Book Reviews


In the Soviet era, state socialism’s propagandized imagery of liberated female heroines who industriously and joyfully fulfilled their dual roles as mothers and workers had become a source of immense pride for a country determined to demonstrate the superiority of its socialist practices over the capitalist variety that supposedly undermined the rights of women. However, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, there has been a return to traditional gender norms in Russia. While women’s public roles have been marginalized, men are increasingly valued for their financial contribution, the output of which determines their status, self-esteem, and respectability in the public domain and in the private space of family life. But given the economic and social hardships associated with Russia’s post-Soviet transition, the principal male task of providing for families is not without stress. Moreover, the widespread reportage on male-related alcoholism, ill-health, low life expectancy, domestic violence, and neglect of family all have placed considerable pressures on men. While such problems do exist, Rebecca Kay, a scholar of Central and East European Studies at the University of Glasgow, seeks to provide examples of how Russian men, in their display of “everyday heroism,” contradict the prevailing stereotypes of men’s supposed “apathy, defeatism and indifference.” Using interviews from a broad cross-section of the male society, as well as from those involved in policy making and delivery of support services designed for men, Kay demonstrates that while there is a crisis of male identity on account of financial insecurity and the threat of exclusion from the family, men “have performed miracles both of invention and survival” in the two thematic categories of the public and private spheres. Accordingly, the author first examines how attitudes towards and understandings of male roles and responsibilities within the family and in the wider society have impacted
and still affect the country’s male population, followed by a description of the objectives and accomplishments of the country’s primary Altai Regional Crisis Center for Men. The book concludes on a positive note of how methods of outreach and awareness raising through mass media and community services can help Russian men gain in confidence and become less socially alienated.

In the first category of *Men in Public Sphere*, Kay addresses the problems faced by men in the military and other public spaces. While men continue to value military training for improving physical fitness and developing their “manhood,” the widespread alcoholism, drug abuse, and bullying within the armed forces has demoralized others. Moreover, unpaid wages makes military service seem less of a patriotic, sacred duty. The war in Chechnya, in particular, has revealed the military’s inability to pay adequate benefits to men left disabled in combat and assist with soldiers’ post-traumatic stress and reintegration into civilian society. When these grievances compound with economic distress and a declining male life expectancy, it is only natural for families to explore methods to avoid conscription. However, subversion of military conscription is not a sign of male weakness or national disservice, but simply a desire on men’s part to provide for their families in the best possible manner.

Kay informs us that because work is a key determinant of male worthiness, the economic climate of employment uncertainty and financial insecurity is damaging for men not only psychologically but also physically when they attempt to redress the issue by taking upon on multiple jobs. Their psychological and physical distress is accentuated in self-employed activities that require an extremely high input of time and work on account of mutual distrust between entrepreneurs and administrators. The fact that men continued to express a strong conviction to provide for their families, were eager to work for the good of the self and nation, and were even willing to take upon multiple, exacting jobs is testimony not to their sloth but heroic determination to succeed.

In the second category of *Men in Private Sphere*, the prevailing stereotype of men’s lackadaisical response to child-care, propensity toward infidelity, and neglect of home affairs is at variance with Kay’s research that demonstrates men’s strong desire to provide for their families and offer guidance, education, and protection to their children. However, the widespread societal belief of the husband as the primary breadwinner and the