The Resilience of Russian Women in Revolutionary Russia

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During a small window after the Bolshevik Revolution, from 1917 to the mid-1920's, women in Russia experienced greater freedoms and gender equality than many other women in the Western World. This essay explores the variety of female roles in Russia leading up to the Revolution and throughout the interwar period to evaluate what influences they had over their newfound freedoms. It also highlights the achievements of Alexandra Kollontai, the Marxist theoretician who worked with Vladimir Lenin to improve legislation for female autonomy in domestic, social, and political life. I argue that women – particularly working-class women – were instrumental in the revolution, but that women's rights and advocacy differed along class lines.

During a small window after the Bolshevik Revolution, from 1917 to the mid-1920s, women in Russia experienced greater freedoms and gender equality than many other women in the Western world. Women achieved the ability to vote, gained access to birth control, enjoyed sexual freedoms, and joined the male-dominated ranks of the government. Until recent decades, however, the substantial contributions women made to the Russian Revolution have been skimmed over in the historical narrative. What degree *did* the influence of women have over the events of February 23, 1917? It was International Women's Day, after all. This essay explores the variety of female roles in Russia leading up to the Revolution and throughout the interwar period to evaluate the influence they had over their newfound freedoms. This essay will also examine the achievements of Alexandra Kollontai, the Marxist theoretician whose legislation improved female autonomy in their domestic, social, and political lives. I argue that women – particularly working-class women – were instrumental in the revolution, but that women's rights and advocacy did not collectivize across class lines. Ultimately, the Russian state, renowned for its backwardness, would unlace this social progress throughout the 1920s and 30s.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the "woman question" was being asked around the globe. Political, economic, and professional roles, as well as social and sexual roles, were changing in the aftermath of the Industrial Revolution. In Russia, the woman question was approached with greater urgency than in other parts of Europe because it worked in symbiosis with the "class question" popularized by communism. If communist doctrine claimed everyone was equal, then its leaders *needed* to respond to women's calls for equality to maintain the movement's momentum and legitimacy. Likewise, women could not access equality without first abolishing (or at least weakening) class structures — an integral aspect of the rise of Bolshevism. However, upper-class and lower-class women had different requirements to define their equality.

Historically, wealthy women in the aristocracy and the merchant class had enjoyed powers and freedoms (for example property ownership) since the 18th century; status could also be achieved by women with literary talents[180] The rhetoric of developing capitalism, in the mid-19th century, propelled *bourgeoise* women to pursue university careers and independent incomes.[181] Many found roles as governesses and doctors, although middle-class women were still considered unequal to middle-class men in terms of what occupations they could choose. During this period, women also could not vote, divorce, or have abortions. Upper- and middle-class frustrations with gender inequality inspired a wave of feminism that leveraged its privilege to improve gender equality *within* the governing monarchial system. Significant milestones within this movement include the work of Anna Pavlovna Flisofova, a daughter of wealthy nobles, who established the Bestuzhev Courses in 1879 to improve women's education and went on to lead the International Council of Women in 1899.[182] Anna Shabanova, daughter of a wealthy landowner, founded the Women's Mutual Philanthropic Society in 1895, advocating for workplace equality and childcare support; Shabanova would also go on to found the All-Russian Women's Congress 13 years later. In 1898, The House of Diligence for Educated Women was founded to help high-school girls and qualified governesses gain employment. Many of these movements agreed on advocating for self-help programs, prohibition of alcohol, and sexual freedom for all.[183] While these women's philanthropic efforts were intended to reach across class boundaries, their benefits remained amongst the upper and middle classes.

On the other hand, the lives of *proletariat* women during this period were defined by grueling work conditions and demanding domestic responsibilities. These working- and peasant-class women also did not have access to voting, divorce, or birth control. Since 1720, peasant families had lived in self-governing communities (*mir)*, and their communal work continued under new land tenure systems created by Alexander II's 1861 Emancipation reforms. In this setting, both men and women farmers worked in solidarity on the same side of Russia's state oppression. Factory work also did not discriminate by gender. As capitalism's influence continued to increase in Russian society, solidarity

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[180] Edith Saurer, Margareth Lanzinger, and Elizabeth Frysak, *Women's Movements: Networks and Debates in Post-communist Countries in the 19th and 20th centuries.* (Weimar: Böhlau Verlag Köln, 2006), 365.

[181] Jodi Dean speaking at The People's Forum NYC. "KOLLONTAI AND REVOLUTION: THERE IS NO SOCIALISM WITHOUT FEMINISM," (Webinar), July 22, 2020, [Youtube], 1:02:00. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ES6XGkANYhU

[182] Seeboth Christine Worobec, *The Human Tradition in Imperial Russia.* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), page 74., and Barbara Engel, *Mothers and Daughters: Women of the Intelligentsia in Nineteenth-Century Russia* (Northwestern University Press, 2000), 59-61.

[183] Cathy Porter, *Alexandra Kollontai: A Biography* (London: VIRAGO Limited, 1980), 56.

between men and women became necessary for survival to oppose government interference in their daily lives that had become complicated by the market economy.[184] Thus, the definition of equality looked different to proletariat women: they wanted shorter work days, fairer treatment, equal pay, and less police surveillance.[185] These issues, by contrast, had no impact on bourgeoise women or their politics. Despite differences between these two strands of feminism, both reached a point of exasperation around 1896:[186] upper- and middle-class feminists wished to collaborate with proletariat women's desires, while proletariat women tended to reject the theory of "feminism" altogether, as it had so far done nothing to liberate them from the bottom of the economic structure.[187] Instead, the exasperation of working class women fueled increasingly militant, revolutionary behaviour in the streets, which in turn received sympathy and support from women of the middle-class.

Pre-existing working-class militancy, especially amongst women, became more deeply agitated at the onset of World War I. In Petrograd, December 1915, women waited in freezing temperatures for morsels of sugar and flour.[188] During the same period, in Rostov, journalist Rhoda Power observed:

> "Peasants stood shivering hour after hour outside the bakery, their tickets clutched between blue fingers, waiting for a loaf of bread. If there were not enough to go round, they went away empty handed. Some of them lined up at midnight and waited 'til the shops opened in the morning. They had families to feed and could not be turned away… [A peasant woman] had often to stop and rest because her limbs, weary with standing, refused to support her."[189]

According to Russian historian, Iurii Kir'ianov, dozens of women-led riots (*bab'I bunty)* took place during this period, consisting almost exclusively of working-class women and their families.[190] For example, in Bogodrodsk, October 1, 1915, a sugar shortage caused 30 women to smash in windows of small-businesses on the streets, and wreak havoc in the town square, proliferating into a several thousand-person riot that went on for weeks; 12,000 women would strike again at the end of the month for the same reason. Recently

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[184] Barbara Engel, "Not by Bread Alone: Subsistence Riots in Russia during World War I." *The Journal of Modern History,* vol. 69, no.4 (December 1997), 702. https://doi.org/10.1086/245591
[185] Jodi Dean, "KOLLONTAI AND REVOLUTION," 13:00.
[186] Porter, *Alexandra Kollontai*, 56.
[187] Ibid.
[188] Engel, "Not by Bread Alone," 697.
[189] Ibid.
[190] Ibid., 699.

released Secret Service historical documents reveal that Russia's central government was warned almost two decades earlier that if a revolution occurred, it would most likely be triggered by women's anger over food shortages.[191] Some scholars argue that the reason these riots continued was the unwillingness of Cossack forces to use violence against women and youth, despite how aggressive their revolts were.[192]

Another reason for the ongoing riots was the fact that women had grown to become economically invaluable. In the decades leading up to the revolution, the number of women in the working-class increased significantly. Between 1904 and 1910, more than 80% of new industrial workers were women.[193] Even more substantial, over the course of World War I (WWI), the proportion of women in the industrial labour force rose from 26.6% to 43.2%.[194] Another aspect of women's increased economic and social value were the wives of soldiers, or *soldatki*. In 1912, the government, using the *sosloviia* system, promised to take responsibility for families of soldiers, but the system collapsed under Russia's depleting wartime economy. [195] This had a major social impact on communities, because it meant the increase of women in the workplace mainly derived from families of soldiers. This was particularly true of the peasant-class, who had lost 47.8% of their workforce to conscription.[196] For this reason, *soldatki* women experienced social elevation and sympathies for supporting their husbands and country in the war effort, allowing them Cossack protections. Their newly acquired positions were advantageous for putting up resistance against the state for their failure to supply bread and basic necessitates. Also of significance was the founding of the *Rabotnitsa (The Woman Worker)* journal in 1914, commissioned by Vladmir Lenin's wife, Nadezhda Krupskaya. The journal provided a public forum for working women to speak out about their dire living conditions. Ultimately, the working women's economic necessity furnished them with greater political value.

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[191] Discussed by Katy Turton, Soviet historian and author of *Forgotten Lives: The Roles of Lenin's Sisters in the Russian Revolution, 1864 – 1937,* and *Family Networks and the Russian Revolutionary Movement (1870 – 1940).* National Library of Scotland, "Women of the Russian Revolution," Webinar, June 4, 2021, YouTube, 57:54.https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z0yV0igtyEE

[192] Engel, "Not by Bread Alone," 696.

[193] Paula Erizanu, "The Revolutionary Sex," Aeon, May 31, 2018, https://aeon.co/essays/the-shining-moment-when-russian-revolutionary-women-reinvented-sex

[194] Alfred G. Meyer, "Impact of World War I on Russian Women's Lives," in *Russia's Women: Accommodation, Resistance, Transformation*, ed. Barbara Evans Clements, Barbara Alpern Engel, and Christine Worobec (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1991), 214.

[195] Engels, "Not by Bread Alone," 710-712.

[196] Ibid., 708.

On February 23, 1917, other factions of Russian society converged in Petrograd to take down the Tsar. The *mezhraionsty* handed out leaflets campaigning for the merchant class: *"Are we going to put up with this silence much longer, now and then venting our smouldering rage on small shop owners?"*[197] Others joined in protest, not just for women's rights, but in protest of the end of the war, the monarchy, and for a small minority, class honour. It may be an exaggeration, then, to state that the February 23 women's march *intended* to be a revolution, but it is undeniable that the consistent reactivity of angry lower-class women drew attention to revolution's possibility, playing a distinct, dependable, and active role encouraging an uprising. The very nature of working-class women's roles depended on the socialist values of the Communist Party; likewise, the validity of Bolshevik values and the Communist Party's reputation depended on the support of the working class and its women. Converging in mutual interest, they were powerful enough to tip the autocracy.

The abdication of Tsar Nicholas II and the subsequent end of autocratic rule in Russia impacted societal sectors differently, but for working women, it offered hope that freedom, food supplies, and workplace equality would finally be prioritized.[198] It also indicated the beginning of a breakdown of other bureaucratic resources, such as the armed forces, as they had shown a candid reluctance to use weapons against women and youth demonstrators on behalf of the State. While it was a positive step forward for most women, change was not celebrated by all. For the 5,000 Russian women who fought in WWI, and other women working at the front, there were no tangible improvements. Alexandra Tolstoy, a nurse on the Turkish and Germany frontiers, describes her thoughts on the events of February 23 in her memoir, *I Worked for the Soviet:*

> "Yet, officers, doctors, nurses, the zemstvo workers — everybody — pretended that with a change in government we had a group of intelligent people at the head of our country instead of Nicholas II, and that everything was utterly changed… And I who awaited a more liberal government for many years, one without militarism, and with religious and political freedom, and with land for peasants, watched these changes with mixed feelings."[199]

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[197] China Mieville, *October: The Story of the Russian Revolution* (London: Verso, 2021): 41-43.
[198] Marcelline Hutton. *Resilient Russian Women in the 1920s & 1930s,* 2015. *Zea E-Books.* http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/zeabook/31, 26
[199] Alexandra Tolstoy, I Worked for the Soviet, trans. by the author in collaboration with Roberta Yerkes (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1935) 2

Likewise, women of the petty-bourgeoise, who had little to gain from the labour movement, criticized the Bolshevik Party throughout this period for failing, in their eyes, to address the "woman question" satisfactorily.

The most significant outcome of the February Revolution was that it enabled the return, or repatriation, of major revolutionary figures to Russia, including Lenin, Leon Trotsky, and, most notably for our purposes, Alexandra Kollontai. Kollontai's contributions to the revolution and its aftermath are inextricable from the subject of the "woman question" in Russia. She was a Marxist theorist, a historical materialist, and a key ideologist in sexual freedom in Russia during this period. Since the late 1800s, Kollontai understood that it was the economic value of working women that would bring the possibility of true equality, and that it would not be able to happen under capitalism. Her progressive and anti-authoritarian theories led her to join Lenin's Bolshevik Party in 1905, and she joined him in exile between 1908 and 1917. During her exile, Kollontai travelled around Europe, spreading her beliefs about social equality and Marxist-Leninism. She also prophesized that the women's movement would remain divided across class lines. She notes this in her 1909 pamphlet, *The Social Basis of the Women's Question:*

> "However apparently radical the demands of the feminists, one must not lose sight of the fact that the feminists cannot, on account of their class position, fight for that fundamental transformation of the contemporary economic and social structure of society without which the liberation of women cannot be complete." [200]

In 1917, she became the first People's Commissar for Welfare under Vladimir Lenin, making her the first woman in history to be a prominent member in a government cabinet. She was keen to work with Lenin, pressing him to "draw a sharp line" between the Bolshevik Party and the provisional government.[201] In the cabinet, she also worked closely with Inessa Armand on the "woman question." In 1917, Kollantai made a political call in the *Rabotnitsa:*

> Comrade women workers! We can no longer resign ourselves to war and rising prices! We must fight. Join our ranks, the ranks of the Social-Democratic Labour Party! However, it is not enough to join the party. If we really want to hasten peace, then working men and women must fight to ensure that state power is transferred from the hands of big capitalists—the ones really responsible for all

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[200] Kollontai, *The Social Basis of the Women's Question: 1909,* Pamphlet. Ed. By Alix Holt. Allison & Busby, 1977. From *Selected Writings of Alexandra Kollontai.* https://www.marxists.org/archive/kollonta/1909/social-basis.htm

[201] Mievelle, *The Russian Revolution,* 87.

> our woes, all the blood being shed on battlefields—to the hands of our representatives, the Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies.[202]

As previously mentioned, socialist views and working women's rights went hand-in-hand. If the basis of Marxist-Leninism was that everyone was equal, there would necessarily *have* to be equality between the sexes. However, leading up to the October Revolution, Lenin and other members of the Bolshevik Party expressed fears that women would act erratically and sabotage the Bolshevik Revolution.[203] Bolshevik women's persistence to be politically and militarily involved in new Soviet society is what earned them recognition and, eventually, the equality and rights that they were striving for. For example, during the Russian Civil War (1904-1905), approximately 20,000 women trained as nurses for the Red Army, 60,000 *fought* in the Red Army, and numerous others practiced a socialist version of a domestic lifestyle: organizing childcare, cooking for school programs, and sewing for each other.[204]

The Bolshevik Revolution in October 1917 helped to crystallise the reality that working-class women fought for in the February prior. Female support for the Communist Party (particularly in the *Komsomol*) and the Bolshevik Party did provide returns; for example, between 1917 and 1927, the Bolshevik land redistribution program allowed 10 million peasant women new domestic and agricultural opportunities.[205] In 1919, Alexandra Kollontai and fellow Russian Communist Party members founded the *Zhenotdel*, a department dedicated to women's affairs. The department legalized and increased access to abortion, secularized marriage, simplified divorce, and decriminalized homosexuality.[206] Ideologically, and separately from bourgeoise women, the proletariat women prioritized the movement over their domestic lives. The Greek writer Nikos Kazantzakis spoke with a 22-year old woman in Moscow, 1928, who stated: "My great joy is not getting a man, but to work and feel that I'm not a parasite."[207]

Despite these encouraging advances, the 1920s were a period of economic despair and poor Bolshevik diplomacy, which peeled back many of the gains women made since during the Revolution. Women's work had become a farcical source of propaganda for the Bolshevik party rather than an effectual prerogative; party members did not

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[202] Kollontai, *Our Tasks: 1917*. Speech. Petrograd: Rabotnitsa (Woman Worker), republished by Progress Publishers, 1984, From *Alexandra Kollontai Selected Articles and Speeches*. https://www.marxists.org/archive/kollonta/1917/tasks.htm
[203] Hutton. *Resilient Russian Women,* 36
[204] Ibid., 26-27.
[205] Ibid., 10.
[206] Erizanu, "The revolutionary sex."
[207] Ibid.

prioritize attendance to women's demonstrations.[208] Similarly, high turnover rates within the *Zhenotdel*, which was eventually shut down by Stalin in 1930, did not reflect well on the public's perception of women. In the decade after the revolution, high-ranking women of the Communist Party advocated for more liberal marriage laws and the destruction of the nuclear family. While these ideas were supported by Lenin, who felt this would strengthen class solidarity and implement a more productive society, Joseph Stalin felt that the nuclear family was the basis of socialism. Stalin thought it would promote larger families, and therefore more production. By 1930, women were actually in a worse position than the pre-revolutionary period: they had earned more responsibility, but lost their freedoms.

In conclusion, there were various factions of women in Russia living in different circumstances, which made it difficult to line up ideologies for a collective feminist movement. Women of the bourgeoise wanted change *within* the political system, and the working-class wanted to dismantle the political system entirely. These women used their voices, and their value to society was eventually noticed by the Communist Party. The real obstacle for the movement, however, was Russia's unstable societal and economic structure in the years following the revolution, the urgency of which inevitably eclipsed the issue of gender equality. The country was so poor that women's equality could not be made a priority by the Party. As the party increasingly relied on the help of women workers, and women workers continued to provide loyal service, the result by the beginning of the 1930s was ultimately more responsibility and yet more difficult living conditions. Despite this, 1900 to 1920 represents a temporary period of catalyzed freedom for Russian women, an unprecedented achievement in the Western world.

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[208] Mievelle, *The Russian Revolution,* 94.

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