

Irina Mukhina, *Women and the Birth of Russian Capitalism: A History of the Shuttle Trade* (DeKalb, Illinois: Northern Illinois University Press, 2014), 173 pp.

In the 1990s after the end of the socialist regime, many Russian factories stopped producing consumer goods and the distribution system stopped functioning. Shelves in state-run stores were empty, so people tried to get hold of everything in markets and on the streets—from a bar of soap, drugs, food, plates, stationery, clothes, to electronic appliances. Those products were increasingly imports. The subject of this book, *chelnoki* (shuttle traders) are the people who traveled abroad to buy consumer goods for resale in Russia. Remarkably, this book tells us that in the heyday of shuttle-trading in the mid-1990s, shuttle traders provided 75% of all consumer-goods in Russia. In addition, most of these traders were women. (4–5) This book is the first monograph on this unprecedented history of women who crossed all borders, European and Asian, to feed and clothe the Russian nation in the 1990s as a stopgap measure between the collapse of socialist planned production and the arrival of basic market mechanisms of supply. As a brief, passing and relatively undocumented phase, it is all the more important to record this historical moment and social experience.

Chapter One discusses the origins of shuttle trade. Gorbachev's perestroika is identified as the beginning, as it legalized private economic activities and made foreign travels easier. First Wave shuttle traders (1987–1988) were a limited number of well-connected people, often party members who had work-related trips abroad to other socialist countries. The Second Wave (1989–90) saw significant growth in the trade, especially after the Law of November 1989, which recognized the Soviet citizen's right to travel abroad and emigrate. Combined with the ever-worsening economic situation and mounting unemployment, slowly an increasing number of people dared to enter this promising profession, overcoming the Soviet-era shame attached to "bourgeois" trade.

Chapter Two analyzes the "golden age" of shuttle trade between 1992 and 1998. The "Freedom of Trade" Decree of 1992 was key to this development, as it allowed individuals and companies to trade without any licenses, taxations, or any customs fees, except for some restricted items such as weapons, drugs, etc. Ordinary citizens traveled to bordering countries like Estonia, Lithuania, Turkey, Finland, Poland, Germany, and China and came back with mountains of goods for sale. Shuttle trade soon became a mass phenomenon with Mukhina estimating that "nearly 30 million people, or approximately 41 percent of the working population of Russia" were involved, although she adds that there is "no reliable data to confirm its exact scope." (50) Women dominated in the shuttle trade. The book argues that the key reason is that women lost jobs at a much higher rate than men in "transition" Russia. But the high rate of divorce in Soviet society meant that many women with children to support quickly, even desperately, found the new opportunity.

Chapter Three analyzes the profile of female traders. Since 75% of them had post-secondary education, it suggests that female traders were relatively well-educated. They were usually in their late twenties and thirties, mostly mothers, and about half were ethnically Russian. The book argues that the key motivation for getting into trading was financial gain for both women and men, but how they presented it was gendered. Most women emphasized their sacrifice and pain for improving the economic life of the family. In contrast, men emphasized their personal aspirations and accomplishments.

Chapter Four elaborates on the content of “suffering” and “pain” that women traders encountered in the business, such as physical and psychological hardships, difficulties with customs officials, violence, health issues (alcoholism, hernia), family issues (limiting childbirth, divorce, unsupervised children). This chapter also includes an interesting discussion of imported counterfeit knock-offs of international brands, such as Chanel, Gucci, and Versace, that were made available in every corner of Russia by shuttle traders. The experience of Russian consumers with these made-in-Turkey or made-in-China products of inferior quality changed the cultural meaning of these “Western” fancy brand names in Russia.

Chapter Five discusses the post-1998 development of shuttle trading, as the sharp devaluation of the ruble in that year throttled trade. According to the author, 90% of the traders left the business after the 1998 financial crisis. The majority of traders went back to their old professions, without taking advantage of their new networks and entrepreneurial skills. For those female traders, shuttle trade had been a temporary survival strategy, rather than the training ground for building Russia’s capitalism.

This book attempts to frame the shuttle trade within the history of Russia’s “transition” from socialist to capitalist economy as well as the emergence of entrepreneurship, but this type of social scientific analysis did not prove particularly conclusive, as the study lacks hard financial and other statistical data or a broad base of interview materials. As the author notes “...it is the lack of such data, not the lack of research, that makes some of my arguments more speculative than definitive.” (13)

The study would also have benefited from more rigorous geographic analysis, as the shuttle trade clearly varied from region to region both in its conditions and impacts. Just to cite one striking difference, the shuttle trade continues even today in the Far East along Russia’s longest border with China, while it has dried up elsewhere. More attention to geography would also help avoid such statements as “...the main center of Russian prostitution in Korea was Harbin...” (120) Another fruitful direction would have been a cultural and gender analysis of the statues of shuttle traders, created in places like Yekaterinburg and Blagoveshchensk, photos of which were included on page 3, but without further elaboration.

I recommend this book not only for those who are interested in the history of the shuttle trade, but also in the history of Russian women and Russia’s so-called “transition” period in the 1990s. Future research into this fascinating phenomenon that brought Russians face-to-face with their neighbors in unprecedented numbers can either proceed through historical and economic materials in Russian and the counterpart languages or as more contemporary border study research in the Sino-Russian borderland.

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