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Changing Menstrual Habits in Late 20th- and Early 21st-Century Russia

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Emerging literature in Critical Menstrual Studies seeks to contextualize and de-centralize the modern Western experience of the menstrual cycle, by paying closer attention to its various historical and cultural specificities (especially in the Global South). This paper extends the discussion by focusing on Soviet and post-Soviet Russia. The post-Soviet case is distinctive because, despite the USSR being a 'developed' country by international standards, Soviet menstruators relied on do-it-yourself substitutes and improvisational bodily techniques instead of industrially produced disposable tampons and sanitary pads. However, the seismic shifts in Russian politics, the economy, society, and culture that accompanied the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of a new capitalist economy also resulted in profound changes in the politics of menstruation.

Drawing on the transcripts of recorded interviews with 80 participants, we enquire into the connections to and discrepancies between socialist ideology, scientific expertise, popular knowledge, and personal experiences of menstruation in the Soviet Union and post-Soviet Russia. In tracing the evolution from cloths and chunks of cotton to sanitary pads and tampons, we remain attentive to the materiality of menstruation, but also approach the topic in terms of the history of the body: going beyond medical discourses of menstruation, we explore menstrual lived experience on a more visceral level.



Introduction

In 2016, a series of political advertisements appealing to younger voters was launched in the name of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF), arguably in an attempt to increase the number of rank and file members.¹ One of the clips appears to start on a typical neoliberal promise of consumption-cum-happiness: two young women stroll along a nondescript mall,² clearly enjoying their shopping. However, suddenly this joyful occasion is broken by something indeterminate and invisible to the viewer. An irresistible, superior force urges one of the women interrupt their pleasant, non-assuming conversation to seek shelter in a toilet stall. In the weird sequence of images that follow, the girl both receives a text message on her smartphone with an invitation to join a Communist Party demonstration on Russia's Labor Day (May 1)³ and is visibly flabbergasted on finding a red hammer and sickle emblem in her underwear — presumably announcing the beginning of her menstrual cycle. This clip might be a strange instance of the largely unsuccessful recent attempt of the Russian Communist Party to appeal to younger voters; or, as another (equally unusual) political advertisement in this series puts it: to attract 'new blood'.⁴ However, the origin of these videos is not reliably known. Perhaps the authors are political opponents of the KPRF, using the narrative of menstruation as a taboo topic to make attending a demonstration unattractive.

However, both versions, by conflating the symbolic language of communism and menstruation, and by bringing the biological into conversation with the political, serve as a good introduction to the set of metaphors that interest us in this paper. In contemporary Russian parlance, the phrase 'red days on the calendar' [*krasnye dni kalendaria*] has two meanings: on the one hand, it refers to any public holiday as a day of rest and, perhaps, celebration; however, it is also used colloquially (primarily by women) to refer to menstruation in a way that is clear but at the same time veiled enough to remain within the accepted bounds of decency.⁵ Like many aspects of contemporary Russian popular culture, this phrase has a distinctively Soviet feel—yet this influence is subtle, unspoken, and elusive.

Emerging literature in Critical Menstrual Studies seeks to contextualize and decentralize the modern Western experience of the menstrual cycle, by paying closer attention to various historical and cultural specificities (especially in the Global South).⁶

¹ *Vse na maevku*, 2016.

² Filmed at the Atlantic City mall in northwestern St. Petersburg.

³ The video is consistently entitled 'An Invitation to the May Day Rally'.

⁴ *KPRF nuzhna svezhaia krov'*, 2016.

⁵ Friedman, 2016.

⁶ Bobel, 2010; Fahs, 2016; Bobel, 2020; Bobel, Winkler, Fahs, Hasson, Kissling and Roberts, 2020.

This paper extends the discussion by focusing on late 20th- and early 21st-century Russia and how new menstrual discourses and practices emerged and developed in the wake of the Soviet collapse. What makes the post-Soviet case distinctive is that, despite the USSR being a rather ‘developed’ country by international standards, Soviet menstruators relied on do-it-yourself substitutes and improvisational bodily techniques instead of industrially produced tampons and sanitary pads. The seismic shifts in Russian politics, the economy, society, and culture that accompanied the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of a new capitalist economy also resulted in profound changes in the politics of menstruation. In particular, in the early 1990s commercially produced sanitary pads and tampons from abroad became readily available and widely advertised.

Drawing on a sample of 80 oral history interviews,⁷ memoirs, visual materials and internet archives, we show how the inclusion of the Russian Federation into the neoliberal financial and gender international order since the early 1990s has been accompanied by the often-uncritical adoption of Western beliefs and practices relating to menstruation (such as the emphasis on the importance of disposable products). We further demonstrate how, in the increasingly globalized and interconnected digital era, emerging Russian menstrual activism also draws on international discussions about menstrual taboos or reusable menstrual products. This article ultimately proposes that we need to view the most recent developments in the politics of menstruation (such as Scotland’s Ending Period Poverty campaign) in a broader international context and account for the continued influence that corporate players continue to exercise on such policies.

In this article, we examine various types of knowledge about menstruation, the diverse emotions associated with it, and information surrounding ‘menstrual innovations’.⁸ By combining archival and published material with oral history in the form of interviews, we seek to provide a comprehensive picture of the Soviet menstruation experience and its changing nature in the second half of the 20th century.

Background and Significance of Research

Menstruation is commonly thought of as a universal experience, one that is repeating, unchangeable and determined by human biology. Furthermore, it is still a taboo topic in scholarship, perceived by many academics as ‘private’, ‘personal’;⁹ something to be concealed and hardly deserving social-scientific attention. We, however, follow the

⁷ The interlocutors quoted here gave their consent to the use and publication of these materials. All quotes are anonymized.

⁸ Pascoe, 2014.

⁹ Owen, 2022.

maxim that ‘the personal is political’ and approach menstruation as a phenomenon that is intrinsically linked to existing political regimes and hierarchies of knowledge, gender and familial structures. Indeed, some feminist social theorists, such as Judy Grahn, place menstruation at the center of all human cultural experience.¹⁰ Moreover, the last 30 years of research in medical humanities have seen scholars (notably Emily Martin and Margaret Lock)¹¹ criticize dominant medicalized approaches to menstruation and demonstrate that both discourses and experiences of menstruation are profoundly culturally and socially specific—and, by extension, historically variable.¹² It is precisely to this body of scholarship, that investigates the intersection of the biological, medical, cultural, and social in menstruation, that we hope to contribute.¹³

For the purposes of this article, we are primarily interested in exploring how Soviet women have managed their menstrual cycle and how this changed in the post-Soviet period—highlighting both some unique features of the Soviet menstrual experience and illustrating more general trends pertinent to global, neoliberal capitalism and its insistence on the importance of single-use menstrual products. We discuss ‘menstrual innovations’ and examine the contradictions involved in discourses about Soviet do-it-yourself improvisational techniques as well as post-Soviet commercially manufactured menstrual products. In doing so, we connect changes in menstrual hygiene with larger political and economic transformations and socio-cultural shifts during the period of the post-Soviet transition.

Historicizing Menstruation

The lack of historically informed studies about menstruation (apart from several explorations of menstrual taboos in different religious traditions, such as Judaism)¹⁴ is remarkable. Since the groundbreaking *Menstruation: A Cultural History* (2005), an edited collection by Andrew Shail and Gillian Howie,¹⁵ the emergence of empirical publications on the topic has been remarkably slow. One of the few welcome exceptions is Lara Freidenfelds’ *The Modern Period: Menstruation in Twentieth-Century America*,¹⁶ which views menstruation through the lens of the modernization paradigm and describes how various education campaigns, bodily management techniques and workplace

¹⁰ Grahn, 1993.

¹¹ Martin, 1987; 1991; Lock, 1993.

¹² See, e.g., Owen 1993; Bildhauer, 2006; Vostral, 2008; Bobel, 2010.

¹³ Cf., e.g., recent discussions of menstruation as the fifth vital sign in both scientific and popular literature: Diaz, Laufer and Breech, 2006; Hendrickson-Jack, 2019.

¹⁴ Wasserfall, 1999.

¹⁵ Shail and Howie, 2005.

¹⁶ Freidenfelds, 2009.

practices contributed to the creation of the specifically ‘modern’ American menstrual experience. Freidenfelds stresses how a modern bodily self-presentation and self-control were perceived to be critical to joining the middle class, and entering a growing women’s white- and pink-collar job market.¹⁷

Additionally, in a number of recent publications, Australian historian Carla Pascoe shows how, between 1940 and 1970, Australian women and girls were ‘encouraged to reject older messages about incapacity at “that time of the month” and embrace a full range of activities, armed with the much-lauded protection of disposable, commercially produced pads and tampons’.¹⁸ Significantly, Pascoe critiques discourses of ‘liberation’ and asks whether Australian women and girls have indeed been ‘liberated by these changes to participate more fully in the public sphere’, or whether they have instead ‘become enslaved to a more rigorous set of hygienic expectations’.¹⁹

Finally, historian Shing-ting Lin has recently addressed the questions of popularization and commodification in her article on the evolution of menstruation discourses in early 20th-century China. Lin convincingly shows the ‘discursive multiplicity’ that resulted from the encounters and entanglements between Western scientific medicine and sanitary hygiene and traditional Chinese medical knowledge. She further stresses the emergence of ‘embodied ‘know-how’ entangled with consumerism’ and the ‘alteration of personal behavior through daily consumption’.²⁰ In the discussion that follows, we build on Pascoe’s and Lin’s observations to problematize the evolution of menstrual hygiene habits in Soviet and post-Soviet Russia.

Methods

We conducted 80 in-depth interviews with women born in the Soviet Union, or in the post-Soviet environment between 1937 and 1995. The participants were recruited through open calls on social media and personal contacts, including recommendations from other research participants (the ‘snowball’ method). Perhaps as the result of the sensitivity of the topic and the character of our social environment, the group cannot be fully representative of all Soviet menstruators. First, most interlocutors grew up in the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR) and not the other parts of the Soviet Union. Second, they tend to be more educated than the average Soviet citizen. While higher education was quite common in the USSR, over 10% of our interlocutors

¹⁷ The term used in the U.S. since the 1970s to denote jobs in the service industry which are largely held by women.

¹⁸ Pascoe, 2014. See also: Pascoe, 2007; 2015.

¹⁹ Pascoe, 2014.

²⁰ Lin, 2013.

have post-graduate degrees and academic backgrounds. Nevertheless, we managed to recruit some participants from different regions of both European and Asian parts of the RSFSR. We also included various social, ethnic and professional backgrounds, even if this is not fully representative of the population.

The interviews followed a semi-structured protocol that included each interlocutor's life context, their own menstrual cycle, their experience and perceptions of the relationship between menstruation and culture, as well as optional demographic details. The interviews lasted between half an hour and two hours, depending largely on the interlocutor's willingness and availability. The participants were given general information about the research project and had opportunities to ask questions or clarify details. They also retained the right to refuse to answer questions or withdraw at any time from their participation in the project. The interviews were anonymized, and all efforts were made to exclude any potentially identifying information. Ethical approval was granted by the Independent Ethical Committee of the National Medical Research Center of Preventive Medicine (#07-03/18).

We were able to collect 80 interviews in total, for which we have audio recordings and transcripts in Russian. The transcripts were read and discussed by the research group, and several key categories were identified (including not only feelings and cultural experiences, but also phases of the menstrual cycle, reproductive and sexual health conditions, and the names of menstrual products and medications). The transcripts were later annotated with reference to these key categories, to allow for an easier search and analysis of the documents. Manual content analysis was used for the analysis of data: closely examining the transcripts and the annotations, we identified repeated features of Soviet and post-Soviet menstrual practices. The interviews were also complemented firstly by analysis of the few available references to menstruation in published memoirs from the Soviet period, which provide a retrospective view, and secondly by more public 'menstrual' commercials and TV sketches from the 1990s.

Rags and Resourcefulness: Naming, Shaming and Taming Soviet Menstruation

We would now like to turn to the development of what we, echoing Pascoe, call 'menstrual innovations'—i.e., the *actual* bodily practices and technologies that Soviet women made use of during their menstrual cycles.²¹ In this regard, the article explicitly engages with the grand narrative about the Soviet Union as a society of deficiency (the permanent, critical shortage of consumer goods leading to the regime's demise and ultimate collapse).

²¹ Pascoe, 2014.

A vivid example of this attitude is given in a post-Soviet ethnographic study of menstruation carried out by Elena Bogdanova and Ol'ga Tkach.²² Among other valuable observations, the authors recall a peculiar encounter with an elderly woman in a supermarket. The woman asked the (younger) female anthropologists to help her with choosing a menstrual pad for her granddaughter who had just started menstruating. As if to justify her request, she framed it as following: 'you know, we did not have anything like this back in our time' [*v nashe vremia ved' nichego etogo ne bylo*].²³ This can be corroborated by quotes from the oral history interviews that we collected:

...No, no, no, nothing has ever been written or said about it [menstruation] at all, it has not been. This is already later, this post-Soviet time began, but before that it was not. These are already our children, my daughter, for example, did not write anywhere, did not speak, but then I told her more.²⁴

Another participant commented:

...Mom never seemed to explain anything, when my period came for the first time [laughs], of course, I was scared, cried [laughs], hid everything—and what to do? Then I told her, mom explained that it happens. In our time there was no such enlightenment as now. In general, I didn't even know about it, I never saw that my mother had something like that.²⁵

We suggest that the elderly woman in the supermarket expressed much more than bewilderment at the wide range of menstrual products suddenly available in a Western-style supermarket in the relatively neoliberal Russia of the mid-2000s. It is not just that products were absent in the 'Soviet' menstrual landscape—the whole *bodily experience* of menstruation could not be articulated as such (at least, not in a format that older women could find comparable). Perhaps, therefore, it could be argued that the very concept of 'menstruation' that entered popular culture in the post-Soviet period was not present before the 1990s.

The narrative that emerges from our interviews and memoir readings suggests an unusual picture by Western standards. Well into the 1980s, Soviet women relied on do-it-yourself substitutes and improvisational methods, instead of ready solutions in

²² Bogdanova and Tkach, 2005.

²³ Bogdanova and Tkach, 2005: 107.

²⁴ 2021, Anonymous interview, 4 May.

²⁵ 2021, Anonymous interview, 9 May.

the form of industrially produced tampons and sanitary pads.²⁶ For example, one Soviet memoirist recalls a classmate (whose father was a diplomat) bringing a copy of the magazine *Vogue* to school:

...we came across a glossy full-page ad for sanitary napkins. As we gaped, our class guide ... mournfully shook her head at this blatant display of Western decadence: 'Oh—*that's* what it is. They would actually put a thing like that in a magazine!' (It would have been nice to see 'a thing like that' on the shelves of a store, instead of having to use shapeless, bulky chunks of cotton wrapped in strips of gauze. It wasn't every day that you could find cotton or gauze in a pharmacy, either. I would rather not think about how women managed in the small towns or villages, where, Mother told me, most people hardly knew what cotton or gauze looked like).²⁷

However, in speaking about their menstrual grievances, these women also appeared to take a certain pride in the ability of their bodies to sustain everything and their own capability in producing something out of very little. As one participant commented with pride: '...I myself took some old rags and put them in my panties and went to school like that, and then I fastened some pins so that it would hold, this rag would not fall'.²⁸ Another explained:

...No, well, in length, maybe more than a palm, but in thickness—like smoked sausage, boiled... Well, in general, so that it doesn't hurt to walk at all. Well, I can't do it that way—it turns out to be very exaggerated—I can't say the exact dimensions. But this, of course, is far from a gasket, this is ... a raw smoked sausage—that's right for sure. By thickness, I mean.²⁹

This self-sufficiency may be reflective of Soviet ideology which proclaimed gender equality and emphasized that women workers were equal to men.³⁰ For example, consider this very matter-of-fact description that another memoirist, Fara Lynn Krasnopolsky, gives about getting her first period at the age of 12 in a small remote

²⁶ It is also important to note that birth control pills that could have altered or minimized menstruation were extremely rarely used in the Soviet Union. See Denisov and Sakevich, 2014.

²⁷ Young, 1989: 166.

²⁸ 2021, Anonymous interview, 6 May.

²⁹ 2021, Anonymous interview, 1 July.

³⁰ Temkina and Zdravomyslova, 2005: 96–115. The Soviets also provided some female-specific labor policies, including the introduction of menstrual leave in the 1920s in some areas of the economy where women were primarily employed (see Ilic, 1994: 1409–1415; Vasilyev, 2020: 75–76). At the same time, it is important to note that not all 'progressive' policies imposed from above were readily accepted by Soviet citizens (see Prozorov, 2016).

village in revolutionary Russia (exactly the kind of setting that Cathy Young abhorred): ‘Mother ... tore a clean old sheet into small pieces. She wrapped one piece around my waist, and other pieces were put between my legs and pinned to the one around my waist. I was beginning to feel *important*. My mind was full of questions’.³¹

This attitude was also evidenced in one of our interviews. Describing growing up on the outskirts of Leningrad in the mid-1970s, our interlocutor recalled the somewhat problematic nature of physical education lessons at school. Like in Scotland and other countries in the West, girls who were menstruating could get an exemption from classes for a few days each month but, to be granted this, they had to talk about their periods to a Physical Education teacher who was usually male. Our study participant reported that some of the students felt so uncomfortable about this that they chose to continue with the classes as usual but with a few extra precautions. With a great sense of pride and satisfaction at her own inventiveness, our interlocutor narrated how she would wear skin-tight tights and put larger-than-usual amounts of cotton wool in her underwear to take part in the classes and successfully perform rather challenging acrobatic exercises such as the ‘buck-jumping’ [*pryzhok cherez kozla*] that was dreaded by most schoolchildren.³²

However, not talking about menstruation during physical education was the norm for some girls. As one participant detailed: ‘...And I have never complained to the coach, the coach did not even know that I have some periods when I perform, I never said, the girls somehow talked to the others, and I was shy to talk’.³³ Some, moreover, considered menstruation a sufficient reason to skip class. However, they assumed this to be fully within their rights, and used euphemistic or vague language: ‘...they did not go to physical education, due to the fact that there...for example, you could get a release, just come to the nurse and say: I have critical days today and I would like this... Calmly, the nurse gave such a release, well, without much, so to speak, confirmation, many even used it’.³⁴ A respondent who moved from the GDR to the USSR as a teenager captured a very different attitude and set of behaviors:

...The first two days I stayed at home, I had one certificate, and then they gave me a certificate for exemption from physical education, because when there is physical education, there is no point in doing it. Other girls just came up, but since I was brought up in *German traditions*, I always took help, and other girls just approached

³¹ Krasnopolsky, 1992: 141–143.

³² 2017, Anonymous interview, 1 February.

³³ 2021, Anonymous interview, 6 May.

³⁴ 2021, Anonymous interview, 23 May.

the teacher and just told him. Here everything depended on the personality of the teacher, our physical education teacher knew who was cheating and who was not cheating, and he put someone in jail, and someone said, ‘Listen, don’t tell me fairy tales’. And he was right.³⁵

After the fall of the Soviet Union, the subsequent establishment of a new economic system and the influx of new consumer goods from abroad, the scarcity of personal care items became less of a concern. Nevertheless, many women continued to use DIY tactics. There is also evidence that they lost their pride and became part of a new form of shame culture. Even with the introduction of pads and tampons, some women testified that they continued to use rags and gauze, as before:

I had been using this gauze and cotton for a long time and had grown accustomed to it, so when these pads emerged, I treated them in some way... And the first ones were a little thick; I tried them and didn’t care for them. And I didn’t buy any more because I used mine to the end. I tried it once and that was the end of it.³⁶

We propose that this proud DIY and ‘can-do’ attitude is characteristic not only of the development of Soviet ‘menstrual innovations’ proper, but reflective of the larger models of the gendered processes of incessant production, meaningless hoarding and constant creative adaptation of material objects that were characteristic of the late Soviet society.³⁷ As Alexey Golubev, Zinaida Vasilyeva and other scholars have recently argued, DIY practices can be seen as one of the key elements in the subjectification of the late Soviet citizen that maintained importance well into the post-Soviet period.³⁸

More specifically, one can relate the idea of menstrual ‘inventiveness’ to the concept of ‘resourcefulness’ (*smekalka*) that Alyona Sokolnikova proposes in her paper on the creative work of women designers in the late Soviet Union.³⁹ Often experiencing the ‘the only woman on a boat’ problem, and subject to widespread workplace discrimination and abuse, these women nevertheless remained highly confident in their capacity for independent, creative labor and their potential to produce innovative designs for the

³⁵ 2021, Anonymous interview, 12 May.

³⁶ 2021, Anonymous interview, 4 May.

³⁷ For key recent works on the subject, see Chernyshova, 2013; Oushakine, 2014: 198–236; Vihavainen and Bogdanova, 2015; Krylova and Osokina, 2016: 147–261. For a social-scientific perspective on the continued importance of DIY, repair and maintenance practices in late capitalism, see Graham and Thrift, 2007: 1–25; Russell and Vinsel, 2018: 1–25; Krebs, Schabacher and Weber, 2018.

³⁸ Golubev and Smolyak, 2013: 517–542; Vasilyeva, 2019; Kochetkova, 2022: 1–25.

³⁹ Sokolnikova, 2018. See also: Karpova, 2015; 2020.

Soviet citizens in the difficult economic conditions of both overstocking and deficit.⁴⁰ In a similar vein, Anna Varfolomeeva describes the gender dimensions of embodied labor in the stone-working industry in Northwestern Russia in terms of *both* ‘hardship’ and ‘glory’.⁴¹ Despite feeling ‘imprisoned’ in the harsh Northern environment, women in this industry praised the sacrifice and the sense of community involved in their hard work—and also took a certain pride in the perceived ability of female bodies to adapt to the most difficult working conditions. Importantly, the transition to the highly mechanized (and also masculinized) techniques of mining in the post-Soviet period left these women feeling useless. The larger iteration of this transition will be explored in more detail in the following section.

Tampax as a Totem: Tampons and the Dialectics of Post-Soviet Liberation

We now turn to discussion of ‘menstrual innovations’ in the period of transition from the Soviet to post-Soviet period (the 1990s and the early 2000s). The seismic shifts in Russian politics, the economy, society and culture that accompanied the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of a new capitalist economy also resulted in profound changes in the politics of menstruation. Commercially-produced sanitary pads and tampons from abroad became readily available to Soviet women and were aggressively advertised on every available medium.⁴² In particular, tampon brands such as Tampax achieved an almost cult status—a snow-white totem pole for ‘modern’ and ‘emancipated’ female worshippers.⁴³

On the surface, after decades of chronic shortages of basic hygiene items in the Soviet Union, it felt like paradise: ‘...you can now buy these, elementary, pads or tampons, not necessarily at a pharmacy. You can buy in any supermarkets, well, that is very cool now with these things’.⁴⁴ Pads and tampons were advertised in commercials and on the pages of *Burda* magazine as transforming one’s level of life comfort; in an advertisement for ‘Always’ pads, the heroine even states that she doesn’t have to wash her underwear after using new kind of pads.⁴⁵ This appears to be an attempt by advertisers to develop

⁴⁰ On a different level (but in strikingly similar terms), Jeffrey Hass makes a convincing argument about the role that inventiveness of Soviet women played in their survival in the Siege of Leningrad during the Second World War (2017: 254).

⁴¹ Varfolomeeva, 2021: 13–25.

⁴² Bogdanova and Tkach, 2005: 100–101.

⁴³ In their 1996 paper, Leila Simonen and Marina Liborakina provide an evocative quote from a participant in their Finnish-Russian women’s discussion group: ‘In the air, there was a feeling of special occasion ... She went to the nearest shop and bought Tampax, regular size. She had read in advertisements that *modern* women used Tampax and concluded that sanitary towels were for old and decrepit ladies. She decided to be a *modern* woman and wore Tampax right from the start’ (104).

⁴⁴ 2021, Anonymous interview, 26 May.

⁴⁵ ORT – VID, 1997.

and perhaps even accentuate the difficult nature of past times. Elsewhere, advertising featured discourse about empowerment in the context of sports,⁴⁶ partying, and wearing white clothing.⁴⁷ Menstruation is not mentioned explicitly in such advertising; instead, it is recognized in the context of a semiotic load of blue liquid, euphemisms such as ‘some difficulties’ or ‘critical days’, or the contrast between menstruation and ‘cleanliness and freshness’, which makes personal hygiene products comparatively desirable.

However, these campaigns failed to achieve the desired effect, for at least three reasons. The first was financial: as contemporary observers already noted in the 1990s, the introduction of tampons ‘makes “hygiene” simpler, but it also divides women into those who have enough money and/or personal connections to buy them and those who cannot’.⁴⁸ This was exacerbated by scarcity; as one of our interlocutors put it:

...So, somewhere in 1990–1991, tampons appeared in our country (perhaps in 1990). Anyway, it was a big shortage, they appeared in pharmacies literally for five minutes and immediately sold out; if you are very lucky, you will grab [laughs] you will become the happy owner of this magical hygiene product.⁴⁹

The radical market reforms introduced in Russia in 1992 (so-called ‘shock therapy’) made possible the transition to the capitalist economy and allowed the country to enter the global marketplace. However, these changes also resulted in a profound socioeconomic crisis. Galloping inflation, widespread unemployment, and a catastrophic decrease in household income led to dramatic changes in the socioeconomic structure of the population and mass poverty. In such conditions, tampons did become a popular and readily available ‘modern’ solution—but only for a relatively small group of affluent Russian women (primarily in large cities of European Russia), who were able to pay for these valuable Western goods on the ‘hygiene’ market.

However, aside from availability, there were also concerns about the usage of these new products. Many of our interlocutors recall their terror at the first sight of the tampon and the dilemma of inserting it into the vagina.⁵⁰ Other difficulties included having to deal with the ‘tube-within-a-tube’ plastic or cardboard applicator (the so-called

⁴⁶ Reklamoteka, n.d.

⁴⁷ Burda, 1995.

⁴⁸ Simonen and Liborakina, 1996: 105.

⁴⁹ 2021, Anonymous interview, 19 April.

⁵⁰ 2018, Anonymous interview, 8 March.

‘penetrator’), which added greatly to the overall confusion. In contrast to the familiar softness of cotton, the hard and erect ‘penetrator’ looked rather ‘uncomfortable’ and even outright ‘alien’.⁵¹ In addition, by the early 2000s, discussions about the medical risks associated with the use of tampons (such as the toxic shock syndrome, or TSS) also became quite widespread and further discouraged many Russian women from the use of such devices.⁵² As a participant detailed: ‘...I’ve never used them [tampons]. I have some gauze pads with cotton wool, I put cotton wool in the gauze, I walked around like that, and then I threw it away, I didn’t wash anything. I didn’t know, I wasn’t interested. I used to do it the old-fashioned way’.⁵³

It is also possible that people of post-Soviet Russia saw an exceptionally high number of commercials for pads and tampons.⁵⁴ As a result, comedic shows began to feature such advertising. For example, male performers in the TV show *Gorodok* are sardonic about the absorbency of pads and the empowerment narrative; in one scene, one of them is swimming in a pool that is rapidly drying due to the actor’s use of a pad.⁵⁵ They also featured a sketch with the words ‘hygienic’ and ‘sanitary pads’ punned together.⁵⁶ Even though the episode with the pool and swimming was ridiculed in the show, it was in fact a serious limitation for some women in realizing their own health in a Soviet way: ‘...Let’s say they call me to the pool or to the river, I say, “No, I can’t”. You could not even call it “*dela*”, “*mesyachnye*” [menstruation], well, that’s how they somehow managed’.⁵⁷ Another commented, ‘...But this is probably the only such guide: that it is better not to experience any physical activity during menstruation. Well, for me it has always been, and now: no bathing at this time (swimming pools, swimming in the river)’.⁵⁸

As Ianina Karpenkina notes in her study of the evolution of advertising in post-Soviet Russia, TV advertisements in the 1990s came to be perceived (especially by the older generations) as too radical and ‘tasteless’.⁵⁹ The industry then responded by building on familiar tropes about the Soviet past, and even nostalgia for the Russian Empire while downplaying earlier ‘libertarian’ experimentations.⁶⁰

⁵¹ 2021, Anonymous interview, 26 March.

⁵² Bogdanova and Tkach, 2005: 102–103.

⁵³ 2021, Anonymous interview, 6 May.

⁵⁴ Karpenkina, 2018: 134–141.

⁵⁵ *Gorodok – pads*, n.d.

⁵⁶ *Advertising of pads*, 1996.

⁵⁷ 2021, Anonymous interview, 1 July

⁵⁸ 2021, Anonymous interview, 31 May.

⁵⁹ Karpenkina, 2018.

⁶⁰ Morris, 2005; 2007. See also Gorbachev, 2015.

Finally, the 21st century also witnessed growing concerns about the environmental impact of single-use menstrual products and the search for more sustainable alternatives. As more and more women turn (back) to reusable menstrual products such as menstrual cups and washable cloth pads, they discover the numerous advantages of these simple and low-tech solutions,⁶¹ while reflective designers of menstrual products critically review their practices to eliminate bias and power inequalities, and to empower female consumers.⁶² At the same time, there is also a certain uneasiness about the ability of global capitalism to enter new markets and encroach on feminist politics to simply ‘sell us more stuff’.⁶³ Importantly, these anxieties are not peculiar to the Russian Federation but instead reflect growing global concerns that have been well-represented in the Scottish debates surrounding period poverty. For example, the centrality of (single-use) menstrual products was highlighted by Saniya Lee Ghanoui in her study of American and Scottish sex education films⁶⁴ and by Sharra Vostral in her investigation of the Scottish ‘menstrualscape’.⁶⁵ However, Russian advertising lags behind worldwide trends in this regard; the Libresse company only released the ‘Stories Inside Us’ campaign in 2020,⁶⁶ showing blood rather than blue liquid or menopausal symptoms. However, the typically heteronormative perspective of a woman’s sexual life continues to dominate such advertising (in Western Europe, ‘red blood’ advertisements were released as early as 2017).

Conclusion

In 1992, American political philosopher Francis Fukuyama published his influential (if controversial) book, *The End of History and the Last Man*, in which he concluded that the triumph of Western liberal democracy and free-market capitalism in the aftermath of the Soviet collapse was the pinnacle of human sociocultural evolution.⁶⁷ Fukuyama was quite popular in Russia in the 1990s and early 2000s, as he seemed to profess that the Western goods and ideas that flooded Russia after the end of the Cold War were also bringing with them a sort of final redemption in the form of ‘the end of history’.

⁶¹ See, e.g., Verklova, 2018. There is also at least one recent study which casts doubt on the perceived hygienic advantage of menstrual cups over tampons (Gérard et al, 2018). Given the global state of the science/biomedicine journalism today, the findings of the study were almost immediately reported in the Russian popular press—although with a somewhat sensationalist/alarmist title: *Menstrual’nye chashki predstavliaiut bol’she vreda, chem tampony!* [Menstrual Cups are Actually More Dangerous than the Tampons!] (Kolesov, 2018).

⁶² Søndergaard and Hansen, 2017.

⁶³ Kissling, 2006.

⁶⁴ Ghanoui, 2022.

⁶⁵ Vostral, 2022.

⁶⁶ Libresse, 2020.

⁶⁷ Fukuyama, 1992.

Given the strong eschatological and millennialist tendencies traditionally associated with both Slavic intellectual thought and popular culture,⁶⁸ it is not surprising that Fukuyama's concepts were well-received in the former Soviet Union.

However, as we are now aware, far from the end of history, liberal democracy and free-market capitalism failed to provide the ultimate solution for the global 'last man'. Moreover, Tampax and Co. did not become the 'magic bullet' for the 'last women' of post-Soviet Russia. Rather, these women developed and now contribute to a new form of 'embodied 'know-how' entangled with consumerism' (to borrow Shing-ting Lin's term).⁶⁹ Building on the global trends in menstrual hygiene, they concurrently utilized existing local traditions and resources and created new ways to interact with and within their bodies. Bearing in mind Carla Pascoe's observation about the more problematic aspects of menstrual 'liberation',⁷⁰ we can conclude that the struggle for 'menstrual innovation' continues in the neoliberal era. Indeed, it might well prove true the saying that 'necessity is the mother of invention' many more times into the future.

⁶⁸ Panchenko, 2017. See also Slezkine, 2017.

⁶⁹ Lin, 2013.

⁷⁰ Pascoe, 2014.

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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