

Project Proposal

In August 2017 ethnographer Kristen R. Ghodsee's "Why Women Had Better Sex Under Socialism," an op-ed published in the *New York Times*, exploded the internet. The article provocatively argued that state socialism did a better job promoting gender equality than the capitalist democracies of the West. The intensity of the debate that followed testifies to the pertinence of studying the experiences of women under socialism. The question remains: did state socialism foster or thwart gender equality?

Historians of women and gender in the Soviet Union are divided on the issue. Some argue that while the Bolsheviks succeeded in dismantling the old gender order, implementing progressive measures in the first decade of their rule, the Stalin era witnessed a conservative turn that revived patriarchal notions of femininity. According to this view, women's emancipation ended in the early 1930s.¹ Others note that the "conservative turn" did not simply negate earlier achievements in women's emancipation but created a spectrum of femininities. These works focus on the productive side of Soviet ideology and its ability to create new subjectivities.² Scholars working on late socialism examine the way both the Stalinist legacy and the urge to overcome it shaped gender politics during the last decades of the Soviet state. While some state that the official discourse was becoming more and more traditionalist, others focus on how it created tools that allowed women to transform their lives for the better.³

The history of domestic service provides a unique window into the evolving meanings of women's emancipation, one of the central tasks of the Soviet state. The book I will be working on at the Zvi Yavetz School of Historical Studies, *The Kitchen Maid That Will Rule the State: Domestic Service in the Soviet Union*, argues that the Bolshevik goal of emancipating women was hindered by the state's inability to see household labor as anything but women's work. The desire to make women equal builders of socialism ran into the limits of Bolsheviks' fundamentally gendered vision of the society, where women's and men's roles were to a great extent predefined by nature. As a result of this contradiction, women were simultaneously bound and enabled by the Soviet system.

Historians have long used domestic service as an entry point into studying gender hierarchies, but there are no scholarly studies that examine paid domestic labor in the Soviet context.⁴ While

¹ Wendy Goldman, *Women, the State, and Revolution: Soviet Family Policy and Social Life, 1917-1936* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Wood, Elizabeth. *The Baba and the Comrade: Gender and Politics in Revolutionary Russia* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000).

² Anna Krylova, *Soviet Women in Combat: a History of Violence of the Eastern Front* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Elena Shulman, *Stalinism on the Frontier of Empire: Women and State Formation in the Soviet Far East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

³ For the critical approach on late Soviet policy towards women, see Barbara Alpern Engel, *Women in Russia, 1700-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 231-249; for a more favorable interpretation, see Gail Lapidus, *Women in Soviet Society: Equality, Development and Social Change* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978); Deborah Field, *Private Life and Communist Morality in Khrushchev's Russia* (Pieterlen: Peter Lang, 2007).

⁴ For the most recent overview of historiography on domestic service, see Raffaella Sarti, "Historians, Social Scientists, Servants and Domestic Workers: Fifty Years of Research on Domestic and Care Work," in *Towards a Global History of Domestic and Caregiving Workers*. Eds. Hoerder, D. et all. (Leiden, Boston, 2015), 25-60.

the existence of domestic service in Soviet society is known to historians, those who acknowledge it state that the practice was part of the “grey economy” and was officially mentioned only in negative terms. My research shows that paid domestic labor was not only legal throughout Soviet history, but widely discussed in Soviet press and ubiquitous in Soviet culture. Moreover, “the kitchen maid that will rule the state” – a misquote from one of Vladimir Lenin’s pre-October works – became the most well-known symbol of women’s emancipation in the Soviet Union. Eventually, paid domestic labor was pronounced to be an essential part of the socialist economy.

I argue that domestic labor was a symbolic battleground for what it meant to be a female worker. Contributing to scholarly discussions of Soviet subjectivity, I use domestic service as a case study to trace the evolution of the meaning of women’s emancipation throughout Soviet history.⁵ Domestic workers were simultaneously extolled as the symbol of the transformative powers of the Soviet state and marginalized by their position in the gendered hierarchy of labor. My study of the Soviet state’s effort to transform “backward servants” into “conscious female workers” will expose the way this group of Soviet citizens made sense of themselves and their place in the Soviet society.

While the focus of my project is the Soviet Union, I seek to begin conversations on the place of paid domestic labor under socialism in general. Soviet scholars and researchers working on domestic labor elsewhere assume that inequality and exploitation, so characteristic of paid domestic labor, are particularly or singularly associated with capitalism. My work is the first to consider domestic labor under socialism as part of a global phenomenon.

My book examines domestic labor as a symbol of transformation, as gendered politics of labor, and as experience. In order to capture these different meanings of paid domestic labor, I utilize a wide spectrum of sources. Discussions in the Soviet press, didactic brochures, and within state institutions, as well as representations of domestic workers and their employers in Soviet literature and film, constituted a rich discursive field. Discourse translated into specific policies. Union documents preserved in the archives in Moscow, Saint Petersburg and Perm show discussions and regulations imposed by state officials and how they were received by domestic workers and their employers. Memoirs and oral interviews provide insight into the way relations between domestics and their employers functioned in the intimate space of the home.

In order to demonstrate the shifts in the meaning of domestic service and female emancipation, the book is structured chronologically. An introductory chapter, “Defining Domestic Service,” charts domestic service as it was conceptualized by European Marxists and Russian intelligentsia before the revolution of 1917. The introduction is followed by three sections. Each section is divided into chapters that explore one theme that defined the gendered policies towards domestic workers.

Section I is entitled “Domestic Service and Revolutionary Politics, 1917-1934.” This section focuses on the early Soviet period, when domestic service was seen as a temporary phenomenon,

⁵ Here I build on the works of Jochen Hellbeck and Igal Halfin. Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution on My Mind: Writing a Diary under Stalin* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006); Igal Halfin, *From Darkness to Light: Class, Consciousness and Salvation in Revolutionary Russia* (Pittsburg: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000).

part of the concessions of the New Economic Policy. The section consists of three chapters that discuss domestic workers' and, more broadly, women's "emancipation" in the spheres of law, education, and labor. Chapter One focuses on the question of social justice. It interrogates the competing ideas of how the Soviet state was to protect the rights of domestic workers. Although the Soviet state introduced the most progressive regulations of paid domestic labor in the contemporary world, domestic workers were increasingly defined as women rather than workers, while paid domestic labor itself ceased to be viewed as an inherently exploitative institution. Yet, the new discourse of rights provided domestic workers with the language to make claims for a better life. Chapter Two deals with the state's effort, by means of "enlightenment" programs and union activism, to turn "backward domestic servants" with a "lackey's soul" into "conscious domestic workers." Unlike with other workers, it was class consciousness and engagement in Bolshevik politics rather than labor that was to define a Soviet domestic worker. Household work was deemed to be "unproductive" labor and therefore not conducive to developing a proletarian consciousness. Domestic workers responded to these educational policies in a variety of ways, some of them taking the official discourse to mean that domestic service was incompatible with revolutionary values and demanding that the state provides them with "real work." "Real work," however, was rarely available for women in service until the introduction of the "five-year plan for female labor" in order to meet the needs of the industrializing economy of the early 1930s, the topic I discuss in Chapter Three. Domestic workers were "transferred" to the "productive" sector of the economy, with service industry seen as the most appropriate. Housework was to be collectivized, and private employment of domestic workers was supposed to disappear.

Section II, "In the Land of Victorious Socialism, 1934-1953," interrogates the rapid shift from declaring the end of domestic service in the Soviet state to proclaiming it to be part of the socialist economy. The chapter argues that, although the mid-1930s did witness women's "return" to the home as wives and mothers, the notions of home, addressed in Chapter Four, and family, addressed in Chapter Five, were fundamentally reconceptualized. Etatization of the home as a site of both cultural and economic production for the needs of the state legitimized domestic labor—paid and unpaid—as a contribution to building socialism. Domestic workers were reimagined as reliable managers of socialist property, experienced house help that facilitated their employers' labor productivity, and as dedicated nannies. Employers were reinvented as respectable supervisors of their household employees. They were also to serve as agents of the Soviet state's civilizing mission by making domestics cultured urban dwellers. Yet, the discourse was not homogenous: older narratives of the kitchen maid's emancipation through waged labor outside the home were still dominant in late-1930s literature and film. Domestic workers were simultaneously expected to be professionals loyal to their employers and aspire to leave service for "real work" outside the home. Domestic workers and their employers tried to make sense of the conflicting messages, building relationships that were professional and at the same time familial against the background of terror and war.

Section III ("Rethinking Domestic Service, 1954-1991") addresses the ways domestic labor figured into key discussions of the late Soviet period: the debates on Destalinization, addressed in Chapter Six, and perestroika, the focus of Chapter Seven. After Stalin's death, the call to return to Lenin's path lead to criticism of class and gender hierarchies in Soviet society. Many Soviet citizens viewed the existence of domestic labor as a sign of inequality and failure to

emancipate women, questioning compatibility of paid domestic labor with socialism. However, the inability to resolve the tension between the call for equality and the understanding of housework as women's work hampered the discussion and prevented its participants from developing a solution. Perestroika witnessed the last attempt to resolve the issue of paid domestic labor under socialism. The result was a new law that removed the state from the domestic sphere, leaving as much as possible to be negotiated between the worker and the employer. At the same time, the kitchen maid that should be running the state remained a powerful symbol of the revolution and its failed promises when it came to emancipation of women.

The book manuscript will be a significant reworking of my doctoral dissertation. It entails restructuring and expanding the overall thesis and the addition of three chapters on the family and the post-Stalinist period. The sources for these chapters are available to me, but I did not use them in the dissertation. As my project shifts, now, from the history of domestic service to a more broadly conceived study of women's emancipation in the socialist context, I also create a dialogue with the existing historiography on women and gender under state socialism beyond the Soviet Union. The reframing of the project calls for an interdisciplinary approach that implies a closer engagement with gender theory.

As a fellow at the Zvi Yavetz School of Historical Studies, I would spend the academic year 2018-19 working exclusively on this book project, with the hope of completing a full draft of the manuscript by the end of my term as a fellow. By the beginning of the academic year, I plan to have completed the first section of the monograph. I plan to draft the remaining four chapters by the end of spring 2019. I will use the summer months to write the introduction and conclusion as well as a book proposal, to be sent to publishers upon completion of my fellowship.