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Anna Temkina. *Seksualnaia zhizn' zhenshchiny: mezhdru podchineniem i svobodoi* [Woman's Sexual Life: Between Submission and Freedom]. Sankt-Peterburg: Izdatel'stvo Evropeiskogo Universiteta v Sankt-Peterburge, 2008. 374 p. ISBN 978-5-9438-0072-6.

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This volume is a thorough presentation of sociologist Anna Temkina's comparative study of paradigms of women's sexuality in post-Soviet Tajikistan, Armenia, and Russia. In three cities (Khujand, Yerevan, and Saint Petersburg), Temkina and colleagues carried out in-depth interviews to ask subjects, both female and male, about their experiences of sexuality and their views on sexuality. Her interest is in the spectrum of control, or freedom, of women's sexuality, drawing on Giddens, Kon, and Connell to theorize the centrality of women's sexuality to gender relations. The research in three post-Soviet states explores changes in paradigms of sexuality from the later Soviet decades through the post-Soviet years. Comparison among cultures allows Temkina to examine tendencies toward what she calls "traditionalization," "modernization," and "liberalization."

Biographies, surveys, and interviews in all three sites revealed commonalities about Soviet "sexual puritanism" in the 1960s and 1970s. Official ideology did not discuss sex openly, and women's sexual lives were exclusively associated with marriage and motherhood. Interviewees reflected on the lack of provision of contraceptives and cramped urban living conditions, and linked these to stories about multiple abortions and lack of pleasure in sex. Narratives from Armenia and Russia, which were more descriptive about actual sexual relations than were Tajik narratives, consistently presented men as sexual actors, and women as passive. Helpfully, Temkina reviews late Soviet literature on sexuality, and its pervasive discourse of essentialist femininity: that a woman loses her womanliness when she has to do certain kinds of work, and expresses her natural emotional and biological essence in becoming a mother. This discourse was reflected across all research sites and never seemed subject to any question or interrogation. But the 1980s and 1990s brought divergence into sexual paradigms.

Tajiks told of liberalization and traditionalization in sexual relations in the independence period. By liberalization, they meant that young people played a role in choosing a mate, a move away from strict arranged marriage. Others emphasized limits on women's roles, turning away from the Soviet model of working mother, and toward defining women as housewives and mothers. Tajik women of all generations were expected to engage in sex only within marriage, while men were not so restricted. In Tajikistan, Temkina's research sample only included Russian-speaking urban Tajiks,

a group presented as “Russified” and hence not traditional; their repeated assertions that they were exceptions from the more traditional norm should have raised researcher concerns about validity. The research sample included far fewer informants in Tajikistan (12) than in Russia (76) or Armenia (42), and only two of them men. While research in Russia and Armenia drew broadly on popular literature that informed ideas of sexuality, the research in Tajikistan did not establish a similar base of discourse against which to measure Tajik responses. As a study of gender and sexuality in Tajikistan, Colette Harris’s ethnographic work *Control and Subversion* (2004), is much more thorough. However, Temkina’s less systematic research in Tajikistan does succeed at establishing a baseline for common and differing Soviet and post-Soviet paradigms.

Research in Armenia also found discourses of tradition and liberalization, noting that parental arrangement of marriage was still common in the Soviet period, but this practice shifted toward parental consent to a couple’s choice, though informants also reported cases of marriage by kidnapping. Armenians, who apparently were more willing to talk openly about sexual experience than Tajiks, often focused on the social significance of female virginity on the wedding night, proven by showing bloody sheets to the groom’s parents. Many informants noted that they followed tradition selectively. In some cases, in-laws did not ask for proof of virginity, but there was also talk about hymen-reconstruction surgery. Informants in Armenia, like those in Tajikistan and Russia, viewed women’s roles as essentially different than men’s roles, but younger Armenians expressed a variety of attitudes toward the idea of the “good wife” who stays at home, from regarding this as a sign of love and protection to seeing it as restricting. Armenians mentioned labor migration, which bore some correlation to changing norms of sexual conduct for both men and women. Questions about nationality and sexuality brought up contrasting stereotypes in Armenia and Tajikistan; Armenians and Tajiks portrayed their own sexuality as traditional, and Russian sexuality as liberal and hedonistic.

Research in Saint Petersburg took place in two phases, in the mid-1990s and the mid-2000s, allowing Temkina to elicit differences in the sexual experiences and ideas among cohorts. Many Russians contrasted the “sexual Puritanism” of Soviet teachings on sex and marriage with their own seeking of love and/or sexual pleasure in extra-marital relations, defending affairs as positive. Temkina’s data described a post-Soviet sexual revolution, with open access to knowledge about sex leading to revised understandings of sexual agency: among the younger cohorts, women viewed themselves as sexual subjects who could seek pleasure, rather than as passive sexual objects. Nonetheless, some aspects of the sexual double standard remained, with men asserting that contraception and pregnancy are women’s concern. Questions about nationality and sexuality in Russia elicited discussions about sexual relations with “Western” foreigners. Russian women tended to use Russian discourses of femininity to present themselves as better companions for men than “Western” women, deploying images of Russian women as less liberated and more eager to conform to a model of husband as breadwinner, wife as housewife and mother, than they perceive “Western” women to be.

The volume uses somewhat repetitive quotations from interviews to illustrate its many themes. Temkina does not present her questionnaire, leaving the reader wondering about what was asked, though it is apparent that two areas of questioning that would provide sharpened paradigms—on homosexuality, and on divorce and sexuality—were not explored. The repetition of themes through multiple voices suggests common experiences and perceptions, but in numerous places, Temkina refers to one speaker's words repeatedly, thus making a unique expression appear to be representative of a common understanding. Nonetheless, Temkina's work provides an empirical basis for discussions of sexual norms in Russia, Armenia, and Tajikistan, and will be extraordinarily valuable to researchers studying gender and sexuality in comparative perspective.

REFERENCES

Harris, Colette. 2004. *Control and Subversion: Gender Relations in Tajikistan*. London: Pluto Press.