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Not Forgetting Women on Women's Day

By Alexei Bayer

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I've always loved March 8, International Women's Day. It comes at the end of the long Russian winter, bringing with it the smell of fresh flowers, sprigs of mimosa and brighter, warmer days. When I was 10 years old, it became a day off from school, which further enhanced its appeal.

Now there seems to be a backlash against this holiday. It was, after all, established by German Communist Clara Zetkin and introduced by the Soviets. While originating in the United States, it is no longer widely known in the West, where it is commemorated mainly by feminists and aid agencies concerned with women's welfare in the Third World. Neither issue is popular in Russia.

And then there are those who say women should be honored every day of the year, not just on March 8. They have a point. Most holidays either celebrate some achievement or mark an event, like Cosmonauts Day on April 12 or Victory Day on May 9. In other words, something tangible is needed to make it a holiday. Women's Day, by contrast, celebrates half the population for nothing more special than having a different chromosome.

It is almost as bad as Men's Day, which in Russia is celebrated on Feb. 23 as Defender of the Fatherland Day. Boys and young men are showered with gifts and best wishes, even though many of them only want to get out of Russia's universal conscription. It is a holiday toasting men for what most of them have no desire to become.

There is a strange symmetry between Men's Day and Women's Day. Before Russia adopted the Gregorian calendar after the Bolshevik Revolution, which added 13 days to the Russian calendar, March 8 in the rest of the world had been Feb. 23 in Russia.

This year will mark the 100th anniversary of the first Woman's Day, established in 1911. Back then, Russia was a rural country where most women lived in medieval conditions, earning their daily bread by backbreaking work and bearing an enormous number of children. No women outside urban centers could read or write in the country, where the illiteracy rate stood at 60 percent prior to World War I.

Celebrating March 8 was meant to draw attention to the plight of women. Whatever else can be said about communism, it did give women equal access to education and career advancement. Women face no impediments — legal, social or otherwise — if they wish to work outside the home. Most do: In the Russian work force, women outnumber men.

But Russian society is in crisis, as evidenced by its declining population. Estimates suggest that it will shrink from more than 140 million now to about 116 million by mid-century. Life expectancy is low, but the number of children per woman, at 1.4, falls well short of the 2.1 needed to replace the existing population. In places like Moscow, the fertility rate is even lower. Russia's non-

The non-Muslim population is shrinking by 0.6 percent per year, compared with 1.6 percent per year growth before World War I.

Of course, Russian women are not to blame for this unfolding demographic catastrophe, but women are clearly part of a broader problem. They must certainly be part of the solution, as well. The situation is complex and will not be resolved by some new law or new initiative by Dmitry Medvedev, Russia's overenthusiastic president. But it is something to which it is important to give at least some thought on International Woman's Day.

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