THE BABUSHKA PHENOMENON

Older women and the political sociology of ageing in Russia

Anna Shadrina

UCLPRESS

The Babushka Phenomenon

FRINGE

Series Editors
Uta Staiger, UCL European Institute, and
Peter Zusi, UCL School of Slavonic and
East European Studies

The FRINGE series explores the roles that complexity, ambivalence and immeasurability play in social and cultural phenomena. A cross-disciplinary initiative bringing together researchers from the humanities, social sciences and area studies, the series examines how seemingly opposed notions such as centrality and marginality, clarity and ambiguity, can shift and converge when embedded in everyday practices.

Uta Staiger is Associate Professor of European Studies and Director of the UCL European Institute.

Peter Zusi is Professor of Czech and Comparative Literature at the UCL School of Slavonic and East European Studies.

FRINGE

The Babushka Phenomenon

Older women and the political sociology of ageing in Russia

Anna Shadrina

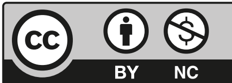
First published in 2025
by UCL Press
University College London
Gower Street
London WC1E 6BT

Available to download free: www.uclpress.co.uk

© Author, 2025

The author has asserted her rights under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 to be identified as the author of this work.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from The British Library.



Any third-party material in this book is not covered by the book's Creative Commons licence. Details of the copyright ownership and permitted use of third-party material is given in the image (or extract) credit lines. Every effort has been made to identify and contact copyright holders and any omission or error will be corrected if notification is made to the publisher. If you would like to reuse any third-party material not covered by the book's Creative Commons licence, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright owner.

This book is published under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International licence (CC BY-NC 4.0), https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/. This licence allows you to share and adapt the work for non-commercial use providing attribution is made to the author and publisher (but not in any way that suggests that they endorse you or your use of the work) and any changes are indicated. Attribution should include the following information:

Shadrina, A. 2025. *The Babushka Phenomenon: Older women and the political sociology of ageing in Russia*. London: UCL Press. https://doi.org/10.14324/111.9781800089099

Further details about Creative Commons licences are available at https://creativecommons.org/licenses/

ISBN: 978-1-80008-907-5 (Hbk.)
ISBN: 978-1-80008-908-2 (Pbk.)
ISBN: 978-1-80008-909-9 (PDF)
ISBN: 978-1-80008-910-5 (epub)
DOI: https://doi.org/10.14324/111.9781800089099

Contents

Series editors' preface vii
Preface ix
Acknowledgements xiii

Introduction: how Russians procreate, grow older and die 1

1 The babushka phenomenon 23

2 'Monstrous' grandmothers in Russian literature and cinema 45

3 How to be a good grandmother 63

4 Financial independence past pensionable age 81

5 Community bonds 99

6 Love and sex in later life 117

7 Epilogue: older women making sense of Russia's politics 139

Conclusion 153

References 157
Filmography 169
Index 171

Series editors' preface

The UCL Press FRINGE series presents work related to the themes of the UCL FRINGE Centre for the Study of Social and Cultural Complexity.

The FRINGE series is a platform for cross-disciplinary analysis and the development of 'area studies without borders'. 'FRINGE' is an acronym standing for Fluidity, Resistance, Invisibility, Neutrality, Grey zones, and Elusiveness – categories fundamental to the themes that the Centre supports. The oxymoron in the notion of a 'FRINGE *centre*' expresses our interest in (1) the tensions between 'area studies' and more traditional academic disciplines; and (2) social, political and cultural trajectories from 'centres to fringes' and inversely from 'fringes to centres'.

The Babushka Phenomenon brings a new yet entirely apposite angle to the FRINGE series as it explores the social production of ageing after Soviet socialism. Re-centring the study of informal care, the volume looks at the traditional role of the Russian *babushka* – a term describing not simply a grandmother, but more generally a woman adopting, performatively, the position of a socially old member of society. The book carefully repositions this figure, hinged between valued caregiver and marginal social status, in the context of a post-Soviet redefinition of the nation and its boundaries. By so doing, and in line with the FRINGE series' focus on cross-disciplinary analysis, this study merges critical area studies with the sociology of ageing and feminist and cultural studies. It also transcends the border of traditional area studies by extending the view outwards: the Russian diaspora in the UK and transnational family-making. As such, it takes its place within a FRINGE series focused on how a radically re- or de-centred view can productively challenge long-received notions, norms and ideologies.

Uta Staiger and Peter Zusi

Preface

I remember the moment when the idea of writing a book about women's ageing after Soviet socialism first came to me. It was the summer of 2013, and I was on a train with a group of colleagues from various former Soviet republics. We were participating in a three-year seminar for researchers interested in exploring the intersection of gender, sexuality and power. The train took us from Uzhhorod, a city in western Ukraine where the seminar was held, to Kyiv, from where we would return to our home countries. Taking part in that seminar was one of the most important experiences of my life. It is impossible to overstate how much it gave me: it resulted in new friendships, professional collaborations and the sense of belonging to an incredible community.

Many colleagues from the seminar were transitioning to Western academia, as academia in our region was still recovering from the economic and political turbulence caused by the end of Soviet socialism. Few post-Soviet universities could provide us with freedoms ranging from choosing a research focus on gender and sexuality to travelling to international conferences.

From the experience of my colleagues, I learned that someone like me, who was born in the Soviet Union and belonged to the first generation in my extended family to graduate from a university, could pursue a doctoral degree abroad. It was also in Uzhhorod that I had my last experience of working, arguing, dreaming and dancing with 'my people' in the same physical space for a long time. Soon after the seminar ended, I would have to learn how to maintain close connections online with my friends scattered around the world. But I still keep a picture of Uzhhorod in my wallet as a reminder of the time when I was truly happy.

By the time I was on the train, I had already written a book about the women of my generation who, like me, were the first to experience the post-Soviet changes in matrimonial norms. In that book, I explored how and why the post-socialist conditions influenced many women to

postpone marriage or remain unmarried. Since my first research project did not provide all the answers I had hoped for, I was working on my next book, which examined the impact of post-socialism on women's reproductive decisions.

On the train from Uzhhorod to Kyiv, on my way back to my home city of Minsk, the capital of Belarus, it occurred to me that I had enough curiosity and determination to write a third book – on women's experiences of ageing after Soviet socialism. The idea of writing three related books was not random: it was inspired by the Belarusian Nobel Prize winner in literature, Svetlana Alexievich, whose trilogy on war trauma had a profound impact on me as a young person.

My first books were written in Russian and published in Russia, as nothing was more important to me at that time than talking with 'my people' – those who, like me, spoke Russian and had experienced life during late socialism and after it. By the time I knew I wanted to write a book about ageing after Soviet socialism, my aspiration was to reach a wider audience. For that, I had to write it in English. However, since the idea for this book first came to me, the reality I was familiar with 12 years ago has dramatically changed.

When I began my trilogy, it was analytically acceptable to examine the changing norms of personal life in Belarus, Ukraine and Russia not through a comparative lens, but as part of a region with a shared Soviet past, where transformations in the private sphere were of a similar nature.

Fifteen years later, some similarities remain, but the differences have had such devastating effects that they can no longer be ignored. The main distinction is that the administration of Vladimir Putin has pursued the project of reinstating Russia's status as a geopolitical power, which has resulted in a long-term war in Ukraine. For my home country of Belarus, the Kremlin's ambitions have materialised in the form of supporting the authoritarian regime of Alexander Lukashenko, which severely punishes those whose opinions deviate from the official line.

My initial plan in writing this book was to focus on Belarus. My mother's painful experience of navigating the first post-socialist years was the driving force behind my motivation. She had lost her previously stable job after the collapse of the Soviet Union, just before reaching pensionable age. Her life had never been easy, but nothing hit her harder than losing her sense of being an accomplished, economically independent professional. Trained for the Soviet planned economy, she had not been prepared to start a new career, and nor had the job market policies provided solutions for mature individuals attempting to find their footing

in the new economic reality. Like millions of other women, my mother had to quickly adapt, learning to juggle multiple precarious, undocumented jobs. My father was luckier in retaining his job, but in the early 1990s, the organisation he worked for, like many others, did not pay wages regularly.

I wanted to write about ageing in the context with which I was most familiar. However, when it came to creating the conditions for the project to take shape, its focus shifted to Russia. From my previous experience, I knew that writing a research book without institutional support was extremely difficult. To complete my trilogy, I applied for PhD scholarships in various countries with different versions of my research proposal: one focused on Belarus, one on Russia, and one on both from a comparative perspective.

Ten years ago, it was easier to present a project on a large, influential country than to explain why the case of Belarus – a country many of my international colleagues struggle to locate on the world map – was worth scholarly attention. It was only with Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 that many commentators outside eastern Europe stopped marking the territory of the former Soviet Union as 'Russia'. But in truth, nor did I believe that the international academic community would find a research project on ageing in Belarus interesting. I acknowledge that I did not push hard enough to make my Belarus-focused proposal theoretically compelling.

It was during the largest anti-authoritarian protests in Belarusian history in 2020, supported by international communities, that I gained the confidence to discuss my home country as an important and interesting research context. But 10 years ago, the version of my research proposal that focused on women's ageing in Russia after Soviet socialism won a PhD scholarship at Birkbeck College, University of London. I am extremely grateful for that opportunity. The 10 years I lived and worked in London changed my life once again. I could not have wished for better mentors, colleagues and friends than those I had during my doctoral and postdoctoral years.

Back in 2013, I did not anticipate writing a book about women living in a country that would later launch a full-scale war, taking lives daily in a neighbouring nation. The data for this book were collected between 2016 and 2020, and this monograph focuses on pre-war Russian society. Since 2022, Russia has been undergoing political and economic transformations that lie beyond the scope of my analysis. However, this book provides insight into how an autocratic system with imperialistic ambitions sustains itself by reinforcing social hierarchies. It delegates to

grandmothers the responsibility for helping their children and grandchildren combine paid work with family life amidst growing existential uncertainties and economic risks. As a result, it is the unrecognised contributions of older women to society that make life liveable for many families in Russia.

Acknowledgements

This book about the 'invisible' labour of older women that mitigates the effects of post-socialism for their children and grandchildren would not have been possible without the support and encouragement of many people. I am deeply grateful to all the women who participated in my study. Though I cannot name them, to protect their anonymity, I cherish the memories of speaking with each of them.

I would like to thank Sasha Roseneil, Lynne Segal and Brendan McGeever for the privilege of learning from them and for the sense of community they provided me during my time at Birkbeck. I also want to acknowledge the intellectual influence of Elena Gapova, Naomi Segal, Richard Mole, Anne White and Alena Ledeneva – scholars who, in different ways, have contributed to my growth as a researcher. I am sincerely grateful to Marina Yusupova, Elena Borisova, Grazina Bielousova, Volodymyr Ishchenko and the anonymous reviewers for their invaluable feedback on various drafts of this book. All mistakes are mine and mine alone. I would like to thank Chris Penfold, commissioning editor at UCL Press, assistant commissioning editor Elliot Beck, copyeditor Carol Fellingham Webb, and all the production team for their support and the professionalism they brought to the project.

This book has benefited from many sources of institutional support, including a PhD scholarship awarded by the School of Social Sciences, History and Philosophy at Birkbeck College, University of London; travel funding provided by Birkbeck in 2016 and the Davis Travel Grant in 2017; the Civil Society Scholar Award (IN2017-37182) by the Open Society Foundations in 2017; and the Leverhulme Early Career Fellowship (2021–4).

Portions of two book chapters have been published previously in other works. Fragments of Chapter 1 appeared in 'Enacting the *babushka*: Older Russian women "doing" age, gender and class by accepting the role of a stoic carer', published in *Ageing and Society* 44 (2024), 457–74, by Cambridge University Press. Portions of Chapter 5 appeared

in 'Narrating the gender order: Why do older single women in Russia say that they do not want to be in relationships with men?' published in *Gender and Choice after Socialism*, edited by Lynne Attwood, Elisabeth Schimpfössl and Marina Yusupova (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

Last but not least, I want to thank my mother, Valentina Shadrina, for taking care of me throughout my life and for being my greatest inspiration. In this book about Russian grandmothers, I also want to acknowledge the labour of my grandparents, who helped my parents take care of me. During my childhood, my grandmother, Evdokia, would make lunch every day so that my grandfather, Vasily, could pick me up from school with a hot meal, while my parents were at work. My parents and grandparents hoped I would live in a better world as an adult. But they could not have imagined that I would write my books far away from home, which is, at present, not a nice place to live.

I would like to dedicate this book to all those who find themselves surviving the global trend of authoritarianism, imperialism and war.

Introduction
How Russians procreate, grow older and die

'Is something not quite right here?'

On 19 May 2011, around three thousand older people, predominantly women in their late sixties and early seventies, attempted to occupy all the seats on the Moscow Metro trains. The message of the public action was written on the white nylon vests the group were wearing over their clothes: 'Is something not quite right here? Have children!' (*Что-то не так? Рожайте!*). The organiser of the event, Tatiana Prusova, head of the civic organisation 'The Older Generation', explained to the press that the aim of the flash mob was to draw public attention to what she defined as Russia's demographic problem. 'We just want to say to our young people that if they don't want to see only old people on the underground, they must think about having children', she said (Pominova and Ilyina 2011).

I would like to begin this book by discussing that performance, which the press and bloggers briefly noted as a curiosity, but the public largely ignored. It did not attract public attention for two reasons. First, it is socially acceptable for older women in Russia to encourage younger people to have children sooner. Second, older women as a social group are commonly perceived as unimportant, even when they engage in rare collective action such as the performance on the Moscow Metro. These two phenomena – older women's involvement in social reproduction and their marginalisation – are, as this book will discuss, the main factors that shape the experience of ageing in Russia after Soviet socialism.

I was unable to find information about the civic organisation 'The Older Generation' beyond references in media coverage of the flash mob. However, I doubt that the performance was a grassroots initiative: it appeared well organised and well funded. Photographs from the event suggest that a manufacturer, not the women themselves, produced the nylon vests they wore. At the same time, the slogan the vests displayed

echoed concerns that the Russian government has articulated since the collapse of the Soviet Union. While it is common for older women in Russia to hold younger people accountable for their reproductive plans, the state and the public use different arguments to promote procreation. Older women typically speak of motherhood as the primary source of meaning and purpose when advocating for childbearing. In contrast, official rhetoric relies on concepts such as 'demographic problem', 'population growth' and 'national interest'. These observations lead me to believe that the flash mob was a state-funded project.

Some commentators on social media suggested that the organisers, allegedly connected to the government, offered extra cash to participants in the flash mob as an incentive to supplement their meagre pensions (Ragulin 2011). Indeed, receiving small benefits for civic engagement from state-controlled institutions is not uncommon among less-privileged, older Russian women, as discussed in Chapter 5. However, for so many individuals to agree to participate in the public action, its agenda had to resonate with their values and concerns.

The first message of the slogan displayed on the women's vests – 'Is something not quite right here?' – referred to the unusual crowd of older passengers on the underground. It presented population ageing as a pressing problem that required an urgent solution. As in many other countries, the age balance of Russia has been shifting towards a predominance of older people (FSSS 2021, 21). However, the problematic meaning that is often ascribed to this global trend varies from one country to another, serving various political aims.

In the US and the UK, following the marketisation of welfare that started in the 1980s and the global financial crisis of 2008, a popular narrative in the mass media blamed the declining prospects of economic stability for young adults on the increasing number of retirees. This rhetoric effectively diverted public attention away from the responsibility of politicians and bankers for the growing inequality within, not between, different age cohorts (Segal 2013, 46–7).

In Russia, the acute socio-economic crisis following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 was accompanied by a population decline that had already begun in the 1980s. Against the backdrop of this trend and Russia losing its dominant status in the erstwhile USSR, conservative politicians and journalists incited a moral panic about how the nation was 'dying out' (Rivkin-Fish 2010, 710). While it is difficult to imagine someone having a child prompted by the aim of 'saving the nation', those who experienced the first post-socialist years as adults are well acquainted with this rhetoric.

In response to slow population growth in certain regions of the Russian Federation and severe depopulation in others, in 2007 the government introduced the Strategy for Demographic Policy. This document, driven by the projection that the small cohort of women born in the 1990s were unlikely to have a high number of children, raised concerns about whether a lower number of working-age people in the near future would be able to fund the pensions of a larger number of retirees (Golubeva and Emelyanova 2020, 96–7).

Some Russian demographers have pointed out that ageing may not be Russia's biggest economic problem, as many men die before they retire anyway, leaving a considerable amount of pension contributions unclaimed (Vishnevsky and Shcherbakova 2019, 160). However, influential nationalist politicians of that time interpreted calls to reduce male mortality instead of promoting childbearing as an 'anti-patriotic' approach (Rivkin-Fish 2010, 710).

The second message displayed on the women's vests during the performance on the Moscow Metro – 'Have children!' – echoed Russia's culture of reproductive pressure. The norm of urging people of reproductive age, especially young women, to have children is rooted in Soviet pronatalism. It pervaded all social institutions, including family, education, healthcare, policymaking, and mainstream culture, thus pressuring young women to have children sooner rather than later.

The Soviet pronatalist agenda was driven by the colossal human losses incurred during the Second World War and Stalin's repressions. The war broke families and took the lives of approximately 27 million Soviet citizens. To replace the dead, the state provided material support for post-war mothers and tacitly encouraged men to have extra-marital children. Contraception was not widely available in the Soviet Union until its late phases. Initially legalised in 1920, abortion was re-criminalised in 1936 and re-legalised again in 1955 (Nakachi 2021, 5, 20). Vladimir Putin's demographic policies combine some elements of post-war pronatalism by providing material support for certain categories of mothers and urging women who request abortion to change their decision.[1]

Since 2006, in addition to maternity allowance, childcare allowance during maternity leave and monthly-paid child benefit, the government has introduced monthly payments to low-income families with children, a one-off subsidy for families with the second and each subsequent child, known as 'maternity (family) capital', and mortgage subsidies for families with two or more children. The 'maternity capital' is a lump sum that can be cashed in once a child turns three; it can be spent on the child's education or the family's housing or paid into

the mother's pension fund. One problem of this benefit is that it does not impact the traditional estrangement of Russian fathers from family labour (Rivkin-Fish 2010, 712). Another problem is that social policies pay little attention to work–life balance, and have not remedied a shortage of pre-school day-care facilities or inflexible working hours (Borozdina et al. 2016, 61). These ongoing challenges that women face in combining paid employment with family care make a new baby boom highly unlikely.

Russia's reproductive pattern

Fuelled by concerns about redefining the nation following the demise of the USSR (Rivkin-Fish 2010, 705), the flash mob on the Moscow underground blamed demographic ageing on the younger generation's alleged refusal to have children. In 1999, following the economic and social upheavals related to the end of Soviet socialism, Russia did witness one of the lowest total fertility rates (TFRs) in the world, of 1.16. This figure indicated the average number of children a woman was calculated to have in her lifetime (Perelli-Harris and Isupova 2013, 141; Zakharov 2008, 968). However, at the end of the twentieth century, a significant decrease in fertility became a global trend. Affected by the proliferation of contraception and women's almost universal access to higher education, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, in most countries TRFs were well below the replacement level of 2.1 live births per woman (Buchanan and Rotkirch 2013, 5–9).

According to World Bank (2019) data, the total fertility rate in Russia rose in 2008 to 1.5 and to 1.7 in 2013, levelling with a fertility rate of 1.5 in Germany in 2019. For comparison, in 2019, the TRF was slightly higher in the UK (1.6) and slightly lower in Poland and Croatia (1.4), Finland and Greece (1.3) and Italy (1.2). While postponing parenthood is a global phenomenon, demographers name gender equality policies that facilitate women's earnings and work–life balance (Buchanan and Rotkirch 2013, 9), as well as improvements in health and living standards (Nettle 2011), among the key factors that stimulate women to have children later in life. With the norm of having at least one child, Russia's low fertility rate is a result of the common trend among most women to bear a child at a young age and choose not to have more children later in life (Perelli-Harris and Isupova 2013, 141).

To achieve the ambitious goal of exceeding the population replacement level by 2025, the government introduced the childcare benefit known as 'maternity (family) capital' (Kazimov and Zakharov 2021,

406). However, despite the monetary incentives, the fertility rate has remained below the announced goal (FSSS 2022, 103).

Researchers acknowledge that there have been attempts to reform social policies to help women combine careers with family life. These include the 2011 policy that enables women to claim compensation for being fired while pregnant, the 2013 reform that made it illegal for employers to require job applicants to supply details of their age, race, religion, marital status, sex, or physical appearance, and the short-lived 2016 criminalisation of domestic violence. However, in parallel, gender policies have shifted towards more conservatism. This tendency is exemplified by the introduction of penalties for 'gay propaganda among minors', prosecuting feminist activists, and the partial decriminalisation of domestic violence in 2017 (Johnson et al. 2021, 509).[2]

Some scholars argue that, by failing to address the numerous forms of discrimination women face in Russia, pronatalist policies are more indicative of the government's short-term focus on mobilising electoral support than a genuine effort to increase fertility (Kazimov and Zakharov 2021, 407).

Although the populist narrative blames population ageing on women's reluctance to have more children, research shows that Russian women actually want larger families. A 2009 survey found that, on average, women in Russia desired 2.28 children compared with the projected 1.78. Scholars link this gap to rising poverty risks for families with children and the increasing importance of education and careers, which make it challenging for women to balance paid work with family responsibilities (Perelli-Harris and Isupova 2013, 146–7).

It is important to note that the post-Soviet pronatalism focuses on specific segments of the female population. For instance, there is a strong media narrative criticising women from central Asia who come to Russia in search of jobs and use its health service to give birth (Kuznetsova 2017). Likewise, poor rural Russian women, who require social assistance to make ends meet, are subjected to criticism in the media for having children at all.[3] Women who have disabilities, are addicted to alcohol or drugs, or are in prison are also often the targets of such criticism.

There is another important aspect that makes Russia an interesting case study when discussing population ageing and social reproduction. The performance on the Moscow Metro, which I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, portrayed the disproportionately large number of retirees as a future to be avoided. However, Russia's Soviet and post-Soviet reproductive patterns would not be sustainable without the extensive involvement of grandmothers in childrearing and housework.

Irrespective of their life circumstances, many Russian women willingly become mothers sooner rather than later based on the expectation that their own mothers will help them combine motherhood with paid work (Rotkirch 2000; Utrata 2011, 2015).

Outside Russia, this model of childrearing, with mothers and grandmothers at the centre of family life, is also typical of many African American families (Pearson et al. 1990). In the US, this family structure developed as a legacy of the transatlantic slave trade, which separated families. Another contributing factor was deindustrialisation in the mid-twentieth century, which made African American men economically vulnerable and often unable to provide for their families. In Russia, the matrifocal family emerged in response to the human losses caused by the Second World War. It was also shaped by Soviet gender politics, characterised by high levels of female employment and low levels of male participation in domestic and care work (Ashwin et al. 2013, 397).

The significantly shorter lifespan of men, along with a high divorce rate, means that many heterosexual middle-aged and older women in Russia do not have male partners. These demographic trends make grandmothers available to help their adult daughters, who often raise their children with little or no involvement from the fathers.

The women who participated in the flash mob on the Moscow underground may well have been among those who have taken on the task of compensating for fathers' failure to share responsibility for family wellbeing alongside mothers. Yet, they were willing to present themselves publicly as a metaphor for a catastrophic future rather than claim recognition for their unpaid family labour. Given that the contribution of grandmothers to family wellbeing often goes unrecognised in the formal economy and is rarely appreciated by their children and grandchildren (Utrata 2011, 2015), such a self-deprecating attitude is not surprising. However, this book seeks to do justice to older women by making their contribution to social reproduction visible.

Reproduction at the heart of politics

This book will explore how post-Soviet cutbacks to the welfare system have shaped forms of social organisation that offer a specific social position to older women and how the latter negotiate it. As I will discuss in the following chapters, the role in informal welfare that Russian society delegates to older women limits their social participation to selfless caregiving. Meanwhile, in the popular imaginary their family labour is

interpreted as driven by their affection for their families, rather than recognised as a valuable contribution to the common good.

The question that prompted my research was how women of pensionable age see their position in society. This book argues that older women's involvement in their children's and grandchildren's lives goes far beyond mere domestic chores. Based on their accounts, I interpret their role as one of the most significant factors in enabling the 'ontological security' (Giddens 1991, 45) of the younger generation. Giddens describes 'ontological security' as a stable source of meaning and continuity in one's life.

Russians who came of age after the end of Soviet socialism, unlike their parents, navigate their lives without state-provided housing, guaranteed employment, and affordable childcare. In the face of new risks brought about by the market economy and the Kremlin's ambition to restore Russia's status as a centre of geopolitical influence, older women's practical and economic support makes the lives of younger Russians liveable. By encouraging the younger generation to maintain Russia's traditional reproductive pattern of having children sooner rather than later, they foster a sense of stability and family continuity.

In other words, older women play an important role in mitigating the effects of post-socialism and enabling Russian society to reproduce itself. From my perspective, it is the unspoken magnitude of this mission that provides older women with a sense of satisfaction and motivates them to look ahead with purpose and hope for the future.

The political character of my sociological inquiry into ageing in Russia is inspired by feminist research which places reproductive labour at the centre of politics (Pateman 1988; Gal and Kligman 2000; Federici 2012; Briggs 2017). These scholars understand reproductive labour as work that extends beyond bearing and raising children. In addition to providing practical, financial and emotional care for family members, it includes creating safety, building community and fostering kinship relationships. This work – critical to the production and maintenance of a labour force – has historically been positioned outside the formal economy and imagined as belonging to the private sphere (Briggs 2017, 2). Following the feminist project of politicising women's 'invisible' labour, this book examines the human cost of post-socialism for those whose lives are often perceived as relics of the past, yet in fact actively shape Russia's present and, in many ways, inform its possible futures.

By discussing the strategies available to older Russian women to practise their membership in society in accordance with gender, age and class norms, I explore the link between economic, intimate and political

citizenship in later life. My book draws on the Marshallian notion of citizenship as full membership in a community (Marshall 1950, 28). Central to my analysis is the feminist perspective which conceptualises citizenship as a combination of the individual's status in a community and the related practices of inclusion and exclusion (Le Feuvre and Roseneil 2014, 529).

I situate the experiences of older women within the context of economic transformations, shifting social values and technological advancements that Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2001) describe as 'the processes of individualisation'. Initiated in the late twentieth century, these processes are characterised by a movement away from life trajectories previously determined by social institutions, such as family or class, towards biographies of one's own making (Beck 1992, 137).

Over recent decades, this theory has faced substantial criticism for its Eurocentric perspective, which universalises the experiences of the Western middle class. Additionally, it has been challenged for promoting a masculine subject as the norm – one allegedly capable of navigating modern risks without support from family, the welfare system or social networks. Yet, most critics do not dispute the thesis that individuals bear increasing responsibility in responding to the uncertainties of today's world (Dawson 2012, 308–9).

The case of older Russian women offers an opportunity to expand debates about individualisation from a new perspective. In most Western societies, the shift from 'inheritance' to 'individualisation' unfolded amidst gradual economic transformations; in Russia, however, it was triggered by the economic catastrophe following the collapse of the Soviet Union (Walker 2009, 531). Consequently, prominent aspects of individualisation, such as the increasingly deregulated labour market and the detraditionalisation of intimate life (Le Feuvre and Roseneil 2014, 529), arrived in Russia with startling abruptness.

Considering post-socialist Russia as a whole, alongside the state's withdrawal from providing free housing, affordable childcare and guaranteed employment in the early 1990s, forms of private life such as extramarital cohabitation, childbearing outside marriage and single living became more widespread. However, while the institution of the family was undergoing detraditionalisation across most regions, since Vladimir Putin's return to the presidency for a third term in 2012, Russia's internal political discourse has been dominated by a push to restore 'traditional family values' (Shadrina 2015). By promoting the heterosexual nuclear family as the Russian traditional way of life, this rhetoric fails to reflect the lived realities of millions of citizens.

Moral concerns about the decline of the family, as articulated by Putin's administration, echo similar trends in the US and UK that started in the 1970s and persisted through the 1990s. Motivated by a desire to reduce welfare spending, conservative governments in those countries attributed various social problems to the rise in single-parent families (Roseneil and Mann 1996, 209). In essence, the rhetoric about defending 'traditional family values' aligns with the neoliberal project of shifting responsibility for individual wellbeing on to citizens themselves.

Meanwhile, in Russia's North Caucasus, traditional structures have been reinstated. In particular, in Dagestan and Chechnya, with the withdrawal of the state, substitute social networks based on religious community and the extended family led to the reincarnation of such practices as child marriage, marriage by abduction and virginity testing, thus intensifying patriarchal control over the private sphere (Aliyeva 2020, 389–91). From this perspective, while intimate life has been detraditionalising in some regions of Russia, this process has encountered significant resistance in others. Moreover, the impact of individualisation varies considerably across different social groups.

In exploring the impact of individualisation on families, many scholars focus on the experiences of younger and middle-aged people whose lives are thought to exemplify the social change. For example, Ehrenreich and Hochschild (2003), Lan (2006), Esping-Andersen (2009) and Le Feuvre and Roseneil (2014) have shown that when women in Western countries joined the labour force en masse in the second half of the twentieth century, they found themselves unable to combine paid employment with reproductive labour without external support. These scholars illustrate how class and racialised differences intensified, as middle-class women pursued careers and motherhood by outsourcing family labour to less-privileged women of the same age.

In the meantime, Solari (2017) poses the question of how the changes that younger Ukrainians face in the context of post-Soviet socioeconomic transformations affect the lives of their parents. She explores how many middle-aged Ukrainian grandmothers work as caregivers in Italy and the US to provide economic support for their adult children, who are raising families back home. Her study demonstrates that Ukrainian nation-building occurs transnationally, in many ways, at the expense of women's labour migration.

Building on the feminist perspective, this study emphasises age as an additional axis of social inequality exacerbated by individualisation processes. Focusing on the experiences of older women residing in Samara, an administrative centre situated about a thousand kilometres

southeast of Moscow, as well as Russian women who migrated to the UK, the book explores the human cost of post-socialism. It illustrates that in Russia, the norm of grandmothers actively involved in supporting their children with childcare, housing and housework has shaped the marginal social position of the *babushka* – a post-professional and post-sexual member of society who, paradoxically, is primarily perceived as a recipient of social benefits rather than an active contributor.

Based on my analysis, as they grow older, Russian women model their identities in relation to the babushka figure – either by distancing themselves from it for as long as possible or by adopting this position while actively seeking ways to add value to their lives and receive social recognition. I discuss this figure and alternative models of self-presentation for older Russian women in Chapter 1. This book focuses on the social production of ageing, which I understand as a combination of formal and informal regulations in relation to older people. I also consider ageing as an individual experience. I conceptualise the social process of ageing as a diminishing ability of individuals to resist societal structures that tend to limit their access to common goods as they grow older. Against this backdrop, I explore women's age-, gender- and class-related norms of self-presentation and social participation.

I find that the extensive involvement of older Russian women in performing reproductive labour shapes a gender-, age- and class-specific subjectivity, distinct from the self-centred individual promoted by the Western ideology of 'successful ageing'. Contrary to the neoliberal imperative to take on responsibility for one's own care to 'postpone' ageing, for many older Russian women 'successful ageing' is associated with altruistic care for others. The responsibility that society delegates to older women to mitigate the impacts of post-socialism often comes at the cost of neglecting their careers and personal lives. However, before discussing my study in more detail, I would like to explain why a book about ageing in Russia focuses on women's experiences exclusively.

'Nature doesn't need men': Russia's pattern of ageing and mortality

I met Zinaida[4] (70), a retired factory worker, in the summer of 2016 in Samara where I was collecting individual biographical interviews with older Russian women for my PhD project on ageing in Russia after Soviet socialism. I was kindly hosted by Marina, a close friend and a Samara native. I met Zinaida through her daughter Zoya, who was also friends

with Marina. Having learnt about my work, Zoya became very excited and suggested I interview her mother, who, according to her, would be delighted to talk to me. When I called Zinaida, she invited me to her daughter's apartment for the interview.

Zinaida was visiting from another city to help her daughter out with childcare. For the younger woman my project was an opportunity to introduce her mother, who did not have a social circle in Samara, to new people and to have some entertaining experience. Zinaida, a tall lean woman with short hair dyed black, talked with me in the kitchen while sifting through dry herbs for home-made tea and warming up lunch for her two grandchildren, who were watching television in the living room. When I asked her what her family situation was, Zinaida told me that she was a widow: her first husband had died young in an accident, while her second husband had succumbed to 'old age' when he was 60. She explained,

> Men don't live long. I mean an old man is a rare thing. Fifty-sixty is their limit. It's because they've accomplished their function on earth. Nature doesn't need men. Their function is just that. Male animals are not needed. That's why a female spider kills a male one with her poison. He's no longer needed. And it's the same with humans…

While the trope of 'spider cannibalism' Zinaida referred to with an ironic smile was meant as a joke, to a certain degree her description of this phenomenon resembled the dominant Soviet gender contract of 'the mother-worker' (Temkina and Rotkirch 1997, 16). Soviet ideology interpreted marriage as a practical unit with reproduction at its core. While delegating to women the responsibility of carrying out housework and family care on top of their paid work, it limited its expectations of men to their monetary contribution and their part in procreation (Utrata 2015, 179). From this instrumentalist perspective, marriage makes little sense to a woman after her reproductive years have passed.

The irony in Zinaida's passage, however, suggests that her relationships with men were not as cold and instrumental as the quotation may imply. Of course, she did not believe that, like spiders, female human beings should kill their male partners after the latter have accomplished their reproductive function, nor did she truly believe that 'nature does not need men'. Perhaps the reference to nature that she used to explain men's premature mortality could be seen as her way of coming to terms with the deaths of her significant others. If it is programmed by nature

that men die early, it is women's shared destiny to bury their husbands; that is how things are meant to be and one has no other option but to accept this reality.

When it comes to irony in speech, one of its functions is to turn pain into laughter by presenting a problematic situation as comical. This effect is achieved by reference to a discrepancy between what was expected or desired and what has actually taken place. While presented in a humorous way, this discrepancy often indicates disappointment, which the speaker is trying to conceal in order to present themself as in control of their emotions and to avoid causing emotional distress to their audience (Sperber and Wilson 1981; Kumon-Nakamura et al. 1995; Dews et al. 1995).

From this perspective, Zinaida's use of irony could be read as a bitter reference to a thwarted wish for her marriages to last longer. The irony enabled her to diminish the emotionally loaded subject. In addition, by naturalising men's shorter lifespan, Zinaida avoided discussing her possible intimate needs in the context of the normative expectation that women of pensionable age will have no desires beyond their role of grandmother. I explore how this expectation shapes women's practices of presenting themselves to the world throughout this book. Below I discuss Russia's ageing pattern and the reasons for the premature mortality of Russian men that in many ways informs the life trajectories of older women.

Conventionally, the ageing of a population is measured by the old-age dependency ratio (OADR), an indicator obtained by dividing the number of individuals aged over 65 by the number of individuals aged 20–64. It is projected that in Russia the OADR will increase from 25.3 per cent in 2020 to 41.7 per cent in 2050 (IIASA 2020). Based on this measurement, the pace of population ageing in Russia is one of the slowest in Europe, following Belarus and Moldova. However, the OADR does not reflect the fact that 65 years of age can denote different points of ageing in different times and places (Sanderson and Scherbov 2008, 3). To illustrate this: in 2010 life expectancy at birth for men in Russia was 61.7 years in comparison to 78.5 in the UK and 79.5 in Italy. While, at that time, for Russian men the age of 65 was hard to achieve, Italian and British men aged 65 still had almost 15 years of life ahead of them (IIASA 2020).

To avoid the confusion of categorising individuals as old based simply on their chronological age, Sanderson and Scherbov (2008, 5) offer the concept of 'prospective age'. According to this concept, individuals are seen as old based on the age at which their life expectancy is 15 years or less. These researchers also indicated that the proportion of people

whose remaining life expectancy is 15 years or less would remain the same globally in 2025 as it was in 1955. This understanding of ageing challenges the alarmist discourse about the growing number of the elderly. However, when it comes to the *prospective* old-age dependency ratio, in contrast to the conventional OADR, this measurement is higher in Russia than in the UK, Germany and the US, which reflects higher mortality rates there. Currently, the age at which prospective life expectancy is 15 years or less for men in Russia is 10 years lower than in most countries of the global West (IIASA 2020).

To return to the flash mob on the Moscow underground mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, it was no accident that the participants in the action were mostly older women. First, it is less common for older Russian men to hold younger people accountable about their reproductive plans. Second, the gender composition of that event illustrated Russia's substantial gap in life expectancy between the sexes, which was 13.3 years in 2000 but decreased to 10 years in 2019 (FSSS 2021, 46). According to the official statistics, the proportion of females in the population increases significantly from the age of 40 onwards; by 59 years of age, women outnumber men by 23 per cent, with this number rising to 60 per cent by 69 years of age (FSSS 2021, 21).

The significant rise in life expectancy that has taken place in most Western countries over the past half-century is explained by a drastic expansion of control over diseases of the circulatory system, cancers and other non-communicable diseases, as well as external causes of death. Russia's shorter lifespan is primarily caused by deaths from cardiovascular diseases and external causes in men of working age (Vishnevsky 2014, 4). According to the Lancet (2019, 1205), one in two Russian men of working age died prematurely because of alcohol in the early 1990s, with life expectancy in men reaching an absolute low of 57 years in 1994. In 2003, annual adult per capita alcohol consumption of 20.4 litres was the reason behind almost half of all deaths in working-age men.

In 2015–16 a set of policies aiming to reduce mortality, promote a healthy way of life and prevent non-communicable diseases was launched by the Russian government (Golubeva and Emelyanova 2020, 95). As a result, between 2003 and 2017 the excessive consumption of alcohol dropped by 54 per cent, causing a decline of around 50 per cent in cardiovascular deaths, homicides, suicides and fatalities from transport accidents. However, the annual alcohol consumption per capita of 11.7 litres in 2016 still makes Russia one of the heaviest-drinking countries in the world (Lancet 2019, 1205). Even with life expectancy in Russia reaching its historic peak in 2018, at almost 68 years for men and

78 years for women (World Health Organization 2019, ix), it is still one of the lowest in Europe. Researchers attribute Russia's deficit in longevity to the lack of gender-specific actions to promote a healthy lifestyle (Golubeva and Emelyanova 2020, 106). Consequently, while many men die prematurely, the available way of social reproduction in Russia produces a power imbalance between women of different generations, often placing grandmothers in a secondary position compared with mothers (Utrata 2011, 2015). I discuss power relations between women of different generation in conventional Russian families in Chapter 3.

Studying women and ageing in Russia

When I ask the participants in my research projects what signifies the transition from middle to old age for them, most point to a sense of exclusion from previously accessible forms of social participation. While biological ageing is an undeniable process, formal regulations and social norms impose meaning on later stages of life that often results in marginalising practices. Reaching pensionable age is the most powerful marker that sets the division between middle and old age. While pension systems were invented to ensure the social inclusion of individuals after they can no longer perform paid work, the meaning conventionally associated with ageing and social benefits often results in implicit and explicit forms of bias.

To examine institutional and cultural practices of meaning attribution to later stages of women's lives in Russia and the strategies of individuals to respond to the social production of ageing, I have explored how older women are portrayed in popular Russian films, novels, television shows and internet memes. Another set of data for this book came from 37 biographical interviews with Russian women aged 60 and over. In the summer of 2016, I collected 23 interviews in Samara, and in the autumn of 2016 and spring of 2017 I collected 14 in London,[5] Manchester and Leeds, the British cities with the largest Russian diasporas.[6] Given that, in 2016, the pensionable age for women in Russia was 55, and had only recently increased from 60 to 63 in the UK, I established 60 as the lower age threshold for the participants in my project. Conducting interviews in two distinct contexts allowed me to explore women's experiences of growing older in the aftermath of Soviet socialism, both within Russia and in a global context.

The selection of my research location in Russia was influenced by my personal life journey. I chose Samara as my research site because my

friend, Marina, whom I mentioned earlier in this chapter, introduced me to a wide network of Samara-based people. Marina's friends introduced me to my potential interviewees – their older relatives and colleagues. Marina's connections also generously provided me with valuable insights into the local way of life. Beyond the advantages of having free accommodation and access to the local community, Samara possesses a unique atmosphere that makes it an ideal context for exploring women's experiences of ageing after Soviet socialism.

Inspired by Edward Said's essay 'Travelling Theories' (Said 1983, 226–47), the concept of 'travelling ideas' has been widely used in the social sciences to examine the historicity, cultural differences, translation and rearticulation of categories that have left their place of origin (Knapp 2005, 250). The transnational element of my study enables me to explore whether and how Russia-specific social norms related to ageing 'travel' with women when they move to another country. It also allows me to discuss aspects of social inequality that older Russian women face both within Russia and on a global scale.

Samara is located along the east bank of the River Volga. During the Soviet era, it was a centre for military industry and research and was closed to foreigners from the pre-war period until the end of the Soviet epoch (Ashwin 2000, 8). In 2016, when I carried out my fieldwork, its population was slightly more than one million people, 85.5 per cent of whom are ethnically Russian. The main types of economic activity in the Samara region were manufacturing industries, wholesale and retail trade, transport and communications, mining and quarrying, and services (FSSS 2011).

Since the collapse of the USSR, the city has been undergoing economic restructuring. A large number of highly educated people, especially those with mathematics, physics and engineering backgrounds, became unemployed and had to look for new sources of income (Hanson 1997, 408). In the 1990s, the women of Samara were the most negatively affected by the turbulence of the first post-Soviet decade, with the unemployment rate reaching 57 per cent (Ashwin 2000, 8). However, Samara survived the post-1989 economic collapse better than some other regions (Hanson 1997, 408).

During my fieldwork, the difference in life expectancy between men and women in Samara was one of the largest in the Russian Federation, with life expectancy for men being 62 years and for women 74 years, on average. At the same time, the divorce rate in Samara in 2015 was one of the highest in the country (FSSS 2022). Thus, owing to the traditional marriage pattern, according to which the male partner is expected to be

slightly older than his wife, by the pensionable age of 55 many heterosexual women in Samara were either divorced or widowed. While I did not plan to focus on the experiences of heterosexual women exclusively, none of my contacts in Samara, including local LGBT+ networks, were able to help me find non-heterosexual participants, probably owing to the homophobic atmosphere established by the state anti-gay project.[7]

In 2015, I moved to the UK from my home country of Belarus to pursue my PhD project. Through my involvement with the Russian-speaking diaspora in the UK I met a few women of pensionable age, who were willing to talk with me about their lives for my research. My own multiple identities provided me with an insider/outsider status in both Russia and the UK. My parents met in the 1960s, when my father's family relocated from Soviet Russia to what was then Soviet Belorussia.

With my Russia-based interviewees I shared a part of my heritage and the Soviet past. But my experience was also different from theirs as I am a Belarusian citizen who resides in the UK. With my UK-based participants I shared the experience of leaving home. The understanding of what it is like to witness the end of an epoch and to change one's social environment helped me build rapport with the interviewees who, like me, were newcomers in the UK.

Russian migration to the UK has risen significantly in recent decades, since the dissolution of the USSR (Pechurina 2017, 41). According to the UK's 2011 census, there were around 68,000 people in England and Wales who considered Russian as their main language. However, that number did not account for the precise extent of migration from Russia to the UK, as it could include Soviet-born, Russian-born and British-born Russians, along with Russian speakers or ethnic Russians from the ex-Soviet republics. While emigration to the UK from the Soviet Union consisted of different kinds of dissidents (Malyutina 2013, 82), the new wave has been identified as based on economic migration, including entrepreneurs, highly skilled professionals, students and low-paid workers (Terentyev 2007).

Marriage was among the most common pathways for immigrating to the UK within my sample. In the 1990s, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, many Russian women pursued marriage migration, influenced by economic instability. Other immigration pathways among my participants included seeking political asylum and Jewish emigration during the late Soviet period. Additionally, I interviewed a number of women who had relocated to Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania from Russia during the Soviet era and moved to the UK from the former Soviet Baltic states in the early 2000s.

My youngest participant had just turned 60; the oldest was 88. Of 37 women, 7 were married, while the remaining 30 were either widows or divorced. The interviewees represented a range of socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds. While the English term 'Russian' refers to both nationality and ethnicity, the Russian language distinguishes between the two with separate terms: *россиянка* for citizenship and *русская* for ethnic Russianness. I use 'Russian' to indicate my participants' nationality, and specify their ethnic background when it is relevant to my analysis of social inequality.

In terms of living arrangements, among the participants in my study there were women sharing households with their adult children and grandchildren, as well as women living on their own. I interviewed female entrepreneurs, low-paid workers, high-status professionals and fully retired women. By the time of the interviews, the participants were either Russian or British citizens or had the right to settle in Russia or in the UK. The UK-based women had migrated to the country as adults and had lived there for no less than five years. All the participants either were born in Russia or had lived in that country for several decades.

Book structure: crafting the political sociology of ageing in Russia

In Russia, a strong expectation that grandmothers will prioritise helping their adult daughters with childcare, housing and housework has shaped the social position of the babushka – an unpaid family carer who is believed not to have interests of her own. The babushka identity is associated with women's exit from paid employment. No longer seen as contributing to the formal economy, less-privileged retired women are expected to relinquish their entitlement to a sexual life. Deprived of the status of autonomous subjects, those who have adopted the babushka identity assert the value of their lives through altruistic care for others.

In contrast, women with higher levels of education who manage to retain their skilled, pre-pension-age jobs rely on their professional achievements and advanced cultural consumption in their practices of self-presentation. Chapter 1 explores how older Russian women negotiate their position within the post-socialist system of social inequality by discussing age-appropriate image-making.

It is grandmothers who play a crucial role in helping their children and grandchildren navigate the challenges brought about by the post-socialist withdrawal of state-sponsored housing and guaranteed

jobs. However, in mainstream culture, older women are often depicted in the most unflattering light. In Chapter 2, I discuss representations of 'monstrous' grandmothers in contemporary Russian literature and film. By focusing on the trope of 'bad' grandmothers, I explore the human costs of post-socialism. Based on my analysis, some grandmothers are portrayed as 'monsters' for demanding recognition of their sacrificial family labour. Others are accused of loving their offspring 'too much' or 'not enough'. Their 'wrong love' violates the expectation that grandmothers will perform altruistic care from a certain emotional distance. I demonstrate that the ostracism of older women who defy age- and gender-specific social expectations reflects the frustrations experienced by many working-age people regarding Russia's political environment and their limited prospects for social mobility within the post-socialist economic system.

Chapter 3 discusses women's multigenerational interdependence in the Russian family: while grandmothers are expected to be the primary source of help to their daughters who are combining motherhood with paid work, daughters are expected to provide long-term elder care should their parents need it. This chapter traces how socialist and post-socialist transformations have altered the status of grandmothers – from the female head of the household to a secondary role as their daughters' helpers. It also explores the strategies of Russian women who do not have grandchildren, or whose grandchildren live in another country, to build a network of care exchange that resembles women's multigenerational support systems in the conventional Russian family. The chapter argues that women's multigenerational support systems, based on a combination of care and control, both oppress women in various ways and at the same time provide them with a sense of meaning, appreciation and belonging.

Chapter 4 explores how older Russian women navigate contradictory gendered age norms in relation to employment in later life. The ideal of sacrificial maternal love motivates them to maintain their financial independence for as long as possible to protect their children from the burden of taking care of them. However, they also face pressure to retire earlier to make way for younger people and to assume the role of dedicated grandmother. The chapter finds that the most common scenario for older women in the Russian job market is to leave their better-paid pre-pension-age jobs and take on precarious positions to supplement their pensions while working flexible hours to help their adult children with childcare. The chapter challenges the common assumption that older women are economically inactive. It demonstrates that they find ways to

exercise some form of economic citizenship outside the formal economy, even when they consider themselves fully retired.

In Russia, older urban women as a social group are commonly portrayed as socialising on *lavochki* (benches). Traditional gatherings of *babushki* (the plural of babushka) on *lavochki* in the shared courtyards of Soviet-style apartment buildings present the most noticeable distinction between working-class older women and older women with a university education, who tend to distance themselves from this type of leisure activity because of its low cultural capital. Chapter 5 reflects on how women based in Russia and the UK interpret age and class inequality by discussing their choices of group-based leisure activities. It argues that even when some Russia-based women can afford the commercial leisure practices associated with the consumer-based standard of 'successful ageing', they often find it difficult to enact the self-centred neoliberal subject, in a context where gendered age norms encourage them to prioritise the interests of others.

Chapter 6 explores how access to post-pension-age employment affects the self-presentation of older women as (post-)sexual subjects. It discusses the two main narratives about older people's sexuality: the traditional one, which negates sexual desire in later life, and the more recent one, which encourages older people to remain sexually active as part of the ideology of 'successful ageing'. The chapter argues that in Russia, women's sexuality in later life is stigmatised based on the expectation that, after their reproductive years have passed, women will focus on contributing to the wellbeing of their children's families. While this expectation limits the range of options available to older women to exercise intimate citizenship to friendships and the role of grandmother, it also allows older Russian women to challenge 'couple-normativity' (Roseneil et al. 2020) and to critically reflect on the existing gender order. The chapter also finds that the ability of some women to retain skilled post-pension-age jobs provides them with a greater sense of being autonomous individuals who are entitled to pursue their own interests, including new romantic relationships with men.

In Chapter 7, I explore women's views on Russia's political system, articulated after the annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas in 2014, but before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. I demonstrate how their political stances are informed by their life trajectories and their positions within the system of social inequality. I find that, although far from being indifferent to various forms of injustice, most of my interviewees did not express a hope for societal change that would bring the Kremlin's autocratic project to an end. In general, citizens' scepticism

in authoritarian countries is the product of the dominant ideology. The regime imposes the belief that there is no viable alternative to it and severely punishes resistance. At the same time, the gender asymmetry in family responsibilities constitutes women's vulnerability, poorly compatible with confronting those in power. Busy doing reproductive work, older women often lack the resources to exercise the autonomy necessary for developing alternative political imaginaries.

In conclusion, I situate the case of Russia within a global trend of conservative political narratives and social policies. This trend is characterised by proposals to address the challenges of population ageing by shifting the responsibility for family wellbeing on to women, rather than investing in the public sphere. I argue for placing population ageing, pronatalism and reproductive labour at the centre of political sociology. As my book demonstrates, autocratic systems sustain themselves, in part, by tying women to unpaid family care, which constrains their opportunities for broader societal engagement.

Notes

1. Since 2007, state organisations in collaboration with the Russian Orthodox Church have launched pro-life information campaigns. Since 2011, medical institutions have been prohibited from performing abortions within 48 hours of the time when a woman requests this procedure and, for a pregnancy of up to 11 weeks, within seven days. During this time, the patient must undergo pre-abortion counselling, performed by doctors and social workers to persuade her to keep the child. Since 2012, medical professionals have been granted the right to refuse to perform abortion based on their religious views (Zhukova 2018). In 2024, Vladimir Putin signed a new law that imposes fines for 'propaganda against childbearing' and prohibits content that 'advocates against childbearing' from appearing in cultural products and on social media (Meduza 2024).
2. In 2023, Russia's Supreme Court banned any activities associated with LGBT+ rights, interpreting them as 'extremist' (BBC 2024).
3. See, for instance, the comments section on the website dedicated to the daytime talk show 'Мужское и женское' ('Male and Female'): Muzhskoe i Zhenskoe 2025, https://muzhskoe-zhenskoe.su/muzhskoe-zhenskoe-vypusk-ot-18-08-2023.html; https://muzhskoe-zhenskoe.su/muzhskoe-zhenskoe-vypusk-ot-18-01-2023.html#more-7391.
4. To protect the anonymity of the participants in my study, I use pseudonyms and alter the information that can potentially identify them.
5. London, where most of my UK-based interviewees resided – a city with a population of more than eight million people – is the ideal context to collect stories of migration. It is characterised by a high concentration of migrant workers and hosts people from 179 different nations. While in 1986, 18 per cent of Londoners were born abroad, by 2006 as many as 31 per cent of the city's population were immigrants (Wills et al. 2009, 261). The increasing diversity of London residents has affected the composition of the local labour market: migrants from rich countries are over-represented in the top echelons of employment, and those from poor countries are over-represented in the lowest earning jobs (Gordon et al. 2007).
6. Leeds and Manchester, the two other British cities where I collected interviews with female Russian migrants, are examples of the rise of the UK-style urban post-industrial entrepreneurialism of the 1980s and 1990s (While et al. 2004, 5). Manchester is a city in England with a population of 503,000, of whom 71.6 per cent were born in England (Manchester City Council 2011). The population of Leeds in 2011 was 751,485, with 86.2 per cent born in England

(Jones 2013). Manchester and Leeds have only slightly smaller shares of their working population in the financial industry than London. Manchester is also more similar to London in its share of the working population in professional, scientific and technical industries (While et al. 2004, 5).

7. In 2013, President Putin approved amendments to the Code of the Russian Federation on Administrative Offences according to which the distribution of 'propaganda of non-traditional sexual relationships among minors' became an offence punishable by fines. With this policy in place, homophobia has become institutionalised in the country and constitutes a threat to openly non-heterosexual individuals. For more on the LGBT+ movement and homophobia in Russia, see Stella (2015) and Healey (2017).

1
The babushka phenomenon

'Even when I'm dying, I'll give death a good kick'

Arina (88), a retired engineer, was my oldest interviewee. To visit her, I went to a residential area on the outskirts of Samara where many former employees of a factory, like her, lived in retirement. Her husband had died three decades earlier and since then she had lived alone in the apartment that had previously been the family home. When we met, Arina, a petite woman with short grey hair and lively eyes, was slowly recovering from a heart attack and using a walking-frame to get around her flat. She was both excited to have a visitor and surprised by the fact that a stranger wanted to learn about her life.

After offering me a cup of tea, Arina showed me her most valuable memorabilia – photographs of her late husband, her daughter, now aged over 60, her grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. She looked happy while sharing stories about some souvenirs displayed around the flat, which her loved ones had brought her from various trips. When I asked her whether she was the one who had created the collection of macramé items decorating her plant-pots, she confirmed that knotting was one of her favourite hobbies when she felt better.

Settling down on a sofa for the interview, Arina told me with sadness in her voice that most activities she used to enjoy, such as tending to her plants on the balcony of the apartment or participating in community service, had become impossible for her owing to her declining health. After her heart attack, she had found herself relying on the assistance of her daughter, who lived nearby and visited her regularly, as well as a social worker, to carry out tasks that required more physical effort than cooking simple meals or solving crosswords. After revealing her present reliance on others, Arina hastened to clarify that this had not always been the case:

> For many years I was actively involved with the Council of Veterans.[1] We ran lectures and organised concerts. We helped older people who faced all sorts of abuse to get legal assistance, we fought the local council about the lift in our block of flats often being out of order. I still want to do something, but my daughter will tell me off for my activism, especially since I had the heart attack. But that's who I am. Even when I'm dying, I'll give death a good kick.

To illustrate the strength of her spirit, Arina added, 'You won't believe, but I'm still doing my morning exercises. If I show you, you'll gasp!' As she said this, she got up from the sofa and attempted to perform several squats, holding on to her walking-frame. This exercise visibly cost her a lot of effort: she was shaking and breathing heavily. After a couple of moves, she fell back on to the sofa, exhausted but also proud of herself.

While I was witnessing Arina's performance, I had mixed feelings. An image of me having to call the ambulance to deal with the possible effects of her exercise on her health flitted through my mind. My first impulse was to ask her to stop putting herself at risk. But it was also obvious to me that demonstrating her determination to remain autonomous was extremely important to this elderly woman, and I was moved by the opportunity to share this special moment with her.

Arina's declaration that, even in her final moments, she would 'give death a good kick' resonates with Judith Butler's claim that 'the bodies that say, "I will not disappear so easily," … are effectively asserting their grievability' (Butler 2020, 196). For Butler (2004, xiv) 'grievability' denotes the popular perspectives that attribute value to lives considered important enough to protect and whose death is worthy of grief.

From this viewpoint, the risk that Arina took to surmount her vulnerability was necessary for her to affirm the value of her life, to use Skeggs' terms (2011, 496), given its increasing dependence on elder care. The high level of that risk was equivalent to how much it meant to her to demonstrate that she was still a subject in her own right, capable of taking care of herself.

The significance of overcoming her physical frailty in my presence also underscored a socially recognised value placed on autonomy. However, as I discuss further in this chapter, contrary to the autonomy of a self-centred subject who does not acknowledge their dependence on others, the self-sufficiency that retired Russian women often exhibit is informed by their concern for the wellbeing of others. Their reluctance to rely on others for care stems from a deeply ingrained sense of

responsibility, as they perceive themselves as caregivers rather than recipients of care.

In this chapter, I discuss how the social production of ageing in Russia establishes hierarchical notions about the socially approved subjectivities of older women. As I mentioned in the Introduction, by the social production of ageing, I understand cultural and institutional norms that marginalise individuals as they age, limiting their access to common goods. In this chapter, I explore the strategies of older Russian women to attribute value to their lives in accordance with gender, age and class norms. In other words, I examine the struggles older women go through in order to win social recognition, which for Taylor (1994, 37) implies a demand for equal value, and for Butler (2004, 3) is conditioned by the assimilation of individuals to dominant social norms and their recognisability within them.

Adhering to social standards is not an easy task for older women. Like many other societies, Russia assigns women the responsibility for unpaid family labour but places a higher value on the lives of those involved in the formal economy. As women grow older, social expectations prompt them to end their careers earlier, making room for younger colleagues, while simultaneously assuming unpaid caregiving responsibilities to assist their adult children in managing their lives in both professional and personal spheres. However, the ideal of sacrificial maternal love also compels them to maintain financial, physical and emotional independence for as long as they can, to avoid becoming a burden to their loved ones.

While interdependence is a fundamental condition of human life, older women often view their need to be taken care of as a burden, a shameful condition to be avoided at all costs. This understanding is implicitly promoted by public narratives and social policies, which, as Davidenko (2019, 613) points out, in Russia prioritise the interests of young families with children. At the same time, as Segal (2013, 102) explains speaking from the UK context, because youth is associated with highly valued independence and productivity, older people are often reluctant to admit their vulnerability, from a desire to be seen as not 'too old' yet, and thus still having something to offer to society. This statement is relevant to what I observed during my fieldwork in Russia.

The rationale behind the self-presentation of my interviewee, Arina – introduced at the outset of this chapter – also aligns with Atchley's continuity theory (Atchley 1971). Atchley (1999, 5–7) contended that over the life course, individuals invest in shaping stable conceptions of themselves. Faced with changes related to ageing, people adapt by

striving to maintain consistency in the patterns of thinking and behaviour that they have developed earlier in life. Thus Arina, although she was unable to control her physical decline, actively managed the presentation of herself to show that she was still capable of making an impact on the world around her.

However, beyond the inevitable biological changes that people must adapt to, many aspects of ageing are socially organised. Consider my other interviewees, Svetlana (71) and Paulina (78), both residents in Samara. Asked about their experience of ageing, both women cited loneliness as their main problem. Both of them had lived alone for a long time and had previously not found their solitude problematic; however, both women started to feel isolated as their chronic illnesses progressed and increasingly prevented them from enjoying their favourite activities – walking her dog for Svetlana and going to the theatre for Paulina.

The problem was that Svetlana and Paulina lived in five-storey apartment buildings without lifts and were no longer able to use the stairs. In theory, Svetlana and Paulina could move to apartment buildings equipped with lifts. But in practice, both childless and without partners, these women did not have the immediate family to ask for help and did not feel energetic enough to handle such a big change on their own. Thus, rather than the direct effect of their biological ageing, their feeling of being detached from society resulted from the lack of accessible mechanisms that would facilitate greater social participation of older adults.

The American gerontologist Robert Butler (1969, 244) introduced the term ageism to describe the systematic production of the idea that older people do not deserve the same treatment as middle-aged people. Macnicol (2006, 6) has pointed out that ageist notions operate at both an interpersonal and an institutional level – within legal, medical, welfare, educational, political and other systems. Simone de Beauvoir (1996 [1970], 2, 262, 541) explained that the value industrial societies place on productivity and individuals' economic independence lowers the status of retired people. Even when older people are financially secure, they are still often portrayed as the inferior Other (Fisher 2014, 110). In this respect, industrial and post-industrial societies project on to ageing their greatest fears – those of dependence and death.

The attitude towards old age in Russia is not dissimilar; however, it is also shaped by the country's unique recent history. While during the first post-revolutionary decade, the young Soviet state associated older people with pre-revolutionary 'backwardness' (Pushkareva 2000, 15), later it developed a more systematic approach. Soviet gerontology research that involved doctors, psychiatrists and architects aspired

to ascertain the needs of the ageing population to facilitate their access to resources, services and amenable housing (Grant and Scarborough 2023, 2). In the second half of the twentieth century, older people were mobilised as the most important actors of memory politics, which aimed to strengthen the connection of the present with the revolutionary past. The introduction in 1956 of universal old-age pensions for urban residents created a distinct social category of citizens who could now enjoy their 'well-deserved rest' (Klots and Romashova 2023, 150).

After the end of Soviet socialism older people once again became associated with the old values the society rushed to distance itself from in the aspiration to join the capitalist world. Over the past decade, Russian mass media have been proliferating the idea that it is the responsibility of citizens to work on themselves to slow down biological ageing, which marks the neoliberal turn in the approach to ageing in that country (Davidenko 2019, 616).

Notably, the ageist imaginary universally disproportionately targets women over men, as frailty and dependence are perceived as markers of the hegemonic notion of femininity. The disdain towards ageing women is intricately linked with aggression towards the mother figure, who possesses enormous power over the child. This emotion combines the terror of abandonment and the dread of engulfment (Kristeva 1982; Pickard 2020, 159).

However, there is good news, too. Drawing on Atchley's continuity theory, Covey (1981, 631) defined the process of ageing as 'a struggle of individual efforts at maintaining social roles balanced against social structural mechanisms that serve to break down these attempts at maintenance'. Put differently, to remain alive and affirm that our lives are worth living, people must resist ageism. As follows from Covey's (1981, 631) proposition, although ageing is associated with various forms of decline, it also inevitably prompts individuals to resist exclusionary societal dynamics and thus serves as a source of agency.

Based on the propositions of continuity theory, I suggest conceptualising ageing as a diminishing ability of individuals to resist societal structures that tend to limit their access to common goods as they grow older. The question, however, is what strategies of acting upon the world does society accept as legitimate in accordance with gender, age and class norms. In the following section I discuss the ways of being older women that Russian society recognises as appropriate because they are based on selfless care. In later chapters, I shall also demonstrate how Russian society regulates older women's identities by ostracising those who refuse to dedicate their lives to endlessly prioritising the interests of others.

The 'babushka' identity

In Russia women of pensionable age are commonly referred to as '*babushki*', the plural of 'babushka' (grandmother). The expectation that all women will become grandmothers extensively involved in childcare has shaped an imaginary that equates the later stages of women's lives with their function in informal welfare. Since women are largely expected to abandon their careers as soon as they have grandchildren, aside from the family role of grandmother the word 'babushka' is often used interchangeably with the term '[female] pensioner'. In this context, 'pensioner' not only denotes an individual entitled to an old-age pension but also implies a distinct type of subjectivity that is believed to take shape as women grow older.

The significance of the role grandmothers play in informal welfare has been widely acknowledged in academic literature (Rotkirch 2000; Tchernina and Tchernin 2002; Zdravomyslova 2010; Utrata 2011, 2015; Tiaynen 2013; Sivak 2018). This recognition is also reflected in various forms of popular culture – for instance, in internet memes. One example of such products is a mock postcard with the humorous inscription: 'У Игоря не было бабушки, поэтому летом родители просили его просто уйти на месяц' (Igor didn't have a grandmother, so during the summer, his parents would simply ask him to go away for a month).

I have shown this postcard to a number of friends who have had long-term experience of living in Russia, and they all invariably laughed in response to the joke. According to Freud (2003 [1905], 11–31), people enjoy jokes because they give us pleasure. The humorous effect of a joke is achieved by a paradoxical twist that just slightly alters a familiar situation. The pleasure derived from the joke comes from recognising the double meaning that arises with the twist. If the joke's underlying message is retold in a direct manner, it reveals its aggressive nature. In Freudian theory, the work of humour is to express aggression towards otherwise sacrosanct figures and institutions in a socially acceptable way.

The pleasurable effect of the joke about Igor and his parents is attained through the recognisability of the situation. It is also intensified by the paradoxical inversion: the parents, who are expected to take care of the child, ask him to solve their problem by going away. When recounted without the intention to cause laughter – 'Igor's parents could not afford childcare, so they had to abandon their son' – the meme reveals its aggression towards the increasing cost of raising a child. The harmful solution Igor's parents are resorting to reflects their despair when they

are left without the assistance of a grandmother, which is often taken for granted.

Paradoxically, while grandmothers are often associated with care, love and wisdom (Tiaynen 2013, 2), 'babushki' as a social group, denoted by the same word, are often ridiculed in mainstream culture for allegedly being regressive and not having their own interests. For instance, the pop song 'Бабушки–Старушки' (Grannies–Oldies) and the contents of typical 'бабушки на лавочках' (grannies on benches) internet memes depict older women as using their supposedly excessive free time to spy on others and gossip.[2] While the song is benevolently misogynistic and ageist, the internet memes are openly hateful.

This unflattering portrayal has a long history: Baba Yaga, the legendary character of eastern European folklore, embodies a patriarchal attempt to downplay older women's important role in society by presenting them as witches. In some fairytales Baba Yaga is represented as an ugly but harmless old woman; in others she is terrifying as she fries and eats children who have lost their way in the woods. Pickard (2020, 158–9) notes that the association of ageing femininity with monstrosity, as part of masculine domination, results in two portrayals of a hag in Western culture – a pitiful one and a powerful one, with the latter carrying emancipatory potential for older women.

As an equivalent of the hag, the babushka figure also has two main representations. The 'good' babushka is depicted as a socially approved image of an 'invisible' old woman whose life is confined to domesticity. The 'bad' babushka is portrayed in mainstream culture as a monster who refuses to serve the interests of others or demands appreciation for her contribution to the welfare of others. In Chapter 2, I discuss in more detail the images of monstrous grandmothers in Russian film and literature.

To be seen as a babushka a woman does not need either to have grandchildren or to be very old. Rather, it is a specific performance of gender, age and class that members of Russian society read as a signal that a woman has adopted the position of a post-professional and post-sexual subject. The transition to the social position of the babushka resonates with Simone de Beauvoir's theory of becoming and unbecoming woman.

Susan Pickard (2019, 57–9) offers a succinct interpretation of de Beauvoir's (2011 [1949]) framework, according to which in Western societies women's lives fall into three stages. In the first stage, female and male children enjoy equal social status. At puberty, under the male gaze, young women become 'the second sex' as they begin to see themselves as both subjects and sexual objects. At this stage, although possessing a secondary social status in comparison with men, women enjoy

their ‘sexual capital’, which they lose with the menopause, becoming the androgynous ‘third sex’ ‘invisible’ to the male gaze. Kaplan and Illouz (2022, 4) define sexual capital as the ability of individuals to convert their appearance and sexual encounters into higher social status and economic assets. This ability is strongly associated with maintaining a youthful appearance.

Drawing on de Beauvoir, Pickard (2019, 59) points out that as women in Western societies grow older, they face a choice as to whether to conceal the biological change in order to retain their appeal to the male gaze or to adopt a new subject position ‘with a different social and symbolic context’. For Pickard, rather than downshifting, the post-woman social position implies possibilities of unbecoming a blank screen for male fantasies and re-emerging as a totally new subject indifferent to the dominant male gaze.

As I discuss throughout this book, for older Russian women the option of retaining one’s status as ‘the second sex’ is subject to entitlement associated with one’s ability to retain skilled post-pension-age employment. At the same time, enjoying one’s post-reproductive freedoms and insisting on one’s equal treatment in the status of ‘the third sex’ requires the courage to face possible ostracism for disregarding normative expectations. But it also implies creating possibilities for winning social recognition outside heteronormative imaginaries.

Based on my analysis of the interviews collected in Russia, the ability to retain skilled post-pension-age employment is the main means available to older women to distance themselves from the babushka figure and its low social status. The social standing a woman held during the Soviet era in many ways determines this ability.

Owing to the state ownership of property and relatively evenly distributed incomes, class divisions in the Soviet Union were derived from the mobilisation of cultural, political and social forms of capital (Salmenniemi 2016, 5). While only a small circle of the bureaucratic elite enjoyed political capital, cultural capital separated off the officially recognised classes of workers and peasants from the ‘social stratum’ of the intelligentsia – members of white-collar occupations. University graduates were seen as socially more significant, which provided the intelligentsia with access to benefits that working-class employees did not enjoy (Rivkin-Fish 2009, 83).

Although Soviet higher education was state funded, the class positions of my interviewees’ extended families played a significant role in transmitting the values and skills necessary for social mobility during the Soviet era. After 1991, the status-based stratification that symbolically

divided Soviet society was replaced by income-based inequality (Gapova 2002, 641). Given women's generally less advantaged position in society, very few of them were able to accumulate significant political and economic capital when the market economy was introduced.

In the new post-socialist reality, older Russian citizens are among those at the greatest risk of poverty (Russian Academy of Science 2013, 31). At the same time, with the emergence of the new class structure, the Soviet language of social justice in Russia has been replaced by the stigmatisation of poverty, vulnerability and dependence, and the naturalisation of privilege (Salmenniemi 2016, 3–7).

For younger Russian women who have the resources to become successful participants in the market economy, conspicuous consumption of elite products serves as the means to demonstrate their social status (Ratilainen 2016, 49). Those who do not possess significant economic assets, like most of my interviewees with a university degree, use the cultural and social forms of capital which they had accumulated during the Soviet era to attach value to themselves.

Soviet cultural capital known as 'культурность' (culturedness) was associated with reading and discussing intellectual books, watching films, and attending theatres and exhibitions (Dunham 1990; Kelly 1998, 130). Soviet social capital, associated with personal connections, was the product of a shadow economy, and it complemented the formal economy which was notorious for its shortages of consumer goods. Informal relationships with people who had access to the distribution of consumer goods, services and decision-making served citizens as an alternative method of satisfying their needs (Ledeneva 1998, 34–5).

However, as I show in the later sections of this chapter, for my retired interviewees who did not possess advanced cultural competences or useful connections, the 'affective value of love and care' (Skeggs 2011, 500) was the primary source of age-, gender- and class-appropriate self-making.

Gendered age-labelling

While less-privileged retired women do not always refer to themselves as 'babushki', they are often called this by others, based on the Russian system that I call 'gendered age-labelling'. This communication code provides a set of appropriate terms of address for interactions between strangers in public places such as on transport, in shops, healthcare institutions, etc. It is enough for a member of Russian society to glance

at a person's self-presentation to locate them within this system and to choose an appropriate gendered age-label to use in an interaction.

A female person from birth to her teens is usually addressed as 'девочка' (girl); from her teens to around her mid-thirties the acceptable address is 'девушка' (female adolescent or young woman); from the mid-thirties to roughly the mid-sixties it is 'женщина' (woman). Approximately from her late sixties, a working-class woman will be often addressed as 'бабушка' (grandmother, old woman). A woman of the same age who is able to retain skilled post-pension-age employment is likely to distance herself from the babushka identity and will therefore be addressed as 'женщина' or 'дама' (lady).

The contemporary practice of gendered age-labelling derives from the Russian pre-revolutionary village system of age classifications described by Olson and Adonyeva (2013, 48–9). Before the socialist revolution of 1917, Russia was predominantly an agricultural country with rural residents making up the majority of the population (Vishnevsky 2006, 29). Members of peasant families organised around natural production were expected to make specific contributions to the economy of the multigenerational household based on their gender and life-stage.

In this context, a woman's life-stage was denoted by a specific term that reflected her social status based on her role in the family economy. The authority held by grandmothers was linked to their physical ability to oversee a multigenerational household. Referred to as 'большухи' (plural *bolshukhi*, singular *bolshukha* – denoting the female head of the family), middle-aged grandmothers enjoyed enormous power. As her old age started to manifest itself through declining health, the *bolshukha* would pass on her status to her daughter-in-law, assuming the role of 'старуха' (*starukha* – old woman). In this transition, she would relinquish her previous dominance over all women, children and unmarried men within the family structure (Olson and Adonyeva 2013, 48–9).

Similarly, the contemporary system of gendered age-labelling reflects the combination of policies and social norms which delegates to women different roles in productive and reproductive labour, with younger women expected to be working mothers and older ones caretaking grandmothers. The ability and desire to retain skilled post-pension-age employment can, to a certain extent, serve as an excuse for a woman to avoid dedicating her life primarily to the care of her grandchildren. However, when this is not the case, to acknowledge the transition to the status of the post-professional and post-sexual subject, less-privileged Russian women employ 'the babushka look'.

The babushka look

The appearance practices that constitute 'the babushka look' diverge significantly from heteronormative women's beauty standards. They include shorter haircuts, minimal or no makeup and loose-fitting clothes in muted colours which are far removed from mainstream fashion. This departure from conventional standards of appearance is particularly evident in women who reached adulthood in the latter half of the twentieth century. As noted by Gradskova (2007, 187–8), a youthful, feminine appearance was strategically crafted to enhance a woman's prospects in the limited marriage market of the post-war era and remained the norm for women of reproductive age till the end of the Soviet epoch.

After the collapse of the USSR, the sexualised and beautified female body acquired a social value independent of reproduction (Davidenko 2018, 445). For middle-aged, middle-class women residing in the Russian capital, as Davidenko (2019, 616) notes, regular work on maintaining a youthful appearance became an important resource to enhance their competitiveness in the job market. By contrast, the less-privileged older women whom I interviewed in the provincial city of Samara, whose chances in the labour market were reduced to low-skilled post-pension-age jobs, had usually decreased their investment in beautification practices.

The end of women's professional careers correlates with the end of their implicit entitlement to a sexual life, which is discussed in more detail in Chapter 6. While having a skilled job does not necessarily warrant the presentation of oneself as a sexual subject, those of my single interviewees who were interested in new sexual relationships with men were more often still employed. In this sense, a woman's participation in the formal economy implicitly grants her the status of an autonomous individual entitled to sexual self-expression. By contrast, women whose professional careers had ended are no longer seen as autonomous citizens, based on the expectation that they will prioritise the interests of their adult daughters over their personal lives.

Women's age-appropriate practices of self-presentation are regulated by social norms that are reflected, for instance, in colloquial expressions. One notable example is 'молодящаяся старая кошелка', which is an extremely pejorative Russian equivalent of the English expression 'mutton dressed as lamb', an idiom that stigmatises older women who violate social conventions by presenting themselves as sexual subjects. On the other hand, comparing younger women to the babushka figure is often meant as an insult and serves as a disciplinary tool to encourage them to

present themselves as sexual and professional subjects, in order to maintain procreative and employment norms.

One of my interviewees, Svetlana (71), based in Samara, was working as a part-time university lecturer when we met. After she mentioned that she used to teach a course on the history of clothing, I asked her about her perspective on fashion conventions for women of pensionable age in Russia. This is how she describes the difference in dress code between older women who have the resources to retain skilled post-pension-age employment and those who do not enjoy the same privilege:

> Typical women pensioners who don't have a very high level of education all wear these sloppy woollen dresses, with buttons in the front, made of cheap material. But women who keep themselves young (продолжают молодиться), they wear trousers and shirts. They carry handbags, though I, personally, prefer a backpack. This is in contrast to those babushki, who drag those bags on wheels. Their bathrobe-like outfits and those bags just drive me mad.

As Svetlana describes it, women of different social strata use different 'practices of distinction' (Bourdieu 1984; Krekula 2009, 7) when choosing their clothes and accessories. According to her, less-privileged women prioritise practicality, whereas those still in skilled employment emphasise and maintain their entitlement through more formal clothes. In reality, women who have adopted the babushka identity often wear trousers, just as women who are still employed may wear dresses. However, despite probably purchasing their clothes from the same mass-market shops, the way women signal their positions of power through dress codes, although less rigid than the way Svetlana portrayed it, is still distinct and recognisable.

Contrary to Svetlana's distaste for 'the babushka look', those of my interviewees who applied it presented their choices as rational, appropriate and informed by common sense. For example, Alevtina (75), a retired factory worker based in Samara, was nostalgic about her Soviet youth. She was visibly happy telling me about the time when she started going out to work and had been able to afford fashionable clothes with the help of her friends who worked in department stores and had privileged access to consumer goods that were in short supply:

> Nowadays you can get anything you want but you don't have the money for it. I look at young girls and can't believe they all wear these flat shoes and ripped jeans. We weren't like that. We looked chic. Now, of course, there is no point in me looking chic as I spend

most of my time gardening at my dacha [summer house]. But it's all right. I dress just like everybody else.

During my fieldwork in Samara, I often encountered the motif of 'being just like everybody else', which women relied on to justify their 'practices of distinction'. Breheny and Griffiths (2017, 40) explain that when older adults can no longer maintain continuity between the younger version of their identity and their current reality, they often resort to describing themselves as adhering to conventions accepted in their circles, in order to present themselves as valued members of their community. Resonating with this finding, Krekula (2009, 17) argues that age-related 'practices of distinction' can do two things simultaneously: both marginalise the individual and provide them with a resource in the form of acceptance by other people.

When a stranger offers an older woman a seat on public transport in Russia, addressing her with 'babushka, please sit down', some women perceive it as an insult. Others, however, gratefully accept the courtesy and read it as a sign of respect for their longstanding membership in society rather than a patronising gesture.

Returning to the interview with Svetlana, who criticised her less-privileged peers for embracing 'the babushka look' instead of 'keeping young', her remark reflects the association of education level with a person's ability to resist ageist societal dynamics. Previously belonging to the stratum of the Soviet intelligentsia, she relied on her cultural and professional competences, as well as formal and informal connections, to retain her prestigious job at a university. Her post-pension-age employment ensured that she felt entitled to rely on appearance practices associated with middle age rather than old age.

However, just like her peers without a university degree, Svetlana was critical of the 'practices of distinction' used by affluent older women, who usually reside in the capital and consume expensive anti-ageing products and services. The strategies of 'age coding' (Krekula 2009, 7), which aim to conceal the signs of growing older, align with the standards of 'successful ageing', a perspective that has given rise to the anti-ageing industry.

The ideology of successful ageing: liberation or oppression?

After the Second World War, in the US and the UK the idea dominated that the withdrawal of older people from active social roles was a

liberating practice as physical and psychological decline was thought to be inevitable after a certain age (Hochschild 1975, 555). This perspective promoted the image of older adults as medical patients dependent on social welfare (Biggs and Powell 2001). However, in the 1970s, social gerontologists began to challenge the view that ageing was merely a biological process. This new perspective recognised growing older as a culturally situated individual experience of transitioning from one life-stage to another, which is embedded in societal, collective and personal dynamics (Riley et al. 1972).

In the 1980s, the marketisation of welfare in the US and the UK replaced the dependence narrative with one of autonomy and self-reliance. Given the gradual increase in longevity in these countries since the 1960s, Laslett (1991) introduced the term 'the third age' to describe a new stage of life that emerged between active involvement in paid employment and old-age dependence. This phase of life has shaped a new demand to find meaningful roles in society for individuals in their sixties. While the 1980s initially witnessed the expectation that people would take earlier retirement in order to give way to younger workers, policy initiatives introduced at the close of the twentieth century began to encourage longer careers or work-like activities in the 'third age' (Biggs and Kimberley 2013, 288).

This change in social policies coincided with the proliferation of the concept of 'successful ageing'. The model of 'successful ageing', introduced by Rowe and Kahn (1987), defines it as the experience of older adults with a low probability of disability, high cognitive and physical functioning, and active engagement in social life. The term 'successful ageing' was enthusiastically adopted by lifestyle professionals to promote 'anti-ageing' products and services (Clarke 2010, 7). As a result, in mainstream culture, the lifestyles of affluent, active older individuals have been promoted as the norm. The fact that this approach represents older people primarily as consumers has been criticised by social gerontologists for ignoring social inequality in later life (Biggs 2011, 93).

In the context of the new perspective on ageing, one's ability to maintain a youthful bodily exterior has increasingly been framed by lifestyle experts as a marker of morality. Ageing women, the primary targets of the 'anti-ageing industry', are encouraged to conceal their wrinkles and monitor their weight in order to maintain a youthful appearance. While some feminist scholars argue that beauty work at later stages of life can be empowering, others see the imperative to work on oneself as a form of ageism, as it results in the portrayal of aged bodies as unattractive, undesirable and unhealthy (Clarke 2010, 74, 136).

In Russia, following the collapse of the USSR, the government encouraged non-governmental organisations and businesses to play a role in providing social services. However, in the 2000s, older people openly protested against post-Soviet reforms that aimed to replace Soviet-style in-kind benefits with cash payments and pension increases. As a result, cash payments were only fully implemented in a few affluent regions of Russia, such as Tyumen and Tatarstan, while many other regions experienced only minor or moderate changes (Kulmala and Tarasenko 2016, 141). The civic engagement of older people in the realm of social provision implied that they had a preference for the paternalistic principles of resource distribution through policy, rather than being interested in the self-reliance associated with a free market.

Following the introduction of the United Nations Madrid Plan of Action on Ageing (United Nations 2002), Russian policymakers embraced the concept of 'active longevity'. This international framework advocates the rights of older individuals to be active members of their communities, to remain empowered and to contribute to society. As a result, the empowerment rhetoric promoted by Russian government agencies and private service providers coexists with the daily experiences of many physically, socially and economically vulnerable older individuals in receipt of social services (Prisiazhniuk and Holavins 2023).

While narratives and images depicting older individuals with exceptionally successful life-trajectories, along with remarkable physical abilities and talents, have proliferated in the Russian media landscape (Nizamova 2020, 46), the competitive standards of 'successful ageing' were far removed from the lived realities of most of my interviewees. When I asked 71-year-old Svetlana, the part-time university lecturer based in Samara, whom I mentioned above, about her attitude to the anti-ageing industry, her reply was sceptical:

> All this rejuvenation and talk that retirement is an active period of life – this is nonsense. It's just a gimmick, I can't relate to it at all because I can see what happens to these women, who like Lyudmila Gurchenko, have undergone several facelifts. It's scary, painful and offensive to watch, and I felt sorry for her to the point of tears. Nature created me this way, right? There is no need to torture yourself over this. This is what I tell myself. In fact, as I told you, I have a complex about my weight.

Lyudmila Gurchenko (1935–2011), mentioned by Svetlana, was a superstar of Soviet film. In the 1950s, her slim, glamorous looks became a

beauty standard for Soviet women. During the post-Soviet period, her reliance on plastic surgery to maintain a youthful appearance was frequently discussed in the press.[3] The majority of my interviewees criticised as inappropriate the attempts of female celebrities of pensionable age to achieve facial rejuvenation.

Zinaida (70), a retired factory worker, stood out as my only interviewee who used rejuvenating facial injections and other 'anti-ageing' products. Zinaida was a member of a wellness club run by a network marketing company specialising in dietary supplements. Her appearance practices were her means to maintain her involvement with a consumption-based circle of younger women. She implicitly recognised that these 'practices of distinction' were often deemed inappropriate for retired women, owing to their association with the expression of sexuality. To avoid potential ostracism, she emphasised that her adoption of 'anti-ageing' procedures was not driven by a desire for new relationships with men; instead, she framed her beautification efforts as a responsible approach to maintaining her health.

Zinaida's strategy of self-presentation challenges the conventional notions about the age-appropriate appearance practices of retired women. However, as Clarke (2010, 74) finds, the medicalisation of signs of biological ageing, promoted by experts in the anti-ageing industry, is problematic because it replaces concerns about structural inequality in later life with an individual's moral obligation to consume 'anti-ageing' products and services. In contrast to condemning facial rejuvenation, those of my interviewees who distanced themselves from the babushka identity supported the idea of controlling one's weight, drawing a link between body size and good health.

For instance, Elvira (60) and Nadezhda (69), both residing in Samara, and Lylia (62), a UK resident, told me about regular exercises such as dancing, attending a gym, swimming or playing tennis as part of what they framed as their self-care. Others spoke of the need to cut down on their sugar and bread intake to signify their awareness of what is considered to be a healthy diet. In a study of Russian middle-aged middle-class women's reflections on ageing, Davidenko (2019, 618) has argued that similar practices on the part of her interviewees indicated their fear of appearing as immoral citizens who are unable to control their weight and, by extension, their lives.

While the 'responsibilisation' of anti-ageing practices (Davidenko 2019, 618) affects women of all social groups, it also foregrounds post-socialist inequality. For instance, Svetlana, the university lecturer who criticised female celebrities for using plastic surgery, admitted that if she

had enough money, she would use non-invasive fat-removal procedures to lose weight. Born in a village, Svetlana dreamed from early childhood of becoming a ballerina. When, as a schoolgirl, she moved with her parents to Samara, she started to take choreography classes. After graduating from high school, she went to Moscow to enrol in a choreography college but failed the entry exams.

After trying her luck in St Petersburg (then Leningrad) and realising that, as a provincial, she did not stand a chance in this extremely competitive sphere, Svetlana returned to Samara, where she studied folklore dance. But her passion for the theatre did not disappear and she later completed a PhD in theatre studies in St Petersburg. Eventually she got a job as a university lecturer in Samara but did not progress in her career to senior academic positions. Now living on a modest pension and the income from her part-time job, Svetlana could only afford expenses covering her basic needs.

Never having been married and having no children, she found fulfilment in teaching many generations of students. Her cultural competence was her most significant source of self-gratification. She was nostalgic about Soviet times, when income inequality was less dramatic than now, when she was older. She talked bitterly about the fashionable clothes and accessories she was interested in but could not afford: 'I go into the shop, look, and look, and think: "Oh, what a nice handbag that is." But the prices infuriate me. That's why I don't often go [to expensive shops].'

Later in the interview, however, Svetlana told me about her strategies to satisfy her desire to have fashionable clothes and perhaps to pass as a financially successful person. She explained that she had discovered a shop that sold good-quality fabric at reduced prices. She also had a friend who could dressmake, making clothes based on whatever was in fashion.

Just like Svetlana, my other employed interviewees expressed their desire to look well groomed, even though their financial resources were limited. For instance, Elvira (60), who worked as a nanny in Samara, told me that she could not imagine herself without a fresh haircut, a manicure and ironed clothes: 'When I don't have the money for expensive cosmetics, I make facemasks out of honey, to take good care of myself.' While she was sympathetic towards those of her friends who were retired, with financial resources even more limited than hers, she also believed that it was the responsibility of each individual 'not to give up on themselves' and to resist 'the babushka look'.

Elvira's point of view contrasted with that of many of my retired interviewees, who told me that their age was a socially acceptable reason

to liberate themselves from a life-long obligation to comply with heteronormative beauty standards. As an exception to this rule, Margarita (70), a retired factory worker based in Samara, was very invested in maintaining an extremely feminine appearance. Tall, slim, with long blond hair, wearing makeup and a feminine summer dress, Margarita looked some 20 years younger than her age when we met. In response to my complement on her attire, she said: 'Well, I'm interested in maintaining a great exterior. I treat retirement as a territory of self-care.'

As became evident from her interview, Margarita, a widow, was looking for new relationships with men and was full of hope about the prospect of developing a romantic bond with someone who had recently reappeared in her life. As I discuss in more detail in Chapter 6, when older single women encounter opportunities to engage in romantic relationships, their normally sceptical attitude about love and sex in later life often shifts.

The value of love: being a stoic carer

As discussed above, more-privileged, older Russian women rely on the idea of self-care to emphasise their responsible attitude to dealing with ageing. However, when older women realise that they can no longer be equal participants in the marriage and job markets, they adopt the marginal but socially approved babushka position. Apart from 'the babushka look', by which they signal that their social status has shifted to that of the post-sexual and post-professional subject, care for others becomes their main 'practice of distinction'. This finding aligns with Skeggs' (2011, 503–4) discussion of how working-class women in the UK attach value to their lives. She finds that for women who are excluded from the possibility of accruing symbolic resources that can maximise their economic profit, love and care become the way to defend themselves against misrecognition and devaluation.

Consistent with this argument, the retired Russian women I interviewed relied on their selfless love for others to maintain their position in society. Feminists have long challenged the assumption that family care costs nothing, since women are socialised to be caregivers and possess all the necessary skills to provide assistance to those who need it. Many feminist scholars have also emphasised that the notion that women take care of others out of love for their families obscures the investment of time and effort that has to be made to maintain the wellbeing of others. When

it comes to the care provided by retired women in Russia, it is typically taken for granted as it is assumed that they have no other meaningful activities, and their time has no value.

However, as was evident from the narratives of my interviewees, their stoic care for others often came at the cost of downplaying their own needs. I met Lydia, aged 74, a retired computer programmer based in Samara, at a children's playground in which she was looking after her two young grandchildren while their parents were at work. Lydia was visibly tired and had difficulty walking. She told me that since having eye surgery she was unable to read or use a mobile phone or laptop: 'I don't read, it's bad for my eyes. My neighbour, who is 57, tells me what she's read on the internet. I could afford a laptop, but I'm okay with the radio and the television.'

After revealing her vulnerability related to her sight impairment, Lydia mentioned that she had been increasingly upset about not keeping up with the rapidly changing IT sphere, which had affected her decision to retire earlier than she would have preferred. To reclaim her sense of autonomy, she then told me that she would do everything in her power to protect her children from the burden of looking after her when she became older. She went on to present herself as a stoic carer who endures physical hardship in performing her role of grandmother: 'When they [the grandchildren] are ill and can't go to the kindergarten, I have them. When they're at my place, I read to them a lot. It's difficult for me, but I do it for them.' Although earlier Lydia had said that she was not able to read for herself and relied on her neighbour's reports of the news, when it came to performing her grandmotherly love, she was willing to challenge her own physical state.

Her selfless care once again became evident when she discussed the potential decline in her health. While assuring me that her children would provide assistance if she needed regular help, she expressed a preference for hiring a paid caregiver. Lydia, who had cared earlier for her elderly, terminally ill father, emphasised that she wanted to spare her children from repeating this challenging experience. Not possessing profitable forms of capital, Lydia portrayed herself as a valuable member of society who actively contributes to the wellbeing of others without expecting anything in return. Her altruistic love played a crucial role in sustaining her membership in society. On the other hand, Klara, a UK-based interviewee, whose story I tell in the next section, agreed to abandon her home and friendships out of her selfless care for her family and struggled to find a sense of belonging in the new place.

Being a babushka abroad

Klara (85) was a child survivor of the Siege of Leningrad (1941–4). After her mother died of hunger, she went to live with her grandmother. Later, when she graduated from a university and was employed as an accountant, she briefly had a relationship with a man, who became the father of her son but was never involved in childcare. As a single mother, she continued to live with her grandmother until the latter died. Soon after reaching pensionable age, Klara, who never married, retired and moved to the countryside, to enjoy life away from the big city.

When I met her in London, she had lived in the UK with her son's family for more than 10 years. However, rather than being an involved grandmother providing help, she was brought to the UK as her son's dependant. Klara told me that she had been happy living on her own back in Russia, tending to her plot of land and socialising with her neighbours. As she was getting older, her son, who lived in London with his wife and two daughters, felt that he had to visit her more often, but found frequent trips abroad exhausting and costly. He insisted that his mother move in with his family. While Klara bitterly regretted leaving her well-established life behind, she prioritised her son's comfort.

Unlike her peers based in Russia, once she had moved to the UK, Klara had few resources to perform the role of a valued member of society. Over a cup of tea at the eastern European shop where we met, she told me that she felt extremely lonely living with her son's family because she did not speak English and her son's wife and children did not speak Russian. In addition to being unable to find meaning in performing the role of grandmother, owing to the language barrier, she also could not find it outside the home. As she viewed her son as the head of the household, Klara gave her pension to him to manage the money and would receive a small allowance from him so that she could buy a Russian newspaper.

Klara also told me that her son, who was working long hours as a nurse, had only given her one tour of the city in the decade she had been living in London. When we met, the only route Klara knew was the short walk from her home to the eastern European shop, the only place where she could talk to people independently of her son's assistance. Klara told me that, out of care for her son, she did her best not to disturb him with requests. That explained why she had not studied English in order to acquire more independence: she had no knowledge of how to seek opportunities for such courses.

Klara was one of few interviewees with whom I remained in touch on a regular basis. She phoned me once a month 'to report that she was still alive', as she put it. However, I could not contact her, as she would only turn her mobile phone on when she wanted to make an outgoing call. When I asked her why she kept her phone switched off, she explained to me that she did not need it on as she did not expect anyone to call her.

I interpreted Klara's approach to using her mobile phone as a form of agency in extremely limiting circumstances. First, she probably believed that by keeping the device off she was helping her son, who paid her bill, to save money. Second, during my first years in London, with close friends and family far away, the silence of my mobile phone for days only intensified my sense of isolation. Perhaps Klara, experiencing similar feelings regarding her mobile device, found a way to exercise control over a small aspect of her life. Clearly, by keeping her phone off, Klara was the one deciding when she would be reachable by others. After all, when someone keeps their phone off, there is no way to be certain that no one has attempted to get in touch.

When I offered to put her in contact with a Russian cultural centre, Klara replied that she did not want me to waste my time as 'she had already lived her life'. While she never explicitly complained to me about her lost independence, I knew she felt isolated, displaced and undervalued from her poetry, which she shared with me. I found her writing extremely painful to read as her experience reminded me of my mother, who lives alone and has to find meaning in life outside the role of grandmother because I do not have children.

Nevertheless, my encounter with Klara also taught me that however limiting their circumstances may be, people always find ways to assert the value of their lives. Klara's circumstances forced her to internalise the identity of the babushka, an elderly woman whose interests are not seriously taken into account by society. By writing poems, going to the eastern European shop and occasionally phoning me, she found ways to maintain her connections with others, outside the role of grandmother which she was not able to engage with fully.

After completing my PhD, I returned to Belarus to support my mother, who was dealing with a serious illness. A year later, on my return to London, I had to purchase a new local SIM card, losing the means for Klara to reach out to me. The shop where Klara and I would meet did not survive the Covid-19 pandemic and, regrettably, there is no way for me to find out how she is doing or even whether she is still alive. Nevertheless, I often reminisce fondly about her, cherishing a plastic folder with the

poems she gave me as a testament to her challenging life, her selfless love for her son and her tenacity in making her life worth living.

Notes

1. Russian veteran councils are Soviet-legacy interest groups, usually non-profit organisations whose members have a common cause for which they seek to influence public policy.
2. See, for example, the contents of typical ‘grannies on benches’ internet memes at https://fishki.net/1260501-babushki-na-lavochke.html [accessed 22.12.2023]; also see the lyrics of the song ‘Babushki–Starushki’ [Grannies–Oldies] by Osiashvili (1989).
3. See, for example, Veligzhanina (2011).

2
'Monstrous' grandmothers in Russian literature and cinema

What does 'the old witch' want?

The novel *Время: Ночь* (*The Time: Night*), by the well-known Russian writer Ludmila Petrushevskaya (1992), is the first-person narrative of Anna, a 57-year-old grandmother who struggles to take care of her family during the Gorbachev era. It focuses on the relationship between Anna and her daughter, Alyona, who has her own children. According to Goscilo (2015, 172, 174), Petrushevskaya is exploring transgenerational trauma: both her female characters are victims of fatherlessness and spousal abandonment. Their sense of rejection is exacerbated by the exhausted, angry and unappreciated mothers who raise them in a hostile environment. The trauma Goscilo discusses is the product of the Stalinist creation of the Soviet empire, compounded by the turbulence of the unmaking of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Anna, a poet and divorcee, takes in her grandson, Tima, while his mother, Alyona, a divorced woman in her twenties, tries to build a personal life. The main theme in the novel is the power of care, which can be exercised as a tool of control. We follow Anna's story through her diary, posthumously discovered by her daughter. From Anna's perspective, she is a dedicated caregiver on whom three generations of her family depend. Her own mother suffers from dementia, her daughter struggles to make ends meet after having three children one after the other, and her son, Andrei, is serving a prison sentence. Anna is aware that her daughter has a different viewpoint, which is reflected in the encounters between the two women described in the diary. From the daughter's perspective, her mother is 'vampirically dependent on her children's dependence on her' (Lipovetsky and Mikhailova 2017, 115).

Strikingly, another novel, *Похороните меня за плинтусом* (*Bury Me behind the Baseboard*) by Pavel Sanaev (1996), offers a similar image of a 'monstrous' grandmother who lives on a blurred boundary between sacrificial maternal love and domestic tyranny. This novel is an autobiographical narrative articulated from the perspective of the author when he was a child. Like Anna in *The Time: Night*, Sanaev's grandmother, Nina, takes care of her grandson while her daughter attempts to build a romantic relationship with the new man in her life.

The grandmothers in both novels had bright professional prospects – as a poet and as an actress – which never materialised. To earn some extra income in addition to her old-age pension, Anna writes poetry commissioned for factory anniversaries. Nina ended up as a housewife, taking care of her husband, an actor in high demand. The difference between the two women is that Anna's ex-husband could not tolerate the competition for her attention with Anna's mother and left, whereas Nina's husband endures what looks, from the narrator's perspective, like a miserable marriage.

Sanaev's grandmother suffers from paranoia, a result of the fear experienced during the Stalinist terror, which manifests itself through her stifling concern for her grandson's health. Nina is portrayed as terrifying in her all-consuming love, which she expresses through brutal control over her family. Her violence is a product of the social order, which commits violence and delegates to women the responsibility for family survival amidst never-ending social upheavals (Balina 2015, 193–4). Both novels are largely built on the same metaphor: like the fairytale *Hansel and Gretel*, by the Brothers Grimm, they represent a situation in which the parents are unable to take care of their children and send them away. As a result, the children find themselves under the care of 'monstrous' grandmothers who, like the old witch from the fairytale, feed on their vulnerability. In my analysis, I draw upon Federici's (2004, 171) premise that the portrayal of women as witches stems from the patriarchal attempt to undermine the enormous power which comes from their reproductive capacities and expertise in reproductive labour.

Both novels represent a conflict of perspectives. The daughters see themselves as victims of their despotic mothers, who have taken away their children. Meanwhile, the grandmothers see themselves as victims of their negligent daughters, who expect their mothers to provide dedicated care on demand. Both authors invite the reader to sympathise with the grandsons, who are too young to protect themselves from the emotional turmoil of the mother–daughter struggle for moral superiority. However, it seems that neither novelist takes a clear side in the conflict between the

two generations of women. Their neutrality allows the reader to adopt a critical stance towards the oppressive 'institution of motherhood' (Rich 1986) rather than try to determine whose perspective is more accurate. Essentially, these two stories illustrate how increasingly deregulated labour markets and the detraditionalisation of intimate life affects women's life trajectories (Le Feuvre and Roseneil 2014, 540–1).

Most societies reproduce the idea that 'good mothers' are those who are able to take care of their children without relying on external help. However, this ideal of motherhood is in conflict with economic realities: most women have to be in paid employment if their families are to survive (Hays 1996). While mothers are at work, someone has to look after their children. In countries such as the US, United Kingdom, Canada and Australia, the systems of social welfare are designed with the assumption that families will mostly rely on market solutions for childcare provision (Esping-Andersen 1990). This means that racial and class differences are exacerbated when middle-class women pursue careers and motherhood by outsourcing part of their family duties to less qualified female migrants (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2003; Lan 2006).

The Russian system of social security offers moderate state intervention and is designed to support the nuclear family, in which men are expected to be the primary breadwinners and women are expected to combine childcare with paid work (Chernova 2013, 37–8). In reality, few families can survive on the father's salary alone. Moreover, for many Russian families, affected by high divorce rates and men's premature mortality, the unpaid help of grandmothers is the only solution.

Both the younger mothers in the above-mentioned novels live in a social environment that stigmatises single women of reproductive age and encourages them to prioritise the pursuit of personal life (Shadrina 2014, 2017). Both previously divorced, they strive to ensure the stability of their subsequent romantic relationships but lack any reliable source of childcare other than their own mothers. Both grandmothers step in to compensate for the lack of involvement of the children's fathers in family duties.

However, not receiving recognition for their unpaid labour, both Anna and Nina make their efforts and sacrifices conspicuous by emotionally terrorising their daughters. Instead of charging money for their work, they make their daughters pay through emotional suffering. The grandmothers aspire to make their grandchildren believe that their mothers are neglectful and favour their lovers over them. Thus, in a society in which women have neither equal status with men nor opportunities for

the recognition of their 'invisible' care, the grandmothers end up competing with their own daughters for the love of their grandchildren.

In her study of the images of 'bad mothers' in Russian culture, Kaminer (2014, 7–13) examines how the violation of the maternal ideal is portrayed across the pre-Soviet, Soviet and post-Soviet eras. She observes that while socially approved practices of mothering vary across epochs, the idealised mother figure is consistently expected to act as a mediator within the family and between the family and the external world. Grandmothers are, of course, mothers first and foremost. But in this chapter, I propose to focus on normative expectations regarding older women's roles in ensuring the wellbeing of the younger generation. By identifying the reasons why grandmothers are ostracised in Russian culture, I shall explore the human costs of post-socialism.

In the case of Russia, the post-socialist precarity associated with the withdrawal of the state from providing free housing, affordable childcare and guaranteed jobs coincides with the aspiration of the ruling elites to re-establish the country's status as a superpower. The Putin era is characterised by the centralisation of economic power in the hands of a corrupt bureaucracy, alongside the emergence of a middle class. Contemporary Russia has experienced a gradual erosion of political freedoms and increasing state control over cultural institutions. These trends have evolved into neoconservatism, neo-imperialism, revanchism, isolationist tendencies and xenophobia directed both domestically and internationally (Dobrenko and Lipovetsky 2015, 3, 6).

In the following sections, I discuss the representations of 'monstrous' grandmothers in two films by Andrei Zvyagintsev – *Elena* (2011) and *Loveless* (2017). By focusing on the trope of 'bad' grandmothers, I shall explore how certain practices of grandmothering are portrayed in Russian culture as a violation of social norms. I shall show how the ostracism of older women who defy age- and gender-specific social expectations reflects the frustrations experienced by many working-age people in relation to Russia's political environment and their limited prospects for social mobility within the merit-based post-socialist economic system.

Grandmother Faust: the monster who loves her offspring too much

Elena (Nadezhda Markina), a former nurse, now a housewife in her late fifties, divides her time between looking after her husband, Vladimir (Andrei Smirnov), a retired businessman in his seventies, and

supporting her adult son, Sergei (Aleksey Rozin), who lives on the outskirts of Moscow with his family. A decade earlier, Elena met Vladimir, who maintains a recognisable habitus of a man with a background in state security, at the hospital where she worked when he was admitted with appendicitis. Emotionally they are both more invested in their relationships with their children from previous marriages than in each other's lives. To help Sergei make ends meet, his mother gives him her old-age pension, and she also sometimes helps herself to money from the bank card Vladimir has given her for running their wealthy household.

Her main concern is her older grandson, Sasha (Igor Ogurtsov), a teenager engrossed in computer games, whose marks at school are not good enough to secure a place at university. Sasha's parents do not have much to contribute to brighten their son's future: his mother is on maternity leave with a new baby, while his father sedates himself with beer during the daytime. Prompted by his wife, Sergei urges his mother to request financial help from her husband for Sasha's education. He explains that given Russia's periodic military actions in the former Soviet states and the brutal hazing in the conscript army, Sasha's only escape from these dangers would be to enrol in a university through a hefty bribe. Elena feels uneasy about asking Vladimir for a big favour, but she does it anyway, because the wellbeing of her children and grandchildren depend on her ability to solve problems. However, Vladimir rejects her request, saying his decision is an 'educational measure' for Elena's son, who failed to repay a previous loan, so that he can learn 'to do better in life before having children'.

Elena reminds Vladimir that he does not apply the same 'educational measure' to his adult daughter, Katya (Elena Lyadova), unmarried and childless, who has no responsibilities beyond spending her father's money. She adds that wealth does not make him and his daughter better people than those who have less. Growing agitated, she warns him that 'everything might change, though'. In response to Vladimir's astonished 'What's that supposed to mean?', Elena replies: 'The last will be the first.' After Vladimir brushes off this conversation as meaningless, Elena comforts her frustrated son over the phone by promising that she will 'figure something out'.

Shortly after this confrontation, Vladimir suffers a heart attack. Deeply worried, Elena dedicates herself to his recovery, diligently administering his treatments and going to church to light a candle for his health. Although his life is not at immediate risk, he informs her that the emergency has prompted him to draft a will, according to which Katya will inherit most of his assets. Frustrated by Vladimir's apparent disregard for

her dedicated care, Elena decides to murder him before the will is finalised. She adds a pill of Viagra to his medications, making it a lethal combination. After Vladimar dies, Elena takes money from his safe and gives it to Sergei, who announces that his wife is expecting a new child. Elena expresses the hope that this time it will be a girl. Meanwhile, Sasha, rescued by his grandmother from the potential violence of the state, joins a violent youth gang. When the new baby arrives, the whole family moves in with Elena, to live in the luxurious apartment she has inherited from Vladimir.

Often criticised at home for portraying Russia abroad as a dark place, Andrei Zvyagintsev is one of the best-known and most acclaimed Russian film directors (MacFarquhar 2018). The winner of the Grand Jury Prize at the Cannes International Film Festival in 2011, his film *Elena*, like his other works, has been a source of inspiration for scholars of contemporary Russian society. For instance, in their examination of domestic space portrayed on screen, Lagerberg and McGregor (2018, 128) define the main storyline of *Elena* as 'one family's upwardly-mobile move from a shabby, Soviet-era flat to a chic and spacious city apartment'. Pointing out that every character in the film on both sides of the class divide is unemployed, Mihailovic (2023, 105–6) interprets this pattern as intended to portray the two families as morally bankrupt, in contrast to the neoliberal standard of investing in 'professional striving and self-optimisation'. To summarise, *Elena* is a critical take on social promotion, based on the violence of a grandmother whose sacrificial love has turned her into a murderer. But I would like to offer a more detailed analysis of the reasons why Zvyagintsev felt that the grandmother had to commit murder in order to help her grandson avoid becoming a murderer in the name of Russia's expansionism.

Despite the class abyss between her and her husband, Elena is not a trophy wife. Unlike the images of the new elite women which were promoted in the Russian mass media at the beginning of the twenty-first century, she does not enjoy luxurious leisure. Nor does she pursue a business of her own using her husband's resources, as many wives of super-rich Russians do, in order to become socially significant actors (Ratilainen 2016, 51). Instead, she works as Vladimir's unpaid nurse and housekeeper. Occasionally, when he is in the mood, he summons her to his bed, where he usually sleeps alone.

While Vladimir drives to a fitness club, Elena takes a train and walks through a rundown area, with her hands full of plastic bags from a supermarket, to visit her son's family. Vladimir is aware of Elena's aspiration to support Sergei and controls her expenses: she carefully places shopping

receipts in his safe. An outsider to the Russian context might be puzzled by such an arrangement, which Mihailovic (2023, 106) calls a 'morganatic marriage', as Vladimir's privileged social position is not passed on to Elena. Since it is also not an affair of the heart, this raises the question of why a woman in her prime would have chosen to work unpaid for an older, stingy man rather than take paid employment.

The film reflects two interrelated aims that often motivate women of pensionable age to encourage their children to start their own families sooner rather than later, and to ensure this by helping them with housing. As the social order does not offer these women meaningful roles outside family care, having grandchildren gives them a sense of accomplishment, a source of agency, and serves as the main reason for them to carry on with their lives. Many of my interviewees told me that they wanted to live longer to be able to see their grandchildren go to university or get married. While Elena is not old in calendar years, her role as grandmother is the central arena of her aspirations.

The theme of reproduction takes centre-stage in *Elena*. It is, for instance, voiced by Vladimir, who is critical of Sergei's growing family given their financial struggles. At the same time, he expresses the hope that his own daughter will have children. Katya's childfree character is contrasted with Tatyana, Sergei's wife, a mother of three. The central concern of Zvyagintsev – the inability of post-socialism to offer people a purpose in life beyond the satisfaction of individual needs – is represented by these women's reproductive choices. Katya is portrayed as a spoiled child, over-indulged by her father's money, who refuses to bring children into the world because it is 'painful and costly'. Tatyana's life is featured as an 'irresponsible' cycle of reproduction: children 'happen' to her because she has not bothered with family planning. For Elena, however, her grandchildren are the main source of meaning.

In her study of post-socialist housing in Russia, Zavisca (2012, 146) finds that while most Russians fulfil the norm of having at least one child regardless of their living conditions, the decision on second and subsequent births is usually calibrated to the family's housing situation. This finding is helpful for deciphering Elena's agenda. From the interior of Sergei's home those who are familiar with the Russian context understand that it is her old flat, which she has passed on to her son. This arrangement explains her marriage to Vladimir, which can be broadly understood as a live-in job that enables her to help her son's growing family have a place of their own.

Elena's generation came of age during the implementation of the Soviet public housing initiative, which aimed to provide every nuclear

family with its own apartment. In practice, white-collar professionals and Communist party members got better housing; many less-privileged families had to wait for years to be provided with a separate home. The introduction of private property rights after the collapse of the Soviet Union made residents of the state-owned flats a unique cohort. Granted the right to privatise free of cost the apartments in which they were officially registered in 1992, they became property owners without being burdened by enormous debts (Attwood 2012, 903).

Because this generation came to see accessible housing as a civil right rather than a commodity (Vihavainen 2005, cited in Attwood 2012), they feel obliged to help their children with housing, so that the latter can start their own families sooner rather than later. In addition to high interest rates on mortgage-backed housing, many young Russians feel reluctant to acquire property through a loan because a life-long financial commitment does not offer the same level of 'ontological security' as their parents enjoyed when they were provided with free housing. In Western countries leaving one's parents' home is commonly associated with the transition to adulthood; getting a place of one's own by means of a mortgage is the primary strategy for becoming an autonomous subject (Zavisca 2012, 90). For many young Russian couples, who are encouraged to start a family even before they have reached economic stability, autonomy in the Western sense is not a priority.

From this perspective, the eponymous protagonist of *Elena* sees helping her son and his family with housing as an obligation. For her this mission means more than just helping out the younger generation: it is her way of passing down the sense of 'ontological security' that she possesses, as the owner of a privatised Soviet property. In other words, she takes on the duty of mitigating the effects of post-socialism on her son.

At the same time, as Utrata's (2015, 124) study shows, many Russian families have little expectation that fathers will help to solve their children's problems. For one thing, Sergei's father is not mentioned in the film. Furthermore, the common attitude of Russian women to the question of men's reliability is reflected by Elena's character when she expresses the hope that Tatyana will have a girl this time. Elena has managed to keep her family together, but the tragedy unfolds when she is expected to accomplish an impossible mission – to obtain a large sum of money to rescue her grandson from the lethal dangers of Russia's imperial violence.

In the context of the Soviet planned economy, money did not function as the main element in economic transactions; things were sorted out via informal connections. When it came to products and services that

were in short supply, people borrowed each other's privileged access. This sort of barter made no demands on citizens' own resources, and it was perceived as 'helping out' (Ledeneva 1998, 34–5). In the 1990s, money suddenly emerged as a more important form of capital, replacing longstanding exchange relations and bringing about a tremendous change in the customary form of sociality (Oushakine 2009, 24, 190).

A product of the previous epoch, Elena is an expert in the 'economy of favours' (Ledeneva 1998); money that goes beyond covering basic needs is outside her reach. Delegated by society the responsibility of helping the younger generation navigate the new economic reality, her calculation is to serve Vladimir in the hope of inheriting some of his wealth. His sudden decision to pass on most of his assets to his daughter turns Elena's unpaid labour into a wasted effort. The insult is so great that it makes her wish him dead. Vladimir's death, in turn, opens up an opportunity to safeguard her grandson's life by stealing his money.

On a broader scale, for someone like Elena to acquire access to money as a new medium of getting things done is so unprecedented that it is akin to gaining superpowers. In this sense, the killing of Vladimir represents something more than simply his extermination; it is Elena's rite of passage from being a good grandmother to being a monster. The director Zvyagintsev uses a range of symbols to picture her Faustian transformation. At the beginning of the film, we follow her to church, where she lights a candle for Vladimir's health. Ironically, while Vladimir's health improves, this fact only deprives Elena of her hopes for his contribution to her grandson's better future.

As negotiation with God has not borne fruit, Elena turns to the dark powers. This move is symbolised by two scenes. In the first, she is on a train on her way to her son's place after she has killed her husband and stolen his money. Clutching the bag full of money to her chest, she looks through the window and sees a white horse lying dead on the ground after presumably being hit by a train. In my reading, the white horse represents the death of her spirit, proved by the next frame, which shows smoking factory chimneys, representative of hellish furnaces.

In the next scene, the whole family is celebrating Sasha's successful liberation from conscription, when a power blackout suddenly plunges the apartment into darkness. 'Game over', Sasha summarises philosophically, which makes his grandmother clutch her son's wrist in horror. To figure out what has happened, Sergei goes to the stairwell, where a neighbour gives him the following update: 'The light has gone off in the whole building.' Out of the darkness someone's laughing voice makes a correction: 'In the whole world.'

This scene prompts the viewer to come to the conclusion that Elena, like many of her compatriots, has sold her soul to the devil. However, unlike Faust, she is not driven by the desire of power or pleasure; rather she is seeking to fulfil a social expectation placed on women of her age – to take care of her children and grandchildren.

The protagonist gets away with the murder, since nobody sees Vladimir's death as anything but an accident. But Zvyagintsev sentences her to a soulless existence, which is represented by the disturbing finale in which Sergei and Tatyana's new baby crawls on Vladimir's deathbed while the whole family is transfixed by a meaningless television show, making themselves at home in his apartment. The indifference exhibited by the whole family to anything other than the fulfilment of their basic needs conflicts with the luxurious interiors of the flat, which suggests that Elena and her family have made it to a secure social position that they do not deserve.

However, the finale is not a call to sympathise with the rich people who have lost out in this Darwinian battle. Nor is the film a resentment fantasy of being able to rewrite the outcomes of post-Soviet privatisation, a process viewed by most Russians as egregiously unfair. Elena does not kill Vladimir with the intention of redistributing previously public resources, of which a disproportionate amount had become the private property of a select group of businessmen with close ties to the government after the fall of the USSR. The film does not advocate the return of socialism, nor is the main character celebrated as a modern-day Robin Hood. On the contrary, by depicting both sides of the drama as morally degenerate, Zvyagintsev appears to criticise the new rich for being rich and the new poor for being poor.

In my reading, the core message of the film is that when Elena chooses to resist Russia's 'colonial matrix of power', this tragically results in her reproducing the system. By the 'colonial matrix of power', Tlostanova and Mignolo (2012, 2) understand the system of domination that extends beyond the formal ending of colonial rule. Elena's sacrificial efforts to prevent her grandson from being killed or killing others in one of Russia's military operations in the former Soviet region is wasted. He has already become the product of Russia's gender order, which promotes violent manhood.

Another point one can derive from Zvyagintsev's film is that by taking on the responsibility of solving the problems of the younger generation, Elena is preventing her son from becoming a responsible father. From the director's implicit point of view, by offering him ready-made solutions she is taking on the responsibility of ensuring that generations

of Russian citizens remain in the lethargy into which they fell after the end of the Soviet era and are now kept by the state-run television broadcasts promoting the views of the Kremlin.

Furthermore, while she is resisting the social order created by Vladimir and his fellow members of the ruling elite, she is also wasting the potential political pathos of her actions by acting violently and purely in the interests of her family. Alienated from politics, she is driven by her 'mother instinct' – a dark force, in Zvyagintsev's interpretation, opposite to rational thinking. Despite being the only one taking measures to save Sasha, she is implicitly accused by the director of ultimately reproducing the system. Remarkably, in the later of the two films I am considering, the director continues to hold older women accountable for the Kremlin's violent politics and the political apathy of Russian society.

Grandmother Frost: the neglectful monster

Andrei Zvyagintsev's *Нелюбовь* (Loveless 2017) represents a 'dysfunctional family' in a 'dysfunctional state'. The director explores the social apathy of ordinary Russians whose high excitement in anticipation of the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi ended up mired in the confusion caused by doping scandals, the overrun budget, Russia's military involvement in Donbas and the annexation of Crimea (Waligórska-Olejniczak 2021, 185, 186). At the centre of the film is a young couple going through an acrimonious divorce. Their failed marriage is Zvyagintsev's way of making a comment on the unsustainability of the 'traditional family values' ideology promoted by the Russian government as the solution to society's problems.

Ishchenko and Zhuravlev (2022, 670) argue that the legitimacy of the Putin regime has been based not so much on the commitment of Russian citizens to the imperialistic project of the ruling elite as on the political apathy of ordinary Russians. They explain that in 2011–12 the social contract of economic stability in exchange for the depoliticisation of Russian society was disrupted by the protest movement 'For Fair Elections'. To the rise of a newly politicised civil society, the state responded with a conservative agenda and the patriotic mobilisation campaign that followed the annexation of Crimea. These processes only reproduced the mutual disengagement between the citizenry and the ruling elite.

Yusupova's (2023, 695) study finds that many Russian men perform their masculinities through the celebration of imperialism, militarism

and male supremacy. However, Zvyagintsev's characters do not seem inspired by the Kremlin's violent expansionism. On the contrary, they retreat further into their apathy, tuning out the background noise of television propaganda. In fact, their indifference towards everything except satisfying their basic needs is the central theme of *Loveless*, and the director explores the consequences of this condition.

The event that sets the story in motion is an argument between two Muscovites, Zhenya (Maryana Spivak) and her soon-to-be ex-husband, Boris (Aleksey Rozin), about their 12-year-old son, Alyosha (Matvei Novikov). Both parents vehemently refuse to live with the child after the divorce. Boris, who has moved in with his pregnant new partner, insists that their son is too young to be separated from his mother. Zhenya, who is indeed the boy's primary caregiver, claims that he would benefit from more of his father's attention. Engulfed in exchanging verbal insults, they ignore their son, who is terrified by this quarrel. Overhearing his mother say that she would rather put him in an orphanage than let his father evade his parental duties, Alyosha goes missing. It takes a while for Zhenya, busy building a romantic relationship with a new man, to realise that the child has disappeared.

At the beginning of the film, we follow Alyosha as he walks home from school down a secluded path in a park, which resembles the sort of forest where a witch would happily reside. He climbs a tree with gnarled branches towering over a creek. The autumn air is thick with mist, adding an other-worldly ambience to the scene. Alyosha throws a gymnastic band, forgotten by someone in the park, at the tree's highest branch. The band, tangled in the tree, dances in the wind, signalling that something sinister is on its way. In one of the closing scenes, from which we realise that the boy has never been found, Zvyagintsev once again takes us to the same spot in the park. The band, still tangled in the tree, emphasises the absence of the child and the glaring hole his disappearance has left in his parents' lives.

Similarly to the novels I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the parents in *Loveless*, who find themselves unable to take care of their child, have affinities with the archetypes in the fairytale *Hansel and Gretel*. However, in his 2017 film, Zvyagintsev offers a twist on the familiar premise. Unlike the tyrant grandmothers in the literary texts, who fight with their daughters over the love of their grandchildren, Alyosha's grandmother (Natalya Potapova), a woman who is not given a name in the film, adamantly refuses to help her daughter with childcare. Consistent with the universally recognised symbolism of the old witch mythology, she lives in a spooky forest. Even though she does not lure the

lost child to her house to feed on his vulnerability, the director still holds her responsible for the tragedy.

In Zvyagintsev's universe, Zhenya, portrayed as an emotionally cruel mother, is the product of her own loveless mother. She fulfils her child's practical needs without fail: she makes Alyosha hot chocolate in the morning before seeing him off to school; he is well fed and well dressed; he enjoys his own room in a spacious flat, and has a bicycle and a laptop. However, in terms of emotional care, Zvyagintsev gives his heroine a definite fail grade. He portrays her as hurting her son by keeping him at a distance and publicly making humiliating remarks about his need to feel safe in his own family. While he places Zhenya in the context of a painful family breakdown, the director does not invite the viewer to sympathise with her. Instead, he emphasises the cruelty of the mother by exploring the suffering of her innocent child. He interprets the emotional abuse that Zhenya inflicts on her son by the compulsion to repeat the cycle of abuse started by her cruel mother, whom Boris calls 'Stalin in a skirt'.

During 'pillow talk' with her new lover, Zhenya confesses that before she met him, she had not loved anyone except her mother, when she was little. She explains that 'the angry, lonely bitch' never returned her love, caring only about 'discipline and order'. She did not love Boris but married him because she did not want to abort an unplanned pregnancy. After Alyosha was born, she resented him for the pain she had endured during the delivery and complications as a result of which she was unable to breastfeed him. Shortly after this revelation, we are invited to find more similarities between the younger and older mothers.

When they find out that Alyosha has vanished, his parents reunite for the search. They drive to Zhenya's mother's house to check if he is hiding there. Unconcerned about her grandson's fate, the grandmother throws a tantrum, suspecting that Alyosha's disappearance is a ploy to make her feel sorry for her daughter and for the latter to take advantage of her sympathy. With her face contorted with hatred, she shouts at Zhenya that nothing will force her to look after the child and that she should not expect her mother to die soon so she can inherit her house. Imbued with verbal abuse, this brief scene serves to portray Zhenya's mother as a neglectful monster who refuses to live up to the social expectation that grandmothers will prioritise the interests of the younger generation.

In response to his ex-mother-in-law's frenzy, Boris asks rhetorically whether she 'even talks to anyone apart from the television'. This intervention amplifies the portrayal of Zhenya's mother as an 'old witch' who has lost her mind to television propaganda, with nothing and no one in

her meaningless life. On their way back, mirroring her mother's inability to empathise, Zhenya verbally attacks Boris, who looks devastated by the assumption that something terrible has happened to Alyosha. She tells him that she never loved him and only married him to escape her insufferable mother. In an outburst of rage, she says that she regrets not having an abortion. Suppressing his anger, Boris responds that an abortion would indeed have been a better decision and orders Zhenya to get out of his car.

Zvyagintsev juxtaposes Alyosha's loveless parents, engulfed in consumerism and social media narcissism, with a group of volunteers specialising in the search for missing persons. The latter are driven by a noble social cause, self-organised and not financially compensated for their dedicated efforts. More importantly, they hold no bond with either the Russian state, the Russian Orthodox Church, portrayed as violently intervening in citizens' private lives, or neoliberal capitalism. Their genuine care for Alyosha contrasts strongly with the emotional distance displayed by both his parents and the police. The volunteers symbolise the hope that the spirit of Russian society has not been entirely corrupted by the poisonous political system (Andreescu 2020, 12).

The director traces the apathy of Zhenya and Boris, which has led to the tragedy, back to two mother figures. The first figure is Zhenya's mother, whose Soviet background, according to Zvyagintsev, is responsible for her and her daughter's emotional incapacity. As Waligórska-Olejniczak (2021, 189) points out, the episode with the grandmother prompts the viewer to conclude that Zhenya's life could have been different if she had received more love from her family. The second figure is the neglectful Mother Russia, who reproduces an indifferent mass of offspring, lacking purpose in life and political will.

Towards the end of the film, Zhenya and Boris are asked to identify the disfigured body of a dead child. They do not believe it is Alyosha, but this harrowing experience breaks through their emotional barriers, and they burst out screaming and crying. Devastated by the death of the unknown boy, Zhenya reconnects with her suppressed feelings and confesses that she would have never given Alyosha away. However, this revelation does not alter the course of Zhenya's and Boris' lives.

They continue to live in a catatonic state, now with their new families. Boris' new child is as neglected as Alyosha was, and television propaganda still plays in the background. Unmoved by the Kremlin's narrative of the war in Donbas, portrayed as a Western plot to destroy Russia, Zhenya retreats to the outdoors. Wearing a tracksuit with the inscription 'Russia', designed as merchandise for the 2014 Sochi Olympic

Games, she runs on a treadmill set up on the balcony of her new home amidst falling snow. This image invites the viewer to see her as a symbol of the country: she represents Mother Russia, who has lost her children and is condemned to a meaningless race that leads nowhere.

In this way, criticism of Putin's political system in *Loveless* descends into depoliticised mother-blaming. By diagnosing the apathy of Russian society as the product of 'bad mothering', Zvyagintsev is reproducing the official gender ideology which places men on the margins of family life. He also sides with experts in 'intensive mothering' (Hays 1996), who promote the new standard of parenting based on the expectation that, in addition to providing practical care, mothers will be primarily responsible for their children's psychological wellbeing. Within this approach, mothers are expected to create a very close attachment to the child in order to be able to respond to all the latter's needs. Based on the mother's constant emotional and practical availability, this mothering style is explained by parenting experts as the only condition that will ensure the optimal realisation of the child's potential (Avdeeva 2020, 11).

In the USSR, childrearing was organised as part of the public sphere. With the post-socialist cutbacks in the welfare state, the responsibility for children's wellbeing was delegated to the family. Public institutions lost their monopoly over the production of knowledge about childcare: social media and experts in child psychology became the new actors redefining standards of parenthood. Access to expert knowledge and commercial services became a basis for social differentiation: the lifestyle of middle-class mothers has been portrayed in the media as a social norm. The Russian popular literature market offers a wide range of translated Western publications, books written by Russian authors adapting Western advice, as well as original ideas by Russian experts. In contemporary childcare discourse, women are viewed as primarily responsible for reproducing a physically and psychologically healthy nation (Shpakovskaya 2015, 1574–84).

To popularise their products and services, experts in the counselling industry for parents often establish the standard of 'intensive mothering' as the norm, against the 'outdated' approach of 'the emotionally unavailable Soviet mother':

> Do you know how to distinguish a Soviet (post-Soviet) parent in a crowd of other parents? If their child stumbles and falls over, the first thing they do is yell at them. Then they might show some empathy, especially if the child is hurt badly and crying bitterly. Or

> they might not: they might go on scolding and ask: 'Didn't I tell you to watch your step? Didn't I?'. But either way, their first impulse is to bark, to jerk, to hiss. And then they brush the child off as if they wanted to hit them harder. (Petranovskaya 2011)

This comment from a popular psychotherapist echoes the message of *Loveless*, which portrays 'emotionally cruel' Soviet mothers as responsible for passing down their lack of empathy to the next generations of parents. Observing images of mothers in popular late-Soviet films, another expert explains that 'the emotional unavailability' of the Soviet mother has a long-term negative impact on the adaptive strategies of her children:

> Evolutionarily, all children rely on their mother. However, there is a type known as the emotionally closed mother, who neither shows nor expresses her feelings, whether positive or negative. Children [of such mothers] do not get enough hugs or praise, and at the same time, they do not encounter anger or aggression when they misbehave. Later on, these people often become emotionally dependent on others, including strangers, due to a constant craving for attention and close relationships. (Golev 2018)

In this quotation Golev is perpetuating the 'intensive mothering' ideology, which holds mothers solely responsible for their children's psychological wellbeing. However, my intention here is not to deny that traumatic events occurring during critical developmental periods can significantly impact the life trajectories of individuals; rather, I am interested in exploring what is identified by expert knowledge as causing psychological harm to children and who is blamed for their suffering. In my previous book (Shadrina 2017, 110–65), I examined the transformation of the image of the mother in Soviet and post-Soviet culture. I found that during the Soviet era, motherhood was celebrated and endowed with the meaning of a noble mission. By the beginning of the new millennium, it had become increasingly defined as the imperative to meet children's psychological needs.

I also found that accusing Soviet mothers of inflicting psychological trauma on their children is a recent phenomenon. For instance, Svetlana Alexievich's book *Last Witnesses* (Alexievich 1985), which collects the testimonies of people who witnessed the Second World War as children, portrays Soviet mothers very differently. In this book, those who endured the horrors of war speak about their mothers with poignant love and respect.

One of the main tropes of the new mothering standard is 'unconditional love', a mode of uninterrupted emotional care which is meant to offer the child a life free from emotional pain. Experts in child psychology explain that this parenting goal is achievable through practices opposite to those employed by Soviet mothers, who are accused of having emotionally neglected their children. The products of the 'intensive mothering' industry resonate with a wide Russian audience because every adult can relate to the feeling of abandonment experienced by Alyosha in *Loveless*. This is because there are no mothers who have never, either intentionally or unintentionally, hurt their children's feelings.

On a broader scale, experts hold the Soviet mother, now grandmother, responsible for the frustration of working-age people who find themselves without the skills to compete for better life prospects amidst growing social inequality and decreasing opportunities for social mobility. Advocates of the new parenting culture often ignore the gender inequality that Soviet women faced and the paradigmatically different social conditions within which they raised their children.

To sum up, the 'bad' grandmothers of the early post-Soviet era whom I referred to at the beginning of this chapter are seen as monsters for demanding recognition of their sacrificial family labour. The grandmother-monsters in *Elena* and *Loveless* are accused by their creator of loving their offspring 'too much' and 'not enough'. Their 'wrong love' violates the expectation that grandmothers will perform altruistic care from a certain emotional distance.

They are expected to be close enough to provide dedicated service but also not too close, to avoid intervening in the private life of the younger generation. If they fail to assist their children to combine paid work and family life in a silent mode, they are held accountable for the effects of post-socialism, including the precarity of neoliberal capitalism, Vladimir Putin's violent expansionism and the prevalence of political apathy in citizens.

3
How to be a good grandmother

Grandmothers with no grandchildren

My interviewee Paulina (78), a retired university professor, introduced me to Elizaveta, a retired factory worker of the same age, who lived two floors down in the same apartment building. When I went to Elizaveta's one-room apartment to interview her, we broke the ice with a chat about the benefits of having good neighbours. I learned from her that the two women were not exactly close friends but had a functional relationship based on neighbour support. Elizaveta introduced herself as an expert in repairing various items; her practical skills came in handy for her neighbours:

> When something breaks down in the block of flats – say the speakerphone to our entrance isn't working – they'll call me. Or if something's wrong with Paulina's washing machine, I see to it. Usually it just gets clogged, easy to fix. But you know what these science people are like ...

Elizaveta gave me a meaningful stare. Apparently, she believed I could get her intended message without the need for elaboration. I was curious, however, to see where she was going with her comment and asked her what she meant. My interlocutor provided the following explanation: 'They live in their own world and don't notice a thing around them.' I squinted at her slightly, to signal that I was still in the dark. Visibly uncomfortable, Elizaveta continued, lowering her voice: 'You've been at her place: it's huge but she doesn't keep it very clean, does she?' I nodded in agreement as an insight started to sink in.

When I had visited Paulina for an interview in her three-bedroom apartment, I did notice that, stuffed full of old things, it had probably not

been renovated for decades. As Paulina had difficulty walking, owing to her rapidly progressing disability, I thought her home did not look well cared for because she was getting old and fragile. The surgical sterility of Elizaveta's apartment, however, represented a striking contrast.

Her comment made me think that foregrounding her practical skills was her strategy to negotiate the distinction between the stratum of the Soviet intelligentsia and the working class that my interviewees belonged to. Clearly realising that Paulina enjoyed more symbolic and material privileges even after the end of Soviet socialism, Elizaveta attributed value to her life by presenting herself as better versed in problem-solving than her 'impractical' neighbour.

Her passion for order radiated through in her appearance, too. She had soft, silver hair styled neatly. She wore a hand-knitted cardigan and comfortable shoes, practical but well maintained. Her face, lined with gentle wrinkles, created an aura of home comfort. In short, Elizaveta looked like an ideal grandmother, except she was not one: both her husband and son had died prematurely, leaving her a widow without grandchildren.

The theme of not being a grandmother was a source of pain that she turned into a source of agency. During her interview, she emphasised several times that since she had started to receive the old-age pension, she could only survive on it because she did not have anyone to share it with. But most importantly, she presented herself as able to support other women who were overwhelmed by their grandparental duties. For instance, here she mentions an encounter with a woman of her age in a park who complained that her children expected her to be a full-time unpaid babysitter:

> I say to her: 'You should be happy that you live with your children, and you've got grandchildren. I, on the other hand, am always on my own, no one thinks about me. After all, it is children and grandchildren that bring you joy – your future generations …When you're poorly, your granddaughter will bring you a glass of water, feed you. But when I fall ill, who will give it to me? It's very bad to be all alone.' And she agrees: 'Yes, of course.' So, in this way, I talk to people and make them feel better.

Telling me that she was a strong, wise person able to make other women feel better made Elizaveta feel better, too – she laughed in satisfaction. However, Elizaveta only interpreted her lack of children and grand-children as a problem when she wanted to comfort other women who

complain to her about their grandmotherly role taking up too much space in their lives. To me, she consistently presented herself as a stoic carer whose family situation motivated her to mobilise her strength in order to be able to take care of herself and other people.

To illustrate that, with a mixture of bitterness and pride in her voice, she told me that one night she had felt extremely unwell, to the point that she thought she was going to die. Scared, she had considered calling one of her neighbours, but eventually stopped herself from disturbing anyone at this late hour. Instead, she unlocked the front door to her apartment so that, if she were to die, the neighbours would not have to break it down. This episode characterised her as an autonomous individual who not only is capable of managing acute distress but also gives priority to the needs of others during a difficult time.

Towards the end of the interview, Elizaveta confided in me that she had found a way to build a network of care exchange that resembled the multigenerational support systems of women in the conventional Russian family. She told me that she had become an 'adoptive grandmother' to her son's ex-girlfriend's children, who lived in another city. While she would occasionally send her 'adopted grandchildren' some money as a birthday gift, they, in return, treated her as their grandmother. When she told me that the children would phone and say, 'Dear Granny, come visit us, we miss you so much', her face shone with happiness.

My other interviewees who, like Elizaveta, did not have grandchildren of their own invariably told me about their strategies to become involved in the lives of children and young people. For example, Elvira (60), based in Russia, worked as a nanny 'to fulfil her urge to have grandchildren of her own'. Svetlana (71), a resident in Samara, would occasionally look after her sister's grandson. Paulina, Elizaveta's neighbour, discussed at the beginning of this chapter, was still doing research in retirement, with some of her former students' students involved in her projects as research assistants. All these four women, including Elizaveta, enjoyed, if not practical help, then at least some recognition of their care, in return.

In this chapter, I look closely at the structural conditions that place reproductive work at the centre of women's lives. I begin by tracing how the status of grandmothers in the family hierarchy changes with Soviet and post-Soviet socio-political transformations – from the female head of the household to a secondary role as their daughters' helpers. Next, I explore how care for children, elderly parents and relatives who cannot take care of themselves shapes women's life trajectories – from being a granddaughter to becoming a grandmother. I conclude by demonstrating

how family care duties, carried out by women throughout their life course, simultaneously oppress them and provide them with a sense of ‘ontological security’.

The transformation of grandmothers’ social status

In pre-revolutionary rural Russia, grandmothers (большухи, *bolshukhi*) enjoyed a social status higher than that of mothers (молодухи, *molodukhi*). Prior to collectivisation, according to Olson and Adonyeva (2013, 67–75), the *bolshak* (derived from the adjective большой, *bolshoi*, meaning ‘big’) was the key figure of the Russian peasant household, which was organised around natural production. The middle-aged *bolshak* was in charge of decision-making regarding material wellbeing: he controlled the work of the farm and the money from the sale of household products. The key figure within the female hierarchy was his wife, the *bolshukha*. She was in charge of the garden, animals, home-made utensils, clothes and food. Additionally, all the children of the multigenerational household were under her care.

The village system of ‘gendered age socialisation’ (Olson and Adonyeva 2013, 67) implied that moving from one age-phase to a subsequent one resulted in a corresponding increase in family status. For a family member, access to certain knowledge, duties and privileges was only possible as they grew older. Although with collectivisation each adult family member would have a specialised job within the industrialised collective farm, the division of labour in the home remained intact until the late 1930s. Collectivisation and the social upheavals of the first part of the twentieth century resulted in a change in the division of power within the peasant family. Thanks to enormous losses in the male population, the *bolshukha*’s role included many of the responsibilities that had previously belonged to the *bolshak*. Consequently, male family roles gradually became less important for family survival.

Prior to the Second World War, when a young woman got married, she would typically live with her husband’s family, becoming subordinate to her mother-in-law. With urbanisation, many young couples moved away from family control. Those who stayed in rural areas began to aspire to establish their own home as soon as possible. This process coincided with the introduction of a new ideology that glorified Soviet motherhood as women’s ‘natural duty’. After the first emancipatory Soviet decade, with Stalin coming to power the nuclear family came to be seen as the main source of regeneration and the primary social unit

expected to deal with the large number of orphans and abandoned children. Soviet women were held responsible for building the nuclear family (Kelly 2007, 193–207).

The new understanding of motherhood represented older and younger mothers as equal in status. By the late 1940s, as more people moved to cities, urban families no longer required the old division of labour and the associated family hierarchy to survive. However, as young mothers still needed help with childcare and housework, they began to form alliances with their own mothers. Within this new arrangement, men often moved into the households of their wives (Adonyeva 2017). In families that lost men during the war, grandmothers became the primary parental partners for mothers.

The introduction of the universal old-age pension in 1956 shaped the new division of labour: while widowed or divorced mothers became solo breadwinners, grandmothers would take on childcare and domestic tasks (Utrata 2015, 15). Additionally, mothers could rely on various maternal benefits provided in the Soviet Union, including state-funded childcare, children's leisure activities (such as after-school programmes and summer camps), healthcare and guaranteed employment. Despite the vital role of reproductive labour carried out informally, which ensured the survival of the family, grandmothers acquired a new social status lower than that of mothers, as this type of work is not accorded the same value as paid labour.

Owing to the demographic upheavals of the twentieth century, several generations of Soviet citizens were raised without fathers, who had died in wars or Stalin's labour camps. Against this backdrop, Russian women strove to enhance their prospects in the scarce post-war marriage market by embodying the image of the ideal homemaker (Healey 2014, 61). The position of women in society as 'mother-workers' was deeply ingrained in Soviet gender ideology, which viewed men as the primary workforce and as potential defenders of the militarised state (Ashwin 2000, 5). In addition to a full-time working day, Soviet women would spend the equivalent of 112 additional working days per year on housework, while men contributed very little at home (Rotkirch 2000, 105; Filtzer 2002, 8).

At the same time, the burden of women's family duties was exacerbated by poor service provision, a lack of washing machines and a chronic shortage of consumer goods, making the cost of women's domestic burden extremely high. Given the low expectations regarding men's involvement in reproductive work, the support of grandmothers was crucial to back up younger women's paid employment and family life. As

women's subordinate status in the home paralleled the discrimination against them in employment, and the best career prospects were unavailable to most of them anyway, most Soviet women were willing to become mothers relatively early in life.

Moreover, mandatory employment made women independent of their husbands' incomes. The absence of fathers – either literally or emotionally – shaped women's multigenerational support systems, which Rotkirch (2000, 124) defines as 'extended mothering'. This regime of informal welfare, she argues, reinforced the estrangement of fathers from childcare and family life.

In turn, the intensive involvement of grandmothers in the families of their adult children was underpinned by the shortage of single-family housing throughout the Soviet era. As a result, multigenerational households remained the norm in Russia well into the second half of the twentieth century. While the pre-revolutionary arrangement implied that the generation of parents and homeowners would accommodate the newly established families of their children, during the Soviet era it was often the younger couple who would be provided with a separate apartment and bring an ageing or widowed parent to live with them in the city.

The latter strategy was and still is seen as a practical solution to the need for family care work: a grandparent (usually a grandmother, given men's significantly shorter lifespan) is expected to be the mother's primary partner in parenting. Likewise, adult children (usually daughters) are expected to be primary caregivers if their ageing parents need long-term care (Harris 2018, 156). This means that not only is reproductive pressure aimed at encouraging women to give birth to the next generation of employees, taxpayers and soldiers, but it also maintains the reliance on informal welfare by delegating most of the reproductive work to the women of the family.

The Soviet norm of the extensive involvement of grandmothers in childcare became a matter of public discussion in the late 1970s. For instance, the 1977 film По семейным обстоятельствам (*Due to Family Circumstances*) explores the challenges faced by a modern multigenerational household. A young woman gets married and brings her husband to live with her in her mother's apartment. The careers of the newlyweds suffer when they have their first child. The young parents put pressure on the wife's mother, a widow in her mid-fifties, to retire to take care of the child. However, as a senior civil servant, she enjoys her career and persistently refuses attempts to make her feel guilty for not being a 'good grandmother'. The family explore the option of nanny services, but the

caregivers sent by the state-run agency turn out to be unqualified people whom they would not trust with their child.

When tension in the family intensifies, the two generations decide to exchange the grandmother's apartment for two smaller ones and live separately. While searching for suitable exchange options, the older woman meets a single man of her age who lives with his mother, and she eventually marries him. The new marriage provides a childcare solution because now the child has a step-great-grandmother, who is portrayed as a matriarch happy to oversee the whole multigenerational family. The film indeed challenges the norm of young grandmothers abandoning their careers and personal lives to provide childcare for their adult children. However, the solution it offers transfers the responsibility for performing reproductive work to the oldest woman of the family while romanticising her unpaid labour. Retired and energetic in her seventies, the great-grandmother is portrayed as constantly grumbling but secretly enjoying her caregiving duties as they keep her busy and make her feel important and essential to the family's survival.

While high-quality paid childcare became available after the end of Soviet socialism, the post-Soviet cutbacks to state subsidies for childcare and after-school activities made the help of grandmothers even more important for less-privileged families than before (Utrata 2015, 128). However, as I discuss in Chapter 4, the intensive involvement of grandmothers in childcare sometimes occurs even when families can afford paid help. Kay (2012, 69) finds that norms of family support persist throughout epochs driven by the close multigenerational ties of the Russian family, as the older generation, intensively involved in children's upbringing, relies on their own early experiences of socialisation.

In the following sections, using the biographical narrative of Alevtina as a case study, I discuss how my interviewees' life trajectories are shaped by their life-long involvement in unpaid family care. I conclude this chapter by exploring how the women I interviewed express their expectations of their children providing care for them in old age.

Nurtured by grandmothers

It was a challenge to arrange a meeting for an interview with Alevtina (75), a retired factory worker. That summer, as usual, she was busy in the plot of land she owned at her summer house outside Samara, harvesting fruit and vegetables and making preserves. Eventually, she agreed to talk

with me one evening at her home. I hesitated to visit her so late, but my concerns faded as soon as we settled in the kitchen to talk.

Resembling Valentina Talyzina, the Soviet film star known for portraying 'ordinary women', she exuded a comforting presence. Her undivided attention made me feel safe. Around her I felt reassured that everything, no matter how uncertain the future seemed, would turn out just fine in my life. Her charm and sense of humour left an indelible mark on my soul.

An eloquent narrator, Alevtina told me that she had been born in a village during the Second World War and raised by her mother and grandmother, as the men of the family had been killed at the front. Many other participants in my study mentioned being raised in multigenerational households with the intensive involvement of their maternal grandmothers. As Alevtina's narrative unfolded, I learned that during the early postwar period, her family lived through a famine. When she was four years old, her mother, a collective farmer, was incarcerated for stealing a handful of grain from the collective farm field. Alevtina vividly remembers the hardships her family endured during those difficult times:

> There was no floor in our house. It was like a dugout, with very small single-glazed windows. In winter, they'd get covered with ice from inside. When I was grumpy because Granny was leaving to go to work, she'd splash some water on the window for me to have a spot I could see through: 'Sit here and watch.'

With warm laughter, Alevtina clarified that the spot on the window served her as entertainment, similar to television or smartphones for modern children: 'So we lived with Granny, and it seemed to me that I didn't have anyone closer in the whole world', my interviewee continued. 'It was only when I went to school that I realised how bad-tempered she actually was. She swore a lot!'

A couple of years later, after serving her sentence, her mother returned from prison with a new husband. Her grandmother, a widow in her late forties, had consistent conflicts with the new man in the family. Alevtina believed that the tension arose because the presence of her mother's new partner was a painful reminder to her grandmother of the loss of her own husband. At the same time, Alevtina suspected that her mother's new husband undermined her grandmother's authority as the head of the household.

When she turned seven, Alevtina's mother and stepfather moved to the nearby city of Samara so that she could attend school there. Initially,

they left the grandmother behind, but when the older woman reached pensionable age, she moved out of the village to join the family in Samara:

> Vasily [the stepfather] died after about seven years. She [the grandmother] outlived him, probably, by eight years. She really exhausted my mum because by that time she'd developed Alzheimer's. Towards the end, she didn't recognise anyone. When my husband and I would visit them, Mum would ask her, 'Who's that come to see us?' And she'd reply, 'Don't know ... some cow to steal from us …' She'd do crazy stuff, so my mum had a very hard time with her.

Many of my interviewees emphasised the critical role of grandmothers in their survival as children, especially in the absence of fathers and owing to the vulnerability of their young mothers to the consequences of war and Stalin's policies. Some of them were raised solely by grandmothers.

For instance, Klara (85), a retired accountant residing in the UK, told me that her mother died in a famine. When Klara's father married a new wife, she and her stepmother did not get along well. As a solution, her father sent her to live with her maternal grandmother. Another participant based in the UK, Tamara (66), a retired interpreter, went to live with her grandparents when her divorced mother remarried. Taissya (70), a retired teacher, told me that her mother died when she was 12. As by that time all her grandparents had died too, she had to become her own mother and mother to her younger siblings. To make ends meet her father worked long shifts, and most of the household chores, including childcare, became her responsibility.

Stepping in: young daughters as mothers' helpers

Like Taissya, mentioned above, some of my interviewees, including Alevtina, had been heavily involved in caring for their younger siblings, which affected their life trajectories. When Alevtina was in secondary school, her mother had a baby boy and needed help with childcare because Alevtina's grandmother still lived in the village at that time. Alevtina told me that in order to help her mother, she had had to sacrifice her chances of a better education:

> I had to leave school in my final year because my mum got pregnant. She was 38 at that time and wasn't very keen on having a

> newborn again. But Vasily really wanted them to have a child of their own. Back then, maternity leave was only 42 days. The problem was that our grandmother was already unwell. So, when Boris was born, the question of childcare arose, and I went to an evening school for working youth. Of course, I couldn't think of trying to get into university.

The above quotation underscores the significance of women's multigenerational family support systems, which sustained Russian families during the Soviet era. In cases where a grandmother was unable to fulfil the role of the mother's parenting partner, that responsibility often fell to the eldest daughter. However, this dynamic was primarily observed in the narratives of my working-class interviewees. It may be that the stratum of the Soviet intelligentsia, whose members prioritised higher education, made reproductive choices and childcare arrangements that would allow their daughters to enter higher education.

The fact that Alevtina attended evening school had a significant effect on her subsequent professional path. She explained to me that by engaging with a circle of employed young people, she prioritised early financial independence over the potentially better career prospects that higher education could have offered. Instead of pursuing a university degree as she had initially planned, Alevtina obtained a diploma and began working in a textile factory. However, later in life, she attempted to earn a university degree:

> Back then, the best workers were given the opportunity to enrol in universities without entrance exams. So I applied. But at the same time, I became pregnant. My husband, Grigory, was against my getting an education. It would've meant leaving the child with him during my exams … So my education came to a halt, and family life began.

Alevtina chose to forgo university because by then her mother, who would have helped her with childcare, had died. As is clear from the above quotation, the idea of a father being involved in childcare was unpopular, since, unlike girls, boys were not socialised to become future caregivers. Furthermore, family labour was perceived as unmanly. The traditional gender division of family responsibilities was, for instance, perpetuated by the school subject уроки труда (home economics), in which girls were taught how to sew and cook and boys were taught repair work.

Ultimately, Alevtina forged a career as a workshop manager. While proud of her professional achievements at the factory, she nonetheless expressed regret that she had not acquired a degree. Reflecting on the experiences of her peers, she explicitly linked having a university degree to securing meaningful employment in later years. Despite remaining busy with her kitchen garden in retirement, Alevtina told me that her happiest years were spent working. I explore women's professional lives in more detail in Chapter 4.

Receiving help with childcare

Alevtina's story was atypical of women in her generation, as she raised her children without the support of her mother. As demonstrated by Utrata (2015, 5), Russian women often perceive themselves as single not only if they have no male partner but also if there is no grandmother to help them with childcare and housework. Ten participants in my study – six working-class women based in Russia, three Russia-based interviewees with university degrees and one participant residing in the UK – told me that they had raised their children with the intensive help of their mothers.

For example, Klara (mentioned earlier in this chapter) was raised by her grandmother, who later helped her to bring up her son. When Klara reached the age of 30, she was still single and childless, which raised concerns among her family and friends. A colleague of Klara's insisted on introducing her to her single male cousin. Klara explained to me that after an extremely brief relationship with the man, she became pregnant. Before she had the chance to inform her boyfriend about the pregnancy, he ceased all communication with her without providing any explanation.

Although Klara might have tracked him down quite easily if she had wanted to, she made no attempt to do so. This decision can be attributed to the Soviet family legislation of the time, which incentivised procreation outside marriage by absolving men of legal responsibility for their illegitimate children but stigmatised women for 'immoral behaviour'. Between 1944 and 1967, only married mothers were entitled to file for child support, rendering it meaningless for Klara to seek out her son's father, who had shown no interest in starting a family.

While Klara was able to raise her son economically and practically with the support of her grandmother, the stigma of being an unmarried mother had a profound impact on her self-perception. Although in the

post-Soviet era, when she and I met, social disapproval of single motherhood had decreased significantly, in Klara's mind the story of her extramarital pregnancy still was scandalous. When she talked about it, she lowered her voice and was visibly overcoming difficult feelings at revealing the greatest secret of her life.

However, my other interviewees, who had raised their children within marriage, also spoke about the importance of grandmothers' support for mothers. For instance, Muza, aged 81 and residing in Russia, and Lilya, a 62-year-old UK resident, told me that as young women, they had married men from cities different from where they lived and relocated to live with their husbands far away from their parents. However, upon becoming mothers, they moved their families back to be closer to their own mothers, so that the latter could help them.

Nonna, who was 79 at the time of our interview, which took place in Samara, recounted that when she was a young married mother, she left her two children with her in-laws for several years while she went to another Soviet republic in search of better work conditions. A working-class woman, Nonna was the only one of my interviewees who mentioned the involvement of her husband's mother in childcare, rather than her own mother. During the Soviet epoch, this arrangement was deemed acceptable in cases where the mother's mother or grandmother was unavailable for support.

Another working-class woman based in Russia, Zinaida (70), also embarked on a long journey in pursuit of a better life. She and her husband relocated to a region where salaries were considerably higher. After having three children in quick succession, she unexpectedly became a widow when her husband had a fatal accident. Despite this loss, Zinaida chose not to return to Samara to be closer to her mother, as the young family had been provided with a state-funded house, which Zinaida was reluctant to give up.

However, raising three children alone proved to be a daunting task. Working two shifts, she had no choice but to enrol her children in nursery seven days a week. These childcare facilities, known as семидневки (seven days) or круглые сутки ('24/7'), were available during the Soviet era and were viewed as a last resort for unmarried working-class mothers who had no support from their own families.

Living with adult children and grandchildren

The cohorts whose experience of ageing is the central theme of this book came of age during the implementation of the Soviet public housing

initiative, which was designed to provide every Soviet nuclear family with its own apartment. Although housing conditions did improve for many families, eligible households – those with less than nine square metres of space per capita, families with multiple children and residents of communal apartments – had to wait their turn in long queues that often took years. At the same time, white-collar professionals, Communist party members and individuals with extensive informal connections could jump the queues and were better housed (Zavisca 2012, 33).

As I started discussing in the previous chapter, the introduction of private property rights after the collapse of the Soviet Union made residents of the state-owned housing units into a unique cohort of Russians. Granted the right in 1992 to privatise free of charge the apartments in which they were officially registered, several generations became property-owners without being burdened by enormous debts (Attwood 2012, 903).

However, the new government's expectation that the next generation of Russians would be transformed from members of the socialist housing sector into consumers in an American-style market was not realised quickly. By 2010, constrained by unstable salaries and high interest rates, fewer than 3 per cent of Russians had taken out a mortgage. While by the age of 40, more than half of Russians had obtained a place of their own, they usually acquired the capital for a housing purchase through selling a privatised Soviet apartment inherited from or gifted by their extended family. Although many young Russians participated in privatisation and shared legal ownership with their parents, the *de facto* property rights remained in their parents' hands. The older generation had a moral claim to these apartments, even if they shared the title with their children. The generation who initially received these privatised units acquired them through their workplaces in Soviet times and developed a sense of deserved ownership over their homes (Zavisca 2012, 131).

As reflected in the narratives I collected in Russia and the UK, one of the main strategies of economic citizenship for my interviewees was to help their adult children with housing. As Zavisca (2013, 225) points out, in contrast to Western countries where the transition to adulthood is strongly associated with leaving the parents' home, many single and married Russians live with extended family well into adulthood, prioritising security over autonomy. The emphasis on security evident in Russia can be explained by the reproductive pressure which motivates many young people to have children before they can afford to maintain a separate household. For my interviewees, allowing their adult children to stay on living with their families in their apartments was one of the most common ways to maintain the reproductive norm.

Although at the time of my fieldwork most of my interviewees lived alone, earlier in life many of them had been part of multigenerational households. Having started their own families while living with their parents or in-laws, many of my Russia-based interviewees found this option acceptable to pass on through generations. Other strategies of helping children with housing included selling the apartment they had privatised, to buy a separate flat for their children's family and usually a smaller one for themselves. Several interviewees told me that they were helping their children to pay off their mortgage, while another group of participants mentioned that they had transferred the title deeds of their apartments to their children or grandchildren, *de jure* no longer owning their homes.

At the same time, the custom of the older generation helping their adult children with housing is often taken for granted and not interpreted in economic terms. For instance, Maria, one of my Samara-based interviewees, a part-time cleaner aged 68, told me bitterly about feeling excluded in her own home:

> So, they [her son and daughter-in-law] got married and stayed on to live with me in my apartment. But it's not nice to live with young people. They're probably waiting for me to pop my clogs, aren't they? First, they have their own family. They keep their doors closed from me … and my granddaughter's always on her computer. I'm by myself all the time.

This working-class woman's struggles to achieve a better life were the central theme of her narrative. Upon graduating from secondary school, village-born Maria went on to train as a cook at a vocational school in Samara. However, during that time, to prevent too many people migrating to cities from undeveloped areas, rural residents were not granted permission to work and live outside their place of origin. For Maria to stay in Samara after her studies, her father had to bribe the local bureaucrat who oversaw the allocation of permission to rural residents to move to a city. Later, when she moved to Samara permanently, she found a job at a factory canteen where she met her future husband, who was working as a driver at the factory.

After they got married and had a young family, they were allocated a room in a dormitory and, later, a house with no central heating or water supply. On top of her full-time job and looking after the two children, Maria had to use coal to heat the house. In addition, she had to carry heavy buckets of water daily from a shared tap situated two blocks away,

to cook and wash the family's clothing. While they were eligible for a flat in an apartment building, they did not move up the queue for many years. Maria had the time-consuming task of writing endless formal complaints and attending countless appointments with bureaucrats at various levels in Samara and Moscow, until eventually the family could move to an urban flat.

Now a widow, Maria was actively involved in helping her children navigate their adult lives. Apart from providing accommodation to her son's family, she worked part-time in retirement to help her daughter pay off her mortgage. While the help of parents and grandparents with housing is often taken for granted by young families, older people do not always accept this norm. Family conflicts over the property of older people is a popular theme of talk shows on Russian television.[1]

At the same time, an older woman's choice to prioritise her own interests over those of her children and grandchildren goes against what Utrata (2011, 617) calls 'youth privilege'. By this term, Utrata is describing the social norm widespread in Russia that places a higher value on the careers and family lives of younger people than on those of their parents. This norm allows young people to pursue their careers and family lives with the extensive family labour of grandmothers taking place in the background.

Being a Russian grandmother abroad

When it comes to my UK-based interviewees, most of them had their children living in other countries or cities. When the adult children of my interlocutors lived nearby, those children usually did not see a multigenerational household as an acceptable option. However, the theme of sharing their home or helping their adult children with housing was still present in the narratives of female emigrants. For instance, Lylia, an academic aged 62, took in her teenage granddaughter, in order to help out her daughter, who had a new child. Three other women mentioned that they had made their children owners of their privatised apartments back in Russia when they emigrated to the UK.

Larisa (67) came to the UK to work as a nanny so that she could afford to build a house. She and her husband, both engineers and originally from Russia, had been allocated to a factory in Lithuania after they graduated from university in the 1970s. As early-career employees, they were provided with a flat and soon had two children. When the enterprise was shut down following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Larisa

and her husband became unemployed. While she tried to work in sales to make ends meet, he was not able to recover from the loss of the life he knew how to navigate. A couple of years later, he suffered a terminal illness and died.

When Larisa became a widow, she went to Italy to work as a carer for elderly people. While living abroad, she felt lonely and homesick. What enabled her to keep afloat was her dream of a big house where she would live with her now-adult children and their families. The image of a multigenerational household was one of her dearest memories from her childhood in a Russian village, where she had lived with her parents and grandparents in a house always full of visitors. Having a meaningful place in the world, with continuity between the past, present and future, as Kay (2012, 64) points out, is crucial for individuals' wellbeing. To make her dream come true, Larisa started work on building a house in Lithuania.

However, her project was jeopardised as she soon found herself burnt out and unable to continue working. Her sense of loneliness was exacerbated by her elderly clients dying soon after she had established meaningful connections with them. Drained by losses, she decided to move to the UK, where there was a demand for Russian-speaking nannies. While working with young children provided Larisa with a larger time-horizon to develop and maintain attachments, her employers' families reminded her painfully of what she wanted for herself but had not achieved. However hard she tried to hold on to her dream, Larisa could not suppress the realisation that her children, who now lived in Spain, did not plan to live in her house in Lithuania.

Moving between countries all her life, Larisa felt increasingly displaced. As her grandchildren were growing up far away, she treated the children she looked after as her own. Apparently, however, her job did not entirely satisfy her longing for family. The evidence of her thirst for connection and recognition was manifested in an episode of her narrative, in which she told me about her involvement with a school trip to London that her sister's granddaughter once had. As a treat to her young relative and her classmates, Larisa made 20 traditional Russian lunch meals of meatballs and buckwheat (котлеты с гречкой). Despite not having a car and suffering from chronic back pain, she brought the lunch boxes by public transport to a park where the group was having a break. She looked happy while telling me that the lunch had been the children's biggest impression of the trip.

While her happiness was infectious, I could not help thinking of the extent of the effort she had invested in feeding the whole class. Perhaps it was indicative of how much she missed the opportunity to perform the

family role of grandmother, which oppresses Russian women but also provides them with a source of power, pleasure and belonging.

Family care in old age

When I mention in conversation with a Russian person who witnessed the Soviet era that my mother, a retiree in her late seventies, lives alone, they usually assume that I plan eventually to bring her to live with me in the UK. Even when state-subsidised and commercial elder care is available, delegating the care of one's ageing mother to someone else is largely perceived as an immoral choice. In this sense, women's support systems in the Russian family cannot be seen as transactional. Since my mother does not have grandchildren, the expectation that I will take care of her is not based on her experience of helping me with childcare in exchange. Rather, it is the heavy reliance of Russian society on informal welfare that allocates family care duties to women in accordance with their life-stage.

Some of my interviewees told me that earlier in life they had lived with their ageing fathers, who were in need of assistance, while other women shared that they had lived with their elderly mothers and cared for them. When I interviewed them, three participants, Nonna and Sofia, based in Russia, and Klara, based in the UK, were themselves in need of daily practical help, owing to various disabilities. These women received help from their co-resident children and grandchildren. Twenty-one other participants mentioned that they would regularly receive care of various kinds from their children or younger significant others, who lived separately.

At the same time, all my interviewees told me that they would regularly provide help for their children and grandchildren. Apart from childcare and housework, monetary help given to adult children and grandchildren, even if in the form of small sums, was a source of pride for many participants in my study. However, this theme was accompanied by frequent complaints about insufficient pensions and the high cost of medicine. When I asked how they coped, many women admitted reluctantly that they had been given practical and financial help by their children and grandchildren.

For many participants in my study, downplaying the help they receive from their families was a way to attach value to their lives by presenting themselves as self-sufficient individuals who provided care to others. But at the same time, financial assistance from their children in the form of covering travel, renovation, leisure and private health-service expenses

was a source of pride for my interviewees. For example, Alevtina, whom we met earlier in this chapter, told me that having her pension as the only source of income made her feel extremely insecure. She told me that her daughter had paid for her surgery at the best eye clinic in Moscow:

> I had an eyesight problem and it could only be treated surgically. My daughter said, 'Mum, we want to give you a present for your 70th birthday – we'll pay for your operation'. It cost them a fortune – the tests, the operation itself and the hospital stay.

While Alevtina explained to me that she felt the monetary help from her daughter was a last resort, she was glad to see that her health was important to the younger generation of her extended family.

My oldest interviewee, Arina (88), based in Russia, proudly showed me a plastic hairbrush which her grandson had brought back for her from his holiday. It was obvious to me that what one might see as a mere piece of plastic had enormous significance for this woman. The souvenir was her evidence that her family loved her and thought of her while they were far away. The feeling of being important to their loved ones was valued by my interviewees no less than material forms of support provided by their families.

When I asked my interviewees how they imagined their ideal future, most of them replied that their strongest hope was that with age they would not become a burden to their children and grandchildren. While they strove to present themselves as stoic caregivers who always prioritised the interests of their offspring, it was clear from their narratives that should they require long-term care, their daughters would not abandon them. Perhaps this expectation explains, at least partially, why older Russian women often act as the main agents of the culture of reproductive pressure. Although hierarchical and often oppressive, women's family support systems provide them with a sense of connectedness, continuity and socially approved identity in later life.

Note

1. See, for example, the talk show *Beyond Reason*, broadcast on 9.3.2023 on the NTV TV channel, 'They claim their inheritance while their parents are still alive' (NTV 2023).

4
Financial independence past pensionable age

'But how boring it is to live without work!'

Muza (81), a retired engineer, was among a limited number of my interviewees who enjoyed travelling the world, had access to commercial medical services and privileged consumption. And yet, despite having a standard of living that is not within reach for most women of her age in Samara, Muza was very nostalgic about her life before retirement. We started our conversation in the living room of her spacious apartment, built during Stalin's era, which she had inherited from her parents, but eventually we moved to the kitchen. Over coffee and cake, Muza reflected on her transition to pensionable age back in the Soviet Union:

> I believe 55 is very early for retirement. Women, in general, are very active people. And if you aren't defeated by illness, then working is … Well, I don't know, maybe now it's just a different time and women pay much more attention to their home, and children, they can look after themselves, they can travel … But how boring it is to live without work! I think it's just insane … It's so interesting, so liveable to be a part of a good friendly collective at work. Work is the second life. But now everything is different.

Muza was born into a family of the Soviet elite, yet some of the freedoms Russian citizens acquired after the collapse of the USSR, such as tourist travel outside the Eastern Bloc, were not available even to them. However, they enjoyed many other privileges. For instance, the family had domestic servants because Muza's father was a high-ranking official. For most of her life Muza worked in a factory design department,

where she met her future husband, who was also an engineer. One of the happiest memories from her working years was associated with business travel to Moscow, where she attended the most famous theatres in the country and went shopping for food products unavailable in Samara at that time.

When *perestroika* began, Muza moved from the factory to a newly established design institute. During the first post-Soviet decade, using connections she had acquired from her father's position in society, Muza helped her son to obtain a profitable contract with a foreign company, which later grew into a private business corporation owned by him. During the Soviet era, Communist party connections had been vital for advancing through managerial ranks, but since 1991, they had become essential for accumulating financial capital (Gerber and Hout 2004, 681). At the same time, the move to marketisation created vast inequality: the queues due to shortages in consumer goods disappeared, but now products were out of reach for most ordinary people as a result of their high prices (Silverman and Yanowitch 2016, 5).

By the time Muza approached pensionable age, the institute she had worked at had shut down. Though the 'shock therapy' reforms of the 1990s had resulted in a rapid increase in unemployment, unemployment benefits were often not provided (Radl and Gerber 2015, 133). During the first post-socialist years, 80 per cent of the unemployed were women; average wages for women were 45–50 per cent of men's wages, compared with 70 per cent during the Soviet era (Shlapentokh 1999, 1174). For many people in the mid-1990s, undeclared or secondary employment was one of the most common survival strategies (Radl and Gerber 2015, 133). However, that was not the case for Muza: she was hired by her son and became the director of his newly established firm.

At the age of 60, after working several years for the family business, Muza retired. She explained her decision to me as motivated by her desire to help her daughter-in-law with childcare after her grandson was born. Later in her interview, however, she told me that her son's wife was a stay-at-home mother with a paid nanny. Thus, in contrast to many other stories that I heard during my fieldwork, Muza's contribution to childcare had not been a matter of the family's survival. While she did not tell me much about her last years at work before retirement, I had a feeling that her passion for the role of an involved grandmother may not have been the only reason she had ended her career. Based on the analysis of other narratives, I infer that it was important for my interviewees to present themselves as subjects, controlling their professional lives in the face of often ageist working environments.

Most of my interlocutors represented their decision to retire as their own, yet described their retirement as a painful event. For the generations of women who came of age during the Soviet era, financial independence was an organising principle of life (Ashwin 2000, 1). In contrast to some younger women who were keen on adopting the new 'legitimate housewife gender contract' (Temkina and Rotkirch 1997, 8), older women found it difficult to leave paid work even when they could afford to retire earlier (Zdravomyslova 1996, 35). This phenomenon is evident in the extract from Muza's interview quoted above. While now, with the help of her wealthy son, she could afford to satisfy all her needs, it was important for her to emphasise her autonomy by making a distinction between herself and her daughter-in-law, who was more interested in the role of a housewife than in pursuing a career.

Later in her narrative, Muza told me that she was nostalgic about the Soviet era because in her view, Soviet socialism provided more security:

> My husband and I didn't plan for retirement. We thought we'd be fine with our pensions just like our parents had been. But look what happened to the country … My pension is 14,500 roubles [per month; equivalent to £179 at the time of the interview]. 5,000 of it I spend on the bills, and most of the remaining 9,000 goes on my meds. What do I have after that? If it wasn't for my son's help … That'd be a suicide.

Even though Muza's pension was higher than that received by many of my other interviewees, for the generations born in the middle of the twentieth century, the introduction of the market economy meant a groundbreaking change of life compared with what they had known during the Soviet epoch. In addition to the establishment of a completely new sociality and despite her privileged position, Muza felt uneasy, after she had retired, about depending for her wellbeing on the support of her son.

However, the position of older citizens in the Soviet Union was unequal both within age cohorts and across generations. From the 1930s to the 1950s, based on the design of the Soviet social security system, people would continue to work until they were no longer able to do so. During that period, the maximum pension was below the minimum wage. This meant that without additional sources of income in later life, individuals were doomed to poverty. In 1956, a new pension law granted workers the right to draw their pensions based on their age and without needing to prove that they were no longer able to work. However, this change did not apply to collective-farm workers, who were only granted

the same right in 1964. It was not until the end of the 1970s that the average pension exceeded the official threshold of poverty (Lovell 2006, 5).

In the post-socialist era, many of my interviewees faced conflicting age- and gender-specific norms. On the one hand, the norm of sacrificial maternal love motivated them to maintain their financial independence for as long as they could, to avoid becoming a burden to their children and grandchildren. On the other hand, in their aspiration to help the younger members of their families in navigating the increasingly deregulated job market, some of them felt they had to retire earlier to become committed grandmothers. In this chapter, I explore older women's strategies to address the contradictory expectations in relation to post-pension-age employment.

I begin by discussing the importance of paid work for Soviet women and the impact of the change in the economic paradigm on older women's strategies of economic citizenship. Next, I outline the differences between the Russian and British pension systems and survey the literature on the position of older women in the job market in the two countries. Finally, I explore the post-pension-age 'livelihood strategies' available to the participants in my study, in accordance with their class position and personal circumstances. By 'livelihood strategies', White (2004, 107) understands culturally specific and structurally limited options for economic survival. I conclude by challenging the stereotypical notion that retired women are no longer economically productive.

Older women and the job market

Most of my interviewees in both countries stated that they had wanted to remain employed after reaching pensionable age, in order to secure their financial independence. However, the availability of options to continue working in later life is conditioned by class-related advantages accumulated throughout the life course, as well as the design of pension systems and the situation in a particular job market (Vickerstaff and Loretto 2017, 177).

During the early post-Soviet years, most of my interviewees lost the various forms of capital that they had accumulated during the Soviet era, owing to a lack of market experience, scarce opportunities for retraining and the ageist dynamics of the job market. However, despite these constraints, only 4 of the 37 participants in my study retired completely after reaching pensionable age, or earlier. But even these four early retirees found sources of income in addition to an old-age pension outside the

job market. Two of them had kitchen gardens and kept livestock at their summer houses; the other two lived on savings acquired by moving into a smaller apartment. While some women continued working to maintain a higher standard of living, others had to have an additional source of income simply to make ends meet.

The age at which an individual can claim an old-age pension is a threshold that marks their transition to later life and implies a related change in social status (Vickerstaff and Loretto 2017, 179). One of the biggest problems associated with reaching pensionable age is ageism in the job market. While a sustainable position in contemporary labour markets requires a constant renewal of competencies, workers of pensionable age are often not considered for jobs that require retraining (Conen et al. 2012, 629). The scarcity of options for retraining available to older individuals pushes them out of professional activities (Street 2017, 13).

Empirical studies show that, despite a stereotypical view of older people as less adaptable, employees over the age of 50 are in fact more skilled, wiser and more productive than their younger counterparts (Taylor and Walker 2003; Furunes and Mykletun 2007; Iweins et al. 2012). Employers often express a reluctance to provide retraining for workers of immediately pre-pensionable and pensionable age because it would entail a change in the organisation's production methods and an increase in cost. In light of this, rather than investing in reforms, most employers prefer to reinforce the negative view of 'older workers' (Street 2017, 21). In turn, the label of 'older worker' negatively affects employees' self-esteem and enthusiasm for their professional duties (Desmette and Gaillard 2008, 170–1).

In Russia, there has been no mandatory retirement since the 1990s. At the point of the pension reform of 2018, the pensionable age for women born before 1964 remained at 55 years and for men born before 1959 it remained at 60. Since 2018, pensionable age has started to rise, and by 2028 it will be 60 for women and 65 for men (see Federal Law 350-FZ. 2018). The Russian pension system is a conventional single-pillar pay-as-you-go scheme. In addition, private pension schemes were introduced in 2002 (Radl and Gerber 2015, 132).

Employment legislation in the Russian Federation defines workers of pre-pensionable age as a vulnerable group potentially eligible for job quotas. However, the actual necessity and level of such a quota is defined by each region individually. In reality, the state distances itself from the relations between employers and employees. Consequently, age discrimination in the labour market begins to target professionals from their early forties (Bogdanova 2016, 537). It manifests itself through indirect

practices of recruitment, resulting in qualitative changes to the character of jobs available for individuals in this age-group.

In Russia, where the state delegates the authority to shape hiring and firing policies to private employers, those deemed 'capable' are expected to compete in the job market, while those who are 'incapable' are entitled to a guaranteed old-age pension. Workers of pensionable age who are looking for a new job are in the group that is most vulnerable to the ageist dynamics of the job market. Not only do they lose out to younger colleagues in the competition for jobs, but they also suffer from inferior working conditions compared with their peers who are able to retain their existing jobs (Kozina and Zangieva 2018, 12–15). A low rate of return to education is common in Russia; jobseekers of pensionable age are usually encouraged to find voluntary work rather than support with retraining (Radl and Gerber 2015, 136).

In 2011, 17 per cent of men aged 60–72 were employed, compared to 10 per cent of women in that age group (making up 4.2 per cent of the total employed population). After reaching pensionable age, only 40 per cent of people remain employed full-time, while 43 per cent become completely retired. Among those previously employed full-time, 8 per cent (mostly women) transition to part-time work. At the same time, 7 per cent of people who were already retired return to paid employment (either full or part-time) when they reach pension age. Very few people of pensionable age make an upward move to become managers; most move from the managerial class to lower-ranking occupations. Skilled manual workers typically move down to semi- or unskilled occupations even before they reach pension age. Even though they are often at their highest productivity level, it is easier for them to find a lower-ranking job elsewhere than to be re-employed in the same organisation (Radl and Gerber 2015, 136–9).

In the UK, mandatory retirement was abolished in 2011. As in many other Western countries, in the UK the new imperative to postpone retirement has been promoted. When I conducted my fieldwork, the pensionable age for the cohorts of women I interviewed was 62 years. Currently, state pension ages are rising to 67 for both men and women by 2027 and are expected to reach 70 over time (Vickerstaff and Loretto 2017, 179). At the same time, cash benefits for retirees aged under 65 will decline, and the opportunities for an early exit via salary-related occupational pensions have significantly declined (Lain 2011, 493). It is projected that the rise of the state pension age will increase the number of women too young to receive an old-age pension and yet too old to continue to compete in the job market (Vickerstaff and Loretto 2017, 180).

Age discrimination legislation in the UK gives the right to request, but does not guarantee, employment past pensionable age. In addition, other structural factors such as migration histories, class and the health of the potential employee reduce the chances of getting better jobs in later life (Banks et al. 2008). The problem of tacit ageism in the UK job market is exacerbated by the gendered aspects of inequality – half a million more women than men claim means-tested pension credit benefits. While 80 per cent of men receive the full basic state pension, only 45 per cent of women do so. In comparison with men, women are more likely to have a lower amount of savings owing to the time they spend on unpaid family care. In 2016, 69 per cent of women in the age group 55–59 were in paid work, with this number dropping to 43 per cent in the age group of 60–64. From the age of 65 to 68, 16 per cent of women remain employed, and only 3 per cent continue their professional careers past the age of 70 (Vickerstaff and Loretto 2017, 176, 182).

Women's reasons for leaving their pre-pension-age jobs

Most women I interviewed had been directly or indirectly pushed out of their previous occupations as soon as they reached pensionable age. Only 7 of the 37 participants told me that they had stayed in the positions they held prior to pensionable age. Five of these participants were either Russia-based academics or professionals who managed to become entrepreneurs during the first post-Soviet decade. Among women based in the UK, 4 of the 14 participants had maintained their previous positions: three were academics, and one woman had a private psychotherapeutic practice. All of them had lived in the UK for more than 20 years.

Most of my interviewees continued their participation in the labour force for at least a short period upon reaching pensionable age. The duration of post-pension-age employment was noticeably class-related. In the UK and US contexts, as Street (2017, 18) observes, the least privileged social groups are less likely to extend their working lives very much, owing to low job satisfaction, poorer health and care-related family duties that cannot be outsourced. Similarly, most of the women in my study who left the labour force earlier were from the working-class group. It follows that the women who held the same positions as before pensionable age, and in fact stayed employed longer than most of the other interviewees, came from more-privileged backgrounds.

With the exception of the four early retirees mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, and several of the most privileged interviewees,

who were able to retain their pre-pension-age jobs, the other participants made a relatively similar transition to post-pension-age employment. Most of the women in my study left secure jobs upon reaching pensionable age to take on poorly paid and lower-skilled positions, in order to maintain their financial independence.

The successful careers of 10 of my Russia-based participants were interrupted as a result of the economic crisis related to the demise of the Soviet Union. Unlike just a few of my interviewees, this group did not benefit from the collapse of the planned economy. On the contrary, most of these women seem to have lost out in terms of social capital and the greater financial independence they had enjoyed during the Soviet era. Most of these participants were made redundant in the 1990s, when economic reforms left approximately 7 million workers in Russia unemployed (Dmitriev and Maleva 1997, 1501). As they were at or approaching pensionable age at that time, they did not manage to find new jobs at the same level and took on lower-paid roles.

Eight participants, including two UK-based women, left their pre-pension-age positions under the pressure of tacit age norms operating in the job market. Although not a single participant in my study was overtly forced to retire, the stories my interviewees told me were full of evidence of covert ageism. Some of the participants left their pre-pension-age jobs in response to implicit pressure coming from their colleagues and families. Others were indirectly pushed out by company pension schemes in both countries.

The lack of retraining for employees of pensionable age was a reason why some of my interviewees left their better-paid and more prestigious pre-pension-age jobs. Several participants told me that they had to retire from their white-collar positions because they felt trapped in a vicious circle. The indirect comments about their older age made by their colleagues undermined their confidence. As a result, they were reluctant to ask for assistance with new technologies, so as to avoid being seen as old and incompetent. Consequently they felt that they were not keeping up with the developments in their fields and retired earlier to maintain their sense of self-worth, taking on less-skilled jobs.

For many women, the impact of caregiving on employment persists far beyond the years of looking after their children. Reproductive labour was another factor that affected women's decisions to make a downward career move. Two participants in my study, who were based in Russia and did not have a university degree, left their pre-pension-age jobs to provide care to their elderly parents and ailing husbands. Like other women, however, they took on lower-paid, precarious and often undocumented

jobs in order to have a source of income in addition to their old-age pensions.

In other cases, it was the professional trajectories of their husbands that affected the career choices of my interviewees. Two UK-based participants left their pre-pension-age jobs when their British husbands retired. One participant's husband decided to return from Spain to the UK when he retired from the business in which the couple had worked together, and another woman's spouse wanted to leave England for retirement in Croatia. As these two participants had emigrated on marrying, they prioritised the integrity of their families over their jobs.

Poor health was another reason why some of my interviewees left their better-paid pre-pension-age jobs. Two Russia-based participants left their last permanent positions at the ages of 48 and 49, respectively, owing to chronic illnesses. In Russia, individuals who have disabilities are entitled to earlier retirement and a disability pension. In addition, people with disabilities are provided with some benefits, such as reduced prices for medicines and special work conditions. Since, despite anti-discrimination legislation, people with disabilities are one of the most vulnerable groups in the Russian job market (Demianova and Lukyanova 2016, 51), these two participants continued working in retirement as undocumented cleaners.

Women's post-pension-age livelihood strategies

Becoming self-employed

Based on my analysis, relatively advantaged women who came of age during the Soviet era used the resources they accumulated before the collapse of the USSR to ensure their longer working lives. In contrast, less-privileged women could only rely on rather modest old-age pensions and additional income consisting of small, often informal extra wages.

While six of my interviewees attempted to create jobs for themselves, only four succeeded in this endeavour. Two Russia-based women, Elvira (60) and Ludmila (62), were trained as engineers and worked in factories. They were in their late thirties when the reforms of the 1990s began and these resulted in their being made redundant. Both widows, they each attempted to launch small businesses to provide for their families. However, as they lacked the substantial skills and sufficient resources to sustain their pursuits, they both quickly gave up on entrepreneurship and chose to look for existing jobs instead of creating them.

In contrast, Evgenia (60) was one of the four participants who managed to become successful agents in the market economy. This woman came from a working-class background and could not rely on her family to help her navigate the post-socialist environment. Trained as a biologist, Evgenia belonged to the first generation in her family to have a university degree. However, she did not manage to build a career in science, as her field of research stagnated during the late Soviet and early post-Soviet years.

In search of a stable income, she found a job as an engineer in a factory. In the 1990s, the factory was predictably shut down, and Evgenia lost her job. For several years she tried working as a cleaner, a receptionist and a social worker. But at the age of 55, she retired from her last permanent position, entered network marketing and has worked successfully as an entrepreneur ever since. After the end of Soviet socialism, many Russian women turned to selling cosmetics through network marketing – a common economic activity based on the use of social capital (Busse 2001, 167).

Evgenia told me that despair had been her main motivation to change her professional trajectory. As a single mother, she had felt ashamed of not being able to afford to buy 'a decent school bag' for her daughter. At the network-marketing company, she quickly climbed the corporate ladder. She invested in training and used professional contacts from her many previous jobs to sell the company's cosmetic products. Her motivation was so strong that in a few years she was able to buy an apartment. This was a rare event among the participants in my study, as most of them privatised the flats they had been provided with by the Soviet state for free and did not earn enough to purchase property.

Turning to retraining

Eight participants interviewed in the UK, who had suffered from the outcomes of the demise of the USSR, had sought opportunities to emigrate. While six women emigrated on marrying, two participants became economic migrants from former Soviet Baltic countries to which they had moved from Russia. The other ways to emigrate that were available to the generations of former Soviet citizens identified in my study were late Soviet Jewish emigration, political asylum and family reunion.

Lilya, who came to the UK to work as an academic, Izolda (67), who obtained a British university degree as a psychotherapist, and Tamara, who married a British citizen and continued to work as an interpreter in the business sphere in the UK, were my only interviewees who did

not undergo professional downward mobility in the new country. In contrast, Alexandra (67), who had worked as a lecturer at a vocational college in Latvia, and Larisa (67), who had had a career as an engineer in Lithuania, received retraining to find employment in the UK. When I interviewed them, both women were working as nannies for affluent Russian-speaking families in London. In fact, this trend was not unique to female migrants. Another interviewee, Elvira (60), who was based in Russia, had been trained as an engineer. When approaching pensionable age, she acquired retraining to work as a nanny for a wealthy family in Samara.

Larisa and Alexandra were both born in provincial cities in Russia and were among the first generation in their extended family to earn a university degree. As part of mandatory employment and state-funded education in the Soviet Union, college graduates were given a compulsory, usually two-year assignment to work as 'young specialists' at industrial enterprises elsewhere in the country. Both women married during their college years and upon graduation followed their husbands who were allocated to the former Soviet Baltic republics. When the Baltic republics declared independence in the early 1990s, both interviewees and their husbands lost their permanent positions as a result of the economic and political turbulence of the period.

According to Larisa, her husband, devastated by the loss of his previously stable position in society, would mostly spend his time simply 'lying on a sofa waiting for a managerial position to be offered to him'. To provide for their two children, she entered the 'shuttle trade', an entrepreneurial activity that involves buying goods abroad and selling them to small shops. During the early post-Soviet years, while many men were depressed about losing their breadwinner status, women would more willingly take on temporary, less prestigious jobs and trade activities to enable their family's economic survival (White 2004, 125).

Soon after being made redundant, Larisa's husband became terminally ill and died. When she became a widow, she went to Russia to work as a group leader in a firm that provided bus shop tours to take people involved in the 'shuttle trade' to Italy, where they could purchase fur coats wholesale and later sell them to shops in Moscow. When the firm closed, she worked as a carer for elderly people in Italy and later as a nanny in London.

Unlike Larisa, Alexandra did not take risks related to the new entrepreneurial opportunities that emerged with the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Instead, she enrolled in several retraining courses offered to people in Latvia who had lost their jobs in the early 1990s. After a long

period of moving from one precarious job to another, she and her family decided to seek better prospects in the UK. In London, Alexandra took a teachers' training course, but she never applied for teaching jobs. During her interview, she told me that she felt extremely insecure about her limited English and found herself unable to overcome her vulnerability.

At first, she attempted to improve her English, but eventually she became demotivated as she discovered that there was a demand for Russian-speaking nannies to work in the families of wealthy immigrants from former Soviet republics. Although Alexandra's own children managed to acquire proficiency in English, they did not succeed in obtaining white-collar jobs in the UK. During her interview, she told me that not persevering in improving her English was the biggest regret of her life. What provided her with a sense of agency, however, was her aspiration to invest all possible resources in her grandchildren's future careers in the UK. To this end, she used her work in affluent families to learn what young people needed to do to succeed.

One of the most prominent themes in Alexandra's narrative was her resentment of her position in the income-based system of inequality that she encountered in London. In the quotation that follows, Alexandra works hard to come to terms with her change of status from a member of the Soviet intelligentsia back in Latvia to the role of a domestic servant in the UK:

> Sometimes there are two or three children in the family. It's a great responsibility. You're in charge and must make sure nothing bad happens ... But again, today a teacher of my level gets paid, at best, 600–700, not even pounds, but euros [a month in Latvia]. Here, on the other hand, as a nanny, you earn £1,200–£1,400. And now tell me, where is your life better – here or there? …
>
> You can go to the kitchen and take anything you like. In these houses they have everything. You're not restricted in anything. You go on holiday with them. You stay in five-star hotels somewhere in the Emirates. Would you be able to go there by yourself? You've travelled all over the South of France. You don't enjoy Nice anymore because you've already been there several times. Now go ahead and compare …
>
> But she [a nanny] will come [to her home country] and won't tell anyone she stayed at a five-star hotel but will tell you about the horror of being left there in the heat without cold water. I mean, in Nice! And that they [the parents of the children] went to watch some performance while you, poor thing, were left behind with the

> children because they needed to be put to bed. And when you did so, it turned out that there was no cold water in the room for you.

In this extract, Alexandra disapproves of her colleague, who was apparently critical about her work conditions as a nanny. By emphasising that the job comes with benefits such as free, high-quality food and travel, Alexandra presents it as being higher in status than a mere blue-collar servant position. In other extracts from her narrative, however, she speaks bitterly about the massive social distance between herself and the new class of rich former compatriots whom she now works for.

She looked proud when she told me that she rented a flat in central London. But she burst into tears when she explained that she could only afford it by claiming social benefits as an under-waged pensioner. Unlike Larisa and Evgenia, mentioned earlier in this chapter, who built their identities on their achievements as agents of the market economy, Alexandra was nostalgic about the high status she had enjoyed as a member of the Soviet intelligentsia before the collapse of the USSR. The problem was that in the UK, Alexandra had not been able to find a way to 'translate' her cultural capital into a more prestigious social position.

Whereas Elvira, Larisa and Alexandra managed to acquire retraining, which allowed them to secure relatively well-paid nannying work for affluent families in Russia and the UK, some of my other interviewees did not have this option. For instance, Serafima, aged 67, a retired schoolteacher based in Russia, had to leave her job, which she enjoyed very much, owing to the absence of appropriate digital retraining. A similar problem was brought up by Lydia, a 74-year-old retired computer programmer. While Serafima took on a job as a museum guard before she left her professional career, Lydia downshifted from the head of a department to a position as an administrative assistant. Even though it was a rather painful move for both of them, they were happy to find lower-ranked full-time jobs, as jobs in cleaning and catering are often the only options available to women of pensionable age in Russia (Kozina and Zangieva 2018, 15).

Thus, many of my interviewees with extensive experience in the Soviet planned economy were not able to retain their professional positions after the collapse of the USSR. A small number of the participants in my study were willing to face the challenge of learning how to become competitive actors in the market economy in Russia and the UK. This strategy of economic citizenship in later life required access to the global care market or to retraining opportunities. In Russia, these opportunities were available to those participants in my study who could afford

to return to education. Some of my other interviewees were given these opportunities as citizens of former Soviet Baltic republics, which implemented national strategies to make the job market more adaptable to EU membership (Paas et al. 2003).

Relying on personal connections

Nine Russia-based interviewees told me that in order to secure employment after reaching pensionable age they had turned to their informal connections. In other words, they had acquaintances who could informally influence hiring decisions to help them. This strategy corresponds with the Soviet 'economy of favours', the tradition of relying on informal connections to 'get things done' that was the functioning alternative to the Soviet planned economy (Ledeneva 1998, 5).

Within the Soviet socio-economic system, people involved in informal connections were defined as 'свои люди' (those who belong to our circle). The informal connections that made individuals 'свои' (one of us) were a form of solidarity not determined by state institutions (Yurchak 2013, 102). This phenomenon of informality manifested itself in the narratives I collected. According to my findings, for the generations trained for the Soviet planned economy, turning to personal connections to ensure employment later in life is still an efficient strategy.

To illustrate this, I will cite Alla, a university professor aged 66 based in Russia. Alla's narrative was a story of professional success.[1] Although her parents were not academics, she knew from the age of 12 that she wanted to teach at a university. She pursued her dream with determination, excelling as a student and eventually obtaining a PhD. She was promoted to the position of professor in her early thirties. By the time of the interview, she had worked at the same university department for more than 40 years. Her late husband had also been an academic, and her daughter continues the family dynasty by working as a lecturer at the same university.

When we discussed the current stage of her career, Alla told me that her passion for her job remained as strong as it had been some 50 years ago. However, her narrative was full of evidence that retaining her job beyond pensionable age had required intensive management of age-specific social norms:

> When we meet up at reunions, my ex-classmates keep telling me to quit my job. I'm the only one who is still working, among all of us; others are already retired. I always reply, 'How am I supposed to

> make ends meet then?' However, the real reason is different. I can't imagine how I'm going to live with all this free time. It'd be impossible, because I'm used to the intensity of my professional life, and I have a deep affection for my students …
>
> I feel no pressure about age at work, none at all. On the contrary, sometimes I tell my colleagues that I'm fed up and leaving. They will reply, 'Nonsense! Who's going to work then?' I get on well with my younger colleagues. There isn't any age discrimination in our department. I studied at university with the head of our department, and we are still close friends. We get on beautifully; it's a pleasure to work with him. I know that ageism exists in other places, though …
>
> I don't teach that much anymore. There are two younger lecturers, both in their forties. So, I've decided to give way to them and pass on my courses. I teach one course, supervise a few doctoral dissertations, and that's quite enough for me. Besides, I have a little granddaughter, and I want to see her grow up. My daughter is a lecturer; she needs to build up her own career.

In this excerpt, Alla emphasises that she has not encountered any pressure about her choice to go on working after reaching pensionable age, yet there are two sources of pressure reflected. First, Alla mentions that her retired peers make disparaging comments about the fact that she still works full-time. Second, she admits that she is passing on some of her responsibilities to younger colleagues in order to assist her daughter with childcare, as the latter 'needs to build up her own career'. These two sources of pressure illustrate well-established expectations that employees of pensionable age will give up their positions for younger colleagues and that grandmothers will provide extensive childcare support to their daughters.

In the face of such expectations, Alla may feel the need to justify her aspiration to work longer. In my interpretation, the passage in which she tells me about occasionally expressing her intention to leave the job signifies that she does feel uncomfortable about not retiring. By stating, 'I am fed up, I'm leaving', Alla may convey an underlying message to her colleagues that she would prefer to stay but needs their endorsement for that decision.

In his essay *On Face-Work*, Goffman (2005 [1967], 30–1) discusses what people do to mitigate tensions that arise in situations publicly perceived as problematic. He explains that when individuals are hesitating to undertake a course of action that may be socially inappropriate, they

may resort to voluntary self-deprecation, to allow favourable judgements and approvals to come from other people. By employing 'negative bargaining' and 'reciprocal self-denial', actors involved in these interactions create an opportunity to show that their choices are not driven by their own egoistic desires. The purpose of this tacit cooperation, then, is to save face in a dubious context.

I assume that by saying she is going to leave her job, Alla is trying to demonstrate that she puts other people's interests before her own, while her interlocutors respond in the same manner and fulfil her tacit request to approve her choice. Thus, Alla's statement that she does not encounter any pressure to give up her position after reaching pension age, in fact, indicates the opposite: to mitigate tension, one must be aware of it, at least unconsciously. Apparently, her denial of the pressure to leave the job is yet another way to justify her decision to continue working.

However, apart from the expectation that professionals of pensionable age will leave the job market, Alla's narrative reflects the fact that this norm can be negotiated. Her friendship with the head of the department, a man of her own age, enabled her to feel supported in the decision to work longer. Similar informal connections also helped the other nine participants in my study who were able to secure their post-pension-age employment. But this form of solidarity is not available on demand. In order to establish mutually beneficial connections, a person who asks for a favour has to have access to some kind of public resource which will allow them to reciprocate when the other person needs something from them (Ledeneva 1998, 10). Thus, turning to informal connections to retain post-pension-age jobs was a strategy available only to my more-privileged interviewees.

Livelihood strategies outside the job market

When all else fails, undocumented jobs can be a last resort for those women of pensionable age who seek additional income but do not have access to the strategies of economic citizenship in later life discussed earlier in this chapter. Russia-based Nonna (79) was my least privileged interviewee. Born in a village, she dropped out of school at the age of 10 to help her mother, who worked as a collective farmer. At the age of 16, she married and soon after had two children. In her twenties, Nonna's family moved to another former Soviet republic where she worked as a bus-garage receptionist for most of her life.

At the age of 48, she retired owing to a disability. When the Soviet Union collapsed, the family decided to move back to Russia. Upon her

return to Samara, Nonna started to work for the retired director of a local factory as a cleaner and a housekeeper. The man did not pay her a salary; instead, he would provide some food for her family. Although Nonna told me that her informal employer was emotionally abusive to her, she endured his behaviour in the hope of borrowing some money from him to buy a modest house on the outskirts of Samara. When the house was bought and the debt repaid, Nonna finally retired.

While working in return for food can be seen as a rather odd choice when other options are available, Nonna's narrative provides an explanation of her logic. This participant's self-presentation was based on the pre-revolutionary rural ethos, with its distinct system of symbolic and economic exchange based on natural production. The major motif of the stories that Nonna told me about herself reflected her creativity in navigating her life by avoiding interactions with institutions and bypassing normative regulations whenever possible.

Although her ways of coping were informed by a lack of competencies in relation to the more conventional strategies employed by my more-privileged interviewees, Nonna did not present herself as a victim of class injustice. On the contrary, she proudly spoke about the adventures she had undergone to maintain the wellbeing of her family through the channels to which she was most accustomed. As her daughter and her grandchildren lived in her house, she felt that she was a fulfilled matriarch who had lived an adventurous life.

Three other participants in my study exercised economic citizenship outside the job market in order to maintain greater financial independence upon retirement. For instance, Russia-based Ksenia (70) had retired together with her husband and they then spent most of their time in a summer house taking care of a large kitchen garden to sell vegetables and fruit to their neighbours and friends. When another interviewee, Klara (85), reached pensionable age, she sold her apartment in Samara and moved to a village where she bought a house with a plot of land and a goat. Similarly, Elizaveta (78), a retired engineer based in Russia, was able to live on savings from selling her large apartment in the Moscow region and buying a smaller one in Samara.

Although the livelihood strategies of these women might be 'invisible' from the perspective of the formal economy, they still actively made use of opportunities to maintain their own wellbeing and that of their family outside formal arrangements. Their experiences are significant as they challenge the stereotypical notion that fully retired women, who are commonly referred to as babushki, no longer make a contribution to society.

Note

1. Androushchak and Yudkevich (2012) have pointed out that Russian academia has struggled with the termination of the Soviet planned economy and the economic crises of the 1990s. Limited resources resulted in low academic mobility, poor rewards and heavy teaching loads, which meant few opportunities to be actively involved in research. As a consequence, most universities, except for a few in Moscow and St Petersburg, have been unable to compete successfully for the best students or faculty.

5
Community bonds

'It's nice to have something just for myself'

When I met Maria (68), in Samara, she was working as a part-time cleaner. She appeared stern and resembled a warrior always ready to repel any potential attack. The marks that the challenges of her difficult life had left on her face contrasted with her dyed ginger hair, bright lipstick and the colourful thread of beads around her neck. Several years before our encounter, Maria's husband succumbed to a terminal illness, having endured years of excruciating pain while she selflessly cared for him. After he died, she found herself emotionally and physically exhausted. It appeared that she was still grappling with the loss but strove to reclaim her life from the grasp of pain.

It was her sister-in-law who had suggested that we talk. Initially, as a modest working-class woman, Maria was sceptical about the idea of participating in a study, since she believed she did not have an interesting life story to tell. However, her relative, who had already given me an interview herself, tempted her to embark on this adventure, saying that her own experience of reflecting on life in front of a respectful and interested listener had been 'a therapeutic experience'. When Maria arrived at her sister-in-law's place to meet me, I sensed she was seeking an escape from her daily routine.

As I mentioned in Chapter 3, she was busy working as a part-time cleaner and helping her adult children with childcare. Her son and his family lived in her apartment, and she also supported her daughter, who lived separately, in paying off her mortgage. Despite her efforts, Maria felt that her children did not really appreciate her contributions to their wellbeing. During our interview, she told me that attending dance classes and choir sessions for people of pensionable age was her way of indulging herself:

> So I sing in a choir, I go dancing in the Palace of Veterans … I've been doing ballroom dancing for eight years now. I love to sing. One needs some entertainment, right? I heard there was a choir for pensioners, free of charge. So I went there, and they signed me up. Then I heard some music from downstairs and went down. There was this ballroom dancing class, where they dance in couples. There were no men, so I've been learning the male part. I have these classes twice a week. We give public performances – we dance for the local philharmonic or at the cinema. I've grown used to this. You know, it's nice to have something just for myself. I know everyone there; I don't know their surnames, though, and I don't have to. I go there, smile, laugh, sing songs. I like it. The only problem is that I now have less time because I have to look after my other granddaughter. But I tell them [her daughter's family, who live separately]: 'You know what, I need you to give me some space. I also need to live.' I don't go to restaurants or theatres. First of all, who goes there alone, right? I don't have single women friends to go out with. So that's my way of being with other people.

In this excerpt, Maria explains that, despite working two jobs past pensionable age – one in her paid position and the other as an unpaid family carer – she feels the need to be part of a community beyond her family duties. She seeks fulfilment in the Palace of Veterans, a local cultural centre that offers free classes for older adults. These classes are predominantly attended by working-class individuals, since former members of the Soviet intelligentsia see little symbolic value in activities unrelated to advanced cultural consumption and professional validation. Affluent older adults, on the other hand, prefer leisure activities associated with the 'successful ageing' lifestyle, which I discuss later in this chapter.

However, for Maria, the free classes were an available means to engage in pleasurable activities outside her role as a grandmother. In addition, the community in the Palace of Veterans helped her challenge the norms of 'the couple culture' (Budgeon 2008, 301), which encourages individuals to seek romantic partners by making them feel awkward going out alone.

Like Maria, some of my interviewees based in Russia, who were working in low-paid occupations past retirement age or were completely retired, made enthusiastic use of the free leisure options sponsored by social service centres and local administrations. In addition to attending dancing and singing classes, craft workshops or free local tourist trips, individuals of pensionable age often have access to state-sponsored

computer literacy programmes or are encouraged to do volunteer work in public organisations. However, while the aim of this provision is to transform 'clients of social services into civil society activists', this endeavour falls short. The opportunities offered to older people do not enable them to assume the role of partners of the state rather than merely recipients of social benefits (Dmitrieva 2018, 41).

Nevertheless, while many individuals avoid engaging in activities associated with old age, given its negative connotations, others find 'classes for pensioners' to be an accessible way of finding a community. Take Taissya (70), who worked as an editor at a publishing house in Russia before relocating to the UK. A single mother, she lost her job following the collapse of the Soviet Union and struggled to secure a stable source of income. A friend introduced her to a dating section in the local newspaper where foreign men in search of women to marry advertised their profiles. During the economic crisis of the 1990s, marriage migration was a survival strategy for many Russian women (Patico 2009, 309). Among the candidates Taissya corresponded with, there was a British man willing to travel to Russia to meet her. They got on well and soon after, the man invited her to visit him in the UK. The relationship led to marriage.

In her new country, Taissya found a job at the same factory where her husband worked. Initially, they enjoyed their life together; they bought a house and travelled the world. However, she soon discovered that her spouse had a drinking problem. Although she was keen to help him overcome his addiction, he was more interested in numbing himself with alcohol than addressing the root cause of his problem. After 10 years, Taissya divorced her husband and relocated to another city. To integrate into the local community, she began attending painting classes for retirees offered by a local college for a nominal price. According to her account, these classes provided her with a sense of belonging and a fresh start.

While Maria and Taissya found enjoyable ways to engage with others of their age, the availability of recreational activities in later life is limited by several factors. First, women generally have less leisure time than men, owing to their disproportionate family responsibilities, and this discrepancy persists as they age (Bernard and Phillipson 2004, 371). At the same time, leisure opportunities in later life are often constrained by declining health, lack of access to transport and a general feeling of insecurity (Sedgley et al. 2006, 44). Lastly, the individual's social origin and educational and income levels influence the accessibility of leisure options and inform their choices for social participation (Scherger et al. 2011, 149).

In this chapter, I pose the question of what it means for older women to be part of a community. I introduce the four types of group leisure options in which the participants in my study engaged: spontaneous outdoor gatherings with peers, sponsored group activities, self-organised activities and unfunded recreational activities. I also explore how women of pensionable age in Russia and the UK negotiate their status in society, by discussing their ways of connecting with others.

Babushki on benches

In Russia, older urban women, as a social group, are commonly portrayed as socialising on лавочки (benches). Outdoor gatherings of babushki in the shared courtyards of Soviet-style apartment buildings have been a traditional form of maintaining local community ties since the late Soviet era. Originating in a distinct type of Soviet urban planning, this phenomenon, which includes elements of social control, peer support and childcare, has been widely represented in popular songs, films, television programmes and internet memes.

In pre-revolutionary rural Russia, social control was organised through a combination of informal community mechanisms and the authority of the landed gentry and the church. After the Bolshevik revolution, everyday life became regulated by the state through the Communist party, professional collectives and местные комитеты (local trade union committees). In addition to allocating social benefits and resolving conflicts arising in the workplace, trade unions, товарищеские суды (comrades' courts) and local party committees were often involved in addressing private issues. In parallel, отряды народной дружины (groups of local volunteers or 'people's watch') sometimes patrolled residential areas to assist the police in preventing crime (Zhidkova 2012, 50).

Benches as a social phenomenon emerged as a result of mass urbanisation in the twentieth century and encompass both pre-revolutionary and Soviet modes of social control and peer support. Rural residents who transitioned to urban life did not immediately change their forms of maintaining a community (Kelly 1998, 125). As a significant portion of my interviewees were born in rural areas, for them benches became an acceptable means to inhabit their new neighbourhoods collectively, challenging the anonymity and atomisation of urban life.

Another factor that shaped this phenomenon was the Soviet organisation of urban space, which remains intact in many residential areas

of Russian cities. Late Soviet residential areas were designed to foster a community spirit. To this end, neighbourhoods were divided into equally sized shared courtyards formed by four five-storey apartment blocks situated one in front of another in the shape of a square. Typically, a children's playground is set in the middle of the square, visible from the windows of the apartment blocks. The entrances to the blocks are adorned with small gardens, tended by the residents. Each entrance is equipped with benches for residents. During the Soviet era, there was a strong tradition of outdoor table games, such as chess, dominos and cards, all of which were commonly played in the shared yards.

The tradition of sharing free time with neighbours was gender-, age- and class-specific: members of the Soviet educated class usually distanced themselves from local outdoor gatherings. It was predominantly older working-class men who played table games, while older working-class women chatted in groups on the benches, watching their grandchildren play on the swing in the playground. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, with the privatisation of social housing and the emergence of a new, property-based class system, the tradition of courtyard games largely disappeared. Nevertheless, older working-class women still gather out of doors on benches, especially in provincial cities.

While for many women of pensionable age, benches are an accessible way of socialising and sharing practical and moral support with their peers, the public image of babushki chatting in shared courtyards is often highly negative. Despite many of them helping their adult children with housing and childcare, they are commonly portrayed as idle, hostile towards children and engaged in gossiping about their younger neighbours.

This attitude is associated with the post-Soviet processes of class formation. In post-Soviet Russia, there has been a discursive shift in the representation of the working class. During the Soviet period, workers held a relatively high position in society as the main builders of communism. In the new Russia, social inequality is discursively individualised and explained as an outcome of personal inadequacies and poor choices. In this light, people in blue-collar occupations have been portrayed in mainstream culture as backward, aggressive and irresponsible (Walker 2012, 223).

However, it is also women's gender and age that contribute to the negative portrayal of babushki on benches. In the popular imagination the combination of femininity and ageing signifies frailty and dependence, qualities that particularly cause ostracism in the context of a merit-based economic system (Segal 2013, 14).

Between loneliness and class resentment

The public image of benches as a space for socialising plays a significant role in the self-presentation of older women. While some participants in my study told me that they were actively involved in socialising on benches, others, like Svetlana, aspired to distance themselves from the connotations of the outdoor gatherings. Svetlana (71), whom I mentioned in Chapter 1 when discussing 'the babushka look' – the conventional appearance accepted among less-privileged retired women – was among those interviewees who expressed their distaste of benches as a phenomenon.

In her narrative, Svetlana, a part-time university lecturer, mainly focused on her career path, her professional achievements and personal networks. From early childhood, she wanted to become a ballerina but did not succeed in passing the entry exams for ballet schools in Moscow and St Petersburg. She studied folk dance before eventually deciding to pursue a PhD in order to become a scholar in theatre studies.

When we met, she was worrying about her upcoming retirement. Owing to a disability that limited her mobility, she was allowed to host small seminar groups at home. Apart from seeing her students once a week and occasional visits from her sister and nephew, this career-oriented woman had few social interactions. She told me that she felt lonely but refused to join the other local women of her age who gathered regularly on benches, as she saw this form of leisure as inappropriate for educated individuals:

> Of course, my circle is very limited these days. I feel quite lonely. But I don't have the desire to go out to our yard where all these тетушки (aunts) gather and discuss all sorts of problems. Even if I am walking my dog in the evening, we just exchange greetings: 'Hello', 'Hello.' They go one way; I go another. These quiet senile gatherings with people of my own age – they just don't suit me. There are very few people of my age whom I'd like to spend my time with. They are all very old friends. I can only spend time with a person of my age if there is a stimulating intellectual exchange. Otherwise, I prefer to spend my time with younger people. I'm bored with the aunts of my age. It's tedious – all those conversations about prices, dachas and a normal ... um ... I'm fine with all that; that's life. I have a dacha myself, with a large plot of land. I haven't planted anything this year, as I spent a lot of time in hospital. That is, I can discuss dachas and prices, but I don't find those topics very engaging.

Svetlana portrays benches as spaces devoid of intellectual conversation where women of her age discuss everyday problems. She, on the other hand, is interested in being seen publicly as an individual who possesses the capital of культурность (culturedness) – the ability to demonstrate advanced cultural competence that used to distinguish the working class from the Soviet intelligentsia. However, later in her interview, she admitted that when she is alone, she very much enjoys consuming popular culture, such as detective stories, for instance.

At the same time, instead of using the term 'babushki', which is strongly associated with the phenomenon of the benches, Svetlana calls the retired women of her age 'aunts'. While this label is commonly used to refer to women with lower levels of education, it also signifies the intermediate phase of life beyond youth but before the stage when women typically have grandchildren. By choosing to use this term, Svetlana presents both her peers and herself as younger than they are. She also distances herself from the negative connotations of old age by ironically marking benches as 'quiet senile gatherings with people of my own age'.

As I mentioned in Chapter 1, in Russian, 'babushka' means both 'old woman' and 'grandmother'. In this light, her avoidance of the word 'babushka' is connected to another sensitive subject. Perhaps, by labelling women of her age as 'aunts', rather than 'babushki', Svetlana is diverting attention away from a potential discussion of her stigmatised position as a childless woman without grandchildren. I assume that when Svetlana abruptly terminates the sentence 'It is boring to have all these conversations about the prices, dachas and a normal … um …', she has stopped herself from saying 'a normal family'.

By avoiding conversations with her neighbours and sidestepping references to the role of grandmother, she protects herself from unsolicited enquiries about her unconventional life scenario. As a childless woman, I am very familiar with this self-defence strategy. To prevent unsolicited enquiries, I avoid attending school reunions, just as my mother, who does not have grandchildren, avoids engaging in conversations with some of her neighbours, who are likely to ask her whether I am ever going to have children. This concern of Svetlana's manifested itself later in her interview. She was willing to bring up her childless status this time because it was her choice to talk about it and she was not held accountable for her family situation by other people:

> I need to talk … I generally was left … It was very hard for me to leave the stage. It's mentally and psychologically very hard for anyone.

> It's very painful. Some people start to drink; others lose their mind or get depressed. I only survived because I went for another interesting profession. But I haven't lost my interest in the theatre. No, I'm still a great supporter of the theatre, as they say. I still enjoy good performances. Just like a good film or a book. Recently I've gone back to Thomas Mann. I've re-read *Joseph and His Brothers*, and now I'm re-reading *The Magic Mountain*. But I read it slowly. (I read detective stories quickly.) I read a chapter, a few pages, and then stop. But with those aunts you can't talk about Thomas Mann. I don't know, I'm just bored with them. Maybe it's because I don't have a fully fledged family, neither children nor grandchildren ... Apparently, because I don't have my own children, I'm just not obsessed with all that stuff. Maybe that's why not. Everything is possible. Would you like some homemade lemonade?

Svetlana begins the passage by explaining to me how painful it was for her to abandon her biggest dream in life – to become a ballet dancer. Although she managed to establish herself as an academic, the transition to another profession still reminded her of what she had failed to achieve in life. When she says that she 'was left', apparently, she means that she was left behind as a resident in a provincial city who did not have enough skills to compete for a prestigious career in the capital. However, the theme of abandonment had another connotation in her narrative.

Svetlana confided in me that during her career as a folk dancer, she was in a relationship with a male colleague. She eventually discovered that her partner was in a parallel relationship with a younger dancer, who became pregnant. After breaking up with the man, Svetlana never engaged in romantic relationships again. While she touches upon the sensitive theme of not having a family of her own, she maintains her sense of self-worth by claiming that she avoids chatting with local women because she does not find their company interesting enough. However, she terminates this discussion abruptly again by changing the subject and offering me some lemonade. Changing subjects was her way of managing her emotions and self-presentation, while reminiscing about difficult experiences.

As her health was declining, Svetlana was planning to retire soon. The transition to retirement was an unwanted change for her and another loss – she loved teaching her students. However, it was more important for her to maintain her image as a person who reads the highly intellectual prose of Thomas Mann than to use the available channel of

socialising on benches with other women, whom she viewed as uninterested in advanced cultural consumption.

Exploring British women's strategies of self-presentation, Skeggs (1997, 74) observes that working-class people are commonly represented in mainstream culture as uneducated, economically unproductive and unworthy. In this light, she argues, distancing oneself from the possibility of being seen as a working-class person is a typical self-defence strategy for those who feel particularly vulnerable in their social position. This interpretation resonates with how I see the self-presentation of Svetlana, who felt that with her impending retirement she was about to experience yet another devastating loss.

However, contrary to Svetlana's assumption that women without university degrees are not interested in advanced cultural consumption, many of my interviewees in blue-collar occupations presented themselves as enlightened, urban individuals, capable of writing poems, reading intellectual literature and having a good understanding of the arts. Perhaps the most noticeable distinction between working-class older women and women with university education in Russia is their attitude towards traditional gatherings on benches.

Like Svetlana, Serafima (67), a resident in Samara, belonged to the first generation of her extended family to have obtained a university degree. For 40 years, Serafima worked as a schoolteacher, but four years prior to our interview, she had decided to leave her job even though she very much enjoyed it. Administrative work at the school was becoming digitalised, but no digital training was provided for the staff. As Serafima had no digital skills, she first tried asking her daughter to help her navigate the school's online system. However, when her son-in-law expressed his frustration at his wife spending 'too much' time with her mother by making ironic comments about Serafima's digital incompetence, she eventually decided to retire.

While she was fortunately able to find another full-time position as a museum attendant, leaving her much-loved job was painful. In her interview, Serafima worked hard to distance herself from women on benches, who have adopted the position of the post-professional babushki. When I asked her what leisure activities she would find appropriate, Serafima replied that she would rather go for a walk by herself than 'have all those trivial conversations on benches'. She mentioned that once a year, with the financial help of her granddaughter, she can afford a cruise along the River Volga. An enthusiastic pianist, she was also interested in attending musical events, but with her modest income she could not afford to go out in the evening on a regular basis.

In my interpretation, for both Svetlana and Serafima, benches, the spaces where women who have adopted the social position of post-professional and post-sexual subjects socialise, were a painful reminder of their career-related and personal losses. However, other women in the study found benches to be a great source of peer support and belonging.

Benches as a means of belonging

Sofia (83), a retired engineer based in Russia, told me that with other female neighbours, she had been going to the local stadium near their apartment building to socialise on benches set up along the running tracks:

> We just go to the stadium to chat. Usually, we do a few circuits walking round the running tracks, and then sit on the benches to chat. Men come from the nearby care home, too. They just want to talk. Well, men from our neighbourhood come along as well. They usually play chess or dominoes. But the women generally just talk on benches.

In this excerpt from her interview, Sofia tells me that she had found a group of people of her age who provided her with a meaningful way of spending her free time and offered her a feeling of belonging. Although Sofia had a university degree, she was not as invested in career achievements as Svetlana. In her biographical narrative, she foregrounded her role as wife, mother and grandmother as her most significant achievements in life.

Several years prior to our meeting, her husband had been killed in an accident. Following the tragedy, Sofia experienced various health problems, including memory loss. Her deteriorating health worried her adult daughter, who lived in Sofia's apartment with her family. The problem was that her daughter struggled to support her mother while being worried about losing her:

> What upsets me the most is when my daughter gets annoyed with me. She might say to me: 'What's the point of telling you anything if you forget it anyway?' Well, I might forget stuff, yes. But that's insulting, isn't it? Why point it out? I can forget, but I write things down, so I don't have to rely on my memory … I remember when my mum was 97. She still wanted to be useful. She lived with us during her last years. We didn't want her to do anything as she was

> quite frail. But she'd help us at the dacha. I mean, she'd sit by the tap to turn it on and off when we were watering the plants in the kitchen garden. My husband wanted her to rest, but I'd say: 'Please let her do this. She's doing something, she's still participating. And look how happy she is about it.'

Sofia explains that her daughter's comments about her memory loss hurt her feelings, as she finds them rude and unnecessary. She feels insecure about losing her abilities and is worried that she is seen as 'useless' by her family. By bringing up the example of her elderly mother continuing to help with chores, Sofia is emphasising that engagement in meaningful activities in later life helps to maintain self-respect and appreciation by others. However, she is also pointing out that it is a relational process, which requires a certain effort from others to create participatory opportunities for individuals who are structurally marginalised owing to old age and related health problems.

Another interviewee, Arina (88), based in Russia, a retired factory worker who lived alone, told me that benches were a space where she could maintain the image of herself as a local activist and a responsible citizen. She proudly told me that she would initiate petitions among women who gathered on benches, to draw the attention of the authorities to communal problems in the neighbourhood. Klara (85), who had come to London to live with her son's family, found the lack of benches in the UK, as a space where older women socialise in groups, to be a significant problem. Accustomed to this tradition in Russia, she struggled to find other ways to make friends with her peers in the new country.

Internalising the position of recipients of social benefits

Several women I met during my fieldwork in Samara told me that they had taken up voluntary work for public organisations that had close links with the government. This type of community engagement was encouraged by the offer of small benefits that the volunteers received for their service, such as free cinema or concert tickets, and packages of food products. For instance, Ksenia (70), the retired employee of a department store, told me about her experience of engagement in public works:

> When my husband was still alive, we'd spend all summer at our dacha. In winter, we'd go to another city to visit some relatives.

> After … he died, for a long time I felt lost. Well, I still do. To have a distraction, I sometimes run errands for the Council of Veterans. For instance, they give me a list of local retirees, and this woman and I send them birthday cards. [Laughs.] Sometimes we make phone-calls instead of sending cards. In autumn, we have Senior Citizens' Day. So we call everyone from the list again, to send them our best wishes. We also invite them to events hosted by the Council or hand out bonuses allocated by the local administration. So I'm involved in community service. Well, they encourage us to do that. They give us free tickets for concerts, sometimes they pay us small sums, like 200–300 rubles. [Laughs.] Well, we use our personal phones, so we need to get these expenses reimbursed. They also give us presents – bags of groceries.

Her family life was at the centre of Ksenia's narrative. For the interview, I visited her in the small apartment where she had lived with her husband until his death a year before. She told me that she had had an extremely happy relationship with her husband. His death had come as a shock to her: she looked frustrated during our conversation but became excited when talking about her previous happily married life. At one point, as the trust between us grew, she took my hand and led me to the bedroom to show me her most precious treasure – a painting that was her husband's last birthday gift to her. It felt like a very special moment, and I was moved by her willingness to share it with me.

When we moved on to other topics, her excitement faded away. However, volunteering was among the subjects she seemed to enjoy elaborating on. At the same time, I sensed her discomfort in telling me that her volunteering was stimulated by modest payments and gifts. This unease about being seen as a recipient of social benefits manifested itself in many other narratives.

But it was evident from the same narratives that engaging in these organised social activities was extremely important for my interviewees. As they grow older, they often lose other sources of belonging and self-realisation in the job market and within their families. In addition, for women like Ksenia who are going through acute distress related to the loss of significant others, self-organisation outside the existing channels of social participation is not always an achievable goal. For some of my interviewees, even though the engagement opportunities prompted by the state, as Dmitrieva (2018, 41) argues, reiterate the subordinate position of recipients of social benefits, they also served as an available source of meaningful roles and activities.

Engaging in self-organised activities

In the interviews collected in the UK, there was a theme that did not emerge in the narratives of the women based in Russia. Unlike the phenomenon of benches that bring together women from the same residential area, mutual aid groups were mentioned by some of my UK-based participants as a type of self-organisation that brings together individuals sharing the same experiences. Since the 1970s, there has been a growth in the number of self-help groups in the UK (Munn-Giddings and McVicar 2007, 26).

This tradition has its roots in the three major forms of working-class self-help in nineteenth-century England: the trade unions, the friendly societies and the cooperative movement (Hopkins 1995, 5). Some of the groups that enable people to collectively develop a response tailored to their specific needs (Seebohm et al. 2013, 391) are gender-, faith- or ethnicity-specific (Munn-Giddings and McVicar 2007, 26). At the beginning of the twenty-first century, there were 23,400 self-help groups in the UK (Elsdon et al. 2000, 3).

My interviewee Izolda (67), a retired psychotherapist, had lived in the UK for 47 years when I met her. As a young woman, she had been brought to London by her parents, Jewish emigrants from the Soviet Union. The family first went to Israel, but after a few years they decided to seek a better life in the UK. In London, Izolda graduated from university and established her private psychotherapeutic practice. A few years before our meeting, she had retired as a result of health problems. The transition to retirement followed another major change – the death of her husband. She described joining a peer-support group as an empowering experience that helped her to rediscover herself:

> My life with Tom ... Well, being his wife was my main identity. That was my position in society. And he died. All my friends, all my connections were couples. And here I am ... now a widow. His death put me in a social vacuum. That is, everyone knew me as Tom's wife. I didn't know who I was without him. So I decided to create a new life for myself. Now I have a completely new circle of friends. No, it's easier said than done, of course. But I did it. My current friends know me as a widow. They never met Tom.
>
> … For years, I did whatever Tom wanted. So when he died, I had to find a new identity. I saw this ad in a newspaper: 'A group for widows and widowers'. And I went there. It was so scary ... You know, it's like going to school for the first time. But now I have this

> circle ... There are 11 of us. We support each other … Recently it's been 5 years since Tom died … He never liked playing table games. Well, I do! So I decided to play bridge. I joined this group of bridge players. [Laughs.] Oh, I really love that game! So now I have another circle of friends because of that. Some of them are couples; some aren't. It gives me an interest in life. We meet in the evening, play bridge, talk, have a glass of wine. I feel like a completely new person.

In this extract, Izolda tells me about creating a new identity beyond her career and the familial role of wife. She explains that becoming a widow was a devastating experience for her, as she lost not only her life-long partner, but also her much-valued identity as his wife. The phenomenon of mutual aid groups organised around shared experiences provided Izolda with a new, meaningful identity as a self-reliant woman who pursues her own interests.

However, it is also important to stress that, economically, Izolda was much more secure than many of my other UK-based interviewees. While she told me that it was scary for her at first to join a group of complete strangers, she had resources such as proficiency in English, a British education and a previously successful career in the UK, which were helpful in overcoming her fears. My other, less-privileged UK-based interviewees did not mention mutual aid groups as their free-time activities. Engaging in this type of socialising requires a certain confidence based on communicative competence, which becomes available with longer residential experience in the new country. Unlike many others, Izolda, who had come to the UK much earlier in her life than many other female immigrants I interviewed, enjoyed the privileges of the British middle class.

What does it mean to grow older successfully?

The narrative of 'successful ageing', which originated in North America and western Europe, promotes the idea that growing older is a matter of individual choice and the self-discipline required to conceal the signs of biological change. Within this perspective, individuals are encouraged to be enthusiastic about self-exploration and updating their skill-set in later life. In advertisements and films, older adults are often represented as a unified social group who enjoy generous pensions and assets accumulated throughout their life course.

Few of my interviewees based in Russia could afford to consume products and services associated with the 'successful ageing' lifestyle,

such as long-distance travel, rejuvenating treatments and expensive hobbies. However, many of them evaluated their level of wellbeing against stereotypical images of wealthy 'baby boomers' in the US and western Europe. Interestingly, this group tended to explain the post-Soviet system of social inequality by contrasting their economic situation with that of 'baby boomers', rather than with affluent compatriots. They were critical of the Russian state which, in their opinion, does not care about pensioners, in contrast to Western countries where people grow old 'gracefully'.

This narrative is in tune with a phenomenon described by Yurchak (2013, 164, 204, 209) as 'the imaginary West' – a popular Soviet mode of constructing an image of the world beyond the 'Iron Curtain'. As the Soviet Union was declared to be a 'classless' society, Soviet people imagined the capitalist part of the world as a classless bourgeois paradise. This metaphor persisted in the post-Soviet phase. Both participants in comfortable economic circumstances and those with a sparse pension as the only source of income were often 'blind' about the new class system that unfolded after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Most of my Russia-based participants shared the opinion that their underprivileged positions were explained by their modest state pensions. A common feature of the interviews collected in Russia was a lack of criticism of the tremendous income inequality that emerged after the end of Soviet socialism. While they did realise that social inequality existed, they tended to take it for granted and rarely articulated their social position in structural terms. A small group of participants in my study who were able to maintain leisure activities associated with the 'successful ageing' lifestyle adopted the neoliberal narrative about the responsibility of individuals for their own wellbeing in later life. One such participant was Zinaida (70), a retired factory worker.

Zinaida told me that she felt relatively confident financially, as she had accumulated some savings during her professional life in the north of Russia, where salaries were higher than in other regions. At the same time, owing to work hazards, she was entitled to an early old-age pension that was significantly more generous than the average pension. In addition, she rented out her apartment and stayed in her children's homes as she was helping them with childcare. She also told me that her favourite type of leisure activity was attending a wellness club where she was involved with a circle of like-minded people. Gathering daily, members came to the club to have nutritional cocktails and socialise. In her interview, Zinaida talked about biological ageing as a disease that it was possible and necessary to cure:

> Our group leader says, 'Hey youngsters, look at our Zinaida, she's so energetic! You are only in your thirties and forties, but you're already past it.' [Laughs.] I arrive at the club, well, say, by eight in the morning. Everyone is already there. Our young people, they have their cocktails and run off to work. We pensioners can stay longer. We chat, discuss our weight-loss. Well, you want to talk to people. I don't watch TV, so with the club I participate ... in life ... We go for barbecues … You can meet lots of people there. I've been going there for three years now.

Zinaida explained to me that the activities in the club were organised around consuming dietary products that enhance weight-loss, which the staff at the club equated with 'reducing' one's age and a responsible attitude to maintaining good health. The employees at the club regularly monitored the weight of the customers and publicly discussed their body shape. Here, Zinaida describes her experience of being a member of this community in more detail:

> A woman, let's say, loses 20 kilos, and her face becomes smoother; she gets her waist back. Of course, women want to look good, especially if they work in business. Personally, I don't need to lose weight. It's just ... there is this scale; it indicates your biological age.[1] Once, I came back from a holiday, and it showed that I was 81 years old! I almost fainted in horror. But after that I really worked hard at the treatment. They have these drugs that maintain all your systems. I quickly dropped probably 10 years and got back to life! [Laughs]. Now my biological age is 68 ...

The ability to succeed in the aspiration of 'becoming younger' enabled Zinaida to maintain a satisfactory sense of herself as part of the community in the club. The sense that she was able to control the biological process of ageing corresponded with her opinion that economic security in later life was also a matter of self-discipline. Here she comments on situations in which people of her age are struggling to make ends meet:

> Pensioners should move! You shouldn't sit around and mourn ... Like, 'If my pension was ten thousand more, I'd live well.' Don't sit around and wait until you're fine. Look for opportunities, grow some potatoes and sell them. Is it really that difficult? Or find somebody who needs a gardener, I don't know ... No, I think it's just out

> of laziness if people don't have enough money to get by. I have many friends who grow vegetables for sale, others look after the elderly …

In this extract, Zinaida, who has been fully retired for 10 years, echoes a narrative that emerged in Russian media with the implementation of the 2018 reform of the pension system, following which the pensionable age has been gradually increasing. Within this narrative, people are encouraged to extend their economic productivity (Prisiazhniuk and Holavins 2023, 311). Zinaida felt confident consuming anti-ageing products and services because she could afford some of the attributes of the 'successful ageing' lifestyle.

In contrast, Ludmila (62), a retired engineer, told me that she felt extremely insecure at an expensive fitness club, for which her daughter had bought her membership as a birthday present:

> That fitness … I can't do it. I just can't stand their behaviour. I tell my daughter, 'No offence, but I simply can't go there.' Last time I was there, there was this young woman. She dropped her stuff everywhere – literally, she had three bags. I said to her, 'You'll have to keep your stuff in one place.' She replied arrogantly, 'Why should I do that? If you need more space, you can move further down.' Do you know what I mean? And in the pool, all those tattoos on their backs, shoulders, a blade, a pistol, or a sort of revolver, a rose, inscriptions … They swim without swimming caps on, pregnant women with naked bellies and pulled down pants … Well, to me, this is obscene. I don't understand it. They don't hesitate to cause trouble there. I feel like my time's running out. I stopped going to the pool. I'm old; I understand life's different now. So, I say to my daughter, 'I'm doing fitness in the kitchen garden today – it activates all the muscle groups.' [Laughs.]

In this quotation, Ludmila is bitterly expressing her feeling that the atmosphere in the fitness club is alien and hostile. The episode she brings up with the younger woman who 'behaved arrogantly' echoed other storylines in her narrative. For example, at one point she recalled a painful experience at her previous job of receiving comments about her allegedly age-related incompetence from her line manager, a much younger person.

She also expresses her anxiety about the more relaxed attitude towards the body that younger women in Russia seem to enjoy. She felt that she was no longer competent in relation to the beauty standards

deemed acceptable for younger women and was uncomfortable being around them. Here she confides in me about her fears:

> What I'm afraid of is being ridiculed. My mum used to say: 'People become like old tree branches as they age, dry and ugly.' She felt very self-conscious about getting older … And now I feel it's inappropriate for me to go to the beach: I can't take my clothes off in front of others … They're so young, and I'm old.

Ludmila maintains her emotional connection with her late mother by reproducing the perspective that explains human ageing as a process of losing beauty. She imagines that younger people see the bodies of those who are no longer young as 'ugly'. To protect herself from the possibility of being hurt, she stopped going to the beach and to the fitness centre. Klein (1997, 7) introduced the concept of 'projective identification' to describe the unconscious defence mechanism of attributing one's unpleasant feelings to someone else. From this perspective, Ludmila's resentment towards the appearance and behaviour of the younger women she met in the fitness club may have been a projection of her own fear that she is seen as the ageing Other.

The fact that her daughter, a successful young professional, had paid for her club membership seems to have contributed to Ludmila's feeling that she did not really belong to that place. For her, leaving the club was a strategy to maintain a more satisfactory sense of herself as an independent member of society engaged in meaningful activities. She regularly attended the local church, which provided her with a sense of connection to others. In summary, the way my interviewees chose to engage with their surroundings was informed by their country of residence, economic security and health status. Nevertheless, forming meaningful connections outside their family roles was among the most important aspects of their lives.

Note

1. Apparently, in this extract, Zinaida refers to a body composition scale which measures various aspects of body composition, including body fat percentage, muscle mass, bone density and water content.

6
Love and sex in later life

A man's take on women's sexual desire in later life

Natasha (Natalya Pavlenkova), the protagonist of the 2016 Russian art-house film *Zoology*, directed by Ivan Tverdovsky, is a middle-aged employee at a zoo in a provincial city. She works in the purchasing department alongside other women her age or slightly younger, who pass the time eating sweets and playing pranks on her, out of boredom with their jobs. Deeply melancholic, she barely responds to their rather unfriendly antics.

In addition to the contrast in their temperaments, there is a difference in how Natasha's appearance and that of her coworkers is portrayed. While the main character is not yet old, her clothes and hairstyle signal that she has adopted the social position of a babushka, an 'invisible', post-sexual woman. The plus-sized bodies of her colleagues, on the other hand, barely contained by their tight and brightly coloured clothes, are impossible to ignore. Irrespective of whether the woman's physique tends to 'disappear' or 'occupy all the space', the depiction of the feminine in *Zoology* represents an abnormality.

The story begins with Natasha experiencing a sudden malaise at work: she feels dizzy, nauseous and even briefly faints. On her way home, she cheers herself up with a cigarette smoked surreptitiously in the hallway of the apartment building where she lives in a cramped flat with her elderly mother (Irina Chipizhenko). During a dull dinner that the two women are having in the kitchen, Natasha's mother tells her something she has learned from a television broadcast: they said on the news that, in Europe, a woman who worked at a zoo had been arrested for having a sexual relationship with a monkey.

Natasha refuses to comment on the piece of information which has both disgusted and fascinated her mother. She asks rhetorically why her

mother watches this sort of programme and suggests changing the channel. Nevertheless, the mother finishes her passage by concluding, 'They are committing abominations in Europe because they've forgotten the Christian faith'.

This dialogue sets the political context within which Natasha's story is situated. It identifies the director of the film as a critic of the dominant regime, with its version of post-truth politics and anti-Western media narratives, which he implicitly labels as absurd. However, at the same time, Tverdovsky is laying the blame for the 'conservative turn' towards 'traditional values' (Novitskaya et al. 2024, 173), initiated by 'the Putin masculinity-based nation-rebuilding scheme' (Johnson 2014, 584) in close alliance with the Russian Orthodox Church, on the elderly woman. The director represents the mother's old age as a phase of cognitive decline, as a result of which she and other elderly women in the film consume and reproduce fake news and the narratives of religious traditionalism and ressentiment.

As the dinner in the small kitchen continues, the women chat about their cat, Barsik. Natasha asks her mother what is wrong with the cat, as he is yowling. Her mother replies that she has locked him in her room because he was behaving restlessly, apparently mistaking autumn for spring. Natasha remarks that Barsik cannot be agitated by spring any more because he is too old for it now. Her mother disagrees, saying, 'How can he possibly be old? Cats live long.' From this dialogue, we understand that Natasha identifies with her cat who, she believes, has transitioned to the post-reproductive stage.

The theme of ageing and its impact on sexuality manifests itself further in the film as Natasha overhears a conversation between her colleagues at work. Discussing her recent loss of consciousness, one of her coworkers suggests that she could be pregnant. Another woman picks up the obvious sarcasm by asking her colleague in disbelief, 'By whom? She has never had a man.' This dialogue indicates that other people see Natasha as transitioning from the social position of a 'spinster', a woman who is stigmatised for being single and childless, to a 'pitiful hag', as Pickard (2020, 164) describes the cultural representation of an older woman who is losing her status in society as a result of ageing and does not aspire to claim it back.

Bullied by other women, Natasha finds solace in the zoo while feeding the caged animals, with whom she seems to have a better connection than with human beings. However, her life, deprived of colour and excitement, changes as her malaise persists and prompts her to seek medical attention. The male doctor to whom she complains about a pain in

her lower back sends her to have an x-ray done. At her next appointment, she meets a young man (Dmitriy Groshev), the radiologist, who introduces himself as 'Petya'. They immediately develop an emotional bond. It is when Petya asks Natasha to undress for the x-ray that we find out about the transformation her body is undergoing. Her dizziness was the sign of a long, thick fleshy tail that has grown out of her body. The colour and the shape of the tail unmistakable resemble a penis.

At first, Natasha resists Petya's attempt to expose the tail for the procedure. However, when he eventually succeeds, he reassures her that there is nothing wrong with her. His friendly attitude makes Natasha feel seen and accepted, and she seems excited about the new developments in her life.

The excitement incites her curiosity about the tail and when she is having a bath, she discovers that she can use it as a dildo. However, as rumours spread about the appearance of 'a diabolic woman in the town who causes other people illness and misfortune when making an eye contact with them', she goes to church to ask for the sacrament. Rejected by the priest, who says that he cannot allow her in the church, she returns to the doctors. As her tail did not show up on the x-ray, she is sent to Petya to have another try, and what started as a random encounter with him turns into mutual attraction.

The spark between the two inspires Natasha to change her image: she starts to wear lace lingerie and short skirts and tries a new haircut. She also pays a visit to a psychic to find out whether Petya's intentions are serious. At the same time, the change in her appearance provokes more tension at work, where the manager accuses her of neglecting her duties and eventually fires her. Unemployed, she has more time to spend with Petya. Together they go to a public lecture on personal growth, a part of the self-help industry ridiculed by the director as the last resort for middle-aged women seeking to make sense of their lives in a provincial Russian town.

Unable to contain their laughter, Natasha and Petya escape the lecture and break into the zoo. In an empty cage, the sexual tension between them resolves into passionate kisses and the exploration of each other's bodies. However, their intimacy turns unexpectedly into mutual disappointment as she discovers that he is attracted to her tail, and he realises that it is not what she expected. When Natasha sees Petya lose himself in pleasure while sucking her tail, she loses her interest in their sexual interaction and leaves the cage. From this abrupt clash, we understand that the woman wanted to be seen and treated as 'normal' by her partner, but he was specifically attracted to her abnormality.

Frustrated, Natasha stops hiding her tail. When she walks the streets in a catatonic state with her tail hanging down between her legs, passersby run away in horror. Even in her own home she cannot find solace, as her mother is painting red crosses on the walls of their flat 'to protect it from the diabolic woman who has caused havoc in the town'. In despair, Natasha reveals her tail to her mother and asks the old woman to hold her, but the latter repulses her, saying: 'You're drunk, sleep it off.' In the closing scene, Natasha cuts the tail off.

An ageing woman with a tail is a tenacious trope with a long history, full of physical and symbolic violence. In her account of witch hunts, Federici (2004, 171) finds that the victims of this crime, which took place mainly between the fifteenth and the seventeenth century in Europe, were women who could potentially undermine male supremacy. Among those accused of witchcraft were older women, who could enjoy post-reproductive freedoms; midwives, who possessed expertise in birth control and procreation; childless women, who challenged the roles assigned to them by society; and poor women who demanded social justice.

In essence, the horrific crimes perpetrated against women aimed to suppress a class struggle that emerged with the advent of early capitalism, alongside attempts to subordinate the female body to the goal of population increase. The portrayal of 'witches' engaging in sexual relationships with animals or possessing the ability to morph into animals served as evidence of their femininity as an evil power capable of destroying lives and cities (Federici 2004, 184).

In parallel, the myth of the witch flying on her broomstick encapsulated a new form of sexual discipline that denied older women, who were no longer fertile, the right to a sexual life. In this imaginary the broom, much like the tail, serves as an overt phallic symbol representing unbridled sexual desire. More importantly, it symbolises women's potential power and their ability to thrive independently of men's control – a power that the witch hunts sought to eradicate (Federici 2004, 92, 184).

From this perspective, the Russian film *Zoology* is an attempt on the part of the director, a man in his twenties, to discuss women's ageing and sexuality by using the symbolic vocabulary of the witch hunt. While Tverdovsky's portrayal may seem to be advocating sexual activity in later life, his depiction of the intimate scenarios available to post-menopausal women is notably reductive.

The tail in his film represents women's post-reproductive (hetero) sexuality, repressed by the strong social expectation that post-menopausal women will put the role of grandmother at the centre of their lives. By portraying his main character as a childless woman without grandchildren,

the director opens opportunities for her to legitimately seek excitement and intimacy outside family caregiving. However, he is not willing to explore the possibility of Natasha having sexual relationships with men or women her own age or with multiple partners. Apparently, exploring sexual intimacy between people who have lost their 'sexual capital' in the public eye would require a sensitivity to ageism that often comes with growing older.

In Tverdovsky's portrayal, the heroine's chances of having a sexual life are limited to the cliché scenario of the 'cougar' – an older woman who initiates a sexual involvement with a significantly younger man. In this power arrangement, the ageing woman adopts the role of the archaic Phallic Mother, who is often depicted with both a penis and a vagina (Pickard 2020, 159). The younger man assumes the role of a sexual apprentice and is positioned at the receiving end of both pleasure and knowledge.

The conflict arises as Natasha is not interested in playing a dominatrix. Instead, she desires what Tverdovsky depicts as 'the impossible': to be desired by the younger man as if there were neither an age difference between them nor the difference in 'sexual capital' associated with it. In other words, she expects Petya to overlook her tail and act out a conventional heterosexual script that renders women objects rather than subjects of desire. His homoerotic desire for her tail is insulting to her because, within this imaginary, it serves as a crutch to her allegedly 'crippled' sex-appeal. Simultaneously, the film portrays the younger man's sexual desire for the older woman as a 'perversion'. As Natasha finds herself indifferent to the scenario offered by Tverdovsky, he punishes her character by relegating her to the state of the asexual 'pitiful hag'.

Given men's premature mortality and the high divorce rates, many older women in Russia do not have male partners. What does it mean for women to grow older as single people in a culture that prioritises youth and romantic couples? Contrary to the trope of the lonely old woman who is miserable because she is no longer seen by young men as a sexual object, most of my single interviewees told me that they were not looking for a new partner.

In this chapter, I explore how single Russian women aged 60 and over negotiate their sexual and romantic entitlements in accordance with age and gender norms. I discuss how they navigate between the two dominant narratives about sexuality in later life: the traditional perspective that considers older people's sexuality as inherently deviant from the norm and the new imperative for older individuals to remain sexually active as part of a wider project of 'successful ageing' (Jones 2020, 1480).

I begin by examining the narratives of the participants in my study who expressed no desire to have a partner. Next, I explore women's ambivalence towards intimate relationships with men in later life. I conclude by discussing the stories of those interviewees who were actively seeking a partner or had recently formed new relationships.

Based on my findings, women's involvement in productive and reproductive labour was crucial for their claims to the social right to have a personal life. While having a stable job did not necessarily correlate with the desire to have a partner, most women expressing an interest in new romantic and sexual relationships were still employed. This suggests that the ability to maintain employment beyond pensionable age seems to legitimise women's post-reproductive romantic and sexual aspirations. In other words, women's greater financial independence provides them with a sense of autonomy which enables them to resist the expectation that as soon as they have grandchildren, they will abandon their careers and personal lives.

However, many participants did not wish to resist the norm that associates sexuality and romantic/sexual relationships with youth. For one group of interviewees, presenting themselves as deliberately post-sexual was a means to avoid ostracism in a culture that stigmatises older women's sexual desire. Some women also claimed that their age provided them with a socially acceptable reason to liberate themselves from women's unpaid labour, which usually increases with the presence of a male partner. The women formed by late socialism typically did not question the traditional family roles of mother, wife and grandmother. However, they were often highly critical of the existing gender order when they were explaining why they did not want to be in relationships with men again.

Women discussing their entitlements to intimate citizenship in later life

The point of departure for my exploration of intimate citizenship in later life is the argument of Roseneil et al. (2020, 18) that the highly personal matter of what our intimate life looks like is the product of social, political and cultural shaping. They explain 'intimate citizenship' as a set of norms and regulations promoted by nation-states that enable or deprive individuals of the ability to exercise control over their intimate desires. In short, the range of intimate relationships available to members of different social groups is defined by political ideologies and the

provision of welfare (Roseneil et al. 2020, 20). From this perspective, intimate citizenship reflects a social hierarchy that renders the intimate needs of some groups more important than those of others based on their expected roles in the job market and reproductive labour.

Most of the participants in my study did not have a male partner at the time of the interview. In Russia most of the interviewees were widows; in the UK most were divorced or separated. A small number of the participants in both countries were married. In addition, there was a group of women who were interested in re-partnering or were positive about meeting a new man.

When I interviewed women who were not in a conventional cohabiting couple, I asked them, after they had told me about the death of their previous partner or their experience of divorce or separation, whether they had considered starting a new relationship since then. The data for this chapter come from my interviewees' answers to this question. Interestingly, most women who did not have a male partner talked about their relationship status as an outcome of their deliberate choice.

Lewis and Moon (1997, 125) provide a useful insight into the performance of agency in single women's self-presentation while negotiating relationship status. They found that the women they interviewed switched between taking on the responsibility for their life choices and delegating it to others. By claiming that being single was their choice, some of their participants presented themselves as subjects in control of their lives. By contrast, when other women delegated responsibility for their relationship status to someone else, they were assuming the passive position of a victim of circumstance.

While most my interviewees took the former position, their explanations of their life choices varied significantly. In the following sections, I discuss the grounds on which society grants or denies women the entitlement to have intimate desires in later life by exploring the variety of their interpretations.

Narrating the post-sexual subject

Dealing with ageist notions about love and sex in later life

In one way or another, one group of my interviewees conveyed the idea that age was the most significant reason for them not considering the possibility of a new relationship. Six participants told me the reason they were single was that, at these women's life-stage, eligible men were

difficult to find because most men are, by that age, either married or dead. The demographic imbalance has indeed had a significant impact on older women's personal lives. However, this explanation of their relationship status is also a product of the heteronormative convention according to which women are expected to be in relationships with slightly older men. Following this norm, Alevtina (75), a widow and retired factory worker based in Russia, tells me that, with age, it becomes more complicated to find a partner:

> We just don't have any men in our neighbourhood. I went to this club for older people. All the old ladies were dressed up, wearing makeup. But there were just one or two [men]. Those who are still around usually aren't single … Perhaps using the internet would be an option. But I can't use it – I had no reason to learn how.

Alevtina implicitly provides evidence that some women of her age are interested in new relationships with men. She mentions public spaces and digital resources available to older people seeking new partners. Her narrative implies that she was motivated enough to go to one of those places. However, she did not explore the option of meeting new people through dating websites and mobile applications. Several other women in my study mentioned the internet as a source of new connections, but only a few of them had actually used it.

Free digital literacy classes are widely available to people of pensionable age in Russia. However, many people over the age of 65 do not find this option appealing and as a result they have insufficient digital skills. Among the demotivating factors is the low number of skilled jobs available to older citizens. They also often state that they do not have enough free time for educational activities. In addition, teachers rarely receive training for working with older citizens, which makes attendees feel that the classes are not designed to meet their individual needs (Anikeeva et al. 2019, 2–6).

Like many other women of her age, Alevtina was not willing to ask for help in the delicate matter of acquiring digital skills for online dating. Perhaps stating that she had deliberately chosen to be single was her strategy for resisting the implicit structural ageism that limits the social participation of older women.

Some of my interviewees explained their lack of interest in a new romantic/sexual relationship by describing potential male partners as too old and therefore unattractive. For instance, Zinaida (70), a Russia-based widow and retired factory worker, explained her relationship

status by implicitly rejecting the idea of becoming the carer to an old man:

> I recently went to a sanatorium and there was this old crone, kind of dressed up and everything … So we had a chat and she asks me: 'Are there men in here?' And I'm like: 'Yeah, I saw one shuffling along with a crutch.' Do I need that, with a crutch?! Do you know what I mean?

In this extract, Zinaida adopts the perspective that stigmatises older women's sexual desire. She implicitly presents herself as an individual who makes socially approved choices, in contrast to the woman she met in the sanatorium who put herself at risk of public ostracism by expressing an interest in meeting new men.

Six other women told me that there were men in their lives interested in starting a romantic/sexual relationship with them. However, these interviewees declined the proposals, citing sexual intimacy as inappropriate for their stage of the life course. Katerina (67), a widow and retired textile warehouse manager based in Russia, tells me about her experience of negotiating the possibility of having a new relationship:

> It doesn't make sense now, when old age is coming my way. There're still opportunities, though. I went to a resort a few years ago. There was this young man. He wanted to go to bed right away. No way! We started going out – I didn't mind that. But I don't need that stuff, you know. It's nice to have someone to talk to, for your soul, so to speak, right? Of course some need a man for that too. But personally, I don't. Because everything is good in its season. I was 60 when my husband died. Since then, I haven't needed that. Never. I don't even want to … I've just recently put on some weight. I didn't used to be like this [slaps her hips]. I just can't stop getting fat.

Katerina explains that she is interested in emotional connections with men but does not see her stage of life as appropriate for a new sexual relationship. She also implicitly expresses anxiety about her body size, which might imply that she is not entirely sure whether she would be treated respectfully by a potential new partner.

At the same time, as I discussed at the beginning of this chapter, society largely marks younger men who are attracted to older women as 'perverts', though the 'cougar' scenario in which women take the leading role in relationships with younger men is represented in culture as

broadly acceptable. However, women are conventionally socialised to gain status and social mobility by adopting the position of the sexual object under the heteronormative male gaze. From this perspective, the position of the sexual subject does not seem an attractive option to many women. The position of the post-sexual subject, on the other hand, provides older Russian women with the opportunity to present themselves as individuals in control of their lives.

Singlehood as a liberating experience

Eight participants told me that they had no need for a new partnership because they expected men not to share family labour equally with them. For instance, when I asked Nadezhda (69), a divorced retired waitress based in Russia, whether she would like to be in a relationship again, she replied with a categorical 'no': 'No way! It is such a burden! Going out with someone is one thing. But feeding him every day is another. Why would I need this?'

Some of my UK-based interviewees, whose stories I discuss at the end of this chapter, were involved with men with whom they shared leisure activities without taking on the traditional family care duties of women. However, Russia-based participants, like Nadezhda, did not believe that male partners for this arrangement would be easy to find.

Paulina (78), a retired university professor and divorcee based in Russia, had difficulty walking when we met. She confided in me that her ex-husband wanted to get together with her again, but she did not see this option as appealing: 'Of course he wants to get back [with me]. But I don't need that burden. He can't do anything. He's useless.'

Paulina told me that she found it easier to live on her own and receive care from a female social worker and her friends. However, having been divorced three times, she also evaluated her previous experience of being married as unsatisfying. During her interview, she wondered if something was wrong with her, as all her ex-husbands were alcohol abusers, two of them had been physically violent and one was unfaithful.

Taking the responsibility for a husband's heavy drinking and violence was not unique to Paulina. Alevtina had also lived with a binge-drinking husband all her life. After he died, she realised that she would not want to repeat that experience:

> I don't feel like taking it on again … I've got used to freedom … I lived such a difficult life with my husband. I really loved him when I was young. I forgave his heavy drinking and other stuff. But

> then I got fed up with it. I tried to divorce him. God, I'm so ashamed to admit it, but when it happened [he died], I felt huge relief. Like a burden was taken off me … During his last years he lived by himself, binge drinking. He'd go to his place and my soul would ache for him – is everything okay with him? I was such a fool. I would check on him all the time. Of course, it drove me mad. I'd come home from work not knowing what to expect. It was horrible. I just came to the conclusion that it isn't worth wasting your life living with a person who drinks.

Alevtina's words accord with the findings of Utrata (2015, 179), who argues that the fragility of marriage in Russia is explained by the vicious cycle produced by family ideology which historically rests on the strict division of gender roles. She finds that for many Russian men the culturally accepted ritual of 'becoming a real man' is strongly associated with heavy drinking, which serves both as a signifier of masculinity and as a compensatory practice owing to many men's inability to support their families. Spared from family work by ideas about conventional masculinity, they have time to drink. In turn, drinking prevents them from carrying out family duties in full and often leads to violence and infidelity.

Nonna (79), a retired employee in a bus garage, divorced and based in Russia, told me about her experience of living with a violent man who drank:

> My husband would come home drunk in a taxi: 'Pay for me, I'm home.' And I'd tell him: 'I have no money, darling. I only have six rubles to live on till the end of the month. I'm not giving it away.' And he'd hit me with a chair, like this. I'd lie unconscious for two weeks in hospital. I'd wake up not knowing where the children were, whether they were alive, or where he was. Once he nearly killed our daughter. He threw a huge plate at her. After that she said to me: 'You've got to choose – me or him.' So I divorced him.

Despite her difficult experiences with her ex-husband, Nonna was among the participants who expressed a hope for a new relationship. After she divorced her husband, she had two other partners. The second had died a few months prior to our conversation. Nonna described him as a caring person. Although she was experiencing grief, she told me that she would be happy to have a new man in her life. Her safety seemed to be in jeopardy again, as her unemployed daughter and binge-drinking son-in-law

lived in her house. Not being able to leave the house owing to disability, she felt the strong need for a defender.

During the Soviet era, there was no attempt to understand violence against women as a structural consequence of the ideology which naturalised the gender division of labour and extolled 'weakness' in women and 'strength' in men (Attwood 1997, 101). With the current family policy, women have become even more vulnerable, as some forms of domestic violence have been decriminalised and are now presented in law as a private matter (Meduza 2017).

Not feeling single

Many participants in my study told me that helping their children with childcare was 'their duty', although they also derived pleasure from this involvement with their grandchildren. The role of dedicated grandmother also serves as a legitimate reason for my interviewees to present their relationship status as an outcome of deliberate choice. For instance, Serafima (67), a widow based in Russia, who worked as a museum assistant, explained her lack of interest in a new relationship by the fact that she preferred spending her free time with her grandchildren:

> I don't feel lonely. I've got my grandchildren. My grandsons often visit me at weekends. The younger one is only 10. He's always excited about staying with me. It's because we go to museums together, or for walks in parks or by the river. So I am not bored in any way.

Serafima, who lived on her own, told me that her need for emotional intimacy was fulfilled by her close relationships with her grandchildren. Alla (66), a university professor and widow, shared her flat with her adult daughter, her grandchildren and her son-in-law. She described her involvement in the lives of the younger generation as a commitment that did not leave any room for a new relationship with a man:

> I can't say I'm single. I don't feel I'm a totally free person because I have my family obligations. I also have my job. And these obligations fill my day. Because if I'm not working, I'm busy with my newborn granddaughter.

For Alla, who was actively involved in helping her daughter combine an academic career with family life, re-partnering would have meant dividing her time and space between her family and a new man. As older women are expected to prioritise the interests of their children and grandchildren, many of my interviewees felt that sharing their often-limited resources with yet another person was not an attractive option.

Loyalty to the late husband

Five women told me that it was extremely difficult for them to recover after their partner died. Some of the men had been terminally ill for some time before they died, which required a long period of intensive emotional and practical care, carried out mainly by their wives. Others died tragically: two men lost their lives in car accidents, and one was murdered.

Sofia (83), a retired engineer based in Russia, was one of the women who told me that they never fully recovered after their husband's death. Lydia (74), a retired programmer from Samara, whose husband had died several years prior to the interview, told me that she 'felt the need to remain faithful' to her late husband:

> He died suddenly. After that, a new part of my life began, devoid of any optimism. I got fully involved with their [her children and grandchildren's] lives. Now I have a double life: I am with the children, and I am at home living in sadness.

Lydia told me that since her husband died, she has not allowed her friends to bring her flowers and has avoided wearing bright colours and going to concerts. Apparently, by practising these rituals, she felt connected with her late husband. Five other participants told me that they did not want to be in a relationship again because they had lived a very good life with their husband. They expressed scepticism about the possibility of being equally satisfied in a new relationship.

According to the study by Bildtgård and Öberg (2017, 37), widows are less likely to be searching for a new partner than are divorcees as the former are often afraid of going through another painful loss. In addition, as it was not their decision to terminate the relationship based on dissatisfaction, widows tend to romanticise their past experiences (Lopata 1996, 153; Davidson 2002, 46).

Decoding women's ambivalence about new relationships

'I'm hoping for a new love. Actually, I don't need it any more'

I visited Larisa (67), a nanny based in the UK, in her rented room in a shared house in London. She made an ambiguous impression on me. On the one hand, she looked well cared for: her stylish haircut and clothes made her look significantly younger than her age. On the other, in comparison with many other interviewees, she looked frustrated throughout most of our conversation.

Before I started the interview, I introduced her to my project about Russian women of pensionable age. To this she replied that she did not perceive herself as a pensioner because she was still employed. She added that she had only agreed to take part in my study because her son was a sociologist like me, and she knew from him how difficult it was to find research participants. By helping me she hoped 'to create good karma' for him so that other people would react positively to his search for participants. While I do not question Larisa's aspiration to help her son, it was also evident that she wanted to distance herself from the stereotypical image of a female pensioner who no longer has an interesting life.

During the interview, Larisa told me that since her husband died, more than 20 years ago, she had had two romantic relationships with men significantly younger than her. Currently, however, she did not have a partner. When I asked her whether she had considered a new relationship, she gave me the following answer:

> I don't mind if it suddenly happens. Because love has happened to me several times, I still hope for it. Recently I was buying flight tickets online and suddenly this dating website for oldies came up. I registered on it, just in case, you know. And now they're texting me every day. But because my English is bad, I don't even check on their messages … In fact, it's not a problem for me to read in English. It's just … I don't even know how to upload a photo into my profile.

In this extract, Larisa is simultaneously expressing the hope of meeting a new love and implicitly revealing her ambivalence about this possibility. Given her positive experience of re-partnering in the past, she is optimistic about future prospects. Bildtgård and Öberg (2017, 67) show that older individuals who have the experience of re-partnering are more likely to strive for continuity in this respect.

However, Larisa also explains that she has been reluctant to engage in the message exchange on the dating website because she does not trust her English. Nevertheless, immediately after that, she adds that she can read well enough in English. Later on, she reveals another constraint that prevents her from becoming an active user of the website – her digital incompetence; however, earlier in the excerpt she has mentioned that she is competent enough to book flight tickets online.

Moving on, Larisa asked me about my experience of living in the UK. When I told her that I had felt painfully lonely during my first year in the country, she recommended a Russian-speaking psychotherapist. To reciprocate, I mentioned that I could show her how to upload a photograph on the dating website. To this she replied, ‘Oh, don’t waste your time on that rubbish.’ This comment may have indicated that Larisa was uncomfortable about me interfering in a highly private sphere of her life. Yet, when located in the broader context of her narrative, this excerpt acquires another meaning, suggesting that Larisa was indeed protecting my time, as she had no intention of engaging with the website anyway.

When I asked her whether she had considered looking for a Russian-speaking partner, given her lack of confidence in English and her wish for a new love, the ambivalence evident in the above quotation manifested itself again: ‘Of course, there are lots of [Russian-speaking men], but I haven’t been looking for them. I’m just not that type of person.’

At first glance, Larisa’s explanation that she was not ‘that type of person’ could mean that, like many other heterosexual women, she expected to be chosen by a man. However, earlier in her interview, she had told me that she had had experience of successfully initiating relationships with men. As the interview went on, Larisa told me that she and her younger female friends had attended Russian-language speed-dating parties in London. However, she had not met anyone she could potentially become interested in because all the attendees belonged to the same immigrant circle and had known each other for a long time:

> Well, we had fun anyway. I think these parties are really needed. But probably it’s better to meet [potential partners] elsewhere. As my friend says, one can meet a future husband while taking the rubbish bins out. I know that sort of people. One of my friends came here very determined to find a husband. She’d go on dates with an English phrasebook. This is how she got married and had a child! Imagine, with a phrasebook?! She just set herself a goal and did it.

While presenting herself as interested in potentially meeting a new man, Larisa ends her passage about the parties with an unexpected confession:

> Actually, I'm not looking for anything, to be honest. I don't think that ... Well, I don't know, maybe I don't have that sort of need. Because as they say, those who really want something always find what they are looking for.

Remarkably, while it was important for Larisa to demonstrate her expertise in the dating arena, she repeatedly stated that she was not going to invest in the search, as she was not actually interested in re-partnering. Her further narrative reveals a similar approach when discussing other matters. For instance, later in the interview, with a deep sadness in her voice, Larisa told me that she had felt extremely unwell and suspected that she had a heart condition. When she had gone to see a doctor, no abnormalities in her heart were found. However, the doctor diagnosed her with depression and prescribed antidepressants. When describing this episode, she became agitated:

> Imagine, antidepressants?! I don't know what they are taught in their medical schools here. But I can't be depressed. I have such a vibrant social life! Where could that depression possibly come from?!

Further on in her monologue, Larisa invested extensively in disproving her doctor's diagnosis. She meticulously listed all the free cultural events that she regularly attended in London. Her advanced cultural competence was one of the central themes of her narrative. Trained as an engineer, she felt that taking on jobs in service and trade during the 1990s had cost her her place in the stratum of the Soviet intelligentsia. To compensate for this perceived loss, it was extremely important for her to assert her identity as a well-educated individual with significant cultural capital. By listing the events she had attended, she portrayed herself as leading an active social life, implicitly rejecting the doctor's suggestion that she might be experiencing emotional difficulties.

Another important theme in Larisa's narrative was her feeling of displacement and loneliness. She told me that she had moved between various countries throughout her life and longed to settle down finally somewhere. As a university graduate, she followed her husband who was allocated from Russia to a factory in Lithuania as part of the Soviet

guaranteed employment scheme. When the Soviet Union collapsed, they were both made redundant. To make ends meet, she worked in sales in Russia and as a carer for older people in Italy. Eventually, she wanted to return to Lithuania, where she had acquired a big house in the hope that her children and grandchildren would come from Spain to live with her. But she also knew that her project was most unlikely to materialise, as her children had no plans to go back to Lithuania.

Her ambivalence revealed itself again when she offered me some tea and we had it with the small cakes that I brought her as a treat. At first, Larisa categorically refused to try the cakes: she said that she avoided eating foods containing sugar. However, when I had a few with the tea during our interview, Larisa ate a few too. I had a sense that it was important for her to present herself as a responsible person with strong willpower, enough to keep to a diet. However, when she saw me enjoying the cakes, she decided to ignore her diet.

When I read Larisa's narrative using Hollway and Jefferson's (2000, 23) concept of the 'defended subject', the episodes in which her ambivalence was manifested form a whole picture. The idea of a 'defended subject' is useful for understanding people's investment in specific narratives which provide them with protection against anxiety and offer support to their preferred image of themselves. In other words, the 'defended subject' is a defensive strategy in which one intellectualises and manages painful emotional experiences through words that offer the comfort of comprehension and the prospect of control.

From this perspective, Larisa's ambivalence could be taken as a sign of her desire to avoid directly discussing her anxiety around her feeling of displacement and missing her family. By presenting herself as an adventurous, competent and socially active person, she refused to give credence to her doctor's opinion that she was going through a difficult time. Perhaps her ambivalence about the prospect of having a new partner was part of her strategy to defend herself from difficult emotions.

When I talked to her, I had a sense that she wanted to come across as more interested in meeting new men than she really was. In my view, she wanted to present herself as an energetic woman, free of anxiety and problems, because she was involved with a circle of younger women, for whom searching for partners was an important part of life. Thus, performing her enthusiasm towards re-partnering may have been her way of fulfilling her longing to belong. But inconsistencies in her narrative also suggested that romantic intimacy was not her top priority. Overall, Larisa's case demonstrates how the presentation of oneself as a sexual subject in later life becomes an imperative of the Western ideology of

‘successful ageing’. It also is indicative of the discrepancy between the notion of success and the complexities of human life.

Women’s positive attitudes to re-partnering in later life

‘I need to get on with my life’

Eight participants in my study were positive about re-partnering. The life circumstances of the women in this group varied: some were dedicated grandmothers living in multigenerational households, others did not have grandchildren and lived on their own. But all of them felt that they were ready for a new chapter, following a divorce or the death of a partner.

The study by Bildtgård and Öberg (2017, 27) offers an interpretation of why individuals in the same age group may have different attitudes towards re-partnering. Their findings suggest that subjective perception of the time-horizon can be either an encouraging or a discouraging factor for considering the prospect of new relationships in later life. Some older individuals find it not worth trying to establish a new attachment, whereas others wish to take full advantage of their remaining lifespan.

Lilya (62), Zemfira (64) and Tamara (66), all living in the UK, told me that they had ‘recreational partners’, to borrow the term of Bildtgård and Öberg (2017, 43), but in their own definition – simply ‘boyfriends’ – men with whom they shared leisure time.

Tamara, a retired English teacher, met her British husband in Moscow, where he worked in archives as a visiting scholar. Within a year they got married and she moved to live with him in London. After 20 years of marriage, he died and for the next couple of years she did not seek new relationships. However, three years before we met, Tamara realised that she was ready to use dating websites to meet new men:

> I had one boyfriend before, now I have another one. I was alone for about three years and then I met this man from another city. We travelled together a lot. But he simply wasn’t right for me. And now I have another boyfriend. He is 10 years older than me, and not very well. But he’s a very interesting person. We’ve been to many countries together.

Tamara was among the very few participants in my study who did not lose their social and cultural capital on immigrating to the UK as an adult.

She was able to retain her career as an English teacher. She was also well established in the social circles that she and her late husband had shared, which gave her the confidence to actively seek new connections.

Margarita (70) and Elvira (60), both based in Russia, were in romantic correspondence with men via social media and expressed a hope that this exchange of messages would lead to a new relationship. A widow and retired quality-control technician, Margarita has recently reconnected with a man with whom she shared a romantic interest more than 40 years ago.

Elvira, a widow who was working as a nanny, was in active search for new relationships via dating websites. Before reaching pensionable age, she had worked as an engineer and at 55 she retired. However, after half a year in retirement she realised that she wanted to have more financial freedom than her old-age pension could offer, so she trained as a nanny and found a full-time job. The fact that she did not have grandchildren motivated her to seek life scenarios outside the role of a dedicated grandmother: she was studying English and Italian when we met. She attended cooking classes and a fitness club and had a vibrant social life. Another motivating factor to seek new romantic relationships that she mentioned was having recently had major surgery:

> After the operation I started looking at life differently. I wanted to take full advantage of the time I had left. I started chatting with men on a dating website. First, for about six months I had a virtual romance with a man from the UK. But he turned out to be not very decent, let's say. He messed with my head. Well, I got over that. Since then, I've met this other man, from the US. He has invited me to visit him, to meet his teenage daughter. My son is 40 now; I would be happy to be involved in the life of a girl. Well, time will tell if this works out.

After my fieldwork was finished, I remained in touch with Elvira, and she told me that the man she was in correspondence with turned out to be a scammer. Like his predecessor from the same dating website, he attempted to extort money from her while pretending he was a middle-class widower from the US. I heard similar stories from my other interviewees who had used dating websites and were groomed by scammers targeting women looking for new relationships.

Evgenia (60), an entrepreneur based in Russia, was involved in a non-cohabiting partnership arrangement of the kind described in research under the term 'living apart together' (Levin and Trost 1999). A single mother, she had lived with her daughter in her parents' house

and struggled to make ends meet throughout the 1990s, until she became involved in network marketing. This career move made it possible for her to acquire a place of her own, which in turn motivated her to seek romantic relationships:

> I worked hard, earned good money, and that's when I started thinking about my personal life. Because, before that, I didn't think about it at all. I couldn't imagine any man who could become a stepfather for my child. Would they accept each other? So before my daughter turned 15, it wasn't an option. Plus, we lived with my parents at that time. The idea of buying an apartment didn't occur to me. Maybe it's from the Soviet times when in theory apartments were given out for free, but families weren't put on the waiting list unless they had less than nine square metres of space per capita. We had a little more than that.

When her daughter started secondary school, Evgenia was 45. At that time, she made friends with a female colleague, which changed her life: 'Suddenly this woman buys an apartment with a mortgage. She explains to me how it all works, and I think to myself, "Oh, hang on a second, why can't I do the same?".' Following her colleague's example, Evgenia bought a flat of her own. This new experience motivated her to use a local newspaper where people in search of partners published their advertisements. Through the newspaper, she met a man and soon after that he moved in with her. However, after several years the relationship ended, and it was not until the next turning-point in her life that Evgenia was ready to meet someone again.

Several years before our meeting, her daughter left home to live with her boyfriend. When Evgenia found herself living alone, she decided to try to find a new partner. Through a dating website, she met a man from another city and had been in a long-distance relationship with him for three years when we met. She found that the 'living apart together' arrangement worked well for her as it allowed her to have a man in her life and also enjoy a certain freedom. This is how Evgenia reflects on the relationship: 'Maybe it's good that we don't live together. I probably don't need someone who's around all the time any more. We see each other once a week. He likes doing man's jobs round my flat. And I really appreciate that.' Evgenia also told me that although she was not 'madly in love' with her partner, they had a strong and well-functioning relationship: in exchange for his investment in maintaining her flat, she took care of his diet and health.

Most of the women in this group, apart from two, had places of their own and were able to retain skilled post-pension-age jobs, which made them feel they were autonomous individuals entitled to pursue their own interests. Overall, however, the attitudes of older Russian women towards new romantic/sexual relationships with men were affected by the strong social expectation that they will dedicate their lives to maintaining the wellbeing of their children and grandchildren. From this perspective, the role in informal welfare that Russian society delegates to older women limits their opportunities to exercise intimate citizenship. Nevertheless, many older women interpreted remaining single in later life as a preferred option, as it freed them from the unpaid family care typically associated with having a male partner.

7 Epilogue

Older women making sense of Russia's politics

Russia's political climate, women's life trajectories and political views

My fieldwork took place between the beginning of the war in Donbas in 2014 and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Following the Euro-Maidan revolution in 2014, anti-Maidan forces, backed by unmarked troops, took control of the eastern Ukrainian regions of Donetsk and Luhansk. The Russian government consistently denied its involvement in the war, but the preceding annexation of Crimea in early 2014 dramatically improved Vladimir Putin's ratings, which had been falling in response to his authoritarian and conservative policies (Greene and Robertson 2022, 41).

The war in Donbas had killed many thousands of members of military forces on both sides of the conflict, as well as civilians (United Nations 2016, 3). But in 2016–17, when I collected interviews with Russian women, the Bucha massacre, the battles of Irpin and Kharkiv, and the siege of Mariupol, which would devastate the world in 2022, bringing many more thousands of deaths and displacing millions of Ukrainians, were still impossible to imagine.

In the Russian media, the war in Donbas was framed as a noble struggle against the 'fascist' Western-sponsored nationalists intent on carrying out a genocide of Russian speakers in Ukraine.[1] The vocabulary associated with the Second World War resonated with Russian audiences for whom the victory over the danger of fascism in the twentieth century is closely intertwined with both their family histories and the national narrative (Gaufman 2015, 146). As one of my interviewees, Elizaveta (78), who witnessed the Second World War as a child, told me in 2016, she supported Putin because he 'kept Russia away from war'.

The imaginary in which Russia's violence in post-Soviet states is downplayed and justified as self-defence has been carefully manufactured by the Kremlin since the fall of the USSR.

In the run-up to the 2018 presidential election, Putin's administration took steps to ensure his victory by maintaining tight control over the political process. In 2012, a law was introduced which allows the authorities to label non-profit and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) as 'foreign agents' if they receive foreign funding and engage in political activity. This law scared away many sponsors and partners of Russian charities and civil society groups. In 2015, another law prohibited 'undesirable organisations' from operating in Russia. The law was used to shut down foreign and Russian NGOs, opposition groups and critical news outlets. In 2016, a new law significantly expanded the powers of law enforcement agencies, allowing surveillance of and collection of data on citizens under the pretext of fighting terrorism and extremism (Karmanau and Litvinova 2024).

I am writing this chapter on the 10th anniversary of Russia's annexation of Crimea. The ongoing full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which started more than two years ago, has already claimed the lives of many hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian and Russian soldiers. Russian missiles continue to kill and terrorise civilians regularly in Zaporizhzhia, Dnipro, Odesa, Sumy, Kherson, Donetsk, Kharkiv and Kyiv.

The Russian opposition politician Boris Nemtsov, who was vocal about corruption and denounced the annexation of Crimea, was murdered in 2015. Based on investigations by Bellingcat, *The Insider* and the BBC, he had been shadowed for almost a year before by an agent linked to a political assassination team (BBC Eye Investigations 2022). In 2024, Alexei Navalny, who had been poisoned with a nerve agent in 2020 and imprisoned in 2021, appeared to be in good health until he suffered from 'sudden death syndrome' in a Siberian penal colony (Baker 2024).

Several million Russian people left the country to avoid being involved in the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. In 2022, more than 15,000 protesters inside Russia were arrested, and some of them faced physical mistreatment, including torture. The government concealed information about the war and its effects on the country (Freedom House 2023).

So far, in this book, I have explored the social production of ageing in Russia. My goal has been to understand how Russia's political, social and economic system shapes the lives of older women. In this chapter, I briefly touch on how my interviewees make sense of the socio-political transformations Russia has been undergoing. Before delving into my

findings, I would like to emphasise that my sample is small and not representative of the diversity of Russian society.

One way or another, most participants in my study reflected on the system of social inequality. Many expressed their dissatisfaction with the existing social order, within which they often face multiple marginalisation – as women, as older citizens and as underprivileged individuals. Some of them discussed their experience of engaging in everyday politics – small acts of resisting institutional injustice. For instance, Arina (88) told me about organising collective actions to demand accountability from the local administration, which ignored problems that had arisen in the facilities of residential buildings. Research on political processes in eastern Europe shows that low-key apolitical resistance activities often serve as the only means available for citizens in this region to recognise and articulate their grievances (Jacobsson and Korolczuk 2020; Baća 2023; Shadrina 2024).

Most my interviewees did not interpret their actions as political, nor did they express hope for social change that could enable alternatives to the Kremlin's autocratic project to emerge. As a person who has lived most of her adult life in authoritarian Belarus, I know all too well that citizens' scepticism in autocracies is the product of the dominant ideology. Autocratic regimes deliberately depoliticise citizens' initiatives, impose the belief that there is no viable alternative to them and severely punish resistance.

Openly articulating criticism of the system carries existential threat. This is why I did not ask my interviewees directly to discuss their political views. My aim was to co-create a space where my interlocutors would be in full control of choosing what to talk about when narrating their life stories. But I would sometimes ask clarifying questions if an interviewee chose to express her political views.

In the political climate I outline above, many women I talked to understandably avoided expressing their political opinions to an interviewer they had not met before. Others, such as Paulina (78), after making critical comments about the government, repeatedly asked me, half-jokingly, if they were now going to be arrested for their views. In non-democratic countries, where expressing political views is dangerous, women, who are often primarily responsible for their families' well-being, face greater vulnerability.

At the same time, marginalised in many ways, many older women internalise the belief that their interests are less important than those of broader society and, therefore, that their grievances are not worth

expressing. This attitude discourages them from seeing themselves as political actors capable of developing alternative political imaginaries.

Nevertheless, by reflecting on their everyday life, they implicitly expressed a variety of attitudes towards Russia's current political course. The largest group of my interviewees were critical of various aspects of social inequality in Russia. Although they did not necessarily share the values promoted by the ruling elite, they pragmatically accepted the system they had learned to navigate. Another group expressed support for the Kremlin's internal and external political agenda, influenced by its populist rhetoric. Finally, a portion of my interviewees were highly critical of Vladimir Putin's politics, but it should be noted that these individuals articulated their views while residing outside Russia. In the following sections, I explore these differing stances in more detail, placing them within the broader context of the women's life trajectories.

Pragmatically accepting the system

Older women's ambivalence about corruption

A number of women I spoke to were critical of the economic gap between the ruling elite and ordinary Russians. Ewick and Silbey (2003, 1328) challenge the conventional notion of political resistance as an action that takes place within institutional channels, mobilising collective action and bringing about societal change. Drawing on Goffman's (1961) 'secondary adjustments', de Certeau's (1984) 'tactics' and Scott's (1985) 'weapons of the weak', they insist that the act of narrating about injustice can be seen as an instance of the 'small acts of defiance' which are available to powerless people to resist structural injustice while simultaneously protecting themselves from the risk of institutional violence.

From this perspective, a group of my interviewees found a way to politically distance themselves from the ruling elite. However, while expressing dissatisfaction with the system responsible for Russia's transition 'from a country with relative equality to a country of extreme inequality' (Schimpfössl 2018, 5), these participants did not hope for political change. Finding themselves in a relatively secure economic position compared with less-privileged citizens, these women normalised the status quo by interpreting politics as an inherently corrupt field irrespective of the political system and its geographical location.

For instance, Alla (66), a Russia-based academic, recalled how as an early-career researcher during the Soviet era, she had used her friendship

with a Communist party bureaucrat to get permission to attend a conference in a western European country. She explained to me that at that time, it was an enormous privilege granted only to citizens loyal to the system who had close personal connection with the party elite.

When she had been invited for an interview with the administration of the regional party committee, the entity which authorised her visit, she was able to have lunch at a canteen where ordinary Russians were not allowed. She described her anger when she saw that party bureaucrats had access to food products unavailable to the rest of society. She concluded that the late Soviet system of privilege re-emerged in post-Soviet Russia under new names and in new forms:

> There's always been inequality – all the money went around in the party's committees, and all the new rich people came from these committees. But I'm absolutely convinced that money doesn't bring happiness. Excess prevents you from developing yourself and getting motivated. I personally always give money to charities if they are raising funds for the treatment of little children. But I keep thinking, in this country, isn't it disgraceful to spend millions on yachts while collecting money from ordinary people? But it's not only here; this is how things are all over the world … You see, corruption has always existed and it will always remain in this country. You can't drag a thirsty person away from a spring of water, so to speak. It's simply impossible.

In this excerpt, Alla voices the frustration of ordinary people about the fact that new wealth in Russia emerged as a result of the privatisation whereby state enterprise managers, who belonged to the party elite, took over whatever was under their control. In the 1990s, a tiny group known as oligarchs appeared at the top of the new rich. During the 2000s oil boom, Russian society moved from mass poverty to mass low income, but the gap between Russia's rich and poor became even more acute after the 2014 economic crisis. After Putin came to power in 2000, he prioritised government personnel with a security or military background, who now could become rich by entering the top management of state-aligned companies (Schimpfössl 2018, 4, 12).

The yachts Alla mentions in the above quotation are a theme which became widely discussed on social media as a result of Alexei Navalny's investigations into the wealth of high-profile officials, including senior members of United Russia, members of the national parliament, the federal government, Moscow city council and officials in the central electoral

commission. One of Navalny's best-known slogans frames United Russia as the 'party of crooks and thieves', conveying the idea that officials offer loyalty to Putin in exchange for opportunities to enrich themselves. Exposing elite corruption helped Navalny create a strong narrative that drew a line between the citizenry and the corrupt authorities (Dollbaum et al. 2021, 45, 50).

The efficiency of Navalny's political project is evident in Alla's effort to distance herself from those who enjoy excessive wealth by emphasising that she donates money to children's medical charities. However, she depoliticises her critique by framing the extreme wealth of the political elite as a psychological problem that is detrimental to personal development. She concludes her reflection by normalising the corruption, interpreting it as analogous to satisfying a basic need such as thirst. She also explains that corruption will always exist in Russia because, within the existing system, it serves as an easy pathway for social mobility for certain groups.

Alla's pragmatic attitude towards the abuse of power for private gain is consistent with the wider societal response to Navalny's investigations, which caught the attention of Russian citizens but did not generate mass mobilisation. Scholarship of informal practices in post-Soviet countries can offer an insight to explain this puzzle. Ledeneva (2006, 13) argues that in Russia, violation of the formal rules is common because the economy operates in such a way that everyone is bound to disregard at least some of these rules.

Analysing the everyday survival strategies of agricultural workers in Belarus, Hervouet (2021) illustrates how authorities foster informal practices among citizens. He argues that, apart from exercising violence, the Belarusian regime maintains a sociality that is appealing to those who have not benefited economically from the collapse of the Soviet Union. According to Hervouet (2021, 223), in exchange for their loyalty, the autocratic system allows agricultural labourers to supplement their meagre wages by misappropriating work time and equipment and engaging in petty fraud and poaching. He maintains that not having anything better to hope for, rural residents settle for the stability of the regime. Within this moral economy, they consider that it is equally wrong to take too much advantage of the system and not to benefit from it at all. They also equate criticism of the status quo with a pitiful inability to take advantage of the existing order.

These insights are helpful for understanding why exposing corruption in authoritarian countries like Belarus and Russia does not shock citizens. When ensuring the 'minimal cultural decencies' (Scott 1985, xviii)

of ordinary people depends on their everyday engagement in small-scale unregulated practices, they become tolerant to large-scale fraud. Perhaps that is why Alla, who was critical of the post-Soviet appropriation of public resources by a tiny group of oligarchs, did not see the opportunistic logic as something that could or should be changed. Her narrative was a story of success which was possible because of her passion for her job and hard work, but also thanks to her ability to navigate Russia's informal rules.

Born in a village, she was one of the first generation of her family to have a university degree. As a successful academic, she was very confident of her position in society. Her professional success contrasted with the life trajectory of her brother, who lost his job as an engineer after the collapse of the Soviet Union. According to Alla, he had many jobs but did not manage to build an impressive career and found himself depressed, mourning the Soviet era. Unlike his sister, he did not have a good professional network and was not able to upgrade his skill-set in order to compete for better jobs or start his own business. Being successful in the new era, Alla criticised corruption, but she also expressed contempt towards people like her brother who had been trained for the Soviet planned economy and found themselves unable to thrive economically and professionally after the end of Soviet socialism. Ultimately, Alla came to terms with the existing political system by reinforcing the belief that people in authority abuse their power everywhere in the world and nothing can be done about it.

Expressing loyalty to Vladimir Putin

Accepting symbolic compensation for structural marginalisation

Several Russia-based participants explicitly supported Vladimir Putin. Most of these interviewees came from less-privileged peasant families for whom the Soviet developmental project had offered opportunities to receive education and become urbanites with guaranteed jobs and access to free healthcare, housing and affordable childcare. Their biographical narratives were built on the theme of overcoming painful experiences – from the hardship of the Second World War and the post-war restoration of the country to the turbulence of the 1990s.

In their stories the dissolution of the Soviet Union was not marked as an exciting opportunity to gain economic and political freedoms; on the contrary, this event had coincided with multiple personal losses

for them: by the 1990s, they were no longer young, and some of them had lost loved ones and their jobs, savings and what they perceived as a predetermined course of life. Many of them had also come to the realisation that some of the hopes they had had earlier in life would never materialise.

The hardship of everyday survival and their feeling of personal loss resonated with the political narrative of 'the Russian tragedy'. From the late 1990s, this narrative has become the dominant interpretive approach to Russia's post-Soviet history. Influential politicians, journalists and academics capitalised on equating the dissolution of the Soviet state with the dissolution of Russia as a nation. One of the most frequently cited examples of this narrative is Vladimir Putin's 2005 address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation, in which he called the collapse of the Soviet Union the major geopolitical disaster of the century. The imaginary of 'the Russian tragedy' offered ethnically Russian citizens[2] the new identity of 'suffering subject' and provided them with a sense of continuity with the past and distinction from other ethnicities (Oushakine 2009, 79–85). The political narrative of suffering has been successfully used by many populist politicians in eastern Europe because it provides them with an opportunity to blame problems on external actors and claim moral superiority from the position of an innocent victim (Barton Hronešová 2024, 449).

In their wish to come across as coherent individuals, my interviewees presented their lives as sequences of logically connected trajectories. Butler (1990, 2004) argues that social recognition is conditioned by people's recognisability as legitimate subjects. For Butler (2004, 3–4), 'the viability of individual personhood' depends on its assimilation to and recognisability within dominant social norms. Those who 'have no desire to be recognised within norms that make their lives unlivable' exercise self-determination at the expense of their sense of social belonging.

From this point of view, one of the commonest ways of maintaining a sense of belonging among this group of my interviewees was interpreting Vladimir Putin's national project as the country's way out of 'the Russian tragedy'. By replicating the narrative of Russia regaining its status as a superpower, they intended to come across as patriots who were reclaiming what was once rightfully theirs. The idea of overcoming crises also served them as a narrative device to evaluate their current stage of life as part of a general upward movement. This perspective helped them summarise their past years in a positive light and maintain hope for a promising future for their children and grandchildren.

This narrative strategy was especially important for participants in their late seventies and eighties. They sought to portray their life course as meaningful and full of accomplishments. Given the stark economic divide in Russia between ordinary citizens and the political elite, achieving this was challenging. Many attributed their sense of marginalisation – as women, older citizens and individuals not benefiting from the end of Soviet socialism – to the consequences of the policies of Gorbachev and Yeltsin, and an alleged anti-Russian Western conspiracy. At the same time, despite not necessarily having a clear understanding of Vladimir Putin's ideological and economic platforms, they perceived him as representing their interests.

For instance, Arina (88), who was born in a village and lived through the Second World War as a teenager, interpreted her life-path as inseparable from the Soviet developmental project, which had various phases, including Stalin's repressions:

> Stalinist … no, it wasn't terror, you know. It may have been necessary. But in the end, it was, of course, insanity. Well, one gets old; they should have replaced him at the time. Perhaps he was clinging to power. Who knows how it was. We are far from Moscow. It's difficult for us to make sense of it all. But anyone can see that from a deeply ignorant, agrarian, mediocre Russia, they created a state like the Soviet Union, so strong and industrial … where a secondary education was compulsory for everyone. That means a lot to me.

In this excerpt, Arina is simultaneously acknowledging the horrors of the Stalinist period and protecting herself from the disturbing knowledge she struggles to come to terms with. She is trying to rationalise Stalin's violent policies by multiple strategies: she interprets them as part of transforming a rural country into an industrial state. She also cites Stalin's cognitive decline, related to his ageing, as a possible reason for the atrocities committed under his rule and blames those surrounding him for not intervening. She then implicitly mentions that she does not trust the official historical narratives but does not have skills to form her own informed opinion. She concludes by emphasising that the Soviet Union was not only a repressive state but also a successful developmental project that advanced the lives of many millions of people.

I cannot help but notice that she equates the Soviet Union with Russia, omitting its multicultural nature and the imposed cultural and political dominance of Russia over other Soviet republics. In 2024, this could be read as an utterly imperialistic statement that reinforces the

Kremlin's aspiration to dominate in the region and be a geopolitical centre of influence. However, during Arina's formative years, this narrative, the product of the Cold War, was the globally accepted way of seeing 'Soviets' as 'Russians' (Hirsch 2005, 1).

Later in her interview, Arina explains that she sees Mikhail Gorbachev as responsible for destroying the Soviet Union and Boris Yeltsin for allowing oligarchs to privatise previously state-controlled resources. This perspective allows her to see Putin's narrative of restoration of Russia's greatness as a project that aligns with her values:

> Now, I think, all things considered, though in some ways I may not agree with Putin, I still deeply respect him. Firstly, he has rebuilt our army, the defence of our state. That is very valuable. As for the economy, I really don't understand anything about the economy, to be honest.

Here, Arina, who survived the Second World War, implicitly cites the official narrative that portrays the Putin regime as the successor of the victory of the Soviet army over fascism. For her, Russia's militarisation is associated with feeling protected from the horrors of war that she witnessed. A former member of the Soviet Communist party, she concludes by providing further explanation of why she supports Vladimir Putin:

> When they started saying that Lenin should be removed from the mausoleum, Putin said: 'We must first ask old people if they will allow it.' I hate it that such a great state was destroyed. Everyone knows that the Soviet Union is the Soviet Union. There were very difficult years during the war: that was very hard, I won't lie. But all the same, we survived.

Arina explains that she supports Vladimir Putin because she believes he defends the symbols that used to be proclaimed as core Soviet values. The Soviet political project was based on the premise that the discourse of Leninism was beyond question. At the end of *perestroika*, the party tried to revitalise Soviet ideology by returning to Lenin's original teachings. However, by dismissing the previously canonised figure of Lenin as a distortion, the authorities failed to find any authentic source of inspiration beyond an empty political construct (Yurchak 2017, 191).

Putin's conservative turn appealed to both Communists and Orthodox Christian believers. In 2012, he was publicly asked how the preservation of Lenin's body in the mausoleum aligned with religious

tradition. He replied that the dead bodies of saints have been publicly displayed in Orthodox monasteries for centuries and the preservation of Lenin's body continues this tradition (Yurchak 2015, 145). This ideological move allowed Putin's political project to secure popular support by offering citizens the narrative of restoring Russia's greatness and a partial preservation of Soviet symbols in exchange for their alienation from formal politics. For the less-privileged group my interviewee Arina belonged to, that seemed like an acceptable social contract.

Resisting the regime from abroad

Life-long dissidents

But in my fieldwork there were Russians who did not support Putin's political course. Among them was Lilya (62), an academic, who was invited to work at a British university in the late 1990s. Since her student years in Moscow, she had been involved in a circle of young dissidents, many of whom came from highly educated families with significant social capital. When Lilya told me about her youth, she mentioned big names among her friends whom anyone familiar with late Soviet history would recognise. However, her narrative was also full of evidence of Soviet antisemitism: as a Jew she had been bullied and had seen other people receive similar treatment. Based on her account, the experience of discrimination on ethnic grounds had taught her to identify the source of injustice and resist it by all available means:

> I saw the double-faced nature of Soviet internationalism. Rhetorically, we were all equal. But in practice, as a Jew, I grew up hearing my parents discuss how we had to make extra efforts to get into a university and get a decent job. Some departments would not accept Jews; one had to hide one's background if one could. So my friends and I would read poetry by Jewish poets, we would incorporate anti-Soviet satire in our creative projects. That was a rather brave thing to do.

Officially, the Bolsheviks opposed antisemitism, which encouraged Jewish communities to support the Russian revolution in the hope of liberation from the oppressive tsarist policies. However, antisemitism was present within both the counter-revolutionary and revolutionary movements (McGeever 2019, 5). During Stalin's regime more Jews than any

other ethnic group were arrested and charged with espionage, treason, bourgeois nationalism and links to American imperialism. Khrushchev's de-Stalinisation and Gorbachev's *glasnost* and *perestroika* led to some relaxation of state-sponsored antisemitism. Yet the absence of physical violence towards Jewish people during the late Soviet era did not entirely make up for the covert discrimination and the sense of insecurity they faced. The primary motivation for the mass emigration of thousands of Jews from the Soviet Union was socio-economic, but anxiety about potential anti-Jewish violence played a crucial role in their decision to leave in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Bemporad 2019, 147–52).

When I met Lilya in 2016, she was involved in a creative circle of Russian immigrants who were critical of Vladimir Putin's political actions. During that time, she regularly organised public events that would bring together Russian intellectuals to discuss the country's potential democratic future. She confided in me that the war in Donbas and the annexation of Crimea ended her marriage. She and her former husband had different views: he became defensive of Russia's politics and eventually moved back to Russia. Weeks before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, I met Lilya at protest rallies condemning the aggression of Russia. After the first days of the Kremlin's military campaign, she went to the Polish–Ukrainian border as a volunteer to help war refugees get food, temporary accommodation and information about where they could travel to in order to find safety.

Resisting oppressive regimes was for Lilya an important part of life. She had valued her married life but could not reconcile with her ex-husband's perspective that justified Russia's expansionism in Ukraine. Her political activism was a life-long passion, which started back in the Soviet Union with partisan practices and continued into her life in the UK. Since her childhood, she had been exposed to dissident activities: some of her relatives had been repressed during Stalin's rule, others would gather in small circles to discuss politics. But her open criticism of the Kremlin's political course had its price: she thought that it was not safe for her to travel to Russia to visit her relatives.

Nevertheless, her life was very different from that of Alla and Arina, my interviewees mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. For more than 30 years she has not lived in Russia and has sought recognition and belonging far away from the everyday reality of her former compatriots. Her professional success in the West was built on the criticism of the post-Soviet authoritarian systems.

In this sense, the economic and symbolic interests of my Russia-based interviewees and the UK-based Lilya translated into different

political interests. Challenging the status quo in non-democratic contexts is a long-term endeavour with an unpredictable outcome. While being critical of the existing system, Alla and Arina settled for the available means of seeking recognition and contributing to the wellbeing of their families. In the end, Arina, who was in her late eighties when I met her, could not plan a long-term fight for Russia's future democratisation. All that elderly woman had was the present moment in the environment she had learned to navigate.

Notes

1. The far right, indeed, has been increasingly present in Ukrainian politics. However, this does not justify Russia's intervention. In fact, Russia's involvement in the war in Donbas and the annexation of Crimea have made those supporting political and economic reintegration with Russia a small minority in Ukraine (Ischchenko 2024, xxvi).
2. Soviet nation-building produced tensions between promoting a universal Soviet identity and simultaneously encouraging ethnic pluralism which included implicit hierarchies. The Soviet ideology rejected the 'bourgeois' notion of inherent racial traits and posited that there were no inferior and superior races. However, from the mid-1930s onwards, the ideological concept of 'friendship of peoples', which aimed to foster unity and cooperation among the diverse ethnic groups within the Soviet Union, coexisted with forced migration of entire ethnic groups from their homelands to other areas of the country on the grounds of anti-Soviet nationalism. From the late Soviet era and into the post-Soviet period, Russianness has operated as unmarked whiteness (Hirsch 2005; Edgar 2022; Woodard 2022). During the late Soviet period, non-ethnically Russian and especially non-Slavic people were among the targets of Russian 'jokelore' – folk humour that perpetuated the representation of Russian people as normative Soviet subjects (Draitser 1998).

Conclusion

My primary goal in this book has been to explore the social production of ageing that occurs alongside biological changes as we grow older. By the social production of ageing, I refer to cultural and institutional norms that marginalise individuals as they age, limiting their access to common goods. I believe that most people aspire to protect the value of their life and, no matter how small, find ways of resisting their marginalisation. From this perspective, the social process of ageing can be understood as a diminishing scope of opportunities for older people to actively resist societal structures that tend to deem their interests less important in comparison with those of younger individuals.

I am neither the first nor will I be the last researcher to discuss how the responsibility for reproductive work, which society delegates to women, translates into their greater disadvantage in later life. For decades, feminist scholars have highlighted the negative impact of reproductive labour on women's life chances, criticised men's unequal participation in caregiving, and emphasised the need for increased investment in welfare systems worldwide. Yet, social structures remain stubbornly 'blind' to the extent of women's altruistic contributions – through their time, attention, efforts and material resources – to the wellbeing of their families on a daily basis.

My aim in this book has been to add a political dimension to a sociological inquiry into the global phenomenon of population ageing. I have used the case of Russia to discuss how conservative politicians worldwide fail to foster innovative solutions for addressing the challenges posed by this demographic trend. Rather than expanding childcare policies and social care provision, they follow the well-trodden path of making women primarily responsible for sustaining society by combining paid and unpaid labour.

For example, Viktor Orbán in Hungary and Giorgia Meloni in Italy have consistently promoted pronatalism as the solution to the growing

numbers of older citizens in their countries. Both leaders revive the old notion that it is women's duty to have more children for the sake of the nation. While they expect mothers to look after their children alongside full-time jobs, they incentivise pronatalism not through expanding child-care provision and introducing family-friendly employment policies, but through the elimination of alternative life choices for women (Fodor 2022; Indelicato and Lopes 2024).

In the US, since the 1970s, conservative politicians have also succeeded in framing the care of children, older citizens and people with disabilities as individual responsibilities, prioritising lower corporate taxes over the expansion of welfare programmes (Briggs 2017, 9). The 2022 decision of the Supreme Court in the Dobbs case overturned the legal protections for abortion established in 1973, making it more difficult for women to control their life trajectories and family sizes. The US welfare system leaves mothers in lower- and middle-income families trapped between the risk of poverty and the exhaustion of juggling multiple jobs (Calarco 2024, 38).

In Russia, 13 per cent of the population (18 million people) live below the poverty line. Of those, 82 per cent are families with children. The fact that many divorced fathers avoid paying child support is one of the main factors that shape these statistics (Rossman 2021). Yet, at all social levels women are encouraged to have children sooner rather than later. This reproductive pattern is sustained by the strong expectation that grandmothers will be mothers' primary partners in childcare, housework and housing provision. In this way, older women in Russia mitigate the effects of post-socialism by helping their children and grandchildren navigate the increasing instability of the job market, while raising their families.

My book has examined how the extensive involvement of older women in reproductive labour keeps Russian families afloat after Soviet socialism. I have illustrated how the role in informal welfare that society delegates to older women in Russia has shaped the marginalised yet socially approved 'babushka identity'. When they no longer have the resources to resist ageist societal norms, older women adopt this subjectivity, which prompts them to seek recognition and belonging by prioritising the interests of their children and grandchildren. As a result, the 'babushka identity' that signifies the status of the post-professional and post-sexual member of society limits older women's social participation to unpaid caregiving.

Although, perhaps, exemplifying an extreme case, the contribution of Russian grandmothers to the wellbeing of the younger generation is

part of a global trend. For instance, in the UK, between 2014 and 2017, the number of grandparents involved in childcare rose from six to nine million. British grandparents spend between eight and eleven hours a week helping their adult children with childcare, and two-thirds provide financial assistance towards their grandchildren's upbringing. In China, Romania and the Philippines, many children grow up with their grandparents while their parents live and work elsewhere. When it comes to the contribution of grandparents to childcare globally, it is grandmothers who take on the largest share of unpaid family labour (Buchanan and Rotkirch 2018, 131).

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has had a devastating impact on the lives of older people in the region. Many older Ukrainians have been displaced from their homes and are facing rental prices that are incompatible with their pensions. Those who remain in conflict zones owing to a lack of alternatives often live in partially or fully destroyed housing. In addition to the risk of being killed or injured, older people are experiencing health emergencies that remain untreated as a result of the ongoing war. Older women, who on average receive pensions 30 per cent lower than those of men thanks to shorter careers and caregiving responsibilities, are more likely to face poverty (Amnesty International 2022).

The war has fractured communities and families beyond Ukraine. The support that the Kremlin has provided to the authoritarian regime of Alexander Lukashenko has led to an unprecedented level of political repression in Belarus since the contested 2020 presidential election. The crackdown on civil society and the Belarusian government's complicity in the Russian war in Ukraine have significantly affected the wellbeing of older Belarusians. Many civil society organisations have been shut down, and hundreds of thousands of younger Belarusians have fled the country, leaving behind their parents and grandparents. In both Belarus and Russia, older citizens are among political prisoners who suffer from violations of their rights to life and health (Viasna96 2024; Zotova 2024). The losses in the male population in Russia as a result of the war will only put more pressure on women of all generations, alongside the rising pensionable age.

While women live longer across the world, power largely remains concentrated in the hands of older men (Carney and Gray 2024, 517). This imbalance perhaps explains why societal structures globally perpetuate male privilege by excluding women's contributions to social reproduction from politics. This book draws on feminist scholarship (Pateman 1988; Gal and Kligman 2000; Federici 2012; Briggs 2017) that places women's 'invisible' reproductive labour at the heart of political analysis.

Discussions of the economy and politics inherently involve people who are part of families and households, where someone performs the labour essential to sustaining life. Without this work no social, political, cultural or economic achievements would be possible.

From this perspective, it is the political responsibility of social scientists to continue prioritising social reproduction in their research agendas. There is nothing more urgent than examining the impact of neoliberal capitalism, authoritarian trends and geopolitical competition on the lives of those who contribute the most to the wellbeing of others yet are the least appreciated for their efforts.

References

Adonyeva, Svetlana. 2017. '*Tri sovetskikh pokoleniya: dinamika semeynykh iyerarkhiy*' ['*Three Soviet Generations: The dynamics of family hierarchies*'], YouTube, 23 June. Accessed 6 May 2024. www.youtube.com/watch?v=0_YF7h7-zgU.

Alexievich, Svetlana. 1985. *Posledniye svideteli: kniga nedetskikh rasskazov* [*Last Witnesses: A book of stories not for children*]. Moscow: Molodaya Gvardiya.

Aliyeva, Lala A. 2020. 'Gender and society in the Caucasus'. In *Routledge Handbook of the Caucasus*, edited by Galina M. Yemelianova and Laurence Broers, 389–400. London: Routledge.

Amnesty International. 2022. '"I used to have a home": Older people's experience of war, displacement, and access to housing in Ukraine'. Amnesty International, 6 December. Index Number: EUR 50/6250/2022. Accessed 1 August 2024. www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur50/6250/2022/en/.

Andreescu, Florentina C. 2020. 'Ruined intimacy and intimate ruins in Andrey Zvyagintsev's *Loveless* (2017)', *Journal of European Popular Culture* 11(1): 5–20.

Androushchak, Gregory and Maria Yudkevich. 2012. 'Post-Soviet Russian academia struggles with the past', *International Higher Education* 69: 23–5.

Anikeeva, Olga A., Valeriya V. Sizikova, Tatiana E. Demidova, Larisa I. Starovojtova, Anna G. Akhtyan, Regina B. Godzhieva, Anastasia V. Karpunina and Zhumagul A. Maydangalieva. 2019. 'IT and computer technologies for education of senior citizens and improving the quality of their life', *Eurasia Journal of Mathematics, Science and Technology Education* 15(11): em1768.

Ashwin, Sarah. 2000. 'Introduction: Gender, state and society in Soviet and post-Soviet Russia'. In *Gender, State and Society in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia*, edited by Sarah Ashwin, 1–29. London: Routledge.

Ashwin, Sarah, Irina Tartakovskaya, Marina Ilyina and Tatyana Lytkina. 2013. 'Gendering reciprocity: Solving a puzzle of nonreciprocation', *Gender and Society* 27(3): 396–421.

Atchley, Robert C. 1971. 'Retirement and leisure participation: Continuity or crisis?', *The Gerontologist* 11(1): 13–17.

Atchley, Robert C. 1999. *Continuity and Adaptation in Aging: Creating positive experiences*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Attwood, Lynne. 1997. '"She was asking for it": Rape and domestic violence against women'. In *Post-Soviet Women: From the Baltic to Central Asia*, edited by Mary Buckley, 99–118. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Attwood, Lynne. 2012. 'Privatisation of housing in post-Soviet Russia: A new understanding of home?', *Europe–Asia Studies* 64(5): 903–28.

Avdeeva, Anna. 2020. 'Natural parenting in contemporary Russia: When "nature" meets kinship'. PhD dissertation, University of Helsinki.

Baća, Bojan. 2023. 'Enacting resistance, performing citizenship: Trajectories of political subjectification in the post-democratic condition', *Sociology* 57(1): 175–93.

Baker, Graeme. 2024. 'What we know about Alexei Navalny's death in Arctic Circle prison', BBC, 20 February. Accessed 25 July 2024. www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-68318742.

Balina, Marina. 2015. '(Auto)biographical prose'. In *Russian Literature since 1991*, edited by Evgeny Dobrenko and Mark Lipovetsky, 188–206. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Banks, James, Gemma Tetlow and Matthew Wakefield. 2008. *Asset Ownership, Portfolios and Retirement Saving Arrangements: Past trends and prospects for the future*. London: Financial Services Authority.

Barton Hronešová, Jessie. 2024. 'The uses of victimhood as a hegemonic meta-narrative in eastern Europe', *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 32(2): 442–58.

BBC. 2024. 'Cenzura, reidy, donosy. Kak rossiiskie vlasti borolis' s "LGBT dvizheniem" posle priznaniya ego ekstremistskim' ['Censorship, raids, denunciations. How Russian authorities fought the "LGBT movement" after it was declared extremist'], BBC, 23 January. Accessed 5 November 2024. www.bbc.com/russian/articles/cj538gq2g5ro.

BBC Eye Investigations. 2022. 'Boris Nemtsov: Murdered Putin rival "tailed" by agent linked to FSB hit squad', BBC World Service, 28 March. Accessed 14 March 2025. www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-60878663.

Beck, Ulrich. 1992. *Risk Society: Towards a new modernity*. London: Sage.

Beck, Ulrich and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim. 2001. *Individualization: Institutionalized individualism and its social and political consequences*. London: Sage.

Bemporad, Elissa. 2019. *Legacy of Blood: Jews, pogroms, and ritual murder in the lands of the Soviets*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Bernard, Miriam and Chris Phillipson. 2004. 'Retirement and leisure'. In *Handbook of Communication and Aging Research*, edited by Jon F. Nussbaum and Justine Coupland, 353–82. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Biggs, Simon. 2011. 'Toward critical narrativity: Stories of ageing in contemporary social policy'. In *Active Ageing, Active Learning: Issues and challenges*, edited by Gillian Boulton-Lewis and Maureen Tam, 89–102. Dordrecht: Springer.

Biggs, Simon and Helen Kimberley. 2013. 'Adult ageing and social policy: New risks to identity', *Social Policy and Society* 12(2): 287–97.

Biggs, Simon and Jason L. Powell. 2001. 'A Foucauldian analysis of old age and the power of social welfare', *Journal of Aging and Social Policy* 12(2): 93–112.

Bildtgård, Torbjörn and Peter Öberg. 2017. *Intimacy and Ageing: New relationships in later life*. Bristol: Policy Press.

Bogdanova, Elena. 2016. 'Trudovyye otnosheniya s uchastiyem pensionerov: zabota ili manipulyatsiya?' ['Labour relations involving pensioners: Care or manipulation?'], *Zhurnal Issledovaniy Sotsialnoy Politiki* [*Journal of Social Policy Studies*] 14(4): 535–50.

Borozdina, Ekaterina, Anna Rotkirch, Anna Temkina and Elena Zdravomyslova. 2016. 'Using maternity capital: Citizen distrust of Russian family policy', *European Journal of Women's Studies* 23(1): 60–75.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste*. Translated by Richard Nice. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Breheny, Mary and Zoë Griffiths. 2017. '"I had a good time when I was young": Interpreting descriptions of continuity among older people', *Journal of Aging Studies* 41: 36–43.

Briggs, Laura. 2017. *How All Politics Became Reproductive Politics: From welfare reform to foreclosure to Trump*. Oakland: University of California Press.

Buchanan, Ann and Anna Rotkirch. 2013. 'No time for children? The key questions'. In *Fertility Rates and Population Decline: No time for children?,* edited by Ann Buchanan and Anna Rotkirch, 3–21. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Buchanan, Ann and Anna Rotkirch. 2018. 'Twenty-first century grandparents: Global perspectives on changing roles and consequences', *Contemporary Social Science* 13(2): 131–44.

Budgeon, Shelley. 2008. 'Couple culture and the production of singleness', *Sexualities* 11(3): 301–25.

Busse, Sarah. 2001. 'Strategies of daily life: Social capital and the informal economy in Russia', *Sociological Information* 38(2/3): 166–88.

Butler, Judith. 1990. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. New York: Routledge.

Butler, Judith. 2004. *Undoing Gender*. New York: Routledge.

Butler, Judith. 2020. *The Force of Nonviolence: An ethico-political bind.* London: Verso.

Butler, Robert N. 1969. 'Ageism: Another form of bigotry', *The Gerontologist* 9(4/1): 243–6.

Calarco, Jessica. 2024. *Holding It Together: How women became America's safety net.* New York: Penguin.

Carney, Gemma and Mia Gray. 2024. 'Introduction: Demystifying ageing and power'. In *The Global Encyclopaedia of Informality: A hitchhiker's guide to informal problem-solving in human life*, edited by Alena Ledeneva, Elena Teague, Petra Matijevic, Gabriel M. Moisé, Petra Majda and Mariya Toqmadi, 517–20. London: UCL Press.

Chernova, Zhanna. 2013. *Semia kak politicheskii vopros, gosudarstvennyi proekt i practica privatnosti* [*Family as a Political Issue, State Project, and Privacy Practice*]. St Petersburg: European University at St Petersburg.

Clarke, Laura H. 2010. *Facing Age: Women growing older in anti-aging culture*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.

Conen, Wieteke S., Hendrik P. van Dalen and Kène Henkens. 2012. 'Ageing and employers' perceptions of labour costs and productivity: A survey among European employers', *International Journal of Manpower* 33(6): 629–47.

Covey, Herbert C. 1981. 'A reconceptualization of continuity theory: Some preliminary thoughts', *The Gerontologist* 21(6): 628–33.

Davidenko, Maria. 2018. 'Multiple femininities in two Russian women's magazines, 1970s–1990s', *Journal of Gender Studies* 27(4): 445–63.

Davidenko, Maria. 2019. 'The ambiguities of self-governance: Russian middle-aged middle-class women's reflections on ageing', *Ageing and Society* 39(3): 609–28.

Davidson, Kate. 2002. 'Gender differences in new partnership choices and constraints for older widows and widowers', *Ageing International* 27(4): 43–60.

Dawson, Matt. 2012. 'Reviewing the critique of individualization: The disembedded and embedded theses', *Acta Sociologica* 55(4): 305–19.

de Beauvoir, Simone. 1996 [1970]. *The Coming of Age*. New York: W. W. Norton.

de Beauvoir, Simone. 2011 [1949]. *The Second Sex*. Translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier. New York: Vintage.

de Certeau, Michel. 1984. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Translated by Steven Rendall. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Demianova, Anna V. and Anna L. Lukyanova. 2016. 'Vliyanie statusa invalida na predlozhenie truda v Rossii' ['The impact of disability status on labour supply in Russia'], *Prikladnaya Ekonometrika* [*Applied Econometrics*] 44: 50–74.

Desmette, Donatienne and Mathieu Gaillard. 2008. 'When a "worker" becomes an "older worker": The effects of age-related social identity on attitudes towards retirement and work', *Career Development International* 13(2): 168–85.

Dews, Shelly, Joan Kaplan and Ellen Winner. 1995. 'Why not say it directly? The social functions of irony', *Discourse Processes* 19(3): 347–67.

Dmitriev, Mikhail and Tatyana Maleva. 1997. 'Russian labor market in transition: Trends, specific features, and state policy', *Social Research* 64(4): 1499–529.

Dmitrieva, Alexandra. 2018. 'Achieving the social inclusion of elderly people: A continuation of employment or "advanced" leisure?', *Journal of Social Policy Studies* 16(1): 37–50.

Dobrenko, Evgeny and Mark Lipovetsky. 2015. 'The burden of freedom: Russian literature after communism'. In *Russian Literature since 1991*, edited by Evgeny Dobrenko and Mark Lipovetsky, 1–19. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Dollbaum, Jan Matti, Morvan Lallouet and Ben Noble. 2021. *Navalny: Putin's nemesis, Russia's future?* London: Hurst.

Draitser, Emil. 1998. *Taking Penguins to the Movies: Ethnic humor in Russia*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.

Dunham, Vera. 1990. *In Stalin's Time: Middle-class values in Soviet fiction*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Edgar, A. 2022. *Intermarriage and the Friendship of Peoples: Ethnic mixing in Soviet central Asia*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Ehrenreich, Barbara and Arlie Russell Hochschild. 2003. *Global Woman: Nannies, maids, and sex workers in the new economy*. New York: Metropolitan.

Elsdon, Konrad T., John Reynolds and Susan Stewart. 2000. *Sharing Experience, Living and Learning: A study of self-help groups*. London: Community Matters.

Esping-Andersen, Gøsta. 1990. *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Esping-Andersen, Gøsta. 2009. *Incomplete Revolution: Adapting welfare states to women's new roles*. Cambridge: Polity.

Ewick, Patricia and Susan Silbey. 2003. 'Narrating social structure: Stories of resistance to legal authority', *American Journal of Sociology* 108(6): 1328–72.

Federal Law 350-FZ. 2018. Federalnyy Zakon No 350-FZ 'O vnesenii izmeneniy v otdelnyye zakonodatelnyye akty Rossiyskoy Federatsii po voprosam naznacheniya i vyplaty pensiy', *Ofitsialnoye opublikovaniye pravovykh aktov* ['On Amendments to Certain Legislative Acts of the Russian Federation Regarding the Appointment and Payment of Pensions', *Official Publication of Legal Acts*], 3 October. Accessed 4 May 2024. http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001201810030028.

Federici, Silvia. 2004. *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the body and primitive accumulation*. New York: Autonomedia.

Federici, Silvia. 2012. *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, reproduction, and feminist struggle*. Brooklyn/Oakland: Common Notions/PM Press.

Filtzer, Donald. 2002. *Soviet Workers and De-Stalinization: The consolidation of the modern system of Soviet production relations, 1953–1964*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Fisher, Linda. 2014. 'The Other Without and the Other Within: The alterity of aging and the aged in Beauvoir's *The Coming of Age*'. In *Simone de Beauvoir's Philosophy of Age*, edited by Silvia Stoller, 107–22. Berlin: De Gruyter.

Fodor, Eva. 2022. 'More Babies for the State: The "carefare" regime of anti-liberal Hungary', *New Labor Forum* 31(1): 34–41.

Freedom House. 2023. 'Freedom in the world: Russia', Freedom House. Accessed 25 July 2024. https://freedomhouse.org/country/russia/freedom-world/2023.

Freud, Sigmund. 2003 [1905]. *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious*. Translated by Joyce Crick. London: Penguin.

FSSS (Federal State Statistic Service). 2011. 'Samarskaya Oblast' ['Samara Region'], *Rosstat*. Accessed 2 November 2023. https://rosstat.gov.ru/bgd/regl/B11_14s/IssWWW.exe/Stg/priv/samar.htm.

FSSS (Federal State Statistics Service). 2021. *The Demographic Yearbook of Russia*. Moscow: Federal State Statistics Service.

FSSS (Federal State Statistics Service). 2022. *The Demographic Yearbook of Russia*. Moscow: Federal State Statistics Service.

Furunes, Trude and Reidar J. Mykletun. 2007. 'Why diversity management fails: Metaphor analyses unveil manager attitudes', *International Journal of Hospitality Management* 26(4): 974–90.

Gal, Susan and Gail Kligman. 2000. *The Politics of Gender after Socialism: A comparative-historical essay*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Gapova, Elena. 2002. 'On nation, gender, and class formation in Belarus and elsewhere in the post-Soviet world', *Nationalities Papers* 30(4): 639–62.

Gaufman, Elizaveta. 2015. 'Memory, media, and securitization: Russian media framing of the Ukrainian crisis', *Journal of Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society* 1(1): 141–74.

Gerber, Theodore P. and Michael Hout. 2004. 'Tightening up: Declining class mobility during Russia's market transition', *American Sociological Review* 69(5): 677–703.

Giddens, Anthony. 1991. *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and society in the late modern age*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Goffman, Erving. 1961. *Asylums: Essays on the social situation of mental patients and other inmates*. New York: Anchor.

Goffman, Erving. 2005 [1967]. *Interaction Ritual: Essays in face-to-face behavior*. New Brunswick: Transaction.

Golev, Aleksey. 2018. '5 mam iz sovetskikh filmov, po kotorym plachet psikholog' ['5 mothers from Soviet films that make a psychologist cry'], *Letidor*, 26 March. Accessed 14 July 2024. https://letidor.ru/psihologiya/5-mam-iz-sovetskih-filmov-po-kotorym-plachet-psiholog.htm.

Golubeva, Elena and Anastasia Emelyanova. 2020. 'Policy initiatives on healthy ageing in Russia from 2010–2020', *European Journal of Mental Health* 15(2): 93–110.

Gordon, Ian R., Tony Travers and Christine Whitehead. 2007. *The Impact of Recent Immigration on the London Economy*. London: City of London and London School of Economics and Political Science.

Goscilo, Helena. 2015. 'Narrating trauma'. In *Russian Literature since 1991*, edited by Evgeny Dobrenko and Mark Lipovetsky, 167–87. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Gradskova, Yulia. 2007. 'Soviet people with female bodies: Performing beauty and maternity in Soviet Russia in the mid-1930–1960s'. PhD dissertation, Stockholm University.

Grant, Susan and Isaac McKean Scarborough. 2023. 'Introduction. Ageing in the Soviet Union'. In *Geriatrics and Ageing in the Soviet Union: Medical, political and social contexts*, edited by Susan Grant and Isaac McKean Scarborough, 1–14. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

Greene, Samuel A. and Graeme Robertson. 2022. 'Affect and autocracy: Emotions and attitudes in Russia after Crimea', *Perspectives on Politics* 20(1): 38–52.

Hanson, Philip. 1997. 'Samara: A preliminary profile of a Russian region and its adaptation to the market', *Europe–Asia Studies* 49(3): 407–29.

Harris, Jane Gary. 2018. 'Re-imagining Russia's social care system in the age of the internet: The gerontological NGO Dobroe Delo, the Madrid plan, and the rights of the elderly', *Zhurnal issledovaniy sotsialnoy politiki* 16(1): 155–68.

Hays, Sharon. 1996. *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Healey, Dan. 2014. 'Chto takoe traditsionnye sexualnie otnosheniia?' ['What are traditional sexual relations?']. In *Na pereputye: metodologiya, teoriya i praktika LGBT i kvir-issledovaniy* [*At the Crossroads: Methodology, theory, and practice of LGBT and queer studies*], edited by Alexander Kondakov, 55–67. St Petersburg: Centr Nezavisimyh Sociologicheskih Issledovanii [Centre for Independent Sociological Research].

Healey, Dan. 2017. *Russian Homophobia from Stalin to Sochi*. London: Bloomsbury.

Hervouet, Ronan. 2021. *A Taste for Oppression: A political ethnography of everyday life in Belarus*. New York: Berghahn.

Hirsch, Francine. 2005. *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic knowledge and the making of the Soviet Union*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Hochschild, Arlie R. 1975. 'Disengagement theory: A critique and proposal', *American Sociological Review* 40(5): 553–69.

Hollway, Wendy and Tony Jefferson. 2000. *Doing Qualitative Research Differently: Free association, narrative and the interview method*. London: Sage.

Hopkins, Eric. 1995. *Working-Class Self-Help in Nineteenth-Century England: Responses to industrialization*. London: UCL Press.

IIASA (International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis). 2020. 'Aging demographic data sheet 2020', International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis. Accessed 30 October 2023. https://previous.iiasa.ac.at/web/home/research/researchPrograms/WorldPopulation/PublicationsMediaCoverage/ModelsData/AgingDemDataSheet2020.pdf.

Indelicato, Maria Elena and Maira Magalhaes Lopes. 2024. 'Understanding populist far-right anti-immigration and anti-gender stances beyond the paradigm of gender as "a symbolic glue": Giorgia Meloni's modern motherhood, neo-Catholicism, and reproductive racism', *European Journal of Women's Studies* 31(1): 6–20.

Ishchenko, Volodymyr. 2024. *Towards the Abyss: Ukraine from Maidan to war*. London: Verso.

Ishchenko, Volodymyr and Oleg Zhuravlev. 2022. 'Imperialist ideology or depoliticization? Why Russian citizens support the invasion of Ukraine', *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 12(3): 668–76.

Iweins, Caroline, Donatienne Desmette and Vincent Yzerbyt. 2012. 'Ageism at work: What happens to older workers who benefit from preferential treatment?', *Psychologica Belgica* 52(4): 327–49.

Jacobsson, Kerstin and Elżbieta Korolczuk. 2020. 'Mobilizing grassroots in the city: Lessons for civil society research in central and eastern Europe', *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 33: 125–42.

Johnson, Janet E. 2014. 'Pussy Riot as a feminist project: Russia's gendered informal politics', *Nationalities Papers* 42(4): 583–90.

Johnson, Janet E., Alexandra Novitskaya, Valerie Sperling and Lisa McIntosh Sundstrom. 2021. 'Mixed signals: What Putin says about gender equality', *Post-Soviet Affairs* 37(6): 507–25.

Jones, Huw. 2013. 'Census 2011: Leeds statistics and implications for housing strategy and policy', Leeds City Council, February. Accessed 30 October 2023. https://democracy.leeds.gov.uk/documents/s90771/Appendix%202.pdf.

Jones, Rebecca L. 2020. 'Later life sex and Rubin's "charmed circle"', *Sexuality and Culture* 24(5): 1480–98.

Kaminer, Jenny. 2014. *Women with a Thirst for Destruction: The bad mother in Russian culture*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.

Kaplan, Dana and Eva Illouz. 2022. *What Is Sexual Capital?* Cambridge: Polity.

Karmanau, Yuras and Dasha Litvinova. 2024. 'A timeline of restrictive laws that authorities have used to crack down on dissent in Putin's Russia', Associated Press, 6 March. Accessed 25 July 2024. https://apnews.com/article/russia-election-repressive-laws-dissent-5927d8932736636a9339fdcbaebd2331.

Kay, Rebecca. 2012. 'Managing everyday (in)securities: Normative values, emotional security and symbolic recognition in the lives of Russian rural elders', *Journal of Rural Studies* 28(2): 63–71.

Kazimov, Rza and Sergei Zakharov. 2021. 'Combating low life expectancy and low fertility in tumultuous political times: A comparison of Ukraine, Russia and Belarus'. In *Global Political Demography: The politics of population change*, edited by Achim Goerres and Pieter Vanhuysse, 401–27. Cham: Springer.

Kelly, Catriona. 1998. 'Popular culture'. In *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Russian Culture*, edited by Nicholas Rzhevsky, 125–58. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kelly, Catriona. 2007. *Children's World: Growing up in Russia, 1890–1991*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Klein, Melanie. 1997. *Envy and Gratitude and Other Works, 1946–1963*. London: Random House.

Klots, Alisa and Maria Romashova. 2023. 'The right to a permanent collection: Archiving the lives of Soviet pensioners'. In *Geriatrics and Ageing in the Soviet Union: Medical, political and social contexts*, edited by Susan Grant and Isaac McKean Scarborough, 149–64. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

Knapp, Gudrun-Axeli. 2005. 'Race, class, gender: Reclaiming baggage in fast travelling theories', *European Journal of Women's Studies* 12(3): 249–65.

Kozina, Irina and Irina Zangieva. 2018. 'Gosudarstvennoye i rynochnoye regulirovaniye trudovoy aktivnosti pensionerov' ['State and market regulation of labour activity of pensioners'], *Zhurnal issledovaniy sotsialnoy politiki* [*Journal of Social Policy Studies*] 16(1): 7–22.

Krekula, Clari. 2009. 'Age coding: On age-based practices of distinction', *International Journal of Ageing and Later Life* 4(2): 7–31.

Kristeva, Julia. 1982. *Powers of Horror: An essay on abjection*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Kulmala, Meri and Anna Tarasenko. 2016. 'Interest representation and social policy making: Russian veterans' organisations as brokers between the state and society', *Europe–Asia Studies* 68(1): 138–63.

Kumon-Nakamura, Sachi, Sam Glucksberg and Mary Brown. 1995. 'How about another piece of pie: The allusional pretense theory of discourse irony', *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 124(1): 3–21.

Kuznetsova, Irina. 2017. 'Dangerous and unwanted: Policy and everyday discourses of migrants in Russia'. In *Migration and the Ukraine Crisis: A two-country perspective*, edited by Agnieszka Pikulicka-Wilczewska and Greta Lynn Uehling, 149–63. Bristol: E-International Relations.

Lagerberg, Robert and Andrew McGregor. 2018. 'From post-Soviet to post-national: Domestic space as non-place in Andrei Zviaginstev's *Elena* and *Leviathan*', *International Journal of Russian Studies* 7(2): 127–41.

Lain, David. 2011. 'Helping the poorest help themselves? Encouraging employment past 65 in England and the USA', *Journal of Social Policy* 40(3): 493–512.

Lan, Pei-Chia. 2006. *Global Cinderellas: Migrant domestics and newly rich employers in Taiwan*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Lancet. 2019. 'Russia's alcohol policy: A continuing success story', *The Lancet* 394(10205): 1205.

Laslett, Peter. 1991. *A Fresh Map of Life: The emergence of the third age*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Ledeneva, Alena V. 1998. *Russia's Economy of Favours: Blat, networking and informal exchange*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ledeneva, Alena V. 2006. *How Russia Really Works: The informal practices that shaped post-Soviet politics and business*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Le Feuvre, Nicky and Sasha Roseneil. 2014. 'Entanglements of economic and intimate citizenship: Individualization and gender (in)equality in a changing Europe', *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State and Society* 21(4): 529–61.

Levin, Irene, and Jan Trost. 1999. 'Living apart together'. *Community, Work and Family* 2(3): 279–94.

Lewis, Karen G. and Sidney Moon. 1997. 'Always single and single again women: A qualitative study', *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy* 23(2): 115–34.

Lipovetsky, Mark and Tatiana Mikhailova. 2017. '"How long can you go crushing bones, I ask you?" The "bad mother" in Liudmila Petrushevskaia's *The Time: Night*'. In *Transgressive Women in Modern Russian and East European Cultures: From the bad to the blasphemous*, edited by Yana Hashamova, Beth Holmgren and Mark Lipovetsky, 112–27. New York: Routledge.

Lopata, Helena Z. 1996. 'Widowhood and husband sanctification'. In *Continuing Bonds: New understandings of grief*, edited by Dennis Klass, Phyllis R. Silverman and Steven Nickman, 149–61. New York: Taylor and Francis.

Lovell, Stephen. 2006. 'Old age and work in the Soviet Union', XIV International Economic History Congress, Helsinki, Session no. 89. Accessed 17 July 2019. www.helsinki.fi/iehc2006/papers3/Lovell.pdf.

MacFarquhar, Neil. 2018. 'A Russian master of the "dark side" in film', *New York Times*, 23 February. Accessed 5 May 2024. www.nytimes.com/2018/02/23/world/europe/andrey-zvyagintsev-russia-loveless.html.

McGeever, Brendan. 2019. *The Bolshevik Response to Antisemitism in the Russian Revolution*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Macnicol, John. 2006. *Age Discrimination: An historical and contemporary analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Malyutina, Daria. 2013. 'Migrant sociality in a "global city": Friendship, transnational networks, racism and cosmopolitanism: A study of Russian-speaking migrants in London'. PhD dissertation, University College London.
Manchester City Council. 2011. '2011 Census: Summary by topic', Manchester City Council. Accessed 2 November 2023. www.manchester.gov.uk/downloads/download/6833/2011_census_-_summary_by_topic.
Marshall, Thomas Humphrey. 1950. *Citizenship and Social Class*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Meduza. 2017. 'Pochemu dekriminalizirovat poboi v Rossii – eto plokhaya ideya?' ['Why is decriminalising battery in Russia a bad idea?'], *Meduza*, 12 January. Accessed 7 June 2024. https://meduza.io/cards/pochemu-dekriminalizirovat-poboi-v-rossii-eto-plohaya-ideya.
Meduza. 2024. 'Putin bans "childfree propaganda" and adoption of Russian children by citizens of countries that recognize gender transition', *Meduza*, 25 November. Accessed 4 December 2024. https://meduza.io/en/news/2024/11/25/putin-bans-childfree-propaganda-and-adoption-of-russian-children-by-citizens-of-countries-that-recognizegender-transition.
Mihailovic, Alexandar. 2023. 'The neoliberalization of Russia in the films of Andrei Zvyagintsev'. In *Screening Solidarity: Neoliberalism and transnational cinemas*, edited by Helga Druxes, Alexandar Mihailovic and Patricia Anne Simpson, 100–40. New York: Bloomsbury Academic.
Munn-Giddings, Carol and Andrew McVicar. 2007. 'Self-help groups as mutual support: What do carers value?', *Health and Social Care in the Community* 15(1): 26–34.
Muzhskoe i Zhenskoe [Male and Female]. 2025. Website dedicated to the daytime talk show *Muzhskoe i Zhenskoe* by First TV Channel. Accessed 7 March 2025. https://muzhskoe-zhenskoe.su/muzhskoe-zhenskoe-vypusk-ot-18-01-2023.html#more-7391.
Nakachi, Mie. 2021. *Replacing the Dead: The politics of reproduction in the postwar Soviet Union*. New York: Oxford University Press.
Nettle, Daniel. 2011. 'Flexibility in reproductive timing in human females: Integrating ultimate and proximate explanations', *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences* 366(1563): 357–65.
Nizamova, Aliia. 2020. 'Normativity and the ageing self: "Active longevity" media discourse in contemporary Russia', *Laboratorium: Russian Review of Social Research* 12(2): 45–67.
Novitskaya, Alexandra, Valerie Sperling, Lisa McIntosh Sundstrom and Janet Elise Johnson. 2024. 'Unpacking "traditional values" in Russia's conservative turn: Gender, sexuality and the Soviet legacy', *Europe–Asia Studies* 76(2): 173–97.
NTV. 2023. *Za Granju* [Beyond Reason]. 'Delyat nasledstvo zhivykh roditeley' ['They claim their inheritance while their parents are still alive']. Broadcast on NTV, 9 March. www.ntv.ru/peredacha/Za_granyu/m89640/o719501.
Olson, Laura J. and Svetlana Adonyeva. 2013. *The Worlds of Russian Women: Tradition, transgression, compromise*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.
Osiashvili, Simon. 1989. *Babushki–Starushki* [Grannies–Oldies]. Available at www.simonosiashvili.ru/tvorch/songs/babushki_starushki.html.
Oushakine, Serguei Alex. 2009. *The Patriotism of Despair: Nation, war, and loss in Russia*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
Paas, Tiiu, Raul Eamets, Jaan Masso and Marit Rõõm. 2003. 'Labour market flexibility and migration in the Baltic states: Macro evidences', University of Tartu, Faculty of Economics and Business Administration. Accessed 30 July 2024. https://mjtoimetised.ut.ee/febpdf/febawb16.pdf.
Pateman, Carole. 1988. *The Sexual Contract*. Cambridge: Polity in association with Blackwell.
Patico, Jennifer. 2009. 'For love, money, or normalcy: Meanings of strategy and sentiment in the Russian–American matchmaking industry', *Ethnos* 74(3): 307–30.
Pearson, Jane L., Andrea G. Hunter, Margaret E. Ensminger and Sheppard G. Kellam. 1990. 'Black grandmothers in multigenerational households: Diversity in family structure and parenting involvement in the Woodlawn community', *Child Development* 61(2): 434–42.
Pechurina, Anna. 2017. 'Post-Soviet Russian-speaking migration to the UK: The discourses of visibility and accountability'. In *Post-Soviet Migration and Diasporas: From global perspectives to everyday*, edited by Milana V. Nikolko and David Carment, 29–45. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

Perelli-Harris, Brienna and Olga Isupova. 2013. ‘Crisis and control: Russia’s dramatic fertility decline and efforts to increase it’. In *Fertility Rates and Population Decline: No time for children?*, edited by Ann Buchanan and Anna Rotkirch, 141–56. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Petranovskaya, Lyudmila. 2011. ‘Odno nablyudeniye’ [‘An observation’], *LiveJournal*, 18 August. Accessed 14 July 2024. https://ludmilapsyholog.livejournal.com/110806.html.

Petrushevskaya, Lyudmila. 1992. *Vremya: Noch* [*The Time: Night*]. Moscow: Novyy Mir.

Pickard, Susan. 2019. ‘From the third age to the third sex: A feminist framework for the life course’, *Journal of Aging Studies* 49: 56–65.

Pickard, Susan. 2020. ‘On becoming a hag: Gender, ageing and abjection’, *Feminist Theory* 21(2): 157–73.

Pominova, Natalya and Ksenia Ilyina. 2011. ‘Chto-to ne tak? Rozhayte!’ [‘Is something not quite right here? Have children!’], *Novaya Gazeta*, 19 May. Accessed 2 November 2023. www.novayagazeta.ru/news/2011/05/19/7107-chto-to-ne-tak-rozhayte.

Prisiazhniuk, Daria and Arturs Holavins. 2023. ‘Active ageing and social services: The paradox of empowerment in Russia’, *Europe–Asia Studies* 75(2): 309–29.

Pushkareva, Natalya. 2000. ‘Materinstvo kak sotsialno-istoricheskiy fenomen (Obzor zarubezhnykh issledovaniy po istorii yevropeyskogo materinstva)’ [‘Motherhood as a socio-historical phenomenon (A review of foreign studies on the history of European motherhood)’], *Zhenshchina v Rossiyskom Obshchestve* [Woman in Russian Society] 1: 9–24.

Radl, Jonas and Theodore P. Gerber. 2015. ‘Work beyond pension age in Russia: Labour market dynamics and job stability in a turbulent economy’. In *Paid Work beyond Pension Age: Comparative perspectives*, edited by Simone Scherger, 129–50. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Ragulin, Vitaliy. 2011. ‘Chto-to ne tak? Rozhayte!’ [‘Is something not quite right here? Have children!’], *LiveJournal*, 19 May. Accessed 2 November 2023. https://dervishv.livejournal.com/229406.html.

Ratilainen, Saara. 2016. ‘Business for pleasure: Elite women in the Russian popular media’. In *Rethinking Class in Russia*, edited by Suvi Salmenniemi, 45–66. London: Routledge.

Rich, Adrienne. 1986. *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as experience and institution*. New York: W. W. Norton.

Riley, Matilda, Marilyn Johnson and Anne Foner (eds.). 1972. *Aging and Society: A sociology of age stratification*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

Rivkin-Fish, Michele. 2009. ‘Tracing landscapes of the past in class subjectivity: Practices of memory and distinction in marketizing Russia’, *American Ethnologist* 36(1): 79–95.

Rivkin-Fish, Michele. 2010. ‘Pronatalism, gender politics, and the renewal of family support in Russia: Toward a feminist anthropology of “maternity capital” ’, *Slavic Review* 69(3): 701–24.

Roseneil, Sasha and Kirk Mann. 1996. ‘Unpalatable choices and inadequate families: Lone mothers and the underclass debate’. In *Good Enough Mothering? Feminist perspectives on lone motherhood*, edited by Elizabeth Bortolaia Silva, 191–210. London: Routledge.

Roseneil, Sasha, Isabel Crowhurst, Tone Hellesund, Ana Cristina Santos and Mariya Stoilova. 2020. *The Tenacity of the Couple-Norm: Intimate citizenship regimes in a changing Europe*. London: UCL Press.

Rossman, Ella. 2021. ‘ “Chem bolshe detei tem bolshe risk skatitsia v bednost”: pochemu materiam postojanno ne hvataet deneg’ [‘ “The more children you have, the higher the risk of falling into poverty”: Why mothers constantly don’t have enough money’], *Mel*, 7 April. Accessed 20 January 2025. https://mel.fm/amp/zhizn/razbor/5286173-chem-bolshe-detey-tem-vyshe-risk-skatitsya-v-bednost-pochemu-u-materey-vechno-ne-khvatayet-deneg.

Rotkirch, Anna. 2000. *The Man Question: Loves and lives in late 20th century Russia*. Helsinki: University of Helsinki, Department of Social Policy.

Rowe, John W. and Robert L. Kahn. 1987. ‘Human aging: Usual and successful’, *Science* 237(4811): 143–9.

Russian Academy of Science. 2013. ‘Bednost i neravenstva v sovremennoy Rossii: 10 let spustya. Analiticheskiy doklad’ [‘Poverty and inequality in contemporary Russia: 10 years later. Analytical report’], Institute of Sociology. Accessed 22 December 2023. www.isras.ru/files/File/Doklad/Analit_doc_Bednost/full.pdf.

Said, Edward W. 1983. *The World, the Text, and the Critic*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Salmenniemi, Suvi. 2016. ‘Introduction’. In *Rethinking Class in Russia*, edited by Suvi Salmenniemi, 1–22. London: Routledge.

Sanaev, Pavel. 1996. *Pokhoronite menya za plintusom*. Moscow: MK-Periodika.

Sanderson, Warren and Sergei Scherbov. 2008. *Rethinking Age and Aging*. Washington, DC: Population Reference Bureau.
Scherger, Simone, James Nazroo and Paul Higgs. 2011. 'Leisure activities and retirement: Do structures of inequality change in old age?', *Ageing and Society* 31(1): 146–72.
Schimpfössl, Elisabeth. 2018. *Rich Russians: From oligarchs to bourgeoisie*. New York: Oxford University Press.
Scott, James C. 1985. *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday forms of peasant resistance*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
Sedgley, Diane, Annette Pritchard and Nigel Morgan. 2006. 'Understanding older women's leisure: The value of biographical research methods', *Turizam: Međunarodni Znanstveno-Stručni Casopis* 54(1): 43–51.
Seebohm, Patience, Sarah Chaudhary, Melanie Boyce, Ruth Elkan, Mark Avis and Carol Munn-Giddings. 2013. 'The contribution of self-help/mutual aid groups to mental well-being', *Health and Social Care in the Community* 21(4): 391–401.
Segal, Lynne. 2013. *Out of Time: The pleasures and the perils of ageing*. London: Verso.
Shadrina, Anna. 2014. *Ne zamuzhem: seks, lyubov i semya za predelami braka* [*Single Women: Sex, love and family beyond marriage*]. Moscow: NLO.
Shadrina, Anna. 2015. 'What is threatening "traditional family values" in Russia today?', openDemocracy, 5 May. Accessed 5 November 2024. www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/what-is-threatening-traditional-family-values-in-russia-today/.
Shadrina, Anna. 2017. *Dorogiye deti: sokrashcheniye rozhdayemosti i rost 'tseny' materinstva v XXI veke* [*Dear children: Declining birth rates and the rising 'cost' of motherhood in the 21st century*]. Moscow: NLO.
Shadrina, Anna. 2024. 'Autocratic power and older citizens: The political subjectification of retirees in Belarus', *Sociology* 58(4): 894–910.
Shlapentokh, Vladimir. 1999. 'Social inequality in post-communist Russia: The attitudes of the political elite and the masses (1991–1998)', *Europe–Asia Studies* 51(7): 1167–81.
Shpakovskaya, Larisa. 2015. 'How to be a good mother: The case of middle class mothering in Russia', *Europe–Asia Studies* 67(10): 1571–86.
Silverman, Bertram and Murray Yanowitch. 2016. *New Rich, New Poor, New Russia: Winners and losers on the Russian road to capitalism*. New York: Routledge.
Sivak, Elizaveta. 2018. 'Managing grandparental involvement in child-rearing in the context of intensive parenting', *Sociological Research Online* 23(4): 830–46.
Skeggs, Beverley. 1997. *Formations of Class and Gender: Becoming respectable*. London: Sage.
Skeggs, Beverley. 2011. 'Imagining personhood differently: Person value and autonomist working-class value practices', *Sociological Review* 59(3): 496–513.
Solari, Cinzia. 2017. *On the Shoulders of Grandmothers: Gender, migration, and post-Soviet nation-state building*. New York: Routledge.
Sperber, Dan and Deirdre Wilson. 1981. 'Irony and the use-mention distinction'. In *Radical Pragmatics*, edited by Peter Cole, 294–318. New York: Academic Press.
Stella, Francesca. 2015. *Lesbian Lives in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia: Post/socialism and gendered sexualities*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
Street, Debra. 2017. 'The empirical landscape of extended working lives'. In *Gender, Ageing and Extended Working Life: Cross-national perspectives*, edited by Áine Ní Léime, Debra Street, Sarah Vickerstaff, Clary Krekula and Wendy Loretto, 3–26. Bristol: Policy Press.
Taylor, Charles. 1994. 'The politics of recognition'. In *Multiculturalism: Examining the politics of recognition*, edited by Charles Taylor and Amy Gutmann, 25–75. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
Taylor, Philip and Alan Walker. 2003. 'Age discrimination in the labour market and policy responses: The situation in the United Kingdom', *The Geneva Papers on Risk and Insurance: Issues and Practice* 28(4): 612–24.
Tchernina, Natalia V. and Efim A. Tchernin. 2002. 'Older people in Russia's transitional society: Multiple deprivation and coping responses', *Ageing and Society* 22(5): 543–62.
Temkina, Anna and Anna Rotkirch. 1997. 'Soviet gender contracts and their shifts in contemporary Russia', *Finnish Journal of Russian and Eastern European Studies Idäntutkimus* 2: 6–24.
Terentyev, Aleksandr. 2007. 'Russkii London: Ot nelegalov do oligarhov' ['Russian London: From illegal migrants to oligarchs'], BBC Russian Service, 20 January. Accessed 30 October 2023. http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/russian/international/newsid_6264000/6264745.stm.

Tiaynen, Tatiana. 2013. 'Babushka in flux: Grandmothers and family-making between Russian Karelia and Finland'. PhD thesis, Tampere University.
Tlostanova, Madina V. and Walter Mignolo. 2012. *Learning to Unlearn: Decolonial reflections from Eurasia and the Americas*. Columbus: Ohio State University.
United Nations. 2002. 'Madrid Plan of Action and its implementation', Second World Assembly on Aging, Madrid, Spain. Accessed 22 December 2023. www.un.org/esa/socdev/documents/ageing/MIPAA/political-declaration-en.pdf.
United Nations. 2016. 'Accountability for killings in Ukraine from January 2014 to May 2016'. United Nations Human Rights Office of the Hight Commissioner. Accessed 12 May 2025. www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Countries/UA/OHCHRThematicReportUkraineJan2014-May2016_EN.pdf.
Utrata, Jennifer. 2011. 'Youth privilege: Doing age and gender in Russia's single-mother families', *Gender and Society* 25(5): 616–41.
Utrata, Jennifer. 2015. *Women without Men: Single mothers and family change in the new Russia*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
Veligzhanina, Anna. 2011. 'Lyudmila Gurchenko delala plastiku vopreki zapretam svoikh vrachey' ['Lyudmila Gurchenko underwent plastic surgery despite her doctors' prohibitions'], *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, 7 April. Accessed 22 December 2023. www.kp.ru/daily/25665.3/826151/.
Viasna96. 2024. 'Statement by the human rights community of Belarus on the death of political prisoner Vadzim Khrasko', Viasna96, 17 January. Accessed 1 August 2024. https://spring96.org/en/news/114011.
Vickerstaff, Sarah and Wendy Loretto. 2017. 'The United Kingdom – a New Moral Imperative: Live longer, work longer'. In *Gender, Ageing and Extended Working Life: Cross-national perspectives*, edited by Áine Ní Léime, Debra Street, Sarah Vickerstaff, Clary Krekula and Wendy Loretto, 175–92. Bristol: Policy Press.
Vihavainen, Risto. 2005. 'Housing in Russia: Policies and practices'. Presentation given at a workshop in St Petersburg.
Vishnevsky, Anatoly. 2006. *Demograficheskaya modernizatsiya Rossii, 1900–2000* [*The demographic modernisation of Russia, 1900–2000*]. Moscow: Novoye Izdatelstvo [New Publisher].
Vishnevsky, Anatoly. 2014. 'Mortality in Russia: The second epidemiological revolution that never was', *Demograficheskoe Obosrenie* [*Demographic Review*] 1(4): 5–40.
Vishnevsky, Anatoly and Ekaterina Shcherbakova. 2019. 'Demography: Pros and cons of raising the retirement age', *Journal of the New Economic Association* 42(2): 148–67.
Waligórska-Olejniczak, Beata. 2021. 'Andrey Zvyagintsev's *Loveless* as the remediation of Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Heart of a Dog*: Towards the question of cultural memory', *Images: The International Journal of European Film, Performing Arts and Audiovisual Communication* 30(39): 183–99.
Walker, Charlie. 2009. 'From "inheritance" to individualization: Disembedding working-class youth transitions in post-Soviet Russia', *Journal of Youth Studies* 13(5): 521–32.
Walker, Charlie. 2012. 'Re-inventing themselves? Gender, employment and subjective well-being amongst young working-class Russians'. In *Rethinking Class in Russia*, edited by Suvi Salmenniemi, 221–40. London: Routledge.
While, Aidan, Andrew E. G. Jonas and David Gibbs. 2004. 'The environment and the entrepreneurial city: Searching for the urban "sustainability fix" in Manchester and Leeds', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 28(3): 549–69.
White, Anne. 2004. *Small-Town Russia: Postcommunist livelihoods and identities. A portrait of the intelligentsia in Achit, Bednodemyanovsk and Zubtsov, 1999–2000*. London: Routledge.
Wills, Jane, Jon May, Kavita Datta, Yara Evans, Joanna Herbert and Cathy McIlwaine. 2009. 'London's migrant division of labour', *European Urban and Regional Studies* 16(3): 257–71.
Woodard, Lauren. 2022. '"As if I were an illegal": Racial passing in immigrant Russia', *Cultural Anthropology* 37(4): 653–78.
World Bank. 2019. 'Fertility rate, total (births per woman)', *World Population Prospects: 2019 Revision*. Accessed 30 October 2023. https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.TFRT.IN?end=2020&name_desc=false&start=1960&view=chart.
World Health Organization. 2019. 'Alcohol policy impact case study: The effects of alcohol control measures on mortality and life expectancy in the Russian Federation', World Health Organization, Regional Office for Europe. Accessed 30 October 2023. https://iris.who.int/handle/10665/328167.

Yurchak, Alexei. 2013. *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The last Soviet generation*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Yurchak, Alexei. 2015. 'Bodies of Lenin: The hidden science of communist sovereignty', *Representations* 129(1): 116–57.

Yurchak, Alexei. 2017. 'The canon and the mushroom: Lenin, sacredness, and Soviet collapse', *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 7(2): 165–98.

Yusupova, Marina. 2023. 'Coloniality of gender and knowledge: Rethinking Russian masculinities in light of postcolonial and decolonial critiques', *Sociology* 57(3): 682–99.

Zakharov, Sergei. 2008. 'Russian Federation: From the first to second demographic transition', *Demographic Research* 19: 907–72.

Zavisca, Jane. 2012. *Housing in the New Russia*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Zavisca, Jane. 2013. 'The lived experience of housing among young people in Russia'. In *Young People and Housing Transitions: Trajectories and generational fractures*, edited by Ray Forrest and Ngai-Ming Yip, 217–34. London: Routledge.

Zdravomyslova, Elena. 1996. 'Problems of becoming a housewife'. In *Women's Voices in Russia Today*, edited by Elina Haavio-Mannila and Anna Rotkirch, 33–48. Aldershot: Dartmouth.

Zdravomyslova, Elena. 2010. 'Working mothers and nannies: Commercialization of childcare and modifications in the gender contract (a sociological essay)', *Anthropology of East Europe Review* 28(2): 200–25.

Zhidkova, Elena. 2012. 'Family, divorce, and comrades' courts: Soviet family and public organizations during the Thaw'. In *And They Lived Happily Ever After: Norms and everyday practices of family and parenthood in Russia and central Europe*, edited by Helene Carlbäck, Yulia Gradskova and Zhanna Kravchenko, 47–64. Budapest: Central European University Press.

Zhukova, Larisa. 2018. 'Tserkovnye marki. Rossiyanok lishaut abortov. Komu eto vigodno?' ['Church's wombs. Russian women are deprived of abortions. Who benefits from this?'], Lenta.ru, 5 April. Accessed 20 January 2025. https://lenta.ru/brief/2018/04/05/prolife_power/amp/.

Zotova, Natalia. 2024. '"Ya vrach, ya ne mogu govorit takie slova, eto bolno". Kak i za chto sudiat 68-letnuu pediatra Nadezhdu Buyanovu' ['"I am a doctor, I can't say such words, it's painful". How and why 68-year-old pediatrician Nadezhda Buyanova is being tried'], BBC, 23 May. Accessed 1 August 2024. www.bbc.com/russian/articles/cv22dy7j47ko.

Filmography

Korenev, Alexei. *Po semeinym obstoyatel'stvam* [*Due to Family Circumstances*], 1977.
Tverdovsky, Ivan. *Zoologiya* [*Zoology*], 2016.
Zvyagintsev, Andrei. *Elena*, 2011.
Zvyagintsev, Andrei. *Neliubov'* [*Loveless*], 2017.

Index

abortion 3, 58, 154
active longevity 37
addiction 101
additional income 89
after-school programmes 67
age coding 35
aged bodies 36
ageing 4, 7, 10, 13, 14, 15, 26, 27, 36, 38, 40, 74, 116, 118, 120, 140, 147, 153
  biological 14, 26, 27, 38, 113
  pattern 12
  social production of 10, 14
  'successful ageing' 10
ageism 26, 36, 82, 84, 85, 86, 87, 88, 121, 124, 154
ageist imaginary 27
agency 27, 43, 51, 64, 92, 123
alcohol consumption 13 *see also* addiction
anti-ageing industry 35, 36, 37, 38
anti-ageing practices 38
anti-ageing products 35, 36, 38, 115
anti-discriminatory legislation 89
antisemitism 149, 150
Australia 47
autocratic systems 20
autonomous individual 19, 33, 137 *see also* subject, autonomous
autonomy 24, 36, 75, 83, 122

Baba Yaga 29
babushka 10, 17, 19, 28, 29, 30, 32, 33, 38, 40, 43, 105, 117, 154
  the babushka look 32, 33, 34, 35, 39, 40, 104
bad grandmothers 48
BBC 140
beautification practices 33
beauty standards 33, 40, 116
  beauty work 36
Belarus 12, 16, 43, 141, 144, 155 *see also* Soviet Belorussia
Bellingcat 140
benches 102, 103, 104, 105, 107, 108, 109, 111
biological ageing 14, 26, 27, 38, 113
biological change 112 *see also* biological ageing
bolshak 66
bolshukha 32, 66
Bucha 139
Butler, Judith 24, 146
Butler, Robert 26

Canada 47
capital 41, 53, 75, 84
  cultural 19, 30, 31, 93, 132, 134
  economic 31
  financial 82
  political 30, 31
  sexual 30, 121 *see also* de Beauvoir, Simone; the second sex; the third sex
  social 30, 31, 88, 90, 134, 149
care 10, 18, 24, 25, 29, 31, 32, 40, 41, 42, 45, 46, 50, 56, 58, 59, 65, 66, 69, 79, 87, 88, 126, 129
  altruistic 10, 17, 18, 61
  elder 24, 79
  emotional 7, 57, 61
  family 4, 11, 20, 40, 51, 66, 68, 69, 79, 87, 121, 126, 137
  global care market 93
  invisible 48
  long-term 68, 80
  network of 18, 65
  self-care 38, 40
  selfless 6, 27, 41
  social 153
  care home 108
  care work 6
Chechnya 9
child
  marriage 9
  support 73, 154
childcare 4, 7, 8, 10, 11, 17, 18, 28, 42, 47, 48, 56, 59, 67, 68, 69, 71, 72, 73, 74, 79, 82, 95, 99, 102, 103, 113, 128, 145, 153, 154, 155
  allowance 3
  discourse 59
  facilities 74
  paid 69
China 155
citizenship 8, 17
  economic 19, 75, 84, 93, 96, 97
  intimate 19, 122, 123, 137
  political 8
civic engagement 37
class formation 103
collectivisation 66
colonial matrix of power 54
Communist party 52, 75, 82, 102, 143, 148
community service 23
comrades' courts 102
conservatism 5

conservative turn 118, 148
continuity theory 27
contraception 3, 4
cooperative movement 111
corruption 140, 143, 144, 145
Council of Veterans 24, 110
counselling industry 59
couple culture 100
couple-normativity 19
Covey, Herbert C. 27
Crimea 19, 55, 139, 140, 150
Croatia 89
cultural consumption 17, 107
culturedness 31, 105 *see also* capital, cultural

Dagestan 9
de Beauvoir, Simone 26, 29, 30
de Certeau, Michel 142
death 11, 13, 24, 26, 53, 54, 58, 110, 111, 123, 129, 134, 139, 140
deindustrialisation 6
dementia 45
democratisation 151
demographic imbalance 124
demographic trends 6, 153
depoliticisation 55
depression 132
detraditionalisation 8, 9, 47
devaluation 40
diet 38, 133, 136
disability 5, 36, 64, 79, 89, 96, 104, 128
  pension 89
discrimination 5, 85, 87, 149, 150
dissidents 149
divorce 55, 56, 123, 134
  rate 6, 15, 47, 121
Dnipro 140
domestic burden 67 *see also* housework
domestic space 50
domestic violence 5, 128
domesticity 29
Donbas 19, 58, 139, 150
Donetsk 139, 140
dysfunctional state 55

economic independence 26
economic instability 16
economic transformations 8
economy of favours 53, 94
elder care 18
emotional unavailability 60
employment 4, 51, 67
  mandatory 68
England 16, 89, 111 *see also* United Kingdom
Estonia 16
Europe 12, 117, 118, 120
exercises 24, 38
expansionism 50, 56, 61
extended mothering 68
extra-marital cohabitation 8

facial injections 38
family 3–8, 16–18, 26, 41–3, 45–6, 48–55, 57–9, 65–73, 76–81, 90–2, 96–7, 99–100, 106, 108–9, 111, 129, 133, 145
  business 82
  decline of 9
  dysfunctional 55
  economy 32
  extended 9, 75, 80, 107
  hierarchy 65, 67
  labour 4, 6, 9, 18, 25, 61, 72, 77, 126, 155
  matrifocal 6
  nuclear 8, 47, 52, 66, 67, 75
  peasant 66
  planning 51
  policy 128
  single-mother 9
  status 66
  structure 6, 32
  support 69
  wellbeing 6, 20
  young 74, 76
Federal Assembly 146
Federici, Silvia 120
female adolescent 32
femininity 120
feminism 5
fertility rate 4, 5
financial independence 88, 97, 122
foreign agents 140
formal economy 19, 25, 31
France 92
free market *see* market economy
free time 29
Freud, Sigmund 28

gender 29, 103
  age-labelling 31, 32
  age norms 18, 19
  age socialisation 66
  asymmetry 20
  equality policy 4
  legitimate housewife gender contract 83
  norms 7, 10, 25, 27, 84, 121
  order 19, 54, 122
  policy 5
  roles 127
  Soviet gender contract 11
  Soviet gender politics 6
Germany 13
Giddens, Anthony 7
girl 32
Goffman, Erving 95, 142
Gorbachev, Mikhail 147, 148, 150
Goscilo, Helena 45
grandmother 5–6, 9–10, 12, 14, 15, 17–18, 28–9, 32, 41–3, 46–8, 53, 64–5, 67–9, 71, 73, 79, 82, 100, 105, 108, 120, 128, 135, 154
great-grandmother 69
grievability 24
Gurchenko, Lyudmila 37

health 4, 23, 38, 41, 87, 101, 108, 109, 111, 114, 116, 136, 155
  health service 5
  healthcare 3, 67, 145
  healthcare institution 31
  healthy way of life 13
heteronormative imaginaries 30

housework 5, 10, 11, 17, 67, 73, 79, 154
housing 3, 7, 8, 10, 17, 27, 48, 51, 52, 68, 75, 76, 77, 103, 145, 154, 155
Hungary 153

imaginary West 113
imperial violence 52
imperialism 55
individualisation 8, 9
industrialised collective farm 66
inequality 92, 142
  gender 61, 87
  income 39, 113
  structural 38
informal connections 94, 96
informal practices 144
informal rules 145
inheritance 8
Insider, The 140
intelligentsia 30
  Soviet 35
intensive mothering 59, 60, 61
interdependence 25
Irpin 139
Israel 111
Italy 78, 133, 153

job market 84, 86, 87, 88, 96, 97, 110, 123, 154
job quotas 85

Kharkiv 139, 140
Kherson 140
kinship 7
Kyiv 140

labour market *see* job market
labour migration 9
Latvia 16, 91, 92
Leeds 14
leisure activities 19, 100, 107, 113, 126
leisure practices *see* leasure activities
Lenin, Vladimir 148, 149
life expectancy 12, 13, 15
lifespan 68
Lithuania 16, 77, 78, 91, 132, 133
livelihood strategies 84
living apart together 135, 136
living standards 4
London 14, 42, 43, 78, 91, 92, 93, 109, 111, 130, 131, 132, 134
loneliness 26
longevity 36
Luhansk 139

male gaze 29, 30, 126
male mortality 3
male supremacy 56
Manchester 14
mandatory retirement 85
marginalisation 1, 25, 35, 141, 147, 153
marginalising practices 14
Mariupol 139
market economy 7, 31, 83, 90, 93
marriage pattern 15
masculine domination 29
maternity
  allowance 3
  capital 3, 4
  leave 3, 49, 72
memory loss 108, 109
migration 16
  marriage migration 16, 101
militarism 56
minimal cultural decencies 144
misrecognition 40
Moldova 12
molodukha 66
moral panic 2
morganatic marriage 51
Moscow 10, 39, 77, 82, 91, 134, 147, 149
Moscow region 97
motherhood 2, 6, 9, 18, 47, 60, 66, 67
  ideal of 47
  institution of 47
  single 42, 74, 90, 101, 135
mother-worker 67
multigenerational family 69
multigenerational household 32, 66, 68, 70, 76, 77, 78, 134
multigenerational support systems 18

nation 2, 4, 59, 118, 146, 154
  nation-building 9
national narrative 139
natural production 32
Navalny, Alexei 140, 143, 144
negative bargaining 96
Nemtsov, Boris 140
neoconservatism 48
neo-imperialism 48
neoliberal capitalism 58, 61, 156
neoliberal project 9
Nice 92
normative expectations 30
North Caucasus 9

Odesa 140
Older Generation, The 1
ontological security 7, 52, 66
Orbán, Viktor 153
ostracism 18, 30, 122, 125 *see also* marginalisation

Palace of Veterans 100
parenthood 59
  postponing 4
patriarchal control 9
patriotic mobilisation 55
pension systems 14
pensionable age 14, 16, 28, 42, 51, 71, 81–2, 84–8, 94–7, 99–100, 102–3, 115, 122, 124, 130, 155
pensioner 28, 34, 93, 100, 101, 113, 114, 130
Petranovskaya, Lyudmila 60
Petrushevskaya, Ludmila 45
Philippines 155
Pickard, Susan 29, 30, 118
planned economy 52, 88, 93, 94, 145
plastic surgery 38
political freedoms 48
political imaginaries 20, 142

political prisoners 155
popular culture 28, 105
population 32
ageing 2, 5, 12, 20, 153
decline 2
depopulation *see* population decline
female 5
growth 3
populist narrative 5
populist rhetoric *see* populist narrative
post-pension-age employment 19, 30, 32, 34, 35, 84, 87, 88, 96
post-pension-age jobs 19
post-reproductive freedoms 30, 120
post-reproductive stage 118
post-socialism 7, 10, 18, 48, 51, 52, 61, 154
post-socialist system 17
post-Soviet reforms 37
post-truth politics 118
poverty 31, 155
risks 5
practices of distinction 34, 35, 38, 40
precarity 48
private property 52, 75
private sphere 9
privatisation 54, 143
productivity 26
projective identification 116
pronatalism 3, 5, 20, 153, 154
post-Soviet pronatalism 5
Soviet pronatalism 3
see also reproductive pressure
prospective age 12
Prusova, Tatiana 1
psychological trauma 60
puberty 29
public sphere 20
Putin, Vladimir 3, 8, 61, 139, 140, 142, 143, 144, 145, 146, 147, 148, 149, 150

reciprocal self-denial 96
replacement level 4
representation 18, 29, 118
reproduction 11, 33, 51
social reproduction 1, 5, 6, 14, 155, 156
reproductive
age 3, 33, 47
choices 51, 72
decisions x
function 11
labour 7, 9, 10, 20, 32, 46, 67, 88, 122, 123, 153, 154, 155
norm 75
pattern 5, 7, 154
plans 2, 13
pressure 3, 68, 75, 80
work 65, 67, 68, 69, 153 *see* labour
years 11, 19
retirement 23, 135
retraining 85, 86, 88, 91, 93, 94
digital retraining 93
revanchism 48
Romania 155
Russia 1–10, 12–14, 16, 18–20, 25, 28, 32, 35, 37, 42, 48, 58, 73, 75, 77, 79–80, 85–6, 88–91, 93–4, 96–7, 100–2, 108–9, 111–13, 115, 121, 123–9, 132–3, 135, 139–40, 142–4, 146–51, 153–5
Russian Federation *see* Russia
Russian Orthodox Church 58, 118
'Russian tragedy' 146

Said, Edward 15
St Petersburg 39
Samara 9, 10, 11, 14, 15, 16, 23, 33, 34, 35, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 65, 69, 70, 71, 74, 76, 77, 81, 82, 91, 97, 99, 107, 109, 129
Samara region 15
Sanaev, Pavel 46
savings 85, 87, 97, 113, 146
Scott, James C. 142
second sex, the 30 *see also* capital, sexual; de Beauvoir, Simone; third sex, the
secondary adjustments 142
self-help groups 111
self-help industry 119
self-making *see* self-presentation
self-perception 73
self-presentation 10, 17, 19, 32, 33, 38, 97, 104, 106, 107, 123
sexual self-expression 33
sexuality 19, 120, 121, 122
shadow economy 31
shortages 31, 82
shuttle trade 91
sight impairment 41
Skeggs, Beverley 40, 107
social activities 110
social benefits 10, 14, 101, 110
social contract 149
social differentiation 59 *see also* social inequality
social inequality 9, 15, 17, 19, 36, 61, 141, 142
social mobility 18, 30, 48, 61, 126
social norms 48, 59
social order 46
social organisation 6
social participation 14, 26
social policy 4, 5, 20
social production of ageing 25, 153
social promotion 50
social recognition 25
social roles 35
social security 47
social services 37
socialism 4, 7, 10, 14, 15, 27, 54, 64, 69, 83, 90, 113, 145, 147, 154
late 122
Soviet Belorussia 16 *see also* Belarus
Soviet gerontology 26
Soviet ideology 11, 148
Soviet intelligentsia 64, 72, 92, 93, 100, 105, 132
Soviet Union 2, 3, 16, 30, 52, 67, 75, 77, 81, 83, 88, 91, 96, 101, 103, 111, 113, 133, 144, 145, 146, 147, 148, 150
Spain 78, 89, 133
Stalin, Joseph 3, 66, 71, 147, 149
starukha 32

state intervention 47
Strategy for Demographic Policy 3
subject 24, 29, 82, 123
  autonomous 17, 52
  defended 133
  of desire *see* sexual subject
  masculine 8
  neoliberal 19
  position 30
  post-professional 32, 40, 108
  post-sexual 19, 29, 32, 40, 108, 126
  professional 34
  self-centred 24
  sexual 33, 126, 133
  suffering 146
subjectivity 10, 25, 28, 154
successful ageing 10, 19, 35, 36, 37, 100, 112, 113, 115, 121, 134
Sumy 140
symbolic resources 40

tactics 142
Talyzina, Valentina 70
Tatarstan 37
television propaganda 57, 58
third age, the 36
third sex, the 36 *see also* de Beauvoir, Simone; second sex, the; sexual capital
trade unions 102, 111
traditional family values 8, 9, 55
transformations
  economic 8
transgenerational trauma 45
travelling ideas 15
trophy wife 50
Tverdovsky, Ivan 117, 118, 120, 121
Tyumen 37

Ukraine 9, 19, 139, 140, 150, 155
unconditional love 61
undesirable organisations 140
unemployment 82
  rate 15
United Kingdom 10, 13, 14, 16, 19, 35, 36, 40, 42, 47, 71, 73, 75, 77, 78, 79, 86, 87, 89, 90, 91, 92, 93, 101, 102, 109, 111, 112, 123, 130, 131, 134, 135, 150, 154
United Nations Madrid Plan of Action on Ageing 37
United Russia 143, 144
United States 9, 13, 35, 36, 47, 87, 113, 135, 154
unpaid labour 47
urbanisation 66, 102
USSR *see* Soviet Union

violence 46, 50, 126, 127, 128, 150
  institutional 142
violent manhood 54
Volga River 15, 107
vulnerability 20, 24, 25, 31, 41, 46, 71, 141

Wales 16
weapons of the weak 142
weight 36, 37, 38, 39, 114, 125
welfare 123, 154
  informal 6, 28, 68, 79, 137, 154
  marketisation of 2, 36
  social 36, 47
  spending 9
  state 59
  system 6, 8
work–life balance 4, 5

xenophobia 48

Yeltsin, Boris 147, 148
youth privilege 77

Zaporizhzhia 140
Zvyagintsev, Andrei 50, 51, 53, 54, 55, 56, 58, 59

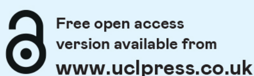
‘*The Babushka Phenomenon* offers a nuanced and insightful approach to gendered aging in the Soviet post-socialist context. While older women are often overlooked in research, this is especially the case in societies undergoing rapid social, political and cultural transformation. By listening to the stories of this seemingly “unimportant” group, Anna Shadrina uncovers their “invisible” labour and selfhood through an intersectional lens of gender, age and class. This book will be of particular interest to readers engaged with questions of post-socialist gender hierarchies, care and citizenship’.
Yulia Gradskova, Södertörn University, Stockholm

The Babushka Phenomenon examines the social production of ageing in post-Soviet Russia, highlighting the role of grandmothers as primary caregivers due to men’s traditional estrangement from family life. This expectation places grandmothers, or babushkas, in a position where they prioritise childcare and housework over their careers, making them unpaid family carers reliant on the state and their children.

Anna Shadrina situates older Russian women’s experiences within the post-Soviet redefinition of the nation, analysing their portrayal in popular media and biographical narratives of women aged 60 and over in Russia and the UK. It addresses class and racial disparities, noting how some women outsource family duties to less qualified women, and emphasises age as a significant but overlooked axis of social inequality. From a feminist perspective, the book explores citizenship as both a status and a practice of inclusion and exclusion. By focusing on older women’s rights to participate in private and public spheres, it discusses the new social inequalities that emerged after the USSR’s collapse. Despite prioritising others’ interests, older Russian women actively engage in economic citizenship, though their struggles for recognition are often excluded from formal economy and politics.

Anna Shadrina is Lecturer in Sociology in the Department of Sociology, Social Policy, and Criminology at the University of Liverpool. She received her PhD in Sociology from Birkbeck, University of London and was a Leverhulme Early Career Fellow at the UCL School of Slavonic and East European Studies from 2021 to 2024. Her previous two monographs (published in Russian) explore the transformation of conventional heterosexual family life in Russia, Belarus and Ukraine.

Cover image: Pexels



FRINGE