

On the Shoulders of Grandmothers. Gender, Migration, and Post-Soviet Nation-State Building. By Cinzia Solari New York, New York; London, [England]. Routledge. 2018. 256 pages.

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In her 2018 book *On the Shoulders of Grandmothers. Gender, Migration, and Post-Soviet Nation-State Building*, Cinzia Solari traces the ways in which a particular generation of Ukrainian women is implicated in Ukraine's state building project. Through ten profiles of women presented throughout the book, Solari shows varying degrees of willing participation, costs and benefits to themselves, their families, and home communities, and of their contributions to both Italy and Ukraine. The author is committed to a multi-sited ethnographic project (Ukraine, Italy, and United States), what she calls "gendered global ethnography" (205), in her attempt to draw attention to both sending and receiving nodes in women's migration trajectories. Specifically, she traces "migrant subjectivities and practices, the effects of migration in both sending and receiving countries, and its links to global and transnational process" (203). As a feminist project, her book highlights "gendered migrant subjectivity forged by a particular intersection between gender, migration, and post-Soviet economic transformation" (2). Although similarities between the demographics of Ukrainian women on the move, their marginalization in both countries, and their impact on the gendered state-building project in Ukraine are striking, Solari is careful to note that the transnational social fields of Ukrainian migration to Italy and the US are quite different. She suggests that a good way of understanding the differences between these two transnational social fields is through metaphors of exile (in case of migration to Italy) and exodus (in case of migration to the US). In Italian exile, migrants continue maintaining strong ties with Ukraine "diligently

remitting their wages to family members” and generally not identifying with the receiving country (69). In contrast, migrants in the US are focused on integration strategies as opposed to investing in their connection to Ukraine.

The central argument of the book, as evidenced by the title, is that migration of Ukraine’s grandmothers supports the country’s state building project and does so with a particular reorientation of Ukraine from its Soviet legacy towards a renewed, European country. A part of this reorientation is a different relationship with the state. Under any regime, the relationship between citizens and the state is deeply gendered, as it hinges upon a particular understanding of gendered division of labor. In the Soviet Union, men’s contributions were not essential to the survival of the family unit since the state provided a robust welfare support network, including healthcare, childcare, education, etc. Because the Soviet state notoriously fell short of its promises, women ended up with the second shift at home, performing most of the household tasks (one of Solari’s respondents even referenced an anecdote about Ukrainian wives on p. 173). Help from grandmothers was therefore essential for Soviet households, where they typically provided a substantial portion, if not the bulk, of childcare and cooking responsibilities.

With independence, this relationship between women, men, and the state has changed. Combined with the post-colonial project of reinventing national and ethnic identity, Ukraine, as many other post-Soviet states, has seemingly embraced a new ideology of gendered division of labor. Women are imagined as *berehynias* (protectresses of the home hearths) and men as Cossacks (masculine, strong, and dominant, referencing Ukraine’s mid-17th century military, 201). This process, according to Solari, has doubly marginalized Ukrainian grandmothers, first from viable sources of employment, and second from their central roles in the kin group, thus drawing them to various migration routes, either through exodus or exile (39). In Italian exile, Ukrainian women

experience incongruence between their education and professional experiences and the reality of back breaking and underappreciated care work. Although a sequence of amnesties has allowed many of them travel back and forth between Italy and Ukraine, the Italian state does not provide many opportunities for migrants to bring their families to Italy, and it only rarely allows migrants stay in Italy permanently (61). Anticipating their eventual return to Ukraine, migrants in Italy are therefore heavily invested in a nation-building project in Ukraine: their remittances (material and social) support the new gendered division of labor in Ukraine, ideally with male breadwinner and stay-at-home mother; they form a vibrant community of expatriates that engages in extensive performance of Ukrainian identity (through religious worship, public performances, voting in Ukrainian elections and other political activities); and they quite literally invest in the Ukrainian economy, providing anywhere between 4% and 20% of the national GDP (43). In American exodus, Ukrainian women similarly experience incongruence between their cultural and social capital and new social status associated with performing manual labor. However, this incongruence is eased by some state provisions, such as legal status and health insurance, leading the migrants to focus on family reunification in the US as opposed to investing heavily into potential return to Ukraine. In both scenarios, however, Solari argues, “the intersection of gendered nationalism and neoliberal capitalism has doubly marginalized grandmothers in particular from both the labor market and the home” (199).

The author acknowledges that the ideal of male provider and domestic wife rarely materializes in reality, and in addition, Ukrainian grandmothers do not fully embrace the idea of their daughters and daughters-in-law “sitting at home” idly, as many of Solari’s respondents described domestic labor. Yet, Solari repeatedly states that grandmothers are pushed away from their central positions in the household, which are now expected to be taken up by men. This

contradiction would benefit from further exploration, as the prominent role of grandmother in Ukrainian households has hardly faded away since Ukraine's independence. A greater historical depth could provide a valuable context for understanding the role of extended kin in Ukrainian family, since the central role of grandmothers possibly predates socialist experience and is unlikely to dissipate with post-socialist uneven development. Indeed, as Solari notes, the Ukrainian state has systematically relinquished its welfare provisions, and even a two-income household is quite dependent on the support of family, neighbors, and friends. Thus, a greater attention to the role of class would also be beneficial in Solari's accounts of exile and exodus.

The author rightfully resists identifying "which is better: Italy or California" (195), though she acknowledges that Italian destination seems to foster a warm sense of community and solidarity as opposed to isolation and alienation the migrants experience in American context. At the same time, the transnational field of exodus in the United States appears to grant more control to Ukrainian migrant subjects, i.e. permanent legal status, family reunification possibilities, health insurance, education and job opportunities for children. Solari's respondents in the US perceived these advantages as a matter of their good luck (188), though discussion of their particular class positions prior to departure from Ukraine would be useful to Solari's readers to imagine how such good fortune is shaped. The author also states that a socialist upbringing and the Soviet Union's partially successful female emancipation project points Ukrainian grandmothers to identify university education for their children as a viable route for their acquisition of new "European" identities and skillsets, rather than encouraging a retreat into the private sphere of home and financial dependence from the male breadwinner. The evidence presented in the book seems to point to largely structural push factors for migration (unemployment and extremely low pay), rather than shifting gender discourses that divorced grandmothers from their previous meaningful

positions in extended families. Most women that we meet throughout the book speak to the palpable absence that their departure has created in their Ukrainian homes. They experience it as a painful sacrifice that is deserving of recognition, a “monument” to their effort, as Solari’s respondent Inna described.

A strong contribution of this title is its attention to the transnational social fields that illuminate globalization from below in a powerful way, especially the ways in which the “restructuring of Ukraine’s institutions of family, labor market, economy, and even political structures are largely produced at the transnational level” (21). As Ukraine is enmeshed in the “redrawing of the contemporary map of Europe,” Solari calls readers to pay attention to the lives of people who are deeply engaged in the transnational social fields of exile and exodus, because their experiences demonstrate how exactly Ukraine is “being reinvented” (205). It is essential to have an accurate understanding of the global politics that have impacted and continue to impact arguably the most significant changes in Europe in the twenty-first century.