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Anna Shadrina (2025). *The Babushka Phenomenon: older women and the political sociology of ageing in Russia*. London: UCL Press, 176 pp. ISBN: 978-1-80008-910-5 (epub).

*Reviewed by Gemma M. Carney**

This book will open up your political imagination in a way that brings new understanding of the private and public lives of women ageing in Russia. The Babushka Phenomenon is a term used to describe the post-professional and post-sexual older woman, "not simply a grandmother" who adopts, performatively, "the position of a socially old member of society" (Staiger & Zusi in Shadrina 2025: vii). By relying on the testimony of women who might fit this category, the book foregrounds the lived experience of one of the most socially marginalised groups in Russian society. The women's experiences of heading matrifocal families, and of living in a society which is constantly affected by war and the loss of men from family life, are eloquently expressed through seven chapters. At times, the book reads more like a novel than an academic text, luring the reader inside the homes of older women who, having survived Soviet Russia, now find themselves isolated and alone in an unrecognisable post-Soviet world. The author's background in humanities and critical

**Gemma M. Carney*, School of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work, Queen's University Belfast, Belfast, United Kingdom

area studies adds richness in the form of film and literary analysis, rendering the book one of the best contemporary examples of cultural gerontological analysis I have come across.

Becoming a Babushka

Becoming a babushka is the result of accumulated disadvantage of sexism and ageism across the life course. The phenomenon is the result of clearly defined roles for Russian women, their need to perform as sexual beings at one point in life, then to raise children alone and to eventually comply with the imposed identity of babushka – a sexless woman of pension age. Some participants recoil in horror from this role, avoiding the community bonding that many babushkas practise through chatting on benches in public places. The split subjectivity many of the women experience is articulated in this rejection. For instance, for Samara, a retired university professor, the cultural pressure to conform to the ideal of babushka is rejected by making sure to dress young. She is determined to avoid becoming a housecoat wearing babushka who trails a shopping trolley behind her. It is clear from the beginning that Shadrina does not view older women within this passive stereotype. The book opens with an account of a Moscow train sit-in led by women in their 60s and 70s thereby placing the women whose lives informed the book at the very centre of the reader's imagination.

Offering Insight into Russian Society and Culture

The book is structured in a way that eases the non-Russian reader into the unfamiliar territory of Russian culture – both pre- and post-Revolutionary. It begins with a clear introduction to the Babushka phenomenon – the tendency to refer to older Russian women as "babushka" particularly if they adhere to the social norm of wearing headscarves and dressing in loose, comfortable clothing. The reluctance of some participants to adopt this identity is explained in Chapter 2 with a detailed critical analysis of monstrous grandmothers in Russian literature and cinema. The next three chapters then delve deeply into the lived experience of Shadrina's 37 participants, 30 of which are divorced or single women. These chapters

highlight several fascinating elements of continuity and change in Russian society as Babushka is clearly a phenomenon which pre-dates the 1917 Revolution, surviving into the post-Soviet era. As a reader with only scant knowledge of Russian society, I found the book's explanation of complex structural causes of Russia's matrifocal families enlightening. For instance, Shadrina (2025: 4) explains that the persistence of mother's pension funds and the absence of childcare policy which may help mothers to participate in paid work means that for most families, grandmothers fill the childcare gap. Grandmothers straddle the public and private. They are important not only in supporting the regime but also in maintaining their families. For many women, it is an extension of motherhood over two generations, motherhood being a central focus of Shadrina's earlier book (Shadrina 2014).

The chapter on Love and Sex in later life is the only one which does not offer direct insights from lived experience, perhaps because of Shadrina's reserve while interviewing women for whom she expresses high regard. Several times throughout the book, she refers to feeling respect for a participant, a level of reflective practice rarely seen in sociological work. For example, consider her reflection on Alvetina, "Her charm and sense of humour left an indelible mark on my soul" (Shadrina 2025: 70). This made me stop and think. The people we interview shape us as much as they shape the research. Perhaps this is something that we should be more cognisant of in social gerontology.

Shadrina's decision to write the book is clearly influenced by the volatile nature of politics in her area of the world – Russia and Belarus. Demographic issues have long been politicised in that part of the world, and thus, pronatalism provides a critical framework for the book. Her reference to the Russian government's 2007 Strategy for Demographic Policy at the beginning of the book is followed with a warning about the pronatalism of current leaders of not only Russia but also Hungary and Italy in the last chapter. At times, pronatalism is accompanied by a narrative where older people are presented as costly devourers of healthcare who live on at the expense of more productive, youthful generations. Such a narrative is mightily challenged by Shadrina's work. The numerous quotations from women who spoke to her, her own knowledge and experience of explaining Russia to foreign audiences, and the examples she

offers from Russian literature and film offer a powerful means of counteracting the prevailing narrative that pronatalism is a straightforward solution to the demographic crisis. Her work resonates with my own, which has long claimed that much of the demographic timebomb narrative can be debunked by paying careful attention to how social policies assume women's invisible labour will be freely available across the life course (Carney 2018). As such, I am in complete agreement with Shadrina's final comment – "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 well-being of others yet are the least appreciated for their efforts" (Shadrina 2025: 156).

In my opinion, the best sociology speaks to the humanity of people who make up the societies we study. The best work is less concerned with making big, bold "the trouble with society" statements, instead aiming to get underneath the structures that define group identity, offering insight into the human experience that is its result. Shadrina's book walks this line between humanity and society with the balance and poise of a trapeze artist.

References

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