Jennifer Utrata. *Women without Men: Single Mothers and Family Change in the New Russia*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press. 2015. 288 pp.

In *Women without Men* Jennifer Utrata focuses on one of the most significant implications of Russia's transition from state socialism to market capitalism—the growth of single motherhood. Russia keeps few statistics on single motherhood, but the scholarship on this topic indicates a strong trend towards an increase in sole parenting. By 2010, according to data cited in this book, 24.1 percent of Russian families were headed by single mothers (231). In her study Utrata take the readers inside the modern Russian family, illuminating how recent socio-political transformations affect people's private life.

The proliferation of families with single mothers is not a trend unique to Russia. Single-parent families are on the rise across the OECD countries and this rise has been especially sharp in the United States in recent decades. As most single mothers combine paid and unpaid work without adequate support, the related academic literature and mass media coverage on this topic has been primarily concerned with the increased risk of poverty associated with single motherhood. Unfortunately, financial insecurity and disadvantage are problems faced by many single mothers. However, as Utrata observes, many single mothers in Russia cope surprisingly well. Interestingly, in the case of Russia the situation of single mothers does not necessarily differ from that of mothers living with husbands or male partners, as Russian men normally are weakly integrated into household duties in any case, both figuratively and emotionally (185). Given that several generations of Soviet people grew up without fathers after the enormous loss of the male population during the Second World War, family life in Russia has long relied on cross-generational assistance among women. This condition has estranged men from their roles as husbands and fathers. As Utrata's research demonstrates, in the context of this distinctive gender regime in Russia, what makes a mother feel isolated, regardless of her marital status, is often the absence of her own mother's support.

Notwithstanding financial hardship and the lack of assistance often associated with single-parent households, some scholars have observed that the spread of single motherhood is fundamentally, albeit so far inconspicuously, changing our core understandings of what it means to be a family. For example, investigating why more and more women in the USA deliberately choose to become mothers outside marriage, Rosanna Hertz (2006) finds that the modern family is frequently organized around a mother and her children rather than based on a sexual couple. Utrata reveals that this global trend is informed by distinct processes and addressed in a very specific way in the context of contemporary Russia. Thanks to Utrata's "outsider" perspective on Russia's reality as a foreign researcher, her comprehensive field work, and her genuine scholarly curiosity, she is able to articulate what in Russia is routinized and, therefore, remains "invisible" and unproblematized. She shows in the book, for example, that Russian women and men see the prevalence of single motherhood as a result of the lack of reliable men and a weak, unsupportive state. In light of the country's high divorce rates and the considerable difference in life expectancy between genders, Russia's nuclear family often comprises children and two parenting adults—a mother and her own mother.

Over the course of a year in the midsized provincial city of Kaluga, Utrata conducted 151 formal interviews with single and married mothers, grandmothers and non-resident fathers. The study is also based on observations and informal conversations derived from the author's involvement in women's networks and participation in many people's daily lives. Significantly, the dynamics the researcher detects and presents here have intensified since she conducted her fieldwork in 2003 and 2004. Hence, the debate to which Utrata contributes with this book is extremely timely and vital. The author concludes that the traditional fragility of marriage in Russia is explained by the vicious cycle produced by a family policy that historically rests on the strict division of gender roles. Unfortunately, for Russian men the culturally accepted ritual of "becoming real men" (49) is strongly associated with heavy drinking, which serves both as a signifier of masculinity and a compensatory practice due to many men's inability to support their

families, especially in the new economic paradigm. Thus, spared from family work, men have more time to drink. In turn, drinking prevents men from executing family duties and provokes violence and infidelity. Whilst most men in Utrata's study declare that their paramount obligation as fathers is to provide for their families, many of them consider the support of their non-resident children to be optional. Neither the pressure to combine domestic labor with paid work, nor the financial burden of raising children that falls primarily on women is problematized in the stories that Russian men tell about themselves. Non-resident fathers interviewed by the author rationalize this asymmetric regime of family responsibilities, referring to and embracing a low bar for fatherhood based on an essentialist biology-driven view on gender roles.

Thus, single mothers are expected to take over breadwinning and childrearing without complaint, as motherhood in Russia is declared to be "women's natural duty." To deal with the obvious hardship associated with this, women tend to draw on the neoliberal discourse of the self-reliant individual. Utrata argues that the pressure that single mothers face to "make something of themselves" can be seen as the dominant cultural code of practical realism (96) which women draw on in their attempts to overcome difficulties. In the context of neoliberal cutbacks in the welfare state, in contrast with the Soviet system of social support that provided many maternal benefits to allow mothers to navigate the family/work balance, single mothers in the new Russia are abandoned by the state and their partners, and often turn for help to their own mothers. This mode of coping, however, produces another type of asymmetry in responsibilities. Because mothers often perform the breadwinning role in such families, while grandmothers take over housework and childcare, Utrata defines this allocation of duties as "youth privilege" (124). She finds that "doing" both gender and age for older women in Russia implies carrying out the "babushka's role," namely to devote themselves to supporting their daughters' families (125). The *babushka*'s contribution to the mother's wellbeing is generally undervalued and is not perceived as work. When it comes to their attitudes towards their own mothers, single mothers often reproduce the conventional

attitudes on the notion of the mother's natural duty as primary caregiver. Utrata draws a connection between the greater prevalence of the ideal of involved fatherhood in the West and the fact Western grandmothers are less involved in care for their grandchildren. Paradoxically, notwithstanding the fact that gender division actually renders marriage fragile, in Russia marital union is endorsed by the state ideology as the best solution for single mothers. Hence, the question to which Utrata leads her readership is truly acute: as rising longevity intersects with the neoliberal discourse on "productive ageing," will the new Russia be ready to cope in the event that Russian *babushki* become less involved in care for their grandchildren?

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Steven Lee Myers, *The New Tsar: The Rise and Reign of Vladimir Putin*. New York: Knopf, 2015. 592 pp.

Recently, quite a few books have been published about Russian President Vladimir Putin, but this is probably the best of them. Steven Lee Myers works for the *New York Times* and spent seven years in Moscow. He has written a highly readable political biography of Putin.

This book consists of five parts with a total of 25 chapters. It has an appropriate thematic-chronological structure, covering Putin's whole life until 2015. Lee Myers succeeds in satisfying both an academic audience and a broader interested public, by offering a detailed narrative in the style of Bob Woodward but also being highly accurate. While this is a journalistic book, it is very well researched and impressively erudite.

The author has used an excellent trick that we all should do more. Putin publishes an amazing volume of personal statements *ad verbatim* on his official website, www.kremlin.ru. Each year, he makes three major annual statements: his address to the Federal