it remains a radically marginalised field often subjected to criticism by prominent figures such as Tatyana Tolstaya and even to ridicule by the educated segment of the population. The most notorious instance of the latter is a book-length diatribe by the journalist Aleksandr Nikonov, *Konets feminizma: chem zhenshchina otlichaetsia ot cheloveka* (The end of feminism: How a woman differs from a human being), Moscow and St. Petersburg: NTsENAS, 2008. Among its 'insights' is the notion that in the United States, feminism has 'caused' an increase in homosexuality and a decrease in heterosexual activity (101). The cover of the book depicts a woman's body in a kneeling position, *derrière* bared, a skimpy, transparent *negligée* covering part of her arms, topped by the head of a roaring tiger – a trivialised woman as sexualised predator.

3. Nancy Fraser, 'Structuralism or Pragmatics? On Discourse Theory and Feminist Politics', in *The Second Wave: A Reader in Feminist Theory*, ed. Linda Nicholson, New York and London: Routledge, 1997, 379–95, 382.

4. Fraser, 'Structuralism or Pragmatics?', 383.

5. The rare exceptions to this general lack of Lacanian and Kleinian Slavic scholarship include Lilya Kaganovsky, *How the Soviet Man Was Unmade*, Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2008; Yana Hashamova, *Pride and Panic: Russian Imagination of the West in Post-Soviet Film*, Bristol: Intellect, 2007; Helena Gosciolo and Yana Hashamova (eds.), *Cinepaternity: Fathers and Sons in Soviet and Post-Soviet Film*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010. In addition, based on our extended and frequent visits to Russia over the years and informal conversations and discussions with Russians, we (HG and YH) can confidently state that the Russian general public harbours a traditional and fairly rigid understanding of gender roles.

6. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H.M. Parshley, New York: Vintage Books, 1989, 267.

7. Gayle Rubin, 'The Traffic in Women', in *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed. Rayna Reiter, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975, 157–210, 165.

8. Michel Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge* (1969), trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith, New York: Harper and Row, 1976. See also, Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* (1976–84), trans. Robert Hurley, New York: Pantheon Books, 1978.

9. Monique Wittig, 'One Is Not Born a Woman', *Feminist Issues* 2 (Winter 1981): 47–54.

10. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York: Routledge, 1989.

11. Rubin, 'The Traffic in Women', 165.

12. Wendy Hesford, 'Documenting Violations: Rhetorical Witnessing and the Spectacle of Distant Suffering', in *Biography* vol. 27 no. 1 (Winter 2004): 104–144, 107–108.