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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Rezension / review

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:
Pető, A. (2011). Negotiating Soviet gendered reality in Lithuania: Among superwomen and alcoholics. [Review of the book *Adopting and remembering Soviet reality: life stories of Lithuanian women, 1945-1970*, ed. by D. Leinarte]. *Baltic Worlds*, *4*(3), 36-37. https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-89165-5

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Leibniz-Institut
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Mitglied der
Leibniz-Gemeinschaft

Negotiating Soviet gendered reality in Lithuania. Among superwomen and alcoholics

Adopting and Remembering Soviet Reality: Life Stories of Lithuanian Women 1945–1970

Edited and adapted by Dalia Leinarte
Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi
2010
234 pages

"ULTIMATELY, SOVIET memory no longer has a place, nor any significance, in this world." (p. 16) This is a rather resigned closing sentence for the first part of a volume that reflects on the complexity and inexpressibility of Soviet women's experience in Lithuania, analyzed by Dalia Leinarte, an internationally renowned expert on Lithuanian family history and women's history. For more than a decade, Leinarte has been working on an oral history project that is in the process of collecting narratives of Lithuanian women about Soviet times. For the present publication, she selected ten stories out of fifty for publication in the book.[1]

In the first part of my review, I would like to reconstruct the complex task of the volume, and then will offer some critical reflections on the main themes and theses of the book.

The volume begins by reviewing other works that use the method of oral history in analyzing Soviet and post-Soviet experience. From the start, Leinarte makes it clear that "a precise account of past events is not the important task of oral history" (p. 9), so she focuses on the formation of subjectivity in a historical context. This orientation is the exception in the field of oral history, especially in the field of post-Soviet studies, where the histories are very often interpreted as "true stories". Leinarte never questions the "authenticity" of these stories; instead she analyzes the frames and rhetorical strategies, and more importantly, the constraints of available rhetorical strategies of speaking about past experiences. This opening literature review section, like the book as whole, is characterized by unusual parsimony. The reader is left wanting to know more about the opinions and thoughts of the author, but her approach was probably the only way to keep this volume elegantly slim.

IN THIS FIRST part, she also addresses the main theoretical challenge for the interpretation of oral histories: the issue of silence. She collected a large archive of oral histories, and, based on an examination of them, she divides the women granting interviews to her into three categories. To the first category belong those whose nostalgic narrative depicts the Soviet period as better, in the second are those giving narrations of the suffering under communism, and to the third, the most numerous category, belong those who wanted to share with her their "true experiences". Leinarte decided not to include any of the stories in this third category, since their narration is incoherent and illogical in the context of the overall project of the book, but she very often uses some segments of interviews conducted with this group of women to illustrate certain points. This editorial move is understandable – the goal being to grasp the complexities of women's lives – but it leaves the reader wanting to know more about the subject.

THE SECOND PART of the book, "Women, Work, and Family in Soviet Lithuania", is an overview of the Lithuanian social welfare system during Soviet times. It shows how the Soviet egalitarian family model, introduced with the hope of eliminating the discrimination against single mothers, met with major opposition from the traditional, Catholic Lithuanian population. This part of the book also analyzes gender roles and family life, everyday practices of family and work life, and the "Soviet" concept of romantic love and friendship. Leinarte uses interview segments to illustrate her points and underlines that no matter how much official state policy advocated equality between men and women, the pay gap was still 40 percent (p. 28), but the sphere of employment became a space for women to exercise their agency.[2] The complexity of this topic is also revealed in the contradictory statements related to happiness. The women who were interviewed pointed out that they were happy in their work life (p. 34), but for them, the most important element of their life was family (p. 198). Leinarte notes that other scholars also found that talking about one's family life proved to be difficult, which is likely not unrelated to the ideological-rhetorical pressure constituted by the image of the working mother as superior to the non-working mother. In the next section of the second part, on gender roles and family life, she points out that life was difficult not only for women, but also for men, because "yesterday's peasant sons, who were today's Soviet plant and factory workers, were unable to adapt to a new model of gender roles. Raised in patriarchal families, they had difficulty accepting modern gender roles based on partnership" (p. 37). This difficulty manifested itself in broken marriages, and very often in alcoholism and violence. For women in Soviet times, and not only in Lithuania, the only role they could strive to comply with remained the superwoman who copes with all responsibilities at home as well as at the workplace, as well as with the "neo-patriarchal hierarchy of gender roles" of Soviet propaganda.

The third part of the book consists of ten life stories with an introduction and carefully footnoted explanations of the narratives – which don't unnecessarily interrupt the flow of the text – followed by a conclusion. It is difficult to reconstruct the category of "Lithuanian women", but with the selection of ten stories, Leinarte has tried to complicate the picture as much as possible by selecting atypical, invisible, and "invisibilized" women: an orphan, a mother of a child with disability, a political prisoner, an artist, a member of the nomenklatura, a barmaid, an exemplary role model of the Soviet woman, a wife of a party leader, a wife of an alcoholic husband. She conducted the interviews herself by the narrative interview technique, a method she carefully describes in the methodology section of the book. The stories also contain the questions asked, illustrating the intervention of the interviewer, which is necessarily unbalanced: sometimes there is a lot of intervention by the interviewer; sometimes the narration just rolls smoothly without further questioning.

THE LAST SENTENCE of the conclusion points out that "erasing the Soviet past from Lithuanian women's memory is an ongoing process, and, most probably, former 'ordinary Soviet people' will not pass on their Soviet experiences to future generations" (p. 200).[3] This statement raises not only the question whether memory can be erased, and if so, with what consequences, but also what this "Soviet past" is that is now being erased. Leinarte's summary makes it clear that the Sovietization of Lithuania brought mixed results as far as a transformation of gender roles is concerned. Partly this is because it was only from the 1950s on that more money was invested in social welfare infrastructure, enabling more women to work outside the home, which caused a major transformation. The concept of romantic love was also replaced by a pragmatic deal between partners. Interestingly enough, this emotional deal supported not only women's participation in the labor market but also increased men's participation in the household work and stabilized relationships, moving them to a practical level. This shift from emotions towards a practical arrangement was an important step towards constructing equality of partners in heterosexual marriages. But we learn from the stories of Lithuanian women that, in practice, this equality was not open to all. In working class families, women were still subjected to violence and exploitation, a condition which, I suspect, would not have been significantly affected by whether a Soviet or bourgeois regime was in place in Lithuania. With the narratives of women, the book proves that "Soviet memory" or "Soviet reality" is contextualized and negotiated over time. Some had more negotiating power, some less. An important argument of the book is that the Sovietization of Lithuania, which had an enormous

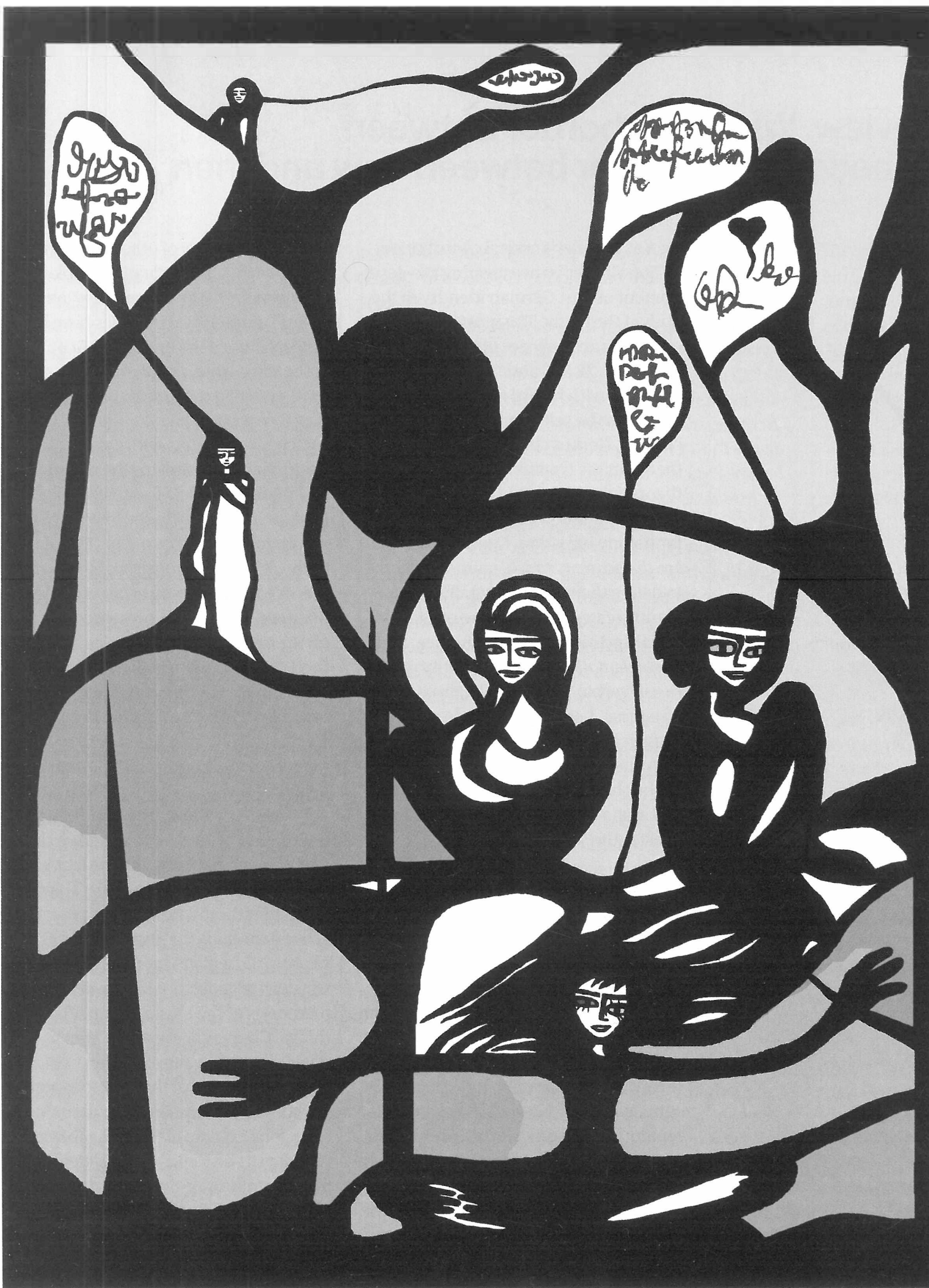

ILLUSTRATION: KATRIN STENMARK

impact on gender relations, happened relatively smoothly, especially after the 1950s – for two reasons. One was that the Soviet occupying forces ideologically discredited the "bourgeois model" of gender relations in interwar Lithuania, which otherwise would have offered, with its hierarchical Christian traditionalism, a strong basis for resisting Sovietization. The second reason involves demographic factors. Lithuania suffered significant losses during WW II because of forced displacement, the Holocaust, the war itself, and emigration. In 1951, after the World War II deportations, the population of Lithuania was ten percent less than it was in 1945. (p. 19) The rural population, which suffered less forced displacement and change in the elite, remained less resistant to the Soviet ideal of the woman worker as far as women's employment is concerned.

LEINARTE CLOSES HER book with an interesting claim: she argues that while resistance to the Soviet occupation was very much present in the attitude of much of the Lithuanian population, Soviet propaganda "was difficult to resist in the private sphere".[4] This is precisely the opposite of what scholars of gender studies found in Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia, where family proved to be a successful site of resistance to Sovietization.[5] It was impossible, she argues, to avoid state intervention into family life, and the women whom she interviewed were narrating their lives from the mid-1950s onwards using Soviet clichés, such as the canonized figure of the heroic Soviet woman worker. Leinarte argues that women "internalized" these clichés. (p. 199) I would explain this phenomenon differently, by raising the question of the unspeakability of memories of the Soviet past. There is no other narrative frame available for these women to talk about their private lives and feelings than the vocabulary of their youth. After 1991, this narrative was replaced by the interwar traditionalism, which had been alien to them, since they had spent their lives with paid labor. The victorious neo-liberalism combined with re-traditionalization did not offer any space of identification for them other than victimhood and consumption. It is left to the reader to rethink the consequences of the slow disappearance from the women's narratives of the element of employment as a space of happiness and pride. What remains is the habitual practice of suffering and self-sacrifice, which is the perfect setting for a conservative backlash.[6]

This book is an attempt to create a space for the memory of Soviet times, thus lending this period greater significance. ■

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REFERENCES

1 The structure of the book is similar to that of Jehanne M. Gheith & Katherine R. Jolluck (eds.), *Gulag Voices: Oral Histories of Soviet Incarceration and Exile*, New York 2011. – Both volumes leave out an analysis of the extremely valuable visual material.

2 See similar findings based also on other sources interviews with women in heavy industry in Malgorzata Fidelis, *Women, Communism, and Industrialization in Postwar Poland*, New York 2010.

3 Leinarte, p. 200.

4 Leinarte, p. 197.

5 See for example: Andrea Pető, *Geschlecht, Politik und Stalinismus in Ungarn: Eine Biographie von Júlia Rajk*, Herne 2007.

6 On the neo-conservative turn in post-communist Eastern Europe, see Andrea Pető, "Anti-Modernist Political Thoughts on Motherhood in Europe, in a Historical Perspective", in Heike Kahlert & Waltraud Ernst (eds.), *Reframing Demographic Change in Europe: Perspectives on Gender and Welfare State Transformations*, Berlin 2010, pp. 189–201.