

Battle and Bread: Biased Representations of Women in Histories of the Russian Revolution



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Since the 1960s, the emphasis on equality stimulated American academics to actively research women's role in the Russian Revolution.¹ The Western morals and ideals of 1960s influence research into women's part in the Russian Revolution to the detriment of the research. Russian women themselves, on the other hand, published lots of materials on their political power and potential as early as the 19th century showing what they aspired for in a revolution. I evaluate Russian women's aspirations – both leading intellectuals and *soldatki* – and then compare them to the Western lens. Using Russian women's own perspectives could help to correct the bias of contemporary Western academics allowing for a fuller picture of women in the Russian Revolution to appear.

The Western bias becomes apparent when compared with Russian women's own aspirations for revolution. When Western historians theorize on the success of the revolution, they clearly exclude the goals of the women themselves causing a reader to question what criteria the historians are using. It quickly becomes clear these criteria are Western concepts of gender equality which do not correspond to the Marxist gender analysis of Russian intellectuals. The bias of the historian raises the question of whether history better represents the studied time period or the time of writing.

Barbara Engels and Ziva Galili represent the development of late 20th century historians' perspective on the role of women in the Russian Revolution. Engels, in her overview of works relating to women in revolutionary Russia, posits that women gained greater power and equality during the early years of Revolution and Soviet rule, but then progress slowed and even reversed

¹ Barbara Engels, "Engendering Russia's History: Women in Post-Emancipation Russia and the Soviet Union," *Slavic Review* 51, no. 2 (1992): 309.

under Stalin's regime.² Engels points to legalization of abortion and divorce as progress and the New Family Code of 1926 as regression.³ Galili amends the two stage theory – one of success and one of failure – by lessening the distinction between the two. Galili suggests that feminism legislatively thrived in the early days of communism and that women's activism played a large role in Russian society, but the legislative changes actually reinforced the "cult of the family".⁴ Furthermore, Galili shows that the leaders of Soviet Russia did not prioritize women's equality and that progressive change was championed exclusively by women rather than men initiating gender equality policies.⁵ Eremeeva and Healey's study of women and violence in propaganda furthers this claim because they discovered that Russian art and propaganda during the Russian Revolution depicted women as the recipients of violence - a stereotyped image that reinforces gender roles rather than breaking them down.⁶ While on paper the Soviet government was radically changing society, it actually reinforced typical gender hierarchies and boundaries. Gatrell further delves into the evolution of women's roles in the Russian Revolution. Gatrell juxtaposes two parts of the Revolution: the "Epic" which signifies the grandiose aims of revolution and the "Domestic" which represents people's day to day private lives.⁷ To preserve the enormous ambition of a socialist revolution on a societal scale, the revolution sacrificed efforts to change lives on the smaller domestic scale.⁸ However, Gatrell does note that war opened opportunities to previously unavailable to women implying that there was some amount

² Engels, 316.

³ Engels, 317.

⁴ Ziva Galili, "Women and the Russian Revolution," *Dialectical Anthropology* 15, no. 2/3 (1990): 124

⁵ Galili, 122.

⁶ Anna Eremeeva, and Dan Healey, "Woman and Violence in Artistic Discourse of the Russian Revolution and Civil War (1912-1922)," *Gender & History* 16, no. 3 (November 2004): 742.

⁷ Peter Gatrell, "The Epic and the Domestic: Women and War in Russia, 1914–1917," In *Evidence, History and the Great War: Historians and the Impact of 1914-18*, (Berghahn Books, 2008): 211.

⁸ Gatrell, 211.

of liberation for women.⁹ The scholarly discussion evolved from a rigid two staged feminist revolution into a murkier timeline where women achieved some equality but gender equality always remained of secondary importance. The claims of Engels, Galili and Gatrell err in that they implicitly suggest progress narrative. In their analysis they assume an aim towards a gender equality represented through legislation ensures parity of treatment. Therefore, these historians look to institutions like the Zhenotdel, abortion and suffrage. This comes from the Western concept of an effective legislature designed to make laws that help their constituents. Russian women, on the other hand, looked to different answers to solve help them.

Russian women analyzed their own potential for revolutionary power. Two such tracts “The Woman Worker” by Nadezhda Konstantinovna Krupskaya and “The Social Basis of the Woman Question” by Alexandra Kollontai consider the role of women in early 20th century and how women can change it. Alexandra Kollontai advocated that socialism would lead to feminism in the early 20th century prior to the Russian Revolution. During the Soviet Union, Kollontai established the Zhenotdel – a organization focused on women’s affairs like education and child services – and became the first female ambassador for Russia.¹⁰ Krupskaya was Lenin’s wife and therefore represents an authority figure. Despite their authority and successes, they did not achieve all the aspirations of their socialist tracts.

“The Social Basis of the Woman Question,” one of Kollontai’s main works, connects feminism to socialism. Kollontai writes that female proletarian laborers and the bourgeoisie feminists clearly diverge in both tactics and end goals because “for the majority of women of the

⁹ Gatrell, 210.

¹⁰ Beatrice Brodsky Farnsworth, “Bolshevism, the Woman Question, and Aleksandra Kollontai,” *The American Historical Review* 81, no. 2 (1976): 299.

proletariat, equal rights with men would mean only an equal share in inequality.”¹¹ In Kollontai’s analysis, capitalism inherently enforces unequal rights, so true equality cannot be achieved within a capitalistic framework. Therefore, socialism leads to true women’s equality by eliminating class struggle in Kollontai’s analysis. Kollontai portrays issues of equality as an economic rather than social or political outcome. Further developing her economic lens, Kollontai ties the existence of feminism to the simple concept of “daily bread.”¹² She claims that Russian feminism – which to Kollontai means bourgeoisie women desiring equality for themselves but not the proletariat – results from middle class mothers needing additional income to combat the “impact of the monstrous successes of capitalism.”¹³ Doors shutting in the faces of the middle class women solely due to their gender caused them to band together under the label feminism in an attempt to ensure access to jobs that could provide “daily bread” for the family. Daily bread implicates the Christian Lord’s Prayer thereby connoting security and stability. The legislative equal opportunity of bourgeois feminists pales in significance compared to a living wage and safe working conditions for a proletariat woman. The proletariat women needs material necessities and tangible change not the philosophical victories of middle-class women. Kollontai surmises that a union with the bourgeoisie feminist would end when the bourgeoisie get their rights and the proletariat still has nothing. Instead, Kollontai believes proletarian women can struggle alone and still achieve victory. Kollontai joins socialism to women’s equality by suggesting that class differences suppress any possibility of true women’s equality and only socialism can end class conflict.

¹¹ Alexandra Kollontai, “The Social Basis of the Woman Question,” In *Selected Writings of Alexandra Kollontai*, trans. Alix Holt, (Connecticut: Lawrence Hill, 1977)

¹² Kollontai, “The Social Basis of the Woman Question.”

¹³ Kollontai, “The Social Basis of the Woman Question.”

Nadezhda Konstantinovna Krupskaya links socialism as the route to equality in Russia. Krupskaya contends – like Kollontai – that since the current horrible working conditions come from capitalism, socialism can solve them. Moreover, Krupskaya declares that a woman needs an independent wage to have true autonomy. Needing a husband’s salary to survive forces dependency on a woman. Krupskaya’s aspires to a socialist country where “all adult and healthy people will work, and it follows that that includes women” and therefore “all will share the benefits produced”¹⁴ in return. Socialism calls to two parts of Krupskaya’s identity – one as a worker and the other as a woman.¹⁵ Krupskaya admits legislative options could amend the crisis of the woman worker however she states that the current political structure prevents accomplishing these legislative options¹⁶. The struggle for equality should be joined with working class men but not with bourgeoisie feminists in Krupskaya’s analysis as well. The aims of these two leading intellectuals were the emancipation and equality of women. For these two intellectuals, women’s subjugation and low standard of living were the natural results of capitalist societies. Thus, the establishment of a socialist state would eliminate the issues of unfair living standards as well as emancipate women from an economic dependency on men. According to Krupskaya and Kollontai, women had to acquire economic capital to translate into social and political empowerment. This heavily differs from the Western historians who analyze legislative change to understand the Russian Revolution. Krupskaya and Kollontai suggest that an economic analysis of women in society more accurately reflects change and empowerment of women in the Russian Revolution, or possibly the lack there of.

¹⁴ Nadezhda Konstantinovna Krupskaya, *The Woman Worker*, trans. Mick Costello, (Britain: Russell Press, 2017), 12.

¹⁵ Krupskaya, 12.

¹⁶ Krupskaya, 20.

Working class women themselves had a different path to socialism. Sarah Badcock depicts the evolution of lower-class women by focusing on the *soldatki* – the wives of soldiers fighting in the World War I. These soldiers’ wives faced an economic crisis because prices inflated while their state allotted allowance stayed the same. The *soldatki* advocate for an increased allowance and the ability to not pay taxes to balance out the inflating prices.¹⁷ In response, the government legislated programs to help soldiers’ wives, however, the tsarist government could not truly enforce them. Following the February Revolution, the *soldatki* absorbed the ideals of “equality, freedom, and justice”¹⁸ into their goal in addition to economic livelihood. The local Soviets created after the February Revolution excluded women from governmental power causing them to create autonomous civil groups.¹⁹ These civil groups continued to apply pressure to make sure that the state helped them in the same way that their husbands helped the state on the battlefield. The *soldatki* were not political groups in that they did not promote a coherent and organized political agenda.²⁰ Rather they merely wanted an income and the resources necessary to care for a family. The *soldatki*’s political participation derives from their ability to show the state’s inability to function by being unable to provide for military families.²¹ *Soldatki*, therefore, did not look to socialism as a solution to all of societies flaws but rather as an alternative to the ineffectual rule of the tsars. The *soldatki* initially strove for a greater income to provide for the family whereas they later adopted the goals of justice and equity to the economic foundations of the movement. The *soldatki* exemplify the disconnect between the intellectuals who pushed for communism and the women who drove the revolution

¹⁷ Sarah Badcock, "Women, Protest, and Revolution: Soldiers' Wives in Russia During 1917," *International Review of Social History* 49, no. 1 (2004): 52.

¹⁸ Badcock, 55.

¹⁹ Badcock, 55.

²⁰ Badcock, 67.

²¹ Badcock, 54.

through protests and bread riots. Women intellectuals perceived a socialist revolution as the beginning of women's empowerment whereas lower-class women perceived revolution as an alternative to the failing tsarist state. Both groups desired stronger economic independence for women but intellectuals desired economic strength because it could be translated into social and political standing. The *soldatki*, on the other hand, already had social influence that they wanted to translate into financial certainty. Badcock focuses on political participation in a way the other historians did not. Rather than look for representation in government, she inspects the social capital that *soldatki* had through newspaper coverage. Badcock, in this way, highlights the economic nature of the *soldatki* movement because the newspapers consistently portrayed them as pitiful because they had no resources.²² Badcock, through analyzing lower-class movements and therefore scrutinizing the economics of revolution, develops an unrecognized aspect of the Russian Revolution pushing back on the Western bias. Regardless of the aspirational goals of revolution, these dreams did not come to fruition. Women's goals were slowly but consistently sidelined so that socialization of Russia could occur quickly and comprehensively.²³

The scholarly discussion on women in the Russian Revolution focuses on the implementation of Western concepts of gender equality. Russian feminist thinkers and *soldatki* themselves initially aimed for economic equality rather than political equality. Later, they hoped to transform economic capital into social and political equality but that is the final result, not the mechanism of revolution. Therefore, investigating women's economic empowerment during and subsequent to the Russian Revolution helps to evaluate the revolution's successes and failures in the initial stages. Bread exemplifies economic security. Rather than analyzing the Zhenotdel's

²² Badcock, 67.

²³ Gatrell, 211.

policies, or women's suffrage or abortion, understanding women's access to flour provides another perspective on how the revolution developed. A materialistic economic analysis of women in Russia may run contrary to Western bourgeois historians' definition of success but is that not exactly the thinking Kollontai wrote against? Realigning Western criteria for evaluating the successes of the Russian Revolution to better fit the needs of the society it came from provides a complementary history to more accurately depict the Russian Revolution.

Bread is just flour and water yet its absence sparks revolutions across the globe. Perhaps, the absence of bread represents the failure of society intruding upon the home space – a space of seclusion and unity that without bread fractures. Perhaps, it is not political oppression or paradigm shifting events that causes the overthrow of the old way of life. Perhaps, revolutions stem from the mere failure of the home to provide refuge from the outside world. Once the sacred domicile is violated, peaceful protest no longer suffices. Then mobilization, organization and cooperation become necessary to drastically change the fundamental concepts that ground society. The lack of bread in Russia indicated the violation of the home space, and women saw this breach first, so they instigated a revolution rallying around the universal concept of bread. A bread revolution is a people's revolution; it comes from the bottom up, not the top down. A loaf of bread after a hard day's work may be the perfect sign of a revolution's success.

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