Mothers & soldiers: gender, citizenship and civil society in contemporary Russia

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Amy Caiazza offers a compelling analysis of how lobby groups deployed ideologies on gender and citizenship to try to change the Russian policy on motherhood and on military service during the 1990s, a time when Russia was in the throes of reconstituting itself after the break up of the former Soviet Union. Her particular concern is to understand how (four) different interest groups used gender ideologies to 'frame' and mobilize support for changes in these two policy domains.

The book is organized into three sections. The first section introduces the issues and provides a succinct overview of Russian political institutions and civil society during the 1990s. It also sets out the political opportunity perspective that underpins her analysis. The second section comprises a description and analysis of how particular (maternalist) gender ideologies were used in the campaigns of two of the more effective lobby groups – Women of Russia (WR) and the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers (CSM). The third section focuses on gender ideology and military service policy and assesses the influence of two less successful interest groups – a liberal feminist group, the Moscow Center for Gender Studies (MCGS) and a men's group, the Antimilitarist Radical Association (ARA). It also considers the possible explanations for the failure of young men to mobilize into a significant social movement to resist the compulsory draft and the poor conditions of military service particularly in Chechnya. The concluding section offers a number of observations and caveats about the salience of gender ideologies in Russian politics during the period of transition.

Caiazza adopts a political opportunity structure approach to her analysis of policy development on the issues of motherhood and military service. In brief, her argument is that the crucial factor influencing the effectiveness of these different lobby groups was the opportunities afforded by ideological constructions of gender rather than by the institutional structures of the Russian Federation during this period. She found that campaigns that were framed in terms of traditional gender ideologies, that is, the campaigns of the Women of Russia (WR) and the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers (CSM), both women's groups which played on the moral authority and suffering of mothers were more effective in influencing policy than were interventions framed in terms of liberal feminist demands for equality (MCGS). For Caiazza (2002: 158) the crucial determinant of the different lobby group's effectiveness was 'the ability to develop and exploit a sense of female consciousness, or sense of shared political identity among women that stemmed from their traditional roles as mothers and wives.' By contrast, the anti-militarist men's group, the ARA had little success in their campaign for

alternative military service and amnesty for deserters precisely because they were unable to exploit a male consciousness in the same way as the maternalist WR and CSM and because anti-militarism runs counter to traditional male gender ideologies. She concludes that a lack of consolidated democracy in Russia allowed gender ideology to play more important role in the shaping of policy than it otherwise might have.

Caiazza attempts to unravel a complex knot of political processes, structures and discourses of gender and citizenship in 1990s Russia and she does so with considerable skill. Her analysis of gender ideology, policy development and Russian political opportunity structures is cogent and persuasive as far as it goes, but her operationalization of the concept of transition as primarily political, rather than as a simultaneously economic and social transition obscures the extent to which the ideological constructions of citizenship and gender she is concerned to understand are inextricably intertwined with discourses of war and capitalism. Caiazza's analysis of gender ideology would have been enhanced by a greater use of feminist work on the gender, war and citizenship nexus, for example a more extensive use of Jean Bethke Elshtain (1997) on 'armed civic virtue' or Theda Skocpol (1992) on maternalism and welfare policy, or more recently (and possibly too recently for her to have known) the work of Vesna Nikolić-Ristanović (2002: 52–9) detailing the re-traditionalization and renaturalization of gender roles in the post-communist societies (Serbia, Macedonia, Bulgaria and Hungary) during the same period, an ideological shift attributes to move to a market economy, the privatization of property, the growth of nationalism and the abandonment of socialist feminism. Finally, a more extensive use of examples of the inscription of gender ideology in the citizenship discourse in other critical moments of Soviet history (for example, the revolution, and WWII) or in other contexts of conflict and transition would have provided a better means of evaluating specific elements of her analysis. That said, Amy Caiazza has produced a well-written, meticulously researched and engaging account of the interplay of gender and politics in the 1990s Russian Federation that will be of great interest to feminist scholars and students alike.

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references

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