The Emancipation of Bolshevik Women: No, The Soviet Woman is Not Yet Free! (pp. 11-20)

Kristina Brandon

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.library.uab.edu/vulcan

Part of the History Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://digitalcommons.library.uab.edu/vulcan/vol12/iss2008/3

This content has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of the UAB Digital Commons, and is provided as a free open access item. All inquiries regarding this item or the UAB Digital Commons should be directed to the UAB Libraries Office of Scholarly Communication.
The Emancipation of Bolshevik Women:
No, The Soviet Woman is Not Yet Free!

Kristina Brandon

In the wake of the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, suddenly everything seemed possible for women: equal wages between men and women, birth control, abortion rights, access to divorce, communal child rearing, and sexual freedom. However, these emancipatory freedoms, though good in theory, proved impossible in a nation steadfast on the brink economic collapse, political turmoil, and civil war, but also because these women lived in a nation that refused to let go of its patriarchal traditions. Under Joseph Stalin, forced industrialization left no time for social experiments. Women were pressured to enter the working world while simultaneously maintaining their traditional gender role as mother and housekeeper.\(^1\) Because Russia refused to let go of its patriarchal tradition, because the country was in political turmoil after the revolution, and because Joseph Stalin refused to deal with women's issues, women after the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 were not able to successfully achieve full equality and emancipation.

Before the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, Russian society was a world of patriarchal power, where the men ruled and women were subordinate. Czarist Law stated, “The wife is held to obey her husband, as the head of the family, to remain with him in love, respect, unlimited obedience, to him every favor, and show him every affection, as a housewife.” These laws also permitted a man to beat his wife.\(^2\) The Russian Orthodox Church reinforced this idea of female subordination and obedience.\(^3\) Russian tradition encouraged all women to stay out of politics, especially those within the working class and the peasantry. Women could not change their residence or even travel abroad without permission of a male guardian. Only upper class women were granted...
very limited admittance to education. Divorce was nearly impossible. Russian women lived under a patriarchal value system that granted men substantial power over them.⁴

Russia had also been a backward country: economically primitive, militarily inferior, and focused on peasant agriculture, which caused the country to fall behind in industrialization (not until the 1890s). Rapid industrialization led to urban overcrowding and poor working conditions. Between 1914 and 1917 in Petrograd (also known as St. Petersburg, and later as Leningrad), women workers constituted one-third of the total workforce.⁵ These women would work all day, only to be forced to stand in bread lines to secure food to feed their families. Food and medicine were scarce. Prices skyrocketed, and a famine occurred in 1917. Tsar Nicholas II failed to solve this crisis, and only the Communists offered a solution, namely by overthrowing the bourgeois democracy, abolishing private ownership of land and factories, and concentrating power into the hands of the working and exploited masses.⁶

“It all began with bread.”⁷ For several weeks, in February 1917, bakeries in Petrograd began to run out of bread and bread lines appeared. The problem was not shortage of supplies. Arctic weather impeded delivery of ingredients. The halt in the bread supply sparked rumors blaming the shortages on the government. On February 23, International Women’s Day, an important date on the Socialist calendar, huge crowds of women began to march into the city, demanding equal rights. Women textile workers demanding bread joined them. The group marched through the streets screaming “bread” and “down with the Tsar.”⁸ Through the next few days more than 200,000 workers, men and women, joined the demonstration calling for the overthrow of the autocracy.⁹ The February Revolution ended with the abdication of Tsar Nicholas II.

At the time of the February Revolution, virtually all of the Bolshevik leaders were exiled. Vladimir Lenin returned to Petrograd in late April. More and more workers, men and women alike, began to join the Bolshevik party. By October 1917, the first great Communist revolution had begun. The Bolsheviks, a faction of the Russian Social-Democratic Labor Party, overthrew the Provisional Government and on October 25 (November 7 on the modern calendar) proclaimed itself
Russia's new government. On October 25-26, 1917, the Second All-Russian Congress of Soviets met and established a new government, the Council of People's Commissars, creating the world's first Socialist state. The Bolsheviks, led by Vladimir Lenin, opposed traditional Russian statehood and the Russian Orthodox Church. Lenin advocated women's emancipation, seeking to liberate them from their role as domestic slaves by replacing the private family household with communal living. In a speech to the First All-Russia Congress of Working Women on November 18, 1918, Lenin proclaimed, "One of the first tasks of the Soviet Republic is to abolish all restrictions on women's rights." He went on to say how the status of women was comparable to that of a slave, claiming that only socialism could unbind women from their roles in the home and bring them into the working world. He blamed the Russian Orthodox Church. Lenin concluded that in the countryside the newly-enacted legislation for women's freedoms remained a "dead letter. The parish priest is harder to combat than the old legislation." He ended the speech by stating that success could only come if women took part.

The Bolshevichki (female Bolsheviks) played a prominent role in the revolution, though mainly at a lower level. Yet, their participation in the February 1917 bread riots remained critical in initiating the movement that led to "Red October." The Bolshevichki dedicated themselves and their lives to educating and leading the working class toward a socialist future of equality. One of their important tasks was "agitation," the spreading of the Party's message. The Party began to publish newspapers, and women spoke at campaigns. Under pressure from Lenin, the Party published the first issue of the newspaper Rabotnitsa (Woman Worker) in 1914, in time for Women's Day. Though Lenin pressed the women to publish it, he refused to write an article for it. Had he done so, Soviet scholars could have justified their claim that the journal was published on his initiative and functioned under his rule. The magazine continued publication until 1930 when Stalin dissolved it. Though short-lived, Rabotnitsa allowed these Bolshevichki to begin formulating their ideas for women's emancipation.

One very distinguished figure of the revolution was Alexandra Kollontai. She worked as a prominent member of the Bolshevik's 


first government. She entered the new Soviet government in 1917 as commissar for social services, becoming one of the first women in history to hold cabinet rank in a European government. The position enabled her to oversee the passage of new laws, which recognized equal rights between men and women. Between 1917 and 1927, the Soviet Government codified numerous laws aimed at freeing women. These new laws accorded women freedoms equal to men—freedoms they had never been given before. Soviet women became enfranchised. Marriage registration required mutual consent. Either partner could take the name of the other. (In fact, Leon Trotsky took the name of his wife, Sedov, for citizenship purposes.) The concept of illegitimate children was dissolved. Free and legal abortion became every woman's right. By 1927, marriage registration was no longer mandated, and divorce was easily obtainable at the request of one partner, with or without the knowledge of the other.

Alexandra Kollontai intrepidly advocated programs concerning communist sexual relations and the communal family. She also defended a woman's need for independence and a separate income. She believed that the independent working woman paved the way to the free woman. She promoted state-sponsored childcare over parental responsibility for children, going so far as to say that a pregnant woman belonged to the state because she "produces" a new unit of work.

In a series of articles published in Rabotnitsa, Kollontai argued, "Patriarchal ideas of male superiority and female subordination affected the love affairs of even the most independent women." She wrote that men treated women as possessions and women knew no other way of love than subordination. Her "glass of water theory" stated that "sex should be as unproblematic as drinking a glass of water." Many of the Bolsheviks though, including Lenin himself, disagreed with Kollontai's views on the new sexually liberated woman. The new sexual revolution became distorted as males began to abuse its ideals by demoralizing love and exploiting women for sex. Lenin and others regarded sexual liberation and the elimination of the family as distractions from socialism. They called for a liberated woman, while simultaneously requiring a family woman. As Engels stated in 1884, "the equality of women...will result far more effectively in the men becoming really monogamous than in the
women becoming polyandrous."

Another prominent female revolutionary, Inessa Armand, a French-born Communist who spent most of her life in Russia, is often overlooked in discussions of the Bolshevik Revolution. Remembered as Lenin’s alleged mistress, Armand made many contributions to the late imperial and early Soviet women’s movement. She began her political career in 1903, when she joined the Social Democratic Labour Party, illegal at the time. She became an “agitator” by spreading propaganda and other written materials, and was one of the first editors of the woman’s magazine *Rabotnitsa*. Her most important task was as Director of the Zhenotdel.

In 1919, Armond, together with Kollontai, established the Department for Work Among Women, or Zhenotdel, the first government department in the world established solely for women. During the 1920s, it conducted and distributed propaganda among working class women. This propaganda encouraged women to release the idea that they were inferior to men and to stand up for their political rights. With the help of Nadezhda Krupskaia, Lenin’s wife, the department published the magazine *Kommunistika* (Communist Woman). It swept news of the revolution to women all across Soviet Russia. The Bureau also worked in the countryside for literacy and welfare rights among the peasants. They attempted to bring women into the revolutionary process and promote their equality in public and private spheres. The Zhenotdel was used as a tool for educating and organizing women. It stressed that the only way for a woman to reach emancipation was through communal society.

By the end of the 1920s, the Zhenotdel, like other government departments formulated for women, had begun to lose momentum. The Bolshevik party began to edit its socialist ideals “to make them fit with a modernized patriarchalism.” It had changed its view from that of free love, communal living, and communal child rearing, to premarital chastity and a nuclear family bound together by love and respect. By the 1930s, the Party’s conception was that a woman should be an equal participant in society, whilst finding fulfillment in taking care of her family. She should be a citizen, worker, housekeeper, wife, and a mother. The department met its fate, however, in 1930 when Stalin dissolved it.
He stated, "All women's issues had been solved."\(^{28}\)

Even with the advances made by revolutionary women, and the efforts made of the Soviet regime, emancipation proved unsuccessful, as Russian was still submerged in its patriarchal traditions and ideals. No woman seemed able to overcome the fundamental disadvantage of being female.\(^{29}\) An interesting example is found in John Reed's *Ten Days That Shook the World*, in which he asks, "Are the women soldiers in the palace?" In the story, the captain answers, "Yes, they are in the back rooms, where they won't be hurt if any trouble comes."\(^{30}\) Male Bolsheviks held virtually all of the high-ranking and mid-range party offices. They formed alliances with men through men. The Bolshevichki steadily lost ground to male Bolsheviks in the party hierarchy.\(^{31}\) Many Bolshevichki also testified to male harassment they endured in the workplace.

Women comprised a significant portion of the workforce in Soviet Russia. In 1917, women constituted fifty-five percent of the labor force in Petrograd, but almost all worked in unskilled positions.\(^{32}\) According to Lenin, "In this work women must, and of course, will play the leading role."\(^{33}\) Unfortunately for women, leadership continued to remain in the hands of men.

In a letter to a Moscow women workers' celebration, Trotsky stated, "the problem of women's emancipation, both material and spiritual, is closely tied to that of the transformation of the family life."\(^{34}\) But the notion was not realized, and in the 1930s, a complete reversal in Soviet attitude towards women and family occurred. Many of the rights women gained during and after the revolution were eliminated. Female children learned special subjects in schools to prepare them for roles as mothers and housewives.\(^{35}\) In 1938, Trotsky explained the matter:

> The position of woman is the most graphic and telling indicator for evaluating a social regime and state policy. The October Revolution inscribed on its banner the emancipation of womankind and created the most progressive legislation in history on marriage and the family. This does not mean, of course, that a "happy life" was immediately in store for the Soviet Woman....Meanwhile, guided by its conservative instinct, the bureaucracy has taken alarm at the "disintegration" of the family.
It began singing panegyrics to the family supper and the family laundry, that is, the household slavery of women. To cap it all, the bureaucracy has restored criminal punishment for abortions, officially returning women to the status of pack animals. In complete contradiction to the ABCs of Communism, the ruling caste has thus restored the most reactionary and benighted nucleus of the class system, i.e., the petty bourgeois family.  

A second reason for the failure of women's rights was economic turmoil. The Russian Civil War broke out in the middle of 1918. The Bolsheviks saw it as a class-based war: proletariat versus bourgeoisie. During the civil war, all emphasis was placed on military matters. Many believed that they were "riding a revolutionary tide that was sweeping away old Russia." The war left the economy of Soviet Russia in shambles, bringing industry nearly to a standstill. The halt of industry added to consecutive droughts in 1920-22, which in turn, led to famine. In the countryside, peasants reportedly resorted to cannibalism. Women concentrated not on their own movement, but on the continuing struggle to survive. Endemic misery and material poverty hampered the socialist experiments. The Party called for women to work during the civil war. When the war ended, the men returned and took back their jobs, placing women back in the home. Lenin, along with the help of Nikolai Bukharin, attempted to help out the ruinous economy by introducing the New Economic Policy (NEP).  

The NEP, introduced in 1922 at the end of the Civil War, served as yet another reason for unsuccessful emancipation. The policy allowed a mixed economy with capitalism. Private property was reinstated in the countryside, in order to encourage the circulation of goods. The newly-hired labor force consisted of privileged specialists, government leaders, and foreigners, and constituted a serious setback for women. Approximately seventy percent of the job cutbacks during this period affected women. The NEP led to a slowdown in the movement towards women's emancipation, postponing the socialization of housework and communal living. Trotsky explained the matter by stating that society proved too poor and little cultured to take on the new experiments in socialized society. Prostitution, previously illegal, became common again.
As unemployment rose, so did the number of women on the streets. Under the NEP, more and more women’s organizations were criticized and shut down. 42

The situation once looked hopeful for women, then seemed to go backward. Any new freedoms enacted for women under Lenin’s government were repressed when Joseph Stalin came to power. Stalin abolished the Zhenotdel, declaring it useless, because he assumed women’s emancipation had already been achieved. 43 In 1936 abortion was illegalized once again—a visible Soviet effort to control women’s bodies.

The Stalinist regime placed a renewed emphasis on the family. The Soviet state became pro-family and pro-natalist, adopting the notion that women should find fulfillment in taking care of their families. The ideal Soviet wife contrasted with the Bolshevichki, “for not only did she confine herself to hearth and home, she was warmly maternal.” 44 The emphasis on women’s reproductive obligations in conjunction with women’s recruitment into the workforce left women with the double burden in Soviet society—responsibility for child rearing and domestic chores alongside full-time work outside the home. 45 This double burden placed on women affected their decisions about having children. That in turn frustrated the efforts of the Soviet regime to increase the birth rate. In the words of Trotsky, women were confined to the home in “suffocating cages… turning her into a slave, if not a beast of burden.” 46

After the death of Stalin in 1953, his successor Nikita Khrushchev enacted many women’s reforms that had been reversed by Stalin. Abortion was legalized again in 1955. Other laws enacted in 1965-68 made divorces easier to obtain by women. Maternity protection gave the expectant mother 56 days of maternity leave and 56 days after the birth. Khrushchev reinstated coeducation, abolished under Stalin. It seemed that women were back on the road again to equality. 47

The Bolshevik Revolution initially offered an opportunity to reshape patriarchal Russia, from a society filled with injustice and oppression into a society based on equality. The newly-established Bolshevik government self-consciously attempted to liberate women. However, an enormous gap loomed between the idea and reality. Russia was engulfed in economic collapse, political turmoil, and war. Also
Russians just could not let go of their patriarchal traditions. Peasant women continued to be subordinate to their husbands. Women in factory towns often lost their jobs to termination or layoffs before men. Male dominance continued to have a hold on all walks of life. Only a few women ever reached high political positions, but never the top. The “new” Soviet woman continued to be a servant to the regime. The sexist wolf of the tsarist past still survived, only now the wolf wore communist clothing. The idea of women having complete equality with men was only theory, and was never practiced in reality.

In *The Revolution Betrayed*, Trotsky sums up the matter by explaining how the October Revolution did fulfill its promise to women. The new Soviet government gave women many political and legal rights that men had. It all also worked to secure her access to all forms of cultural and economic work. However, even the boldest revolution “cannot convert a woman into a man—or rather, cannot divide equally between them the burden of pregnancy, nursing, and the rearing of children. No, the Soviet woman is not yet free.”

8 Figes, *A People’s Tragedy*, 308.
15 Clements, Bolshevik Women, 270.
16 Rossi, “The Emancipation of Women in Russia”
17 Trotsky, Women and the Family, 9.
19 Clements, Bolshevik Women, 213.
20 Pavla Vesela, “The Hardening of Cement”
21 Clements, Bolshevik Women, 214
23 R.C. Elwood, Inessa Armand: Revolutionary and Feminist, ix- xi.
24 Clements, Bolshevik Women, 207.
26 Bridenthal, Becoming Visible, 462.
27 Clements, Bolshevik Women, 274-276.
28 Clements, Bolshevik Women, 190.
30 Clements, Bolshevik Women, 159-161.
31 Bridenthal, Becoming Visible, 434.
32 Lenin, The Emancipation of Women, 82.
33 Trotsky, Women and the Family, 29.
34 Trotsky, Women and the Family, 10.
38 Bridenthal, Becoming Visible, 462.
39 Rossi, “The Emancipation of Women in Russia”
40 Bridenthal, Becoming Visible, 462.
41 Rossi, “The Emancipation of Women in Russia”
42 Clements, “The Utopian of the Zhenotdel,” 496.
43 Clements, Bolshevik Women, 276.
45 Trotsky, Women and the Family, 29.
46 Bridenthal, Becoming Visible, 467.
47 Trotsky, Women and the Family, 61-73.