



NEWS FROM *Hemispheres*

THE INTERNATIONAL OUTREACH CONSORTIUM
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

Spring 2008

IN THIS ISSUE: Analyzing Images of Women

Restoring Women to World Studies, Hemispheres's 2007 Summer Teachers' Institute, explored the situation of women—historical and contemporary—in Latin America, the Middle East, Russia, East Europe and Eurasia, and South Asia. During the course of the week, presentations addressed the contributions of women to historical and artistic movements, concepts of gender roles and gendered spaces, issues that have driven women's movements, and more.

One discussion focused on Indian women's history as seen through photographs: Dr. Geraldine Forbes (SUNY Oswego) presented a classroom strategy using photographs as primary sources that could both illustrate and belie the reality of women's lives. In the activity, students initially discuss their personal observations of the photo, followed by a larger class discussion that takes into account the points of view of the photographer (who captured the image, and why?) and viewer (for whom was the photograph taken?), as well as historical-cultural context provided by the teacher.

Inspired by Dr. Forbes, this issue of *News from Hemispheres* consists of an image analysis activity (a student worksheet is enclosed) that incorporates themes from the summer institute. Four images focus on women's history; the selected images both reinforce our assumptions and raise new questions about women around the world. We also have provided contextual information and resources for additional research. We hope that this activity will spark an active discussion about women's history in your classroom.

Hemispheres Summer Teachers' Institute 2008: Recognizing Rights and Responsibilities in the 21st Century

How do we define human rights, in the most expansive sense of the term? How are rights and resources being claimed and fought for around the world? In what ways are governments and other powerful institutions accountable to individuals and to each other? Hemispheres Summer Teachers' Institute (June 10–13, 2008) will explore the international context for the rights-related challenges we face today. We will look at specific cases that illustrate how people conceive of and struggle for crucial rights in civil, political, cultural, and economic realms. For more information see the back cover or visit our Web site.

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Latin America

Photograph of soldaderas during the Mexican Revolution, 1910s

This photograph hints at the societal changes that accompany times of war. Historically, men left home to go to war—they lived on the battlefield, making their home and doing all of their daily tasks (cooking, washing, etc.) in a public space, surrounded by hundreds or thousands of other men. Meanwhile, at home, women lost the male head of household, the one who protected them and who financially supported the family. Because the men were away, women were forced to take on the roles of protector, wage earner, and, eventually, head of household. War changed the roles that men and women played within and outside the home.

In Latin America, beginning with the independence wars of the early nineteenth century, women often joined their husbands in the battlefield camps, both to continue their family life and to perform the daily duties that men were not accustomed to doing. The military did not provide food

and other necessities, so women brought food, cooked, washed, sewed, nursed injured soldiers, and so on. They made the military camps a continuation of their home lives: getting married, having children, raising families in the camps. As soldiers were killed, women often attached themselves to other men, to continue living the life to which they had grown accustomed. These women became camp followers, and served in many different functions (nurses, cooks, prostitutes) within the camps.

Some women took on leadership positions in the camps and performed military functions—they served as spies (as women, it was easier for them to gain the trust of the enemy) and as soldiers, picking up weapons and fighting alongside the men. Some became soldiers out of necessity, to protect themselves from other types of violence (pillaging and rape) that accompany war, and some became soldiers out of political conviction, because the cause was that important to them. These *soldaderas* were very common during the Mexican Revolution (roughly 1910–1920), but also have been important

in Nicaragua during the Sandinista conflict and in Mexico today with the Zapatistas.

One important thing to consider is the way that war changed the social system: soldiers brought their private lives to the battlefield (inversion of public and private spheres) and women took on roles that had belonged only to men (inversion of the patriarchal system). The reason that these changes were acceptable was that they were only temporary: people understood that life had to change during times of conflict. At the time, making these changes was in the best interest of society: having women transplant home life into the camps was useful to the soldiers. While women were leaving home and some were becoming soldiers, women on the whole continued to play traditional, nurturing roles in the camps and served their husbands much as they did at home. Only later in the twentieth century, with socialist revolutions that intended to transform the social system, was gender equality a major goal—only later was a permanent change in the status of women an important part of the revolution.

Middle East

Photograph of women baking bread in a communal village oven, Özyayla, Nevsehir, Turkey, 2004

The societies of the Middle East have long struggled to maintain a distinct identity in the face of pressures and influences from outside. Perhaps nowhere is this struggle more apparent than in the process of defining and attempting to redefine gender roles for men and women.

Gender roles in the Arab, Iranian, and Turkish cultures have long been well defined, with certain societal expectations set for both men and women. Due to recent events, significant attention has been focused on the political rights of women in the region, and on cultural and societal issues related to women, highlighted by persecution under the Taliban and honor killings in the Levant countries that, while deplorable, also do not reflect the situation for the majority of women in the region.

The roles of women and men in traditional Middle Eastern society, which was shaped not only by the Islamic faith but also in the tribal origins of the Arab

and Turkish peoples, were defined by spatial geography. Men's roles dominated the public sphere: politics, economics, and religion; while women's roles dominated the private sphere: the household, education, and marriage.

Traditionally, the woman's role as wife and mother was more important than any other. In many ways, the woman's role in governing the household was greater than that of her husband. Women controlled the household treasury and were expected to negotiate for the purchase of food and provisions such as cooking fuel. Education was also in the domain of women, who usually made decisions about which children could attend school. The arrangement of marriages was also a woman's task: although the details of the marriage contract would be arranged by the husbands, the wives would decide on the pairing of their children in the first place. In many of the kingdoms and empires of the medieval Middle East, it was not the Sultan or Caliph who wielded the most power; it would be his mother in the harem who had far reaching influence and was at the center of palace intrigue.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, however, these norms began to

change rapidly. After the establishment of the Republic of Turkey, a number of reform laws were passed that required women's education and banned wearing of the veil in public places. Several of the Arab countries made similar reforms after World War II to grant women political, economic, and legal rights. In many countries, a dual-income household became a necessity for survival, sending women into the workplace *en masse* for the first time.

The force of centuries of tradition continues to play a strong role in opposition to the economic and political realities of the early twenty-first century. Countries like Egypt and Jordan have seen the number of women graduating from their universities increase exponentially. Ironically, increased female participation in the public sphere also has led to a resurgence in the number of women who wear a headscarf, as this is seen as a way for women to establish their chasteness and modesty while out and about. This trend, which includes high fashion and even the creation of "Islamic sportswear," seeks to affirm traditional values from the region while recognizing the need to change—yet another way in which the societies of the Middle East are trying to maintain a distinct identity of their own.

LATIN AMERICA



RUSSIA



Portrait by P. F. Sokolov

MIDDLE EAST



SOUTH ASIA



Russia

Maria Volkonskaya, age 20, and her son, Nikolenka, 1826

This painting of a young woman and her infant son embodies the Russian romantic ideal of self-sacrifice. Maria Volkonskaya, pictured here with her son, Nikolenka, is one of several women known as “Decembrist Wives.” In December 1825, a group of young army officers challenged the new Tsar with calls for reform and a constitution. The revolt was repressed, the leaders hanged, and more than 120 “conspirators” were exiled to labor in Siberia, a land known for its harsh climate and devastating conditions. Among these exiles were several men of noble families.

In order to spare the wives the fate of their husbands, the court permitted the wives to be considered “widowed” so they could remarry without the stigma of divorce. However, several wives followed their husbands into exile. The idea of noble women, accustomed to being pampered, making lives for themselves in Siberia astonished the Russian aristocracy. The women were discouraged from following their husbands, forbidden from taking

their children, stripped of their noble titles, and refused the right to return to western Russia, even if their husbands died.

Despite the many sacrifices she was compelled to make, Maria Volkonskaya was among the first to follow her husband to Siberia. Although she had been married only a year when her husband was first imprisoned, she felt it was her place to be near him. She left Nikolenka, still an infant, with her parents in St. Petersburg and began the arduous overland journey of more than 3,000 miles.

The “noble convicts” worked 16 hours a day in salt or silver mines. The wives found lodging near the prisons and tried to stay in contact with their husbands. In some locations, they were permitted to visit twice a week. The prison wardens recognized the strength and bravery of the women who had given up so much, and for the most part the wives were treated with respect. Although their travel, budgets, and correspondence were monitored and restricted, the wives formed a support system. When Maria learned that Nikolenka had died two years after she left him behind, she found comfort among her friends. The wives also tried to improve the lives of their husbands by providing home-cooked food and by sending petitions to authorities for fair treatment.

Once they had adapted to Siberian conditions, the wives tried to create a life of culture. Their standard of living was very poor compared to their previous lives of luxury, but their cultural lives were still above that of the locals. They had musical evenings and discussion circles, to which they invited local officials. Although their children born in Siberia had no hereditary noble rights, the wives maintained the standards of culture of European society and taught them foreign languages.

After 20 years, the husbands were released from prison, but were still required to live in exile in Siberia. With improved living conditions, the wives turned to charitable efforts. Among Maria Volkonskaya’s concrete efforts were funding improvements to a hospital and the construction of a theatre in Irkutsk, but the intangible improvements to the level of culture in Siberia are harder to quantify, though recognized.

The sacrifices of the Decembrist Wives were commemorated in essay and poetry by famous contemporaries such as Alexander Pushkin. They persevered in the face of great hardship to support their husbands and their ideals, and are remembered for their strength, sense of duty, and the good works they did in their communities in exile.

South Asia

Photograph of women boiling seawater in India, 1930

This image shows women volunteers boiling seawater to violate a ban on salt-making. As part of the larger independence movement, Gandhi called for an end to the British monopoly and tax on salt in January 1930. Roughly a month later, Gandhi announced he would march to a coastal city to manufacture salt illegally.

Gandhi included no women in his original group of marchers, and this drew considerable resentment from many nationalist women. Some wrote to him angrily insisting that he invite women to participate. On the last day of the march, Sarojani Naidu, Gandhi’s close friend and a nationalist leader in her own right, insisted on joining him. She was the first woman to be arrested in the salt march. Her presence signaled hundreds of other women to join. Soon thousands of women were breaking the salt law and leading protests all over the country. Eventually the salt protest was made successful by the many women who not only made salt, but

also sat openly in marketplaces selling and buying it. This period marked a new level of participation by Indian women in the nationalist movement. It is generally remembered as the first time masses of Indian women participated in the struggle for independence and marked the involvement of women from all walks of life, extending the movement from its upper class enclave.

Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, another leading woman in the nationalist movement and Sarojani Naidu’s sister-in-law, recalls the impact of women’s participation in the salt protests: *On that memorable day thousands of women strode down to the sea like proud warriors. But instead of weapons, they bore pitchers of clay, brass and copper; and instead of uniforms, the simple cotton saris of village India.... Women young and old, rich and poor, came tumbling out in their hundreds and thousands shaking off the traditional shackles that had held them so long. Valiantly they went forward without a trace of fear or embarrassment. They stood at street corners with little packets of salt, crying out: “We have broken the salt law and we are free! Who will buy the salt of freedom?” Their cries never went unheeded. Every passer-by stopped, slipped a coin into*

their hands and held out proudly a tiny pinch of salt (Kumar 1993, 78).

At the time, ideas on women’s participation in the nationalist movement grew out of commonly held cultural beliefs on the nature of Indian women as essentially self-sacrificing and thus ideally suited to nonviolent protest. Emphasizing these feminine qualities and their role as mothers empowered women to find places in the public arena of protest. Gandhi and other nationalist leaders believed women were specifically well-suited to spread a message of nonviolence and to bear the hardships of protest. The emphasis on her essential nature created a new dignity for women in public life, a new confidence and self-view, where women could become agents of change.

By Indian standards, the women in the photograph are dressed modestly with little jewelry and in white saris, which are typically worn by widows or female saints. Two women have their heads covered, another sign of modesty. The women also appear to be surrounded by a group of standing men. Might they be observing or protecting the women from British authorities?

Image Analysis Worksheet

Use the following student exercises to analyze images. Students should compare their findings; the class can then discuss the image and its context as a group.

A. OBSERVATIONS

Study the image for two minutes. First, consider any written information that accompanies the image (including title, date, source, comments). Next, form an overall impression of the image and then examine individual items in the image. Divide the image into four sections and study each to see what new details become visible. Use the graphic organizer below to write down your observations. List people, objects, and activities in the image.

PEOPLE	OBJECTS	ACTIVITIES

B. DEDUCTIONS

Based on your observations in the graphic organizer, list three things you might deduce from this image.

C. QUESTIONS

List two questions this image raises in your mind. How might you go about finding answers to your questions?

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For more information on the topics covered in this newsletter:

Women in the Mexican Revolution:
Women and the Mexican Revolution, University of Arizona, <http://www.ic.arizona.edu/ic/mcbride/ws200/mex.htm>

Las Soldaderas: The Battlefield Heroines of the Mexican Revolution, University of Michigan, http://www.umich.edu/~ac213/student_projects06/joelan/index.html

"Soldaderas Played Important Role in Revolution," Borderlands, El Paso Community College, http://epcc.edu/nwlibrary/borderlands/21_soldaderas.htm

Women in the Middle East:
Middle East and Women's History, http://womenshistory.about.com/od/middleeast/Middle_East_and_Womens_History.htm

Women in the Middle East, Columbia University, <http://www.columbia.edu/cu/lweb/indiv/mideast/cuvlm/women.html>

The Decembrist wives:
Decembrists in Irkutsk, <http://www.irkutsk.org/fed/dec.html>

Christine Sutherland, *The Princess of Siberia: The Story of Maria Volkonsky and the Decembrist Exiles* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1984)

Women in the Indian independence movement:

Global Studies of South Asia, http://www.historyteacher.net/GlobalStudies/SoAsia_Colonialism.htm

Women of India, <http://www.kamat.com/kalranga/freedom/women.htm>

Female Indian Freedom Fighters, <http://www.liveindia.com/freedomfighters/jhansi.html>

Geraldine Forbes, *Women in Modern India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996)

Radha Kumar, *A History of Doing: An Illustrated Account of Movements for Women's Rights and Feminism in India, 1800–1990* (London: Verso, 1993)

Hemispheres

Summer Teachers' Institute 2008 Recognizing Rights and Responsibilities in the 21st Century

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For more information and the registration form, see the Hemispheres Web site <http://www.utexas.edu/cola/orgs/hemispheres/> or contact Christopher Rose at csrose@austin.utexas.edu or 512/471-3582.

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