Review of "Post-Soviet Women Encountering Transition: Nation Building, Economic Survival, and Civic Activism" by Kathleen Kuehnast; Carol Nechemias

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summation of its main arguments in the span of a few hundred words. Below is a break-
down of sections and chapters of the book to provide a window into its accomplishments.
The subject is divided into three parts. The first part, titled “Islam in Russia, Past and Pre-
sent: An Overview,” is composed of two introductory chapters that highlight the history of
Islam in Russia as well as the demographic, geographic, institutional, socioeconomic, ide-
ological, and political profile of Islam in post-Soviet Russia. This part is rich with informa-
tion and encompasses a well-narrated account of the history of Islam in Russia. This sec-
tion would have benefited greatly if a more in-depth account of Tatar rule in Russia had
been presented. Some observers believe that the Tatar impact was critical in setting the
tone and defining the chemistry and dynamics of Russia’s relations with its Muslim
minority.

Part two, titled “Identity Politics in the Russian Federation: The Islamic Factor,” is
composed of three chapters. One chapter explores the evolution of post-Soviet national
identity. Here the book rehashes the origin of the growing hostility between Russia and Is-
lam, as well as the uneasy relations it has had with the west—the other hostile entity. The
section also addresses contemporary Russian versions of nationalism and identity under
Putin as well as the evolution of Russian federalism and democratization and how Islamic
populations have been affected by and have influenced the two trends in the post-Soviet
period.

Part three is composed of six chapters. Titled “Russia and Islam: The Islamic Factor in
Russia’s External Relations,” this part attempts to put into perspective the impact of Rus-
sia’s foreign policy with the Muslim world, including the so-called Near Abroad countries
of the Commonwealth of Independent States, as well as the west—the other element that
has exacerbated Russia’s identity crisis for decades. The book ends with a discussion of
difficulties of democratic transition in multiethnic post-totalitarian states such as Russia.

This book is a must-read for students and scholars of Islam and of Russian history and
politics. It is perhaps one of the most significant volumes published by M. E. Sharpe. Islam
in Russia has clearly bridged an important gap in the field of global Islamic studies.

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Post-Soviet Women Encountering Transition: Nation Building, Economic Survival, and Civic Ac-
Notes. Index. Figures. Tables. $55.00, hard bound.

Post-Soviet Women Encountering Transition includes nations not regularly attended to in the
discussion of postcommunist societies. The introduction highlights the critical issues and
brings together a set of diverse, differently oriented chapters. Kathleen Kuehnast and
Carol Nechemias suggest that the collapse of the Soviet Union significantly altered the ide-
ological landscape for women, though the legacy was complex in this respect. The first sec-
tion of the book, on “Gender and Nation Building,” deals with the justifications of women’s
return to their “natural roles,” motherhood, nurturing, and so forth. In many of the re-
publics, embracing pre-Soviet ethnic and national identities was a closely connected de-
development. Tatiana Zhurzhenko argues in the chapter on Ukraine that contemporary
problems are rooted in the earlier elimination of private property and state interference
with children’s education, leaving the family with neither economic nor moral autonomy.
While the old labor code still contains significant social guarantees for working women,
the new state offers neither more family autonomy nor an effective social contract. The
cost of the transition has been transferred to the household, with a particularly heavy bur-

Katherine Graney discusses state and nation building in Tartarstan, one of Russia’s
twenty-one national homelands. The regime’s constitution emphasizes—in a nod to egalitarianism—the placement of motherhood and fatherhood under state protection. Since it neglects women and family policy, it also avoids the neofamilialist legislation that other postcommunist countries have enacted. In another vein, Graney points to international pressures to emphasize the multiethnic and civic character of the nation; at the same time, the “main state-building priorities of the Tatarstani elite . . . lean toward consolidating the claim to sovereignty within the Russian Federation and the international arena” (59). David Abramson highlights, in his discussion of Uzbekistan, the tension between secular nationalism and Islamic revivalism, which results not only in different understandings of the meaning of citizenship but in different ideals of citizenship for men and women. In a very interesting chapter on Belarus, Elena Gapova explores the impact of the elite on nationalistic rhetoric. She sees the nationalism project as promoting the decline of equality between men and women and increasing social inequality due to capitalist class formation.

The two chapters in the second section focus on “Women and Rural Household Economies.” Cynthia Werner’s excellent study on women traders in rural Kazakhstan gives us some context for understanding the changes that have taken place as well as the legacies of Soviet communism. Although the expansion of market trade was a postcommunist phenomenon, the mobility and freedom of Muslim women were an inheritance of the past. The postcommunist changes, which include an increase in bride kidnapping and arranged marriages as well as a loss of jobs for women during the transition years, are placed in a broader historical perspective. Susan Crate’s chapter on the village of Viliui Sakha in the Sakha republic of Russia notes that despite the maintenance of male- or female-dominated activities, some “traditionally sex-role stereotyped activities are now shared by both sexes” (142). That includes the production of food in the household after the end of the state farm system. She stresses the importance of paying attention to local realities when developing policies.

One of the major findings in the section on “Democratization and Women’s Civic Activism” is the increased participation of men in formal political positions and women’s participation in nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Nayereh Tohidi, dealing with Azerbaijan, discusses a number of important developments in women’s participation in informal politics, in the building of civil society, and in NGOs. In this informative chapter, we are reminded of the end of the quota system for parliament, the additional burdens occupying women during the transition years, and the benefit of their linguistic and other skills that are important for their connections to international donors. The larger context of this chapter is particularly helpful in understanding the developments that are taking place. Ludmila Popkova uses the example of Samara to discuss political activism in Russia. Andrea Berg analyzes the socioeconomic divide between leaders in women’s NGOs and the women living in poor urban and rural areas, the lack of integration between women’s informal networks and the NGOs, and the generally “more divergent paths” taken by urban and rural women since the national independence of Uzbekistan. The last chapter in this section by Janet Elise Johnson focuses on the women’s organizations that developed in Russia to respond to all forms of sexual violence and the problems they encountered.

The final section of the book, “Assistance Encounters,” questions the assumptions with which aid organizations from the west first approached the post-Soviet states, expanding the complexity of issues raised in Berg’s chapter. This section highlights the differences in approach during the rapid change in post-Soviet nations, the predominant Soviet understanding of women as mothers and as workers, the revival of older ideas of the role of mothers in transmitting the values of national culture, and “feminist” ideas about the full participation of women in political, economic, and social life. Although the foci of exploration differ in the chapters of Rebecca Kay, Armine Ishkanian, Michele Rivkin-Fish, and Julie Hemment, all authors deal with tensions between international donors and women’s groups. Ishkanian describes the use of two different discourses in the communication of Armenian women with western organizations and among themselves. Kay notes the hierarchy of NGOs acceptable to the west and critiques the lack of connection among women’s groups. Michele Rivkin-Fish includes a fascinating analysis of encounters between the World Health Organization and maternal health providers in St. Petersburg in her advocacy of the importance of attention to local concerns.
A few of the chapters in the first three sections of the volume could have included more structural detail about the present situation of women—in education, in the workforce, in political institutions—and a more clear-cut identification of the major political forces. But the actual research that engaged the contributors and their rich descriptions and analyses make this a fascinating volume.

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David Mandel’s book Labour After Communism is the best theoretical and empirical examination of the post-Soviet working class available to those interested in labor issues and civil society development in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus since the abolition of the Soviet Union. Mandel’s primary project is to explain the weakness of the working class in postcommunist societies and secondarily to suggest possible means of overcoming that weakness. Using an impressive array of primary sources and interviews, the author convincingly argues that the dire situation of postcommunist working classes can be attributed to a combination of structural legacies of the Soviet period, the effects of “shock therapy,” and self-defeating choices made by trade unions and workers themselves in the years since 1989. Mandel adopts an avowedly Marxist analytical perspective, but readers will not find much Marxist theory in the core empirical chapters; this is for me the one disappointing aspect of an otherwise excellent book.

The first two chapters of the book provide a compelling analysis of the nature of the Soviet and post-Soviet systems and the relationship of workers to the state and management in each period. Mandel argues that in spite of the repressive strength of the Soviet state, the rule of the nomenklatura was never viewed as legitimate by workers. This necessitated not only repression but also the hypercentralized command economy and trade unions controlled by the state. These unions survived but proved allergic to reform; they remained ineffectual for workers, but highly beneficial to the state and the emerging bourgeoisie after 1991. The Soviet system also created a problem for workers in terms of where to direct their discontent: to the state or management, since managers controlled the shop floor but the state extracted the surplus. Mandel demonstrates that this problem remains in spite of privatization, testifying to the weakness of capital in the region and to the continued primacy of the state. The book then turns to the sources of labor’s weakness in Russia in particular, most of which are rooted in the massive economic crisis in the 1990s. This economic implosion led to the intensification of the arbitrary power of management, to a decline in workers’ wages and living standards, to a loss of job security, and contributed to the continued weakness of unions. Taken together, this has led to the demoralization of workers, to a decline in activism, and to the increasing degeneration of the working class.

In the remaining chapters, Mandel focuses on specific cases of trade-union and worker activity and protest, examining the Union of Auto and Farm-Machine Workers of Russia (ASMR), the independent union Edinstvo, and unions in Ukraine and Belarus. The main argument is that the weakness of “traditional” unions is primarily the result of workers’ lack of confidence in them. This in turn is the result of “traditional” unions exchanging “subservience to management and to the state in the name of ‘socialism’ for subservience to management and to the state in the name of ‘social partnership’” (59). In order to preserve their power, the union elites agreed with the state and managers to avoid and/or limit labor activism and not to challenge privatization or shock therapy. As Mandel notes, this is not unique to postcommunist states—it is a common form of union behavior in the current neoliberal climate. Mandel gives a fascinating account of the independent union Edinstvo, depicting it as the antithesis of the ASMR. Edinstvo works because it focuses on organizing; it is relatively militant given the circumstances, it is open and transparent in its operations and provision of information, and it focuses its attention on the...