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Sarah D. Phillips. *Women's Social Activism in the New Ukraine: Development and the Politics of Differentiation*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008. 232 pp., \$24.95, paper.

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The theoretical focus of this book is on “differentiation” or the increasing social inequality that has been a result of the breakup of the Former Soviet Union (FSU). Differentiation here indicates the shift in the criteria for what it means to be a productive citizen. Among other changes, workers are no longer the glorified citizens of the FSU; “mothers of many children” are no longer afforded special privileges; and the elderly and the poor no longer have a safety net provided by the government.

A concomitant stress is taking place that focuses on “personification” or “individualization,” indicating a more Western approach to placing the burden of care for the needy more on individuals than on the government. NGOs are providing the framework for staving off these differential processes among the vulnerable, but they are also using their training sessions to inculcate the trainees in a Western mindset (at least those with Western models), to accept “individualization” and to think more about themselves as individuals and less as part of a collective.

Phillips argues convincingly that this “differentiation” has disproportionately affected women. It is women who are the “losers” of “transition” as evident by macroeconomic indicators and unemployment statistics. In the process of enlightening us about the differential impact of these changes on women she also reveals the changing nature of women’s role in Ukraine and how it plays out among those women who absorb an albeit transformed individualist message from the NGO training and those women who don’t or who can’t.

This is a well-written and very readable book, composed of a series of stories about a number of women running NGOs in contemporary Ukraine. Phillips’ real forte is in painting the pictures of these women’s lives. Specifically, she blends extensive interviews with four activists whose lives best reflect different trajectories within the NGO framework. Two stark contrasts stand out: Ivana who was a former high school physics teacher and then became a seminar instructor for one of the international NGOs in Kyiv which was promoting NGO development among women, a paid position. She later became a marketing representative for a major publishing house and then director of one of the publisher’s Kyiv divisions (children’s books). In contrast, Svetlana worked in a charitable fund which provided assistance to large families (three or more children), generally the same category of people she belongs to herself: “mothers of many children” who were previously recipients of special attention and assistance from the government, an unpaid position except for double rations. Her organization still exists at book’s end but cannot pay its rent; Svetlana now works from home in a limited way, as a counselor for a crisis hotline.

The stark differences in these women’s lives, both of whom took NGO leadership training and were social activists in their communities, are best explained by their wholesale, partial, or non-acceptance of the Western messages they were receiving in their NGO training about individualization. Ivana bought into the focus on individual integrity and leadership skills

of the NGO training. She hated the Soviet mindset with its external attributions for success which held the belief that “outer conditions are responsible for their life” and that contained a “passive expectation of better times” (p.97). Svetlana, on the other hand, did not absorb the Western mantra of individualization despite her training. She maintained the traditional Soviet mindset and did not become as steeply enmeshed in the need to separate her needs from others.

The Western model of NGO seminar trainings, as reported by Phillips, were radical for the FSU because they took such a strong focus on “I,” exhorting the trainees to personify (they were cautioned not to say “everyone knows or believes” but instead “I think”). Ivana’s priorities “as a woman” had changed during her lifetime. Her original goal was to become an atomic physicist (a male-dominated profession) but she studied to become a mechanical engineer instead. She quit engineering to become a nanny in the preschool her children attended and realized her calling was to work with people, especially children. She was taking a “womanly” role and responsibilities in promoting social change. “Back then I tried to prove myself as a worker; now I’m proving myself as a woman” (p.145). The training seminars provided a chance for Ivana to learn about women’s rights, but she softened what she learned into a hybrid of believing that women should work but that men and women were inherently “different” and that these natural differences had equipped women and men for success in different spheres.

It has been difficult for some observers of the FSU to understand why women there have not wholeheartedly embraced feminist ideals, given their strong ideology for pursuing full employment for women as a natural progression of women’s role. The stories in this book help us understand that there has been a reversion to traditional women’s roles espoused by the Ukrainian government and press. In an example from electoral politics, Phillips notes Yulia Tymoshenko (the former Prime Minister of Ukraine) attempted to merge her identity with that of Berehynia, a pagan goddess of ancient Slavic mythology, in her quest for political support.

What’s missing from the general analysis in the book is a historical overview of the Soviet legacy in relation to civil society. In Russia, for example, Yeltsin and Putin have attempted to curtail civic activity; Ukraine has thus far been spared that. That said, the strengths of the book are multiple and override the limitations. Phillips gives a thorough, in-depth analysis of a diverse set of social activists in Ukraine working in NGOs with a diverse set of outcomes. She provides good insights into women’s role reversal in the FSU by presenting a framework for understanding why a full Western model gives way to hybrid alternatives for determining a woman’s role in Ukraine. Phillips does not spare the details in how this transpires; in fact, she chooses her cases well to illustrate the role of context and individual initiative in determining the eventual paths her informants took.