

*Dr. Anita Shelton's "Women in
Russia's History"*

Dr. Anita Shelton's presentation on Women in Russian history, given on April 9, 1992, dealt with the significance of women in the overall history of Russia. Through her research for this topic she became fully aware that the seemingly marginal history of women, in fact casts new light on the central questions of human existence.

It is this new light that shows, for example, that although the social position of noble women has changed dramatically from the origins of the Russian state, to the present, it has always intertwined with (and often been fused with) the main themes of the whole of Russian history.

There is evidence available that shows women in early Rus history were warriors and matriarchs. The word "amazon" comes through the Greek from the ancient Slavic word *amuzhonnaia*--masculine woman. The Primary Chronicle--the main written source of early medieval Russian history--indicates that Olga, an eleventh century queen of Rus was a shrewd and ambitious ruler.

The significance of this lies in the survival of the myth of the super-competent slavic "amazon" beyond the next phases of greater oppression and into the modern collective consciousness. This is expressed by the popular saying that "women do everything and men can do the rest." The beginning of the phases of oppression came with the Byzantine Orthodox Christianity and continued through the Mongol invasion. Both of these in different ways combined to reduce the Slavic female to the sole role of producers and tenders of children. This oppression remained in this form until Peter I and his mass reconstruction of Russian society forced the beginning of the reemergence of women into broader society.

Dr. Shelton went on to explain that women played an extensive role in the intelligentsia of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. These women were not solely of the nobility; in fact, this is the period when the peasant woman joined the noble woman to pursue the task of eliminating both class and gender inequality. They became especially active during the earliest stages of communist growth in Russia. Ironically, this activity, did not give them any positions of authority in the Bolshevik government. Again they found themselves producing children for the state and its wars, as well as working full time. It is also interesting to note that when the women in the United States were lobbying for the E.R.A. and the legal right to "do it all", Soviet women could not understand this need of American women--they "had it all" and would not mind being so "limited" occasionally.

The women of Russia through the ages have gone from matriarchs to slaves to citizens. These metamorphoses have not always been beneficial or appreciated. That each of these changes corresponded to a change in the complete history of Russia is undeniable.

--Jeanine L. Reardon