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Representations of the Soviet Reader: A Case Study

This paper will examine a series of articles and reader responses published in *Literaturnaia Gazeta* in 1969. The first article in the series, published September 24, contains a short parable by Viktoria Tokareva about a conflict between a husband and wife. The article opens a discussion of gender roles in the family and society, which was a particularly complex issue in the Soviet Union at that time. In subsequent articles from November 19 and December 17, *Literaturnaia Gazeta* published a number of reader responses to Tokareva's parable, and these letters demonstrate a wide range of opinion on gender roles. However, through the careful curation and arrangement of these letters, *Literaturnaia Gazeta* offers a representation of its readership, as well as a view of the debate on gender relations, that ultimately conforms to official state policy. In my analysis of these three articles, I will show that *Literaturnaia Gazeta* created an identifiable narrative of reader opinions on state-sanctioned issues, and in doing so, constructed the appearance of a consensus among readers.

The weekly periodical *Literaturnaia Gazeta* was in a period of transition in 1969. In its early Soviet incarnation, beginning in the late 1920s, it consisted of only eight pages addressing literary and cultural issues. After adding a second set of eight pages in 1968, the periodical “began a more general discussion of social issues...”\(^1\) The articles in question appeared in the early phases of this increasingly popular second section, which became well-known for its surprisingly frank discussion of contemporary socio-cultural issues. Here it is important to note the targeted readership of *Literaturnaia Gazeta* As

\(^1\)Ibid., 101.
Stephen Lovell has pointed out, during the 1960s an emerging group of “educated and urbanized people were eager for information on all aspects of modern living” but “it was rare for them to be able to look to specific magazines for help with particular questions.” though “the existence of a highly educated elite with a strong interest in current affairs and social and political discussion was acknowledged only grudgingly by the Soviet Press,” there was a clear demographic need for a publication geared to certain interests. According to Lovell, “the intelligentsia was eventually offered Literaurnaia Gazeta as its ‘house publication.’”

Litervaurnaia Gazeta published its 39th issue of 1969 on September 24. Page eleven of that issue contained four separate pieces that addressed the same problem: “He and She.” In the center of the page, under the heading “Conflicted Situation” [Конфликтная Ситуация], the title “He and She” [Он и она] appears in enormous capital letters. Beneath the headline is an explanation of the article, which is surrounded by the four pieces. At the top of the page is a parable by Viktoriia Tokareva. As the editor explains in the center of the page, the story is ripe with “sociological, moral and legal dimensions.” In light of the interesting questions that Tokareva’s parable raises, the editor writes, “we are publishing the opinions of philosopher T. Samsonova, futurologist A. Gorbovskii and sociologist A. Ianov.” These three writers’ responses appear on the page below the parable, on the left, right, and bottom, respectively.

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2Lovell, 105.
4 Ibid., “мы публикуем мнения философа Т. Самсоновой, футуролога А. Горбовского и социолога А. Янова.”
Viktoriia Tokareva’s parable begins by introducing the two main characters: “He” (Он) and “She” (Она). “When He and She were married, He was a young specialist and She was a graduate student at Moscow State University, preparing her master’s thesis on the Galvomagnetic Effect in the crystals of Germanium.”⁵ Although her degree presented He and She with challenges in raising their daughter, She was able to successfully complete her degree. After a time, however, “He walked in file along the roads of his native country, saw that the grass was growing green, that the sun shone, and a woman in shorts with long hair walked in front of him.”⁶ The husband never returned to his wife, and as a result, she never completed further graduate studies. Though satisfied with his new family, He eventually decided to try to retrieve his daughter, leading to a custody dispute. In her concluding paragraphs, Tokareva writes, “Some prefer duty and go on in a bad mood, realizing for oneself the full right to be unhappy. Others choose happiness, but soon become accustomed to it and feel unhappy, not having any right to this unhappiness.”⁷

The three responses to the parable take the discussion in a somewhat surprising direction. The “philosopher” T. Samsonova writes, “The question of the equality and harmony of human relations always worries people… [The question] is in the form of an organized revolutionary struggle for the high ideals of justice, equality, fraternity and the

⁵Ibid., “Когда Он и Она поженились, Он был молодым специалистом, а Она аспиранткой МГУ, готовила кандидатскую диссертацию на тему "Гальваномагнитный эффект в кристаллах германия."
⁶Ibid., “Он шёл в цепочке по дорогам родной страны, видел, что травка зеленеет и солнышко блестит, и впереди него идёт женщина в шортах и с длинными волосами.”
⁷Ibid., “Один предпочитает долг и ходит в плохом настроении, сознавая за собой полное право быть несчастными. Другие выбирают счастье, но скоро привыкают к нему и чувствуют себя несчастными, не имея на то никакого права.”
happiness of the nation.”

Distancing herself from the questions of “duty” and “happiness” that Tokareva presents, Samsonova continues, “[In] this struggle the problem of women’s emancipation occupied a particular place.” Like the authors of the other two responses, Samsonova diverts the topic of conversation to gender dynamics. Taking a moderate tone in her discussion of the problem, she concludes that “the emancipation of women cannot be reduced to the elimination of the great distinctions of gender in the family and in personal life.” Of the three authors of the opinion pieces, Samsonova takes the most moderate stance. Positioned on the left side of the page, her piece refocuses the discussion more precisely on gender roles, and she manages to maintain a neutral position throughout the essay.

On the other hand, the sociologist A. Ianov is much more partial. He writes, “If it had been that He and not She had been going to the study hall and... if the presently conflicting parties had played traditional roles in the family—those prescribed for centuries—then, indeed, there would have been no conflict at all. On the contrary!” While Samsonova explicitly addresses the question of gender roles, Ianov presents the reader with a more traditional perspective on what Samsonova had dubbed “the problem of female emancipation.”

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8Ibid., “Вопрос о равенстве и гармонии человеческих отношений всегда волновал людей... [вопрос] в форме организованной революционной борьбы за высокие идеалы справедливости, равенства, братства и счастья народа.”
9Ibid., “[в] этой борьбе особое место заняла проблема женской эмансипации.”
10Ibid., “Эмансипация женщин не сводится к устранению всяких различий пола в семейной и интимной жизни.”
11Ibid., “если бы Он, а не Она ходил в читальный зал и... если бы обе конфликтующие ныне стороны играли в семье традиционные, от века положенные им роли, то, право, никакого конфликта вообще не было бы. Наоборот!”
To the right of Ianov’s conservative opinion, we find a piece by A. Gorbovskii, a “futurologist.” Gorbovskii counters Ianov’s strict anti-feminism with a ringing declaration of already-existing equality between men and women. “Today a woman feels just as confident in science as in the remaining areas of mental labor.” Though this piece does take on a more egalitarian tone than Ianov's, Gorbovskii portrays some anxiety over the power that contemporary women hold in society. He writes, “Did not women laugh in the epoch of matriarchy when someone hinted to them that men may someday rule over them?”

Commenting on Tokareva's story, each of these essays represents a different point on a prescribed spectrum of opinion. They draw the conversation away from the problems explicitly proposed in Tokareva’s story and direct the discourse to the topic of gender dynamics. Samsonova's moderate opinion appears on the left side of the page, presumably the first response that the reader is intended to see. Following this, Ianov's conservative opinion is located at the bottom of the page, and finally, Gorbovskii’s more anti-traditionalist perspective is given at the right hand of the page. The opinions radiate out from the center, implying balance in the discourse. This functions to delimit the boundaries of discussion in regard to the problem at hand, in this case, the “problem of female emancipation.” On one extreme, we find a call for traditional, nuclear family structures. On the other extreme, we find a claim that gender equality is already in place and that women need not seek any further liberation in Soviet society.

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12Ibid., “Сегодня в науке женщина чувствует себя так же уверенно, как и в остальных областях умственного труда.”
13Ibid., “Не так ли смеялись женщины в эпоху матриархата, когда кто-нибудь намекал им о возможности грядущего господства мужчин?”
An examination of the November 19 piece published in response to “He and She” demonstrates the efficacy of the demarcation discussed above. The piece consists of four letters, ostensibly written by readers, commenting on Tokareva’s story and focusing on problems of gender roles. Alongside these letters, the three professional responses from the original article were also reprinted. Thus, each letter clearly functions within the boundaries of discourse prescribed by the professional responses. Jeffrey Brooks has discussed the role of such publications in what he has called the “interactive sphere” of the Soviet media. Beginning in the 1920s and continuing throughout the tenure of the Soviet press apparatus, letters that had been “carefully selected, redrafted, or simply invented” were included in several newspapers and other periodicals. Brooks also notes that “[t]opics usually concerned local affairs, and contributors were often identified as activists.” This interactive sphere had a two-pronged effect. First, government officials utilized this sphere as they “officially treated [these] letters as an accurate reflection of opinion and used them to evaluate policies.” On the other hand, the interactive sphere served to represent the opinions of a mass readership to individual readers, who could clearly see party-sanctioned opinions being put forward by readers in their letters to the editor. As we will see, the published letters could sometimes provide a periodical’s readership with a very specific and tailored narrative.

The publication of the November 19 letters certainly qualifies as an example of the interactive sphere of the Soviet media. However, the letters also present a surprisingly liberal perspective, often offering substantially more sympathy for “She” than the professional responses. As Brooks has pointed out, although “[Stalin’s] successors
struggled to maintain key elements of the system that he and Lenin had created, including... the state’s monopoly on public information, the illusion that state and society were one, and the presumption of a single official narrative of national life,” the press of the post-Stalin era also “cautiously opened the media to new voices, allowed limited scope for reforms and commentary, and tried to instill sufficient vitality into the unitary narrative to keep it alive.”

In the first of the four letters published on November 19, respondent “V. K.” insists that the wife’s dissertation had nothing to do with the couple’s eventual separation. “He left because there was no love between them. There was, from appearances, a passion that just did not grow into a great love.” Though this may be a rather romantic view, it certainly stands in stark contrast to the professional responses of the September 24 issue, which focused on whether or not "She" was to blame for the divorce. V. K. goes on to write, “All of this affects me very personally because I too am writing my doctoral dissertation. With great regret, my family split up.” This letter certainly changes the boundaries of the discourse laid out in the preceding commentary on the subject. By including real-life testimony, the editors of Literaturnaia Gazeta lent far more legitimacy to a liberal perspective on Tokareva’s story. At the end of her letter, V. K. contradicts the professional commentary outright. “When I left my husband, the people around me also

16 Ibid., 233.
17 “Konflikttnaia Situatsiia,” November 19, “Он ушёл потому, что не было между ними любви. Было, по-видимому, увлечение, которое так и не выросло в большую любовь.”
18 Ibid., “Меня всё это задаёт за живое, потому что я тоже пишу докторскую диссертацию. К великому сожалению, моя семья распалась.”
thought that it was because of my dissertation, but this is, of course, untrue and primitive.”\textsuperscript{19}

Although they are perhaps not as sympathetic to "She," the second and third letters in this issue also display a less conservative and traditionalist understanding of the situation. In the second letter of the series, entitled “Is Woman Prepared to Take Power,”\textsuperscript{20} M. Oganesiants writes, “The woman in the family used to have a decisive influence” and remarks, “In the contemporary family the woman acts just as she thinks necessary, defining the shape, structure, form and program of activities of each member of the family.”\textsuperscript{21} In the third letter, S. Pakal’nis focuses on modern shifts in family structures. “It seems that today we have formed a free and pluralistic union of independent individuals—women and men—which, as a rule, is responsible to society.”\textsuperscript{22}

Though he does seem somewhat concerned with his observation, he also notes that society-at-large seems to be taking a more fundamental role in the socialization and education of the population. In a rather apathetic declaration, he writes, “If this is good, then we must calm ourselves; if this is bad, then it follows that we must take particular measures.”\textsuperscript{23}

\textsuperscript{19}Ibid., “Когда я ушла от мужа, окружающие тоже считали, что виной тому диссертация, но ведь это неверно и примитивно…”

\textsuperscript{20}Ibid., “Готова ли женщина принять власть?”

\textsuperscript{21}Ibid., “Женщина в семье и прежде имела решительное влияние,” “В современной семье женщина поступает так, как только она считает нужным, определяя образ, состав, форму и программу деятельности каждого из членов семьи.”

\textsuperscript{22}Ibid., “Похоже, что сегодня складывается у нас свободный и разновariantный, как правило, ответственный перед обществом союз самостоятельных личностей--женщины и мужчины.”

\textsuperscript{23}“Если хорошо, то, видимо, надо успокоиться; если плохо, то следует скорее предпринять определенные меры…”
The final letter published on November 19 proved to be the most controversial. In response to Tokareva's story, a woman identified as “M. Shch.” (М.Щ.) describes her very unconventional family situation. Although her first husband was a “good husband,” she still felt that “life with him was not going well,” and they eventually separated. However, it is the description of her second marriage that engenders so much controversy. Though her second marriage is very happy, she and her husband live separately. She thereby breaks from the traditionalist values that other readers express. Gleefully describing this eccentric situation, she says, “What is important is that every meeting is a holiday for us. My husband often calls unexpectedly, arranging a surprise for me. It is always delightful and interesting.” Owing to this marital situation, her “life became full and interesting” and she remarks that “Our fidelity is not just a stamp on a passport, it corresponds to our desires and because of that, it is true fidelity.”

The more liberal viewpoints offered in this series of letters provide an interesting contrast to the conservative tone of the three professional responses included in the first publication. Here, letters by Oganesiants and Pakal’nis seem to delimit the conservative boundary set in the previous publication. In contrast, letters by V. K. and M. Shch. open a much more liberal side to the conversation. The anti-traditionalist opinions are situated on the sides of the page, straddling the letters that represent a more normative stance on gender roles. M. Shch. offers an especially unusual perspective on the issue by offering her own non-traditional family model as a solution to the problems described in

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24Ibid., “хороший муж,” “жизнь с ним у меня не ладилась...”
25Ibid., “Главное то, что каждая встреча--для нас праздник. Нередко муж приходит неожиданно, делая мне сюрпризы. Это всегда радостно и интересно.”
26Ibid., “жизнь моя стала полной интересной жизнью,” “Наша верность--не только штамп в паспорте, она соответствует нашим желаниям, и потому это действительно верность.”
Tokareva’s parable. The inclusion of this letter in *Lituraturnaia Gazeta* marks the most extreme anti-traditionalist boundary in these exchanges. It is surprising that this letter was included at all. As I will show, however, M. Shch.’s letter was not the last word on the subject.

On December 17 *Lituraturnaia Gazeta* published yet another article with the heading “He and She” [Он и Она]. This article consists of three letters, each one responding to the piece by M. Shch. from November 19. All three of these letters are thick with rancor, heavily criticizing the eccentric family model that M. Sch. describes. The first letter, credited to N. Z., condemns even M. Sch.’s word choice. He writes, “Is this a family in the conventional sense of the word? I do not believe it.”27 The second letter, tellingly entitled “Freedom from What…!”28 offers a similar sort of criticism. In this letter, E. K. directly asks M. Shch., “Do you have a family? I think not. Such a pity!!!”29 The third letter continues the traditionalist attack on M. Shch.’s family structure, insisting that she and her husband have “a relationship between a boyfriend and girlfriend, not between spouses.”30 In fact, this letter contains the most scathing criticism of them all. The author, Natalia M., goes on to ask, “Where is the concern of a wife that she should prepare for her husband breakfast, lunch, dinner, and wash his shirt; where is the help of the husband for his wife in the housework? No, there is none of this!”31 She insists that M. Sch. is living under an illusion, and that “right now [her] happiness is like

28 Ibid., “Свобода от чего...!”
29 Ibid., “А есть ли у вас семья? Я считаю, что нет. Жаль!!!”
30 Ibid., “...отношения парня и девушки, а не супругов.”
31 Ibid., “Где же забота, жену о том, чтобы приготовить мужу завтрак, обед, ужин, выстирать сорочку, где помощь мужа жена в домашнем хозяйстве? Нет, всего этого нет!”
fragile glass” that will inevitably break. As we have seen, the three letters published on December 17 clearly present a relatively uniform opinion. They attack the eccentric family model of M. Shch. as dishonest, immoral and disingenuous.

It is now possible to understand with some clarity the puzzling presence of M. Sch.’s letter in this exchange. The first series of letters published offered a spectrum of readers’ opinion within certain boundaries. On the one hand, there are lines of prescribed state-sanctioned opinion in response to Tokareva’s parable. On the other hand, the extremely liberal and anti-traditionalist viewpoints of M. Shch were also published. As we have seen, the series of letters from December 17 functions to evaluate the liberal contours of opinion offered in the previous publication, and ultimately, to condemn them. The first two articles of the series shaped a particular problem and the boundaries for the discourse surrounding it. The subsequent publications constructed a narrative of readers’ opinion wherein liberal and anti-traditionalist viewpoints were tolerated but remained unsanctioned and unacceptable. In part because publications from the “interactive sphere” were officially viewed as public opinion, a case of such discourse demarcation allowed the Soviet authorities to point to these sorts of letters from the readership as a legitimate authority for shaping public policy. In addition, the message to the readership is clear: though variations may occur within the boundaries of state-sanctioned discourse, a general consensus will be reached by the readers, and the Soviet citizenry will ultimately condemn eccentric or dangerously liberal opinions.

Clearly this exchange accomplishes significant discursive and political work. At first, it offered and delimited a range of official opinion that shaped the subsequent reader

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32 Ibid., “...сейчас ваше счастье, как хрупкое стекло.”
responses. By publishing this series of letters, the editors of Literaturnaia Gazeta created a narrative wherein the opinion of readership conformed to the discourse boundaries associated with the professional opinions included in the initial publication. Indeed, the entire enterprise was more complex and ingenious than a simple publication of letters affirming state-sanctioned views. The exchange delivers both argument and consensus to the reader; it offers opinions, some of which are heeded while others are condemned. A simulacrum of open discourse was constructed in order to represent official opinion as public opinion in a capacity that was officially acceptable given the legislative practices of the Soviet government. Still, it seems that this exchange was created more for the benefit of readers, rather than lawmakers. Such a representation of reader opinion constitutes a kind of discursive theater for the readership, one in which individual opinions are viewed openly, considered publicly and face universal judgment in the form of consensus.

Works Cited


