

AWSS Research Notes

The Fifth International Research Conference of the Russian Association of Researchers in Women's History (RARWH)

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The Fifth International Research Conference of the Russian Association of Researchers in Women's History (RARWH) was held in Tver' on 4-7 October 2012. Dan Healey, Professor of History at the University of Reading in the United Kingdom has written a wonderfully detailed and scrupulous conference report (see link below). As both participants and observers, we echo Professor Healey's sentiments and in this companion piece elaborate on a few of the points that he raised in his report.

If we look at the conference as a microcosm on the functioning of civil society, then we wholeheartedly agree with Dr. Healey that we saw an engaged, democratic and vociferous academia whose members are confident about debating their ideas in the university market place. We were particularly impressed by a number of graduate students demonstrating a keen interest in gender politics, and holding their own when pressed by more traditional scholars. Conversations with students and faculty members from universities in Rostov on the Don, Yaroslavl, Omsk, and St. Petersburg among others revealed that many of the Russian universities are training a cadre of scholars who are committed to uncovering the history of both Russian and non-Russian ethnic minority women.

We are happy to note that there was often more debate than agreement, and participants were quite vocal in registering their opposition to concepts and scholarly claims with which they disagreed. At a particularly stormy session with Marianna Muravieva, Dan Healey and Sergei Mozzhegorov, certain members of the audience complained about Sergei's direct quotations of what they considered improper language from his interviews about male gay experiences. But even though they complained loudly, the offended scholars nonetheless participated in this scholarly conversation about GLBT Studies. It should be noted that GLBT Studies ran into similar kinds of opposition before becoming institutionalized on Western campuses. Discussions at the conference revealed that sharply different scholarly and political worldviews coexisted at this conference and remained in healthy and constructive dialogue with one another throughout. We found it extremely salutary during the discussion of our own papers to have our underlying assumptions fundamentally challenged, because these assumptions are almost always taken for granted by our peers in the US.

Similarly, on the last the day of the conference, there was an open discussion on the topic of the next year's conference to be held at Nal'chik, the capital city of the Kabardino-Balkar Republic in the North Caucasus. Again, we were impressed by the engaged discussion that ensued and marveled at Natalia Pushkareva's diplomatic ability to secure consensus among a fractious crowd after allowing everybody present to voice his or her opinion. The decision of organizers of RARWH to hold the annual meeting in the far south of Russia to counterbalance the influence of scholars from the capitals was itself a stroke of genius, and self-governing associations such as these will surely have a cumulative impact on national politics before long.

In conclusion we leave the reader with a few vignettes about the acknowledgment of the legacy of the Russian revolutionary tradition in contemporary Russia. We greatly enjoyed the book exhibition on "The History of Women's Emancipation" on display at the Tver' State

University Scientific Library. It was a pleasure to see how the exhibit foregrounded a range of 19th century feminist publications that were downplayed in Soviet times, but we did note the almost complete absence of references to revolutionary women such as Sofia Perovskaia and Vera Figner. We look forward to the weaving together of these various strands of history. On a visit to an art exhibition at the Tver Exhibition Hall, we noted that that the “plein air” paintings on the walls deliberately evoked a peaceful and pastoral landscape in an impressionist manner. The canvases were dotted with churches, meandering rivers, and picturesque wooden homes. The few references to urban areas evoked a pre-revolutionary twentieth century city that was dominated by bourgeois commercial places. And on our very last evening in the charming city of Tver, we dined at the Stefano Rasini Pizzeria, on Stenka Razin Embankment by the peaceful Volga River. We marveled at the clever transnational pun, conflating the 17th century rebel Stenka Razin with the Italian footballer Stefano Rossini in the interest of selling (rather tasty) pizza. Revolution repressed, revolution commodified, revolution consumed?

RE: Dan Healey, “Gender History is Thriving in Russia,”
<http://unireadinghistory.wordpress.com/2012/10/09/gender-history-is-thriving-in-russia/>

Photo to insert: Stefano Rasini Pizzeria in Tver

