

## An essay on feminist thinking in Russia: to be born a feminist

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### Abstract

This paper is based on one particular life history of a Russian feminist. It analyses a narrative biography interview with one of the leading Russian feminist thinkers, Olga Lipovskaya, who was a founder of the Petersburg Centre for Gender Issues and promoted gender equality in Russia. The study examines the current situation of Russian feminist thinking by contextualisation of this biography into a larger scale of political and cultural transformations that have occurred after the fall of the USSR. Firstly, I provide contextual details, in which feminism in its contemporary form in Russia is developing as a political and scientific practice. Secondly, the paper raises problems of the method of narrative interview. Finally, I find common points of this particular life history and the history of the country once known as Soviet Union.

### Key words

Russian feminism; biography interview; gender equality in Russia; Olga Lipovskaya

### Resumen

Este artículo está basado en la particular biografía de una feminista rusa. En él se analiza una entrevista biografía narrativa con una de las principales pensadoras feministas rusas, Olga Lipovskaya, una de las fundadoras del Petersburg Centre for Gender Issues y promovió la igualdad de género en Rusia. El estudio analiza la situación actual del pensamiento feminista ruso, contextualizando esta biografía en un marco más amplio de las transformaciones políticas y culturales que se han producido después de la caída de la URSS. En primer lugar, se contextualiza cómo el feminismo ruso contemporáneo se está desarrollando como una práctica política y científica. En segundo lugar, el artículo plantea los problemas del método de la entrevista narrativa. Finalmente, se destacan puntos comunes entre esta biografía particular y la historia del país que en su día se denominó Unión Soviética.

### Palabras clave

Feminismo ruso; entrevista biográfica; igualdad de género en Rusia; Olga Lipovskaya

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## 1. Introduction

This paper examines the current situation of critical feminist thinking in Russia. It analyses a narrative interview with one of the leading Russian feminist thinkers, Olga Lipovskaya, who was a founder of the *Petersburg Centre for Gender Issues* and promoted gender equality in Russia. The first section provides details of the historical context, in which feminism in its contemporary form in Russia is developing as a political and scientific practice. The main problem facing contemporary Russian feminist is increasing gender inequalities occurring in context of demobilisation of feminist political and activist groups (Gapova 2005).

Second, the paper raises problems of the method of narrative interview. As this paper is based on only one particular life history, generalisation of my conclusions seems impossible. However, the third section presents the interview within broader context of the events that Olga relates, and thus the paper presents a connection between an individual's life and sociological concerns. Olga Lipovskaya's life history narrative is divided into three parts: the 'Soviet' part of her biography, the 1990s part, and restoration. This division makes visible certain common points of this personal story and the history of Russia and Russian feminism in general. This allows for possible generalisation without insisting on full match of all these histories.

Olga largely interprets her story as a personal failure: she had to close her Gender Centre in 2005. The 1990s was a period of forging an acquaintance between the actors of the renewed Russian society. Hence, the strategies of dealing with each other were negotiated. I want to show how feminist thinking was constituted in the new Russia in 'the age of stability' which was announced in the 2000s. I argue that the neo-traditional back-clash that stroked Russian society in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (which evident example is Pussy Riot case)<sup>1</sup> is another reflection of this failure.

## 2. Feminism in the Soviet and 'Democratic' Russia

Feminism and women's movement in Russia have been conditioned by the historically specific circumstances which influenced Russian society in every sphere. The construction of a communist state, socialist society and soviet citizens were the officially articulated aims of the government after the Great October Revolution of 1917, which was supposed to be implemented through proletariat dictatorship (Section 1 of the USSR Constitution (Konstitutsia 1924)). Marxist-Leninist ideology proclaimed the abolishment of every kind of inequalities through the elimination of class segmentation and shaping of egalitarian social structures, based on the fair sharing of resources in accordance to the needs of people (Art. 12 of the USSR Constitution (Konstitutsia 1936)). The 'Stalin's Constitution' (Konstitutsia 1936) was formally egalitarian and stated the equality of rights of women and men before the law (Art. 122, Art. 137).<sup>2</sup>

At the same time, the elimination of classes and construction of the new egalitarian society were supposed to be fulfilled through transition to a society based on only one social class: the class of workers and peasants (Art. 1 of the USSR Constitution (Konstitutsia 1936)). As Voronina (1993, p. 221) states:

The state needed women as workers so it provided them with access to education, professional career and guaranties of formal legal equality.<sup>3</sup>

It was supposed that a monolith national unity would be constructed, subjected to the purposes of proletarian ideology and communist revolutionary society. So any departure from this line was considered harmful or suspicious and was viciously suppressed by ideological police or other disciplinary institutions. The articulation of

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<sup>1</sup> See Russia Today (2012) about the event.

<sup>2</sup> Constitution of 1977 claimed equality between women and men in Art. 35 (Konstitutsia 1977).

<sup>3</sup> All references originally in Russian are given in author's translation.

the 'women's question' was controlled by the state through special 'women sectors' in the local Party cells all over the state that were supposed to organise their activities in accordance to instructions from Moscow (Voronina 1993, 218-219). Overall, in the beginning of the Soviet era and Stalin's period, the women's movement was unable to articulate its demands due to a number of circumstances: the existence of special institutions that dealt with women issues; subordination of any political claims to the purposes of class interests; the state's totalitarian control; and achievement of formal legal equality between women and men.

Although it was believed that the proletariat revolution would abolish any kind of discrimination, there is little evidence that this actually happened during the Soviet era. The gap between the proclaimed State ideology and realities lived by the Soviet people was never bridged. Formally guaranteed rights were accompanied by paternalist policies of the state and the Communist Party who took the place of men in the process of the subordination of women. The most common 'feminine' issues discussed in newspapers and academic circles were those of the significant part of women's labour in the course of communism construction (Pushkareva 2002, p. 23-24).

This has resulted in the emergence of the Soviet dissident movement that included the 'renaissance of independent women's movement in the end 1970s' (Ayvazova 1995, p. 129). These feminist claims were based on the radical ideology of difference between genders and injury that was caused by a patriarchal state. The feminists of 1970s believed that equality is possible, 'if the 'feminine' is highly valued' and that 'liberation of the Soviet women is impossible without recognition of the fact that their real life is significantly different from official declarations.' As Yaroshenko (2011, pp. 12-13) states:

In the society of real socialism, where social inequality is insignificant, and women are equally to men included into the sphere of paid labour, destruction of differences and suppression of personality were actually achieved in the name of 'collective interests.' Therefore, recognition of the right to be different in general and the right to 'feminine difference' in particular is an important requirement of changes of the Soviet routinized order.

Another explanation of emergence of the dissident movement was the rise of the Soviet consumerist society, coupled to the growing inequalities between the existing social classes: status inequality was substituted by the economical inequality (Gapova 2005, p. 101). In any case, researchers generally agree that the Russian feminist movement emerged as a part of dissident movement as a reaction against inequalities. The state violently reacted to the claims of dissenters by imprisonment or expulsion from the USSR. Dissident feminism of the 1970s was suppressed by the KGB and only in the second half of 1980s did it reappear when new democratic principles and ideas of autonomous value of a person were implemented (Yukina 2007, p. 465). Before this moment it survived underground, changing its forms and constantly being transformed.

Soviet feminism of 1970 was a specific kind of feminism, different from the Western one, because it was grounded in the Soviet women's experience in the USSR (Yaroshenko 2011, p. 20). These feminists believed gender differences to be essential, and based two arguments on this essentialist idea: first, there was a secular argument that called for the equalisation of rights between men and women; second, religious arguments claimed the existence of a feminine soul that is capable of love and spiritual experience and, therefore, could bring social justice if allowed to flourish (Yaroshenko 2011, p. 13). This latter point won the ideological debate, possibly because it referenced Russian feminists' argumentation of the 19<sup>th</sup> century who claimed for liberation from the oppression of patriarchy through love and religion (Ayvazova 1995, p. 126). This position also assumed 'obedience and humility,' which is a safer strategy within a totalitarian state (Yaroshenko 2011, p. 13). It is not clear if the first Soviet Christian feminists influenced the ideological

ground of feminism in 1980s when feminist demands followed a more 'Westernised' (Zdravomyslova 1996, p. 58) and more political (Temkina 1996, p. 19) model of argumentation.

When *Perestroika* was announced the underground movement became more visible. It may be understood as a period of political mobilisation of the underground and the state officially promoted civil societies (Temkina 1996, p. 19-20). All of a sudden, women's clubs, groups and associations appeared in the domain of the speakable, some 300 of them managed to get official registration (Ayvazova 1995, p. 130). On the one hand, many organisations did not present themselves as feminist or women's organisations, and actually worked to reshape the means of state control over women's organisations. On the other hand, liberalisation of control gave a chance for arranging one's own independent institution, supported by money from abroad that were allowed to cross borders in the beginning of 1990s. The issues that could not be articulated in the USSR before – such as sex, sexuality and new forms of personal dignity – were brought into public discussions. Foreign researchers and human rights activists visited the main cities, keeping in contact with the leaders of underground *tusovkas* (informal groups of people, united by a common interest) and emerging grassroots organisations (Zdravomyslova 1996, p. 58).

These processes, as well as the fall of the USSR, created increasing awareness of gender inequalities within Soviet society: occupational discrimination, disposition of women from decision-making processes and institutions, formation of specifically feminine less paid jobs (Voronina 1993, p. 208), practice of double day work, patriarchal family structures, women's economical dependency on men (Rotkirch and Temkina 2007, pp. 173-174) and so forth. After the announcement of the start of the political transformation to the 'democratic' Russia, many new political and civil society groups became active in addressing these inequalities. These included political parties (*The Women of Russia*, founded in 1993), gender research groups and centres (*Gender Research Centre in Ivanovo*, founded in 1996), non-governmental organisations (*Soldiers' Mothers Committee*, founded in 1989) and those that combined a number of different activities (*Petersburg Centre for Gender Issues*, founded in 1992).

The transformation of Russia (or 'transition') as it went on further resulted in decline of political activity: the period of mobilisation was followed by a period of political demobilisation, more or less completed by 1995 (Temkina 1996, p. 21). Other forms of women's activities, such as research and civil activism, experienced a process of institutionalisation. This created either in marginalisation or integration into pre-existing organisations such as academic faculties and governmental bodies (Zdravomyslova and Temkina 2002, p. 45-46). *Demobilisation* and institutionalisation were accompanied by 'fashion for patriarchy that was recovering from the wrecks of socialist past' (Ayvazova 1995, p. 122) and 'disregard of the conclusions of gender research in politics' (Zdravomyslova and Temkina 2002, p. 43-44). Moreover, common points were not identified by gender researchers and feminist activists (Barchunova 2002, p. 185). The lack of common language contributed to the lack of solidarity of the fragile academic, activist and political movements.

The general background of state transformation is characterised by growing inequality between different social groups: national and class transformations are coupled with reconfiguration of gender relations (Gapova 2005, p. 101). New imagination of nation turned into reproduction of that traditional gender order of patriarchy (Zdravomyslova and Temkina 2007). This historical circumstance seems to distinguish Russian feminism from its Western sister once again. As Gapova (2005, p. 116) argues:

If the point of that process [Western feminism] was reduction of class structure that became less tough due to redistribution of access to resources, post-socialism

on the contrary generated class segregation by the means of economic inequality. This is precisely what is considered the reason of downgrade by those women whose conditions are worse now than then and who see plenty of men around them in the same conditions.

This background is considered to be one of the main reasons of failure of post-Soviet women's movement in the new Russia and some other post-socialist states (Gapova 2005, p. 102). The reproduction of old practices of paternalist state control, lack of grassroots support for feminist activism, flourishing of official neo-traditional gendered discourses and disregard of academic gender research – in which disagreement between gender researchers plays an important part – has become the reality of Russia in the mid-2000s. This may contribute to shaping protest and resistance practices, but meanwhile this situation serves to demotivate and discourage. Formal equality between women and men is still guaranteed (Art. 19.3 of the Constitution of Russian Federation (Konstitutsia 1993)), but constitutional declarations have already been replaced by traditional normative order hostile to this equality.<sup>4</sup>

### 3. Personally Speaking

Olga Lipovskaya's life history, upon which this paper is based, is a prominent example of those women who followed the path of these transformations of the state, civil society and feminisms. She was born in a small town in the south of Russia and managed to found the *Petersburg Centre for Gender Issues* in 1992 which she ultimately closed in 2005. The Centre contributed to the careers of many feminist researchers in Petersburg, it provided information to women who were interested in empowerment strategies, supported gender research, and tried to implement gender equality legislation in Russia. Olga's life history might be interpreted not just as retrospective identity seeking, but as 'one singularity among others, which, however, stands for each of them' – or an 'example' in Agamben's (1993, p. 10) terms. This story is an instance of Agamben's 'whatever': it is as particular as one's story may be. At the same time, many other particular stories may – and I think do – fall in the same narrative line.

The use of life history approach in feminist research has been heavily debated. Michèle Barrett believes that in collecting and analysing biographical interviews the researchers lose the sense of reality: taking things as stories fictionalises them (Barrett 1997, p. 113). She argues for understanding that individual narratives are filled with emotions and values which may result in subjective biases in research (Barrett 1997, p. 120). Therefore, it is important to explicitly formulate one's biases while interpreting and analysing life history interviews, so long as the idea of 'objective' and neutral knowledge suspiciously tends to express masculine view of the world (Harding 1991). Instead, I want to present this study as a feminist standpoint research (Smith 1974): an engaged investigation of a particular woman's experience whose life is different from that of men (Harding 1997, p. 163). This intention derives from Olga's interview itself: so long as she identified herself as a feminist of the radical sort, it is reasonable to read her interview from this position. Besides, being a feminist myself, I still can provide criticism of Olga's

<sup>4</sup> See for the most prominent example Snob (2012), where it was stated that:

The Court sees religious hatred motive of the accused in the following.

The accused present themselves as upholders of feminism which is a movement for equalization of rights between women and men.

In Russian Federation, the equality of rights and freedoms is guaranteed by the Article 19 of the Constitution of Russian Federation... Man and woman have equal rights and freedoms and equal opportunities for its realization...

Being a part of feminist movement is not a violation, neither is it a crime. A number of religions have religious dogmatic basis which is not compatible with the ideas of feminism. Though feminism is not a religious thought, its upholders intervene into such spheres of public relationships as morality, norms of decency, family relationship, sexual relationship, including non-traditional, which were historically built upon the ground of religious views.

arguments, which are located with radical feminism, but I should recognise her arguments as an intelligible possibility.

Liz Stanley has argued for understanding feminism through personal histories of feminists told in sociological interviews (1990). There is certainly a risk of being accused of essentialism when introducing one's experience as a peculiar experience of woman when she is taken as a category of analysis (Riley 1997). At the same time it is important to put a particular history into the general context which in many cases is gendered and reproduces essentialist gender differences and inequality. Hence, a researcher is not supposed to ignore social construction of gender (Stanley 1997), but at the same time take into account that the gender categories might be used by interviewees in essentialist sense.

I do not claim that the Olga's experiences are relevant for all women or all feminists, neither is it so for feminists born in the USSR. Following the logic of Olga, I will contextualise her fictionalised story of her own life. In this way, Olga's narrative becomes a particular example of feminist life trajectory. This interview is the point of view of a white Russian woman, a feminist leader who took upon herself obligations to promote gender equality, gender research and feminist standpoint in Russia in the age of transformations.

It will be possible to find similarities and distinctions with other stories: life history interviews have been used in many studies of women's movement in Russia. Irina Yukina restored personal histories of Russian feminists in 19<sup>th</sup> century (Yukina 2007). Anna Temkina identified women's scenarios of political participation in 1990s (Temkina 1996). Elena Zdravomyslova wrote a collective biography of contemporary Russian feminists (Zdravomyslova 1996).

"It all starts from my birth", Olga Lipovskaya says. We talk in her room in the centre of Saint-Petersburg. The room is filled with a dull light of a lamp, massive furniture dumped in a heap and books. Olga explains that she was born a feminist and the circumstances of her adolescence serve to make this clearer: "I was the elder sister out of five sisters... We were raised by my granny... and my aunt left her husband [and lived with us] with her two children... As the elder sister I was supposed to be responsible for the minors." For Olga, her identification as a feminist made her feel different from others.

Olga believes that her sense of difference resulted in an injury from the first meeting with the men outside her childhood world. She felt that difference between women and men was difference between biological sexes, when sex became a part of her own experience. "I couldn't understand what does 'penis envy' mean," she explains, "How can one possibly envy to such a – so to say – uncontrollable and ephemeral thing? I have got used to independent decisions, so I have never had the idea of secondariness of a woman in my mind, although the majority of women are raised with this feeling... I faced with a paradox: My freedom was considered as something bad, negative... by men and by women, too." This is how she was born a feminist within the Soviet gendered structures, which constituted gender differences as gender inequality.

Olga's sense of difference motivated her to write: "Suddenly I started to question what was wrong. Why my expectations do not fit the expectations of my partners. I expect being treated as a human being, but they give me something else all the time. So I started to write some notes. I called it 'the complex of a Soviet man.' So feminist ideas were shaped in my head with a formula of the Soviet man,... who was incapable of perceiving a woman as a human being." Olga reports her writing being marginalised. This made her think of moving from her home town to a big city, where at that time the 'hidden' civil society was being formed and welcomed the marginalised ones.

#### 4. Resisting the Totalitarian

In a totalitarian state – such as the USSR – different spheres of life are supposed to serve the goals of the ideological regime. This ideology excludes critical thinking from the recognised political, cultural or academic possibilities. At the same time, it does not exclude critical thinking from possible personal activities. Moreover, so long as disciplinary power produces resistance, this resistance needed to find its place. Consequently, it had to be internalised due to the dangers that its articulation entailed. Critical thinking in the USSR was a personal project executed in private.

Being oppressive towards independent thinking, in the 1970s the Soviet system still allowed a place outside the private for the dissemination and development of alternative knowledge. Some called it '*dissidentstvo*' which is a circle of people who disagreed with the existent power and explicitly resisted it. At the time of the totalitarianism, the groups were constituted from different sorts of people who could hardly be imagined together some years later: there were rockers together with professors, scientists and hippies, writers and painters, anarchists and liberals, Marxists and Christians. They had their special places: cafes and apartments – those were semi-private or 'private in the public' zones where alternative thinking flourished.

"I had a hippy period," Olga says. In the 1970s, she had been into the rock *tusovka*. Rock music was considered to be dangerous by the authorities. The *tusovkas* had been the environment where resistance was shaped and where practices of self-identification could be performed (Zdravomyslova 1996, p. 44). Zdravomyslova distinguishes different sorts of *tusovkas* where different sorts of people gathered together: here were the painters, and there were the scientists. She argues that *tusovkas* were characterised by opposition to the Soviet power and criticism.

In the case of Olga, it is difficult to label her *tusovka* with a certain stamp: it was a gathering of people from music, academy, literature and so forth. Besides, she passed through different *tusovkas* in different periods of her life. Her first feminist book was given to her by a man from *tusovka*. It was 'Sweet Freedom' by Beatrix Campbell and Anne Coute. As Olga describes it, "in our common *tusovka*, there were women and, moreover, men who were aware of feminism." It also distinguishes Olga's interpretation from the one that Elena Zdravomyslova gives, who argues that *tusovkas* were organised hierarchically and lead by men which situation became contested and brought women to feminism (Zdravomyslova 1996, pp. 46-47).

Some have argued that ideas such as feminism were brought to the USSR from the 'West,' in order to destroy this country.<sup>5</sup> Olga testifies that in the 1980s she indeed communicated a lot with the scholars and activists from Europe and the USA. She names different people who visited the USSR at that time and with almost each of person she felt that she made a connection which then changed her ideas: "In the life of a person sometimes some clicks happen which crack one's mind very fast," she says remembering an inscription on a t-shirt of another 'Western' guest. The t-shirt was saying: "When god created men, *she* was only joking." This saying was important in shaping Olga's feminist ideas. From then on she understood how normativity constitutes differences as being natural.

The 'Western' ideas were also influencing Olga's from the books she read and translated. By the end of the 1980s she had already translated a significant number of works: 'What Do Women Want' by Susie Orbach and Luise Eichenbaum, 'Compulsory Heterosexuality' by Adrienne Rich, 'If Freud Was a Woman' from

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, analysis of Western ideas and notions such as 'gender' and 'feminism' appeared in Russia made by Serguei Oushakine (2002, p. 18).



'Moving beyond Words' by Gloria Steinem and many others. As Olga points out, "I never got out from the second hand bookstore: I was selling some books and buying the others." It has been argued that there is no common ideology between different gender researchers and activists (Barchunova 2002), but Olga's translations and interests in literature tell us that there was no common ideology within even one particular person.

Olga does not appear to have taken on the idea of Western feminist uncritically. She explains that those books "fell into a prepared soil." In other words, the European and US feminists did not penetrate Olga's mind with their 'perverse' critical thoughts, but helped her to articulate what she had already felt. Further evidence of this may be found in the fact that one of the English feminists ("one of those leftists, you know") advised Olga to read Engels's 'The Origin of the Family' which she considered unnecessary due to ideological prejudices. "For the first time in my life I referred to something Marxist-Leninist," she says, "so I read Engels and I was stunned!" It seems that the point of the Western intervention was not the destruction of the state, but in an exchange of knowledge between different cultures.

Olga was translating, writing and gathering people with similar ideas around herself. Her *tusovka* persuaded her to issue a review of the studies she had conducted. One of the ways to do so was the practice of *samizdat*. *Samizdat* ('publish-it-yourself') is a book published by the author on her own with a typewriter and carbon paper, and then the issues were spread among the interested groups. "I decided to issue 'The Women's Reading'... I printed it on tissue-paper... Then, you take a nail, make two holes or three and lace it all together." From 1988 to 1991 she issued six 'Woman's Readers', dedicating them to different gender topics.

Since 1987 Olga had been conducting gender research (Khotkina 2000, p. 39). Her spheres of interest have included cultural issues, linguistics, identities and so forth. One study was conducted for a German Foundation *Frauen AnStiftung* which will play an important role in the further development of the story, though it will be a different time in Russia.

As a provisional conclusion, some points have become evident by the end of the 1980s. Olga states that she was born a feminist, meaning that the gendered order of her experience made her notice the existing gender inequality. This required a certain level of criticism from her, because difference between women and men in the USSR was carefully concealed. Then, she only had to formulate, shape and reshape what it was to be a feminist in different settings of the constantly changing reality. 'Hippy period' and rock culture *tusovkas*, together with other informal groups of people gathered by resistance to the state contributed to the formation of a solid and conscious subjectivity. Her resistance could have led her to other direction, especially as the informal gathers exposed her to many contradictory ideas. However, being born a feminist, and her childhood sense of being a 'responsible' person focused Olga's route. Thoughts and ideas from the 'West' contributed to the conceptualisation of this route.

## 5. It's Gender Time!

When the USSR collapsed, Olga started to think about organising public activities in the spheres that she had promoted in the underground. As Olga spoke English, it made it easier for her to become a leader of her own *tusovka*. Interaction with foreign activists and theorists and knowledge of foreign literature was important argument for becoming a group leader (Zdravomyslova 1996, p. 58). Her friends from abroad supported this idea and introduced her to the foundations which could make it possible. Besides, Olga had finished a survey on the conditions of women in the USSR for a German organisation.

Olga became a rather famous Soviet feminist in the 'West.' By the time of the USSR collapse she had already published several papers in English (Lipovskaya 1990, Lipovskaya 1992a, Lipovskaya 1992b). These circumstances led her to the decision to open a gender centre in Saint-Petersburg. German partners have agreed to help, but the Centre was opened with her own money that she had got for the survey. It happened in 1992. Next year the Centre got the German financial support from a foundation that promoted women's rights (*Frauen AnStiftung*) and references for application for grants given by UNO.

The *Petersburg Centre for Gender Issues* was founded as a non-governmental feminist, resource, research, educational, and activist organisation. The main goal was to study and overcome gender inequality. Target groups of the Centre were identified as follows: women; women organisations; students, professors and researchers interested in gender research. The activities of the Centre included: publication of a monthly review (no more *samizdat*); publications of books and readers; research; conferences and seminars; advocacy (consulting, trainings, lectures, seminars); activism (public actions, cultural events, exhibitions).<sup>6</sup>

Olga was the head of the Centre. And who worked there? "All the women were half-accidentally met," she says, "subsequently, they turned out to be quite different: one was a thief, another one was a bitch and so forth." She then continues: "The enthusiasm was in my head, all the others were just mercenaries." Certainly, they shared common ideas and actually believed in feminism, but some general disappointment was a background of this activity.

Twice a year, the Centre published a review 'All the Men Are Sisters,' later rebranded to a monthly newsletter '*Posidelki*' ('The Gatherings'). One of the issues started with an already known saying: 'When god created men, she was only joking.' A number of huge international conferences were organised. One of them attracted a significant amount of politicians, scholars, researchers, activists and other interested persons. The book 'Feminist Theory and Practice: East-West' was published. The centre was a place of attraction for scholars from abroad. They lectured there and were giving their seminars. Women were learning theory together with practical things (such as computers, writing and even yoga). An outstanding library on feminism was collected. Olga also continued her translations and gave 'Epistemology of the Closet' by Eve Kosovsky Sedgwick to the Russian readers. Those Russian scholars who now work with gender issues were studying and lecturing in the Olga's centre. Research on lesbian couples was initiated (Khotkina 2000, p. 39), which could hardly be imagined due to unimaginable character of the topic.

Olga combined different practices together. The Gender Centre was not merely a resource, research and education centre. It was an art platform, as well. This situation has roots in the Soviet practices of resistance in the 1980s, when the art was a political strategy of fights against inequality: "a routine, mass, everyday artistry is a political experience of non-utilitarian and egalitarian relations with the others... instead of pragmatic dissidents' political strategy of conspiracy experience and, therefore, a privileged experience" (Zherebkina 2010, p. 281).

It seemed like the Centre was reaching the desirable goals, but at the same time, it should be acknowledged that the 1990s was a period in history of Russia when ex-underground thinkers and the new 'democratic' government were studying each other in order to invent strategies of dealing with each other. Olga says that she thought: "a year or two will pass and we'll stop depending from some German funds. I thought so not because I was against the funds, but because it was a matter of principle for me to persuade the authorities to do this work. Look, how naïve I was!"

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<sup>6</sup> The information is taken from the Petersburg Centre for Gender Issues' (2003) official web-site: <http://www.pcqi.ru/> [Accessed 05 April 2011].

While the emerged independent organisations which came up from the underground of the Soviet epoch were expecting the government to support them on the premise that the government was different from the Soviet one which oppressed them, the government sought for a means to get them back under ground. Critique was something none of the governments would like to support if it had a choice. Moreover, individual motives of the people who held state power prevailed over public interests. Olga describes it as follows: "They expected us to give them a share of ours, they thought we had lots of money from abroad."

Olga tried to introduce the conclusions of her studies to the government: promote legislative initiatives, gender analysis of forthcoming laws, consultations of the members of government on gender equality. She pushed her work to the labyrinths of power. But the power was indifferent to it. Here is an example of a talk between Olga and a representative of the authority, as she remembers it:

"Women have the right to take places in the political structures," Olga says, "we can consult you on these issues free of charge... we can consult official bodies on the principles of gender equality, taking the legislative level, basing on the European documents..."

"You know how much I love cakes!" the official replies, "I adore them!"

## 6. Reinventing Soviet Union

These circumstances have led Olga back to resistance. Once she went to a collective meeting with the governor organised especially for the representatives of non-governmental organisations. It started with the anthem. "All the people stood up, but I didn't. I didn't, I was sitting on my place. A guy beside me was taking glances at me and then he sat down as well!.. What am I doing here? I thought. So I stood up and went out." Her relations with the officials to whom she went for collaboration she described with a sorrow: "After years of work I understood: it's a crap!"

The powerful seemed to invent the strategy of dealing with the critical thinkers at last. It is unclear, though, if the strategy is a production of consciousness of the officials' imaginary or if it is sourced from the workings of institutional, social and political discursive forces. Nonetheless, the idea was to organise certain official bodies which would deal with the same things within the state structures. By the end of the 1990s, special 'Departments of Women's Issues' were founded within the local authoritative bodies. Later on, Gender Centres started to flourish in the state Universities (basically in the Philosophy faculties).

It all could be nice ideas. However, the official bodies' efforts are driven to reinforce the state's standpoint to the relevant for their work issues. As Olga suggests, it is achieved by the staff policy casted to hire incompetent and unprofessional persons to the institutions. Olga remembers when one of the officials has come to her right after the appointment. She could not understand what she was supposed to do on her new position. "I have read to her 'educational programme' 'Feminism for the Beginners'..." Olga argues, "But it was impossible to fight with this ignorance." As for the academy, Olga calls what is developing there a 'ghender' (she pronounces this word with a particular accent which marks illiteracy in Russia). "There is 'ghender.' 'Ghender' means that it is supposed that 'ghender' should be. So here it is." Olga refers to the well-known Soviet practice of formalism: a situation when something is supposed to be, no matter what the quality of it is. A Ukrainian gender theorist Irina Zherebkina (2010, p. 277) also argues, that some former feminists and newly emerged gender specialists have occupied positions to perform gender expertises, women's rights protection and at the same time paradoxically remove gender makers from these practices.

Olga "started to get tired and drink, drown myself in drinks." She says that her "dreams were ruined." Certainly, when the only leader gets tired, it is quite

dangerous for the whole organisation. By the end of 2003 Centre's funding was cut off. Olga tried to find a cheaper place for her office and some money in different foundations. However, soon the *Petersburg Centre for Gender Issues* was closed.

"So this is the end..." I say.

"What do you mean 'the end'?" Olga wonders, "The feminist studies are powerful, because they are right! Well, we all just went by different routes... But I am still a feminist! Besides, my granddaughter is growing up..."

## 7. Conclusion

Olga Lipovskaya's example is only one story of many others. It shows how her personal attitudes and contradictory accounts travelled among the workings of powers. She suffered a wound of being alien to the normative order and she managed to articulate it in the critical discourse of feminism. Olga had to shape her conduct by the possible means of resistance in the Soviet times, when critique was merged to the sphere of private and underground. Then she tried to institutionalise this knowledge within the new settings of the 'democratic' Russia. But the political power limited Olga's facilities and merged her back to the margins. The authority has shown that the Soviet order is still around, and one has to stick with it.

Jean Baudrillard believes that the occident societies look like systems where everything circulates, moves, goes on and changes. On the contrary, he thinks that Russian society is the one that appears very inert or inactive. In this regard, he argues that the real situation is different: Western societies only create an illusion of progress, while those societies that look unchangeable are very vivid and active in the lower levels. '[T]he power represents an effect of mass: it is inert and massive; but resistant to the power hidden civil society is always in the state of interior mobility, it has the vitality' (Baudrillard 2002, p. 72).

It could be argued that Olga Lipovskaya forms a part of this hidden force. She appears to have interiorised critical thinking and represents it in the personal level as well as in the level of society of which Baudrillard speaks. For a short period of time she had a chance to publicise her knowledge, but its place seems to be clearly defined. Olga says she had a choice: "either become a swine myself, or start drinking. I've chosen the second way." As Irina Zherebkina points out – talking about Olga among others, by the way, – 'in general, today, post-Soviet intellectuals have turned back to protesting revolutionary practices of the end of 1980s – beginning of 1990s. To be exact, they have found themselves back in the situation of protest against state apparatus of violence; therefore, it is a situation of political choice between freedom or non-freedom, obedience or non-obedience, to be or not to be' (Zherebkina 2010, p. 274).

This conclusion is charged with pessimism, because what one can notice is restoration of the gendered order which has been contested by Russian feminism since 1970s without success. Moreover, the feminist thinking is again regulated by the same means which the Soviet government used for this purpose: either it is suppressed by inclusion to the official bodies and universities with their own pre-existing rules, or it is marginalised to be doomed for silencing or extermination. There are few exceptions. These results that turn to a general failure may be explained by many ways: multiple visions of feminism by the feminists that makes solidary fights impossible; oppressive traditions of state governance; general disillusion of the 'democratic transformation'; growing class inequality which overlaps gender troubles in 'general public opinion' and so forth. All these issues probably point to the right answer. Nevertheless, what may be made evident by this analysis is that gender inequality has been growing together with Russian radical feminist movement. Women and men have been made different and, consequently, less equal. Though, this very inequality can be the first step towards equality.

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