

BOOK REVIEW

Review of *Gender in 20th Century Eastern Europe and the USSR*, edited by Catherine Baker. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

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The anthology *Gender in 20th Century Eastern Europe and the USSR* is a collection of fourteen essays on a wide range of gender-related topics, from motherhood to concepts of masculinity, sexuality, and professional work. In contrast to many previous publications on gender in the socially and culturally very diverse region—for example *Women and Citizenship in Central and Eastern Europe* (Regulska 2006), *Gender Politics and Everyday Life in State Socialist Eastern and Central Europe* (Penn & Massino 2009), and *Eastern Europe: Women in Transition* (Grudzińska-Gross & Tymowski 2013)—this book does not limit itself to a specific politically delineated period in time, offering instead analysis from the entire span of the 20th century.

The book's broad geographical and historic range makes it especially innovative and interesting. Each short analysis offers fascinating insights into a specific issue. Some essays interrogate visual material and artefacts, asking about their symbolic and discursive meanings, such as the chapter on motherhood in pre-WWII Czech culture (Paces). Others use ethnographic research on a vast variety of topics such as the changing self-perception of female Red Army soldiers (Bischl) or the intimacies of everyday life in communist Romania (Bucur). Some analyses investigate official state discourses and their regional implementation, such as the chapters on Yugoslav gender policies after WWII (Simić), the construction of mascu-

linity within revolutionary discourses (Fraser), and the construction of the 'New Soviet Woman' in the context of Soviet Armenia and the broader Soviet South Caucasus (Laycock and Johnson). Yet another set of essays explore dissident discourses such as the research on masculinity in Eastern Europe during the 1980s (Muller) or the politics of Post-Yugoslav activism (Zaharijević).

Through their individual focus and research scope, the authors offer a brief look into the respective geo-temporal historical contexts and allow the reader to understand the diversity of the Eastern European and Eurasian regions. In its entirety, the collection shows that concepts such as gender, nationality and sexual identities are geo-temporally specific as well as trans-regionally influenced and changeable over time. The book assembles research that looks at transnational and transcultural encounters alongside regional and national gender politics, for example in the analysis of the British-Yugoslav lesbian network during and shortly after WWI (Dimitrijević and Baker), or of transnational LGBT politics after the Cold War (Baker). The analyses of trans-regional mutual influence, not just within the context of Soviet patronage, but also across the so-called West-East divide, challenge the seemingly fixed geographical categories and show their embeddedness in global discourses. This makes the book especially fruitful for use in the classroom, to help students understand the epistemic violence that continues to reproduce the efficacious West-East dichotomy or concepts such as 'post-socialist transition.' Importantly, it also deconstructs the stubborn classifications of pre- and post-1989/1991 phenomena and discourses by hinting at continuities over time and between capitalist and socialist societies.

The editor's introduction to the issue proposes a comparative approach to the study of the book, and multiple essays in the collection actively compare phenomena over time and between geograph-

ical locations, such as the essay comparing the histories of women's advancement in professional work throughout the 20th-century in socialist Hungary and Soviet Russia (Adamson and Kispeter).

More particularly, the overview of LGBT politics since the end of the Cold War (Baker) highlights that social action, as well as gendered and sexual identity formation, unfold in a context influenced by transnational and regional/local politics. Such a multi-level historical perspective fundamentally questions the prevailing "theology of progress" from socialist oppression towards capitalist gender and sexual equality over time. Additionally, and no less importantly, it also questions the argument of so-called Eastern regional 're-traditionalization' (Verdery, Gal, Kligman) as a distinctly post-socialist phenomenon, thereby deconstructing the teleology of the West-East divide once more.

Further adding to the complexity of global hegemonies is the inclusion of the analysis of the construction of the 'New Soviet Woman' in the context of the Soviet South Caucasus (Laycock and Johnson). In this way, the book opens up the important question of Soviet modernization, developmentalism and imperialism, critically complicating the common assumption that Soviet policies helped to develop parts of the South Caucasus from a pre-modern state to a modern one.

While the broad scope of the book makes it useful for comparative discussions, covering a lot of geo-temporal ground, the shortness of the essays and their diverse foci and methods also limit its depth and thoroughness and make the comparability between the geographical regions less conclusive. Moreover, while the book can be appreciated for its critical usage of categories and concepts in general, there are a few problematic examples. Especially difficult is the usage of categories in the chapter on race, nationality, class and gender in Poland during WWII (Jolluck). The author uses the signi-

fier ‘Poles’ as shorthand for “Polish Christians (for the sake of simplicity [...]),” (p. 96) in differentiation to ‘Jews’ or ‘Polish Jews.’ This rhetorical removal of Jewish citizens from the national body seems even more questionable considering the lack of acknowledgement of the participation of Polish Christians in the violence against Polish Jews, along with sentences such as “Ironically, deportation to the USSR, a tragedy that destroyed the lives of many Polish citizens, turned out to be a favour for many Polish Jews, as it took them out of the reach of the Nazis and made it possible for thousands of them to survive the war” (p. 97).

Apart from the above exception, the book opens up important discussions into fascinating topics and suggests innovative and critical methodologies for investigating different phenomena and discourses. It shows the wide variety of methodologies used in contemporary historical research. Presenting empirical as well as semiotic research and discourse analyses side by side creates visibility for the incongruities between the analytical spheres that significantly structure peoples’ lives and experiences. Moreover, it gives the reader an idea of the wide range of interdisciplinary methodologies in contemporary historical research on intersectional gender issues.