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Russian Revolution: Women's struggle - A Struggle that should Have Been More Visible

Tuesday 8 November 2016, by [MARIK Soma](#) (Date first published: 7 November 2013).

A short piece which I wrote three years back.....still relevant as I find today where women in revolutionary parties or mass organizations are not heard enough or gender issues are yet to be treated as class issues on the 99th year of the revolution.

Soma Marik, November 7, 2016

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I. Populism, Liberalism, and Women's Participation

The roots of the Russian Revolution go back to the reforms of Tsar Alexander II, notably the emancipation of the serfs. Unhappy with the limited reforms (for example, emancipation came with a price tag as serfs had to pay a huge compensation), many young radicals, influenced by a number of Russian and Western political thinkers and activists, became revolutionaries. Belonging to the Russian upper and middle classes and notably the intelligentsia (men and women) they came to accept socialism as the goal, but hoped to avoid the West European path, through banking on peasant collectivism and moving directly to socialism, bypassing capitalism. Because of their call to go to the people they were called Populists or Narodniks.

The early efforts at raising peoples' consciousness to overturn the exploitative state and social order failed, as did the efforts to form revolutionary terrorist organizations. The latter, an organization named Narodnaya Volya [Peoples' Will or Freedom], succeeded in killing Tsar Alexander II, but perished in the subsequent state repression. Among those hanged was Sophia Perovskaya. Vera Figner spent many years imprisoned for her role in the revolutionary movement. Vera Zasulich had begun her career as a militant who shot a notorious general, but became the supporter of a minority current, led by G. V. Plekhanov, which formed the first Marxist group in Russia, the Emancipation of Labor Group.

However, though issues of women's equality were part of the subjects of discussion in the political movements, a full fledged women's movement did not develop till 1905, the year of Russia's first revolution. And then, given the sharp class conflict in Russian society as well as the clear position of Russian and international Social Democracy about feminism, two distinct women's movements came

up at once.

A. The Suffrage Struggle

In times of general political unrest, 20th century feminism took on a more decidedly political color. Younger feminists were not satisfied with philanthropy. Close at hand was Finland, ruled by the Tsar, but with a different political system. Like many countries of Europe, in Finland feminism had progressed from philosophical reflections to education, and thence to social work and eventually a battle for the suffrage.

Around 1905, a number of liberal organizations, like the Union of Liberation, invited Russian women to their political banquets. In February 1905, several hundred women members of "Moscow society" published in the liberal paper *Russian News* a lament for Bloody Sunday (January 9, 1905, when a huge number of peaceful workers were gunned down by the Tsarist armed forces). By late February, an all Russian Union for Women's Equality [Women's Union] calling for freedom and equality before the law irrespective of sex was formed which began by petitioning the City Duma [municipality] and the local *zemstvo* [self-governing body] for voting rights in those bodies. Soon St. Petersburg became its headquarter. Leaders of the Union included Zinaida Mirovich-Ivanova, Anna Kalmaovich, Lyubov Gurevich, and Mariya Chekhova.

A meeting on April 10, 1905, attended by some 1000 women laid the foundations for the Union's Congress. Held on May 7-10, in Moscow, the Congress demanded a constituent assembly elected by equal, direct, secret and universal vote, without distinction of nationality, religion or sex. Its progressive demands included equality of the sexes before the law, equal rights of peasant women in any land reforms, laws for the welfare and insurance of women workers, equal opportunity for women, co-education, reform of laws relating to prostitution, and abolition of the death penalty. In July 1905, the Union of Unions, an all-inclusive liberal formation, accepted the Women's Union as a member, though the future Kadet [Constitutional Democratic] leader, Paul Miliukov, was opposed to this. When the Women's Union threatened to turn to revolutionary working class parties for support, male liberals of the *zemstvos* gave in.

In December 1905, Dr. Maria Ivanovna Pokrovskaya and some supporters formed the Women's Progressive Party. They demanded a democratic constitutional monarchy, and opposed united action with men in the struggle for women's rights. More moderate than the Women's Union it was opposed to strikes. But it called for factory reforms for women workers.

The demand for women's suffrage found diverse response among the political parties. The Social Democratic Party had incorporated women's equality, including the right to vote, in its party program in 1903. Within the Socialist Revolutionary Party [SR], the latest Narodnik organization, Viktor Chernov, the main leader of the party, was entirely in favor of women's complete equality, including the suffrage. But sections of peasants in the party, opposed complete equality, suggesting women should get the vote but not the right to be elected. Peasant women fought against such prejudices, and in the end the Peasant Union joined the SRs in endorsing political equality for women.

The liberals were more strongly divided. At the Kadet Congress of January 1906 there was a sharp division, with Miliukov opposing Ana Miliukova and Tyrkova. But Professor Petrazhitsky's support tilted the balance, and the feminists won by a narrow margin. Parties to the right of the Kadets, like the Octobrists, refused to give feminists any hearing. Till January 1906, the suffragists had partially sided, with great hesitation, with the extreme left. The vote at the Kadet Congress came as a relief for them, and many turned to the liberals. A small left-wing oriented to the Trudoviks, a group of moderate Narodnik deputies to the Duma [Russia's semi-constitutional representative body].

During the elections of March 1906, the women organized meetings, raised money and helped in counting votes. This approach of loyalty in return for rights, originally taken by the Women's Union, would lead many feminists to support the Russian state during World War I. After the elections, the feminists tried to mobilize opinion in favor of a women's suffrage bill without much headway.

After June 1907, when new Premier Stolypin used marital law to smash the revolutionary struggles, there was a general decline in radical activities. Kadets like Miliukova and Tyrkova devoted their main efforts to their party. Zinaida Mirovich was aligned with Carrie Chapman Catt of the USA and Millicent Garrett Fawcett of England, on the right wing of the women's suffrage movement and was opposed to universal suffrage movements.

On the left wing of the feminist movement were people like Gurevich and Olga Volkenstein. They criticized the bourgeois character of the Women's Union. Gurevich had some Marxist links, as her familiarity with the works of August Bebel, Karl Kautsky and Klara Zetkin show. But she was not a member of any Marxist party. Her attempts to organize women workers came within a feminist context of organizing women separately. This led to women Social Democrats like Alexandra Kollontai turning very sharply against her. The final confrontation between the organized Marxists and the feminists came in 1908, at the First All Russian Women's Congress.

B. The Russian Marxists:

The Russian Social Democratic Labor Party (RSDLP) was intended to be an orthodox party in the German model. But under Russian conditions, where there were no democratic rights and the struggle for democracy had to be fought in a very militant manner for any success to be achieved, Lenin's party building strategy focused much more on organizing militant proletarians. In addition, his concept of building up the party with an initial scaffolding of "professional revolutionaries" had both a positive impact on making it a revolutionary workers' party, and a more complex impact on women workers. Lenin wanted a party of vanguard workers. In order to centralize the political experience of a fragmented class, it was necessary to bring together vanguard workers and unify the sectional experiences of the class by giving them respite from routine waged work. Though the concept of full-time professional revolutionary was aimed at ensuring the proletarian democratic content of the vanguard very little was done to integrate experiential or existential realities of the women workers, who had no respite from deskilling house-work, and who were routinely treated as backward.

In early 20th century Russia, the average woman worker married and had children by the time she was 20-22. Without party education to enhance the value of work done by women, or to organize them separately, formal equality of comrades in the party could not erase the real inequality of the private sphere as women had to look after children, do household work, and earn money for their professional revolutionary husbands. Cecelia Bobrovskaya, a veteran revolutionary and a mid-wife, wrote later that during a long underground career, she had met a number of committed women, who were so tied down by domestic work that they could not become professional revolutionaries. A large number of male Bolshevik workers became leaders, while the percentage of women leaders was low and only two of them, Alexandra Artiukhina and Klavdiia Nikolaeva, came from the working class. On the eve of the February revolution, out of 24,000 members there were about 2500 women in the Bolshevik Party. Yet, in absolute terms, this fact, that there were 2500 women Bolsheviks, despite the difficult conditions of the underground, is a sign that women did join the revolutionary movement, despite the multiple burdens on them.

Nadezhda Krupskaya's pamphlet, *Zhenshchina Rabotnitsa* [The Woman Worker] in 1901 urged the party to turn to women workers as a group and to look at their demands for the first time. Indeed, until Kollontai's book appeared in 1909, this was the only Russian Marxist work that warned Russian

working men that taking women out of the labor force would not end exploitation. The writings of the founders of Russian Marxism had said virtually nothing on women. So the fact that reviewing in 1899 the first Russian Marxist program of 1885, Lenin stressed that there was a need to add a demand for complete equal rights for men and women when the program talked about reforms of the laws, was possibly a result of Krupskaya's influence.

Certainly, like the men, the women who joined the Social Democracy felt that the Marxist program offered a way out of the exploitative society and the autocratic Tsarist order. The liberal feminist analysis and the limited reforms seemed inadequate by the side of the Marxist analysis, which linked the real emancipation of millions of working class and peasant women with the social revolution.

Relatively larger numbers of women joined the SR Party than the Social Democratic Party. There were a number of reasons for this. First, the Populist movement had a longer indigenous root. Second, Populism attracted large numbers of intelligentsia women. While Marxist socialism also attracted some of the latter, its focus on the proletariat made it very different from the Populists. According to the assessment of Richard Stites, over 9 per cent of mandated delegates to SR congresses or conferences in 1905-08 were women. The Union of School Teachers was dominated by the party, and these teachers were crucial in spreading SR politics in the countryside. The party believed in revolutionary terrorism, and its terrorist wing also had a number of women. General Min, who led the military repression of the Moscow uprising of 1905, was killed by the SR Zina Konoplyanikova. She was hanged at the Schlüsselburg Fortress. The most important of such SR women was Maria Spiridonova. Under the instructions of the local committee, she shot General Luzhenovsky, who had subjected her province to punitive raids in 1905. She was arrested by soldiers, tortured brutally (including whipping and having cigarettes being extinguished on her body). International protests resulted in her being exiled to Siberia instead of being hanged.

The revolution of 1905 resulted in relatively larger numbers of women coming towards the Social Democratic party. Also, with an increase in women's recruitment into industry, the party had to pay more attention to work among women. Secretaries of the city committees were professional revolutionaries. The usual structure was to have three secretaries— one for the basic political decisions, one for publication of pamphlets and leaflets, and one for the technical work of the committee. In 1997, Barbara Evans Clements published her massive study of the Bolshevik women, which showed that women secretaries were mostly technical secretaries. This reflected internalization within the party structure of a typical gender division of labor.

The picture among the émigrés was even clearer. No woman other than Alexandra Kollontai ever got recognition as theoretician in the Bolshevik Party. It was always felt better to engage them in other kind of work, for e.g., working in the underground, working as couriers, working as assistants, working to earn money so that theoretician husbands need not work, and so on. As the life of Inessa Armand shows, it could be because the party leadership (in this case Lenin) exerted considerable pressure on them, asking them to do more 'useful' work. From the Second Party Congress of 1903 to the February Revolution, women theoreticians, Central Committee members, and members of any other émigré committee, whether Bolshevik or Menshevik all added up to not over a dozen.

1905 revolution brought many women workers into the political and trade union movements. Moreover, feminists were trying to create women only unions. As a result, some Marxist women turned to organizing women workers. When a few working women were elected to the Shidlovsky Commission appointed to inquire into the tragedy of Bloody Sunday, the government refused to seat them. This led to protests by women workers. In Ivanovo-Voznesensk, some 11,000 female textile workers took part in a huge strike. Kollontai played an important role in this period. Coming into contact with Marxists while living in West Europe, by 1903 she was a committed party activist, engaged in illegal socialist work in St. Petersburg. Bloody Sunday found her in the streets. She

worked hard for the party, writing, distributing literature, raising money. Participating in the inaugural meeting of the Women's Union, Kollontai was appalled at the support given to a bourgeois liberal feminist meeting by many socialist women. She spoke sharply against "classless" feminism, and was attacked by the feminists in response.

Her exposure to a meeting of German socialist women in Mannheim convinced her that a special effort among women workers was needed. But now she was faced with the accusation of a "harmful tendency towards feminism". When the Party Committee grudgingly gave her permission to hold a women-only meeting, she found the premises locked and with a sign that read that the meeting for women only had been cancelled, and a men only meeting called.

Organizing women was difficult both in the party or trade unions not free of male prejudices. Unequal educational opportunity was supplemented by lesser pay in the case of women who were also saddled with the double burden of being workers and housewives. Despite all this, Kollontai was able to work among the Union of Textile Workers, made up largely of women. She organized a number of meetings, where, under the guise of discussing women's health, she explained the nature of social exploitation and liberation, and fought against Kadet feminism. In 1908, hearing of feminist plans for the All-Russian Women's Congress, Kollontai wanted to intervene. But unlike the official line of simple rejection of the Congress, or to participate it to purely rhetorically "expose" the liberal feminists, Kollontai tried to turn the women workers' participation in this Congress into a political education for them. Her theoretical intervention came through *The Social Bases of the Woman Question*, (1908). It involved a simultaneous criticism of the class limitations of bourgeois feminism as well as a critique of the ungendered nature of Social Democratic politics. By rejecting the resolution of the on universal suffrage and other measures, the liberal feminists showed clearly enough their opposition to the demands of working class women at the Congress.

II. From the Decline of the 1905 Revolution to the February Revolution

The consequence of struggles by women workers was the recognition by a number of Bolshevik women that some kind of women-specific effort should be made to mobilize women. One major step in creating an autonomous space for women came in 1912, when, looking at the women readers' response to a women's page in Pravda, a number of Bolshevik women activists decided to launch a paper for women. Inessa Armand and Krupskaya among the exiles, and Anna Elizarova, and Konkordia Samoiloova within Russia were the main figures behind the launching of the Rabotnitsa. There were two perspectives among them, with Krupskaya writing that women were backward and had to be brought into the movement, while Armand stressed that without more encouragement to the struggles of women workers the socialist movement could not proceed forward. In article after article the women workers highlighted the dual oppression faced by women workers, thereby compelling the Pravda to pay more attention to women workers.

In 1913, Bolshevik and Menshevik women in Moscow were also able to organize a meeting in honor of International Proletarian Women's Day, despite the problem of police intervention, and deep suspicion in many socialist quarters about such a program. A day for spontaneous self-expression also signified the global struggle for proletarian women's rights.

As a result of the initial lack of socialist attention to the struggles by women workers, the women's strikes and agitation sometimes remained unorganized. The violence and elemental spontaneity was displayed in 1917, when women textile workers forced concessions out of their director in ways trade union organizers would oppose as spontaneous violence. But the "general demands" chalked out by these organizers seldom talked about equal wages for men and women. In 1905, the demand

was for 90 kopecks daily for men and 75 for women. In 1917 too, when factory committees won a minimum wage clause from the owners in Petrograd, the rates were five rubles for men and four rubles for women. When women themselves took a leading role, the demands could change. In 1912-13 several strikes, in which women were present in a significant number, were organized in protest against sexual harassment in the name of searching workers as they left the factory premises. Women workers were aware of problems posed by male bias in the unions. Tsvetkova, a woman worker in the leather industry pointed out that male workers did not regard women workers as full and equal members of the working class, and tried to pass the burden of unemployment and lay-offs on the women.

The coming of World War I intensified class conflicts in Russia, and within a few years, led directly to the revolutions of February and October 1917. Nobles and many intelligentsia women including pacifist feminists supported the war, in the hope that their patriotism would be rewarded by the suffrage and other rights by the government. A number of women also fought in the army, the most well-known being Maria Bochkareva, who tried to organize women's battalions in 1917. Though all these did not lead to women's enfranchisement before 1917, upper class women gained in educational and employment opportunities. The demand for more engineers, for example, led to granting graduates of the Women's Technical Institutes the right to become full-fledged engineers. In 1917, the feminist organizations therefore had legal existence and ample funds.

The February Revolution of 1917 grew out of a rising wave of working class struggles. The turning point came with International Women's Day (8 March 1917, which in the old, unreformed Russian Calendar fell in February). Women workers insisted they would call a strike. The Bolshevik leadership was cautious and opposed a general strike. But the women went ahead, and were followed thereupon by the more militant Marxist groups, like the Mezhrainitsii, or the Vyborg district Bolshevik party committee.

After the February Revolution, the pro-war League for Women's Equality re-emerged as the Republican Union of Democratic Women's Organizations. It won over the aged Vera Figner to its cause, and organized a demonstration to the Provisional Government. The radicals ridiculed this, with the Bolshevik women pointing out that women's right to vote for the constituent assembly should not depend on the blessings of the Provisional Government. By May, Bochkareva had taken the initiative in forming a Women's Battalion of Death, hailed by feminists like Anna Shabanova. In August, a Women's Military Congress was held. One unit of these battalions fought to defend the Kerensky regime in its last days. In the face of the rising Bolshevik power, differences between bourgeois liberal feminists and women of the moderate socialist parties tended to vanish.

By 1917 women formed 43 percent of the workforce. Before the Bolsheviks entered the field, women workers themselves had taken initiatives. The first weeks after February saw an unprecedented increase in the number of women organizing themselves to make political and economic demands. Bolsheviks were active among them. In Petrograd Bolshevik women were active in organizing the Soldatki [Soldiers' wives] helping to grow Bolshevik influence in the army. The social peace established by the Mensheviks and the SRs after February was broken for the first time by several thousand women laundry workers in Petrograd. Bolshevik women like Goncharskaya, Novikondratieva and Sakharova led these struggles for 8-hour working day, and for minimum wages. Under the influence of Kollontai Pravda regularly reported about the strike. After a month's strike, there was a partial victory.

But the liberal feminists and right wing socialists or ex-socialists were active in mass movements and had to be combated. Among them was E.D. Kuskova, an early Social Democrat famous in Russian Marxist history as a major target of Lenin for her support to revisionism, or Menshevik women like Lyubov Akselrod, who said in 1917 that Marxism was closer to liberalism than to anarchism,

especially in times of revolution.

The League for Women's Equality, working among women, was able to put up socialists as well as democrats in its list of candidates for the Constituent Assembly. A meeting of the Executive Committee of the Petersburg Committee of the Bolsheviks gave Vera Slutskaya, in charge of organizing women, suggested the necessity of setting up a bureau of working women under the city committee, as some kind of autonomy was essential to enable women to think out things for themselves, to talk freely, and to express their political concerns while at the same time being part of the party and the class movement. Despite resistance to Slutskaya and Kollontai's attempts to create autonomous space in the party for women, the latter's return to Russia from exile, and her enthusiastic support to Lenin's *April Theses*, put power behind the work of agitating among women.

Rabotnitsa was revived and became the center of agitational and organizational work among women workers. As one activist named Prokhorova wrote in the women's journal, whatever was done without women's participation was likely to be dangerous for them. But within their work it is possible to find the stirrings of a Bolshevik-'feminist' discourse that went beyond the Bolshevik orthodoxy. They organized working class women and strove to incorporate gender equality within class struggle politics in a big way. This resulted in significant gains after the October Revolution, including in terms of autonomous organization for women.

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P.S.

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