

8. Women's liberation and the Russian revolution

The Russian revolution advanced women's liberation more than any other event in modern history.

Women were makers of the Russian revolution. They were not revolutionary "brides" "handmaidens", "daughters", "midwives" or any other derogatory appellation found in many history books. They were active participants and *as a group* integral to the revolutionary process. As a woman Moscow textile worker recalled with pride: "We carried the revolution on our shoulders. And we didn't give in!" Aleksandra Kollontai, probably the most prominent woman socialist during the 1917 revolution, told a women's conference a year after the seizure of power: "The conclusion to the story is that women can do anything".¹

Socialist feminists were central to leading the revolution. Strong, determined Bolshevik women, political activists and intellectuals in their own right, made a positive contribution to the revolution. In fact the RSDLP was the best place in Russian society where women could find emancipation from patriarchal traditions. Historians such as Barbara Evans Clements, Jane McDerimid, Anna Hillyar and Katy Turton have demonstrated how these "Bolshevik feminists" fought for women's liberation as an integral part of their fight for socialism. Women such as Kollontai formulated a vibrant Marxist-feminist outlook, raising questions and seeking answers to matters that remain central in today's conditions.²

The role of women in the Russian revolution is an integral part of the whole story and every chapter of this book. But the considerable part played by Bolshevik feminists is explored in more detail in this chapter. It reiterates the irreplaceable role women played throughout 1917, describes some prominent women leaders, and examines how Bolshevik women (*'Bolshevichki'*) organised, building on the tradition of organising working-class women established by the German SPD. It assesses the achievements and limits of the Bolshevik government in the realm of women's freedom. It evaluates the theoretical contribution of women revolutionaries — especially Kollontai — which speak to contemporary socialist feminist debates. The legacy of Bolshevik feminism is a vital resource for anyone fighting for women's liberation today.

Women — makers of the 1917 revolution

Conventional histories of the Russian revolution typically ignore or downplay the role of women. In an important book about the women's liberation movement in Russia, historian Richard Stites claims that during the revolutionary year of 1917, women acted only as the initiators of the February revolution and as defenders of the Provisional Government in October. He argues that women did not walk the corridors of power and were not therefore involved in the important decisions that changed the course of history. He concludes "there is no sense in trying to magnify the role played by the female half of the population [during 1917]".³ Stalinist histories are little better, at best portraying women as "Lenin's little helpers", subordinates who merely carried out the will of the glorious leader. Yet women played an enormous part in making the Russian revolution the festival of the oppressed it was. It is worth reiterating events from previous chapters in more depth and adding some personal examples to emphasis this.

The proportion of women in the industrial workforce as a whole soared in Russia from 27% in 1914 to 43% in 1917. The numbers of women factory workers rose from 732,000 in 1914 to more than a million at the onset of revolution. By January 1917, around 130,000 women worked in Petrograd factories, while there were approximately 80,000 employed as domestic servants, 50,000 office workers and another 50,000 as shop workers. On the cusp of the revolution, women workers were also spending on average 40 hours a week simply queuing for food. As McDermid and Hillyar put it: "Women did not 'take to the streets' in 1917, they already spent much of the time there, travelling, working, socialising, on errands, queuing, scouring for provisions, looting, rioting and 'gossiping'".⁴

Women sparked the revolution that overthrew the tsar in February 1917 and it was social democratic women who took the lead. The RSDLP had established a Petrograd women's circle and it was this circle that decided that international women's day should be commemorated with an anti-war demonstration. Four years earlier, socialist women had celebrated international women's day for the first time in Russia and, in February 1915, a brief appeal was issued, signed by the "Organisation of Women Workers of the RSDLP", indicating the involvement of Bolshevik, Mezhraionka and other socialist women.

On 23 February 1917 (8 March in the western calendar), various factory meetings were organised across Petrograd. Revolutionary socialist agitators addressed those gatherings, calling on women work-

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ers to demonstrate. Female textile workers from the Vyborg district called for strikes, arguing that women carried an excessive workload while working in the factory and caring for children. They convinced male workers to join the strike and then rallied support by marching to other factories and calling out other workers.

Nina Agadzhanova, a member of the RSDLP since 1907 and with a decade of underground revolutionary activity, worked as a machine operator at Novyi Promet factory. Agadzhanova and Mariia Vydrina organised mass meetings at the factory and fought to bring the workers out to join the strikes. Anastasia Deviatkina, a Bolshevik since 1904, organised and led the demonstration of women workers and soldiers' wives on international women's day. Striking women workers from the Sampsonievskaja cotton-spinning mill brought out workers from the Ludwig Nobel factory. I M Gordienko, a male Bolshevik activist working there, remembered how "masses of militant women workers flooded the narrow street. Those who noticed us began to wave their hands and shouted, 'Come on out! Down your tools!' Snowballs were thrown through windows. We decided to join the demonstration. A short meeting took place at the main office by the gates, and the workers went out onto the street".

The strikers marched to the central district of Petrograd. Confronted by Cossacks, they surrounded them and described their miserable situation, exploited for profits while their men were slaughtered, pointing out that the Cossacks too had mothers, wives and sisters and children suffering from such privation. They convinced soldiers to refuse to fire on the crowds. A Bolshevik woman worker, Arishina Kruglova, described one encounter between her factory and soldiers: "A detachment of Cossacks bore down on us quickly. But we did not waver; we stood in a solid wall as though turned to stone... The soldiers... lowered their rifles... Someone at the rear yelled: 'Cossacks, you are our brothers, you can't shoot us'. And the Cossacks turned their horses around".⁵ Through such courage, the tsarist state crumbled and the autocracy was ended.

But February was not the end of women's involvement. Many continued to organise, some becoming delegates to local and city-wide soviets. Some took part in factory committees and participated in strikes. In May 1917, 40,000 Petrograd women laundry workers struck for increased wages, the eight-hour day and for more machinery to lighten their load. They were led by Sofia Goncharskaia, Bolshevik leader of the union of laundry workers. In May, women constituted a significant proportion of the participants in a prolonged strike of 350 workers in dye and dry clean premises along with

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around another 150 sales people from affiliated shops in Petrograd. In June, mostly women workers in the capital's teashops and restaurants also took strike action.⁶

The Bolshevik party had to catch up with the militancy shown by women workers in February 1917. On 19 March a demonstration sponsored by the bourgeois League for Women's Equality marched to the Tauride Palace to demand the Provisional Government support full civil rights for women. When Kollontai spoke at the rally, the crowd hooted down her criticism of bourgeois feminism. The Bolshevik Inessa Armand attended as an observer at a preparatory meeting in May 1917 for an all-Russian women's congress, proposed by the League for Women's Equality. She gave a speech claiming that proletarian women had nothing in common with bourgeois women and should have nothing to do with the proposed congress; Armand led a walkout of six other worker-representatives.

In 1917, the *Bolshevichki* engaged in all the activities that prepared the way for their party's seizure of power in October. As Clements has put it, "they made speeches, wrote newspaper articles, served as soviet and дума delegates, did clerical work, ran committees, and, in the autumn... built bombs and trained with pro-Bolshevik militia units, the Red Guards". As they had in the past, "*Bolshevichki* did what was needed, with little regard being given to their gender". The revolution "actually intensified the party's longstanding practice of engaging women in all its activities". In March 1917, the Petrograd committee of the party recognised the need and potential for systematic work among women. A bureau was set up and resumed publication of *Rabotnitsa* (*Woman Worker*) newspaper, which had first appeared before the war. It was, however, emphasised that no independent women's organisation was being formed. The women who edited and wrote for *Rabotnitsa* organised women workers and soldiers' wives throughout Petrograd, including a school to prepare women as agitators in their own workplaces. McDermid and Hillyar argue that "*Rabotnitsa* played a crucial role," reaching thousands of women and helping to "pressure male workers into recognising women as comrades in their struggle". A similar paper, *Zhizn rabotnitsy* (*The Women Workers' Life*), was established in Moscow.⁷

The Bolshevik party fought to have women represented on factory committees and acted within the metal workers' union to challenge patriarchal attitudes and tactics that discriminated against women. Bolshevik women participated in many of the great events of 1917. Liudmila Stal, who had joined the RSDLP in 1898, was a party agitator in Petrograd. From August 1917 Stal worked as an editor of *Pro-*

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letarshoe delo, a Kronstadt newspaper, and as a member of the party executive committee. Liza Pylaeva, who had joined the Bolshevik party in February 1917, succeeded in smuggling Bolshevik party documents in a basket to evade soldiers during the repression of the July days. Pylaeva was the only female on the eight-member inter-district committee of the Socialist Union of Working Youth in Petrograd, which held a conference on 18 August. (Of the eight, four were Bolsheviks, two non-party and two anarchists.)

Traditional histories focus on Mariia Bochkareva, who led the women's battalion that defended the Provisional Government in its last days at the Winter Palace. Such histories, hostile to the revolution, focus on Bochkareva because she was not fighting for women's rights, but to continue the war effort. By contrast, thousands of Bolshevik women who took part in the seizure of power are often ignored. In the October revolution, Bolshevik women carried arms. Large numbers took part in the October revolution, fighting in the Red Guards, serving in their medical brigades and maintaining communications. Arishina Kruglova, who joined the RSDLP in 1905, organised Red Guards in her area and, during the October revolution, raided wealthier districts of the city in search of weapons and helped with local medical work. Mariia Avilova, who joined the party a year before the revolution, headed Red Guard units during October 1917. Elena Giliarova, who represented soldiers on the Petrograd soviet, ran first aid courses and trained female Bolsheviks and sympathisers to join the Red Guards. Evgeniia Adamovich and Feodosiia Drabkina, both RSDLP members since 1903, worked in the Petrograd military revolutionary committee, organising the actual seizure of power in October. Elena Rozmirovich, a party member since 1904, worked from Smolny.⁸

Perhaps the most graphic incident in 1917 involved the Bolshevik Evgeniia Bosh, who addressed the Keksgolm regiment of the second guard's corps (known as "the wild division") in central Ukraine when they were on leave from frontline duty. Bosh spent two hours haranguing a thousand battle-hardened soldiers about the evils of the Provisional Government and the necessity of replacing it with a soviet government. The men listened attentively and asked her questions for a further two hours. When Bosh finally told the soldiers that she had to leave, the company's musical band rushed off to find its instruments and the wild division escorted her to her car with hurrahs and music. They would later fight for the Bolsheviks under Bosh's leadership.⁹

What characterised the *Bolshevichki* in 1917? Clements argues that

they adhered to the collective identity of the RSDLP and its Bolshevik faction. Russia's social democrats saw themselves as "a band of comrades armed with a powerful understanding of their world, whose purpose it was to educate the workers and provide them with leadership in the coming revolution". This collective identity consisted of, first, "a worldview that embraces a conception of the world as it really is and an alternative vision of what it might ideally become". A second element was "a conceptualisation of the movement itself that lays out the proper spheres of action for the movement and its goals and defines the proper character of members". The third element was "the movement's group memory, that is, shared interpretations of common experiences". In particular, the ethic that Bolshevik women valued most was *tverdaia*, which meant hard, firm, and steadfast. A *tverdaia* revolutionary woman was tough, durable and "hard-as-a-rock". But to be hard was "to think rationally, to examine facts and draw conclusions in a disciplined, logical way. It was also to be realistic, strong-willed and goal-orientated".¹⁰

This attitude and outlook is clear from the biographies of the most prominent Bolshevik women during the revolutionary period. A decade after the October revolution, Kollontai reflected on the women who had played a leading role in the revolution. Kollontai highlighted the roles of Nadezhda Krupskaya, Inessa Armand, Elena Stasova, Klavdiia Nikolaeva, Konkordiia Samoiloova, Vera Slutskaya, Evgeniia Bosh, Varvara Iakovleva, Anna Elizarova and Mariia Ulianova.¹¹ Their biographies show how they forged their Marxist credentials through decades of shared revolutionary work, legal and underground, imprisonment and exile, writing and distributing publications, arguing, convincing and persuading workers to join the struggle — and, most of all, building the party.

What did the Russian revolution do for women?

What did the workers' state do for women? On the second anniversary of the October revolution, Lenin claimed that "in the course of two years of Soviet power in one of the most backward countries of Europe more has been done to emancipate women, to make her the equal of the 'strong' sex, than has been done during the past 130 years by all the advanced, enlightened, 'democratic' republics of the world taken together".¹² After the Bolsheviks took power, they scrapped old, reactionary laws. They legislated for full legal and political equality for women, including the right to divorce and the right to vote. The Bolsheviks wanted to liberate women from the burden of housework and tackle wartime shortages, so they established communal

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kitchens, laundries, schools and nurseries. They introduced rights such as two months paid maternity leave and paid nursing breaks for mothers at work to breastfeed their babies. They ran education campaigns against oppressive religious authorities, both Christian and Muslim.

In November 1917, a month after the revolution, two decrees established civil marriage and allowed for divorce at the request of either partner. The code on marriage, the family and guardianship, ratified in October 1918, established a new doctrine based on individual rights and the equality of the sexes. The new family code eliminated the distinction between “legitimate” and “illegitimate” children. It allowed women to claim child support from men, whether they were married to them or not. The code also established the right of each spouse to their own property and the right of all children to parental support until the age of 18. The Bolsheviks also abolished all laws against homosexual acts and other consensual sexual activity, with the new law based on the principle of “the absolute non-interference of the state and society into sexual matters, so long as nobody is injured, and no one’s interests are encroached upon”. The framers of the new law recognised that this was not socialist law as such, but rather transitional and preparatory for further improvements.

During the first months of soviet power decrees were passed aimed at improving the material conditions of life for working-class women. One decree ordered all lying-in hospitals and all centres, clinics and institutes of gynaecology and midwifery be transferred to the Department for the Protection of Mother and Child. Medical services for expectant mothers would be organised on the basis that medical assistance be available to all mothers in need, doctors be paid a state salary, and expectant and nursing mothers would be protected against being practised upon by unskilled midwives and medical students. The decree also replaced one-year midwifery courses with two-year courses. The same decree ordered the creation of a model Palace of Motherhood — the conversion of all the lying-in hospitals and children’s homes in Moscow and Petrograd into one general institution and the renaming of children’s homes. In November 1920, the Bolshevik government became the first in the world to legalise abortion, although it was motivated as a temporary necessity due to the perilous state of the country for raising children, rather than in terms of women’s reproductive choice.¹³

Under the pressure of the dire economic and social circumstances of the civil war, the functions of the family were transferred to the

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state. The threat of starvation in the urban centres forced the government to establish control over food supplies and by 1920 hundreds of thousands of working-class families were eating in state canteens. At one point in 1921, over 90% of Moscow residents ate in public dining halls. Communal laundries were established in larger towns and nurseries and kindergartens were created to care for pre-school children. But the arrangements were not simply made by exigency: they fitted with the Bolsheviks' vision of a new, equalitarian society. For example, Trotsky advocated collective housekeeping units set up by the "most enterprising and progressive families" as a way out of the present deadlock, a way to jump from the "realm of necessity to the realm of freedom".¹⁴

The workers' government also used the power of the state to enforce equality in the face of religious opposition, against both Christian and Muslim authorities. On 17 December 1917, the soviet government abolished the existing legal system and established elected people's courts. In Turkestan, where the population was almost entirely Muslim, the Bolshevik government at first tried to abolish the old system of sharia law, but then retreated to allow its use as long as it did not contradict soviet law. The election of judges was brought in but removed in 1922, in part because it reinforced the power of religious authorities. From 1925, the sovietisation of central Asia led to rapid decline in religious courts. Between 1924 and 1928 customary practices such as the abduction of women and the payment of ransom were outlawed. Practices such as polygamy, the marriage of pre-pubescent girls and vendetta were forbidden, while women's right to testify as witnesses was enforced. Education in medressahs and cheders was attacked.

From 1926, the increasingly bureaucratized regime organised mass demonstrations where women were forcibly unveiled and weddings invaded to prevent arranged marriages. Communist Party women's sections were empowered to intrude into a person's private life, to carry out family hygiene campaigns and set up women's clubs. This was part of a pattern of retreat from the earlier emancipatory goals of revolution in many areas of gender relations.¹⁵

The Bolshevik government also made a qualitative step forward in the realm of sexual politics and more specifically, in increasing the freedom of lesbians and gay men. Historian Dan Healey has demonstrated how the early workers' government tore up the old, reactionary tsarist laws against sodomy that had been used to persecute gay men in Russia, and instead deliberately chose not to legislate in matters of sexual freedom, effectively legalising same sex relations.

The Bolsheviks did not make a specific theoretical contribution to the question of homosexual emancipation. However, they inherited the German social democratic tradition of practical support for sodomy decriminalisation. SPD leader August Bebel was among the first signatories to Magnus Hirschfeld's petition to repeal paragraph 175 of the German criminal code against male same-sex acts and the first politician to speak in the Reichstag in favour of this campaign in 1898.

Hence within weeks of coming to power the Bolsheviks began revising the criminal code. When this was finally revised and published in 1918, it omitted the previous references to sodomy found in tsarist law. In 1923 Nikolai Semashko, the commissar of health, visited Hirschfeld's Institute for Sex Research with a delegation of Russian doctors. The Institute's journal reported that Semashko stated how pleased he was that in the new Russia, the former penalty against homosexuals had been completely abolished. In 1925, the Bolshevik social hygienist Grigorii Batkis published *The Sexual Revolution in Russia*, which stated that in the USSR homosexuality was a private matter, to be treated like so-called "natural" intercourse". Batkis and other Soviet representatives contributed to Hirschfeld's World League for Sexual Reform and were praised for the decriminalisation of male homosexuality. Kollontai was a member of the League's international committee of directors.¹⁶ Healey highlights a legal case of a woman who had lived as a man since the revolution and who had married another woman in 1922. As late as 1927, the courts recognised the marriage as legal because it was concluded by mutual consent. Without exaggerating these achievements or ignoring their limitations — given the conditions of conflict and social deprivation in the civil war that followed the revolution these measures were difficult to implement — it is important to recognise the practical steps made by the first workers' state.

How did Bolshevik women organise?

How and why did *Bolshevichki* organise in the way they did? Why were they apparently so implacably hostile to the feminists of their time? Above all else, Bolshevik women were inspired to organise by the model they had witnessed pioneered by the German SPD. Kollontai published a pamphlet, 'Women Workers Struggle for their Rights' (1919), which is a venerable eulogy of the German working-class women's movement. Without ambiguity, she argued the German example was the one Russian Bolsheviks should follow. In particular she was inspired by the SPD leader August Bebel's book *Woman and Socialism* and by Clara Zetkin's organisational work.

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Zetkin edited the party's women's paper *Die Gleichheit (Equality)*, supported women organisers, special women's conferences, and autonomous women's organisation within the party.¹⁷

Zetkin also convened international women's organisation, starting from a caucus at the Second International's congress in 1896. The first official international women's conference took place at the instigation of German SPD women at Stuttgart in 1907. Some 58 delegates from 15 countries discussed voting rights for women and the forms of international cooperation between socialist women's organisations throughout the world. The second international women's conference met at Copenhagen in 1910, with almost 100 representatives from 17 countries. The conference was notable for its resolution to introduce an international women's day. Although events and demonstrations had been held before, for example in the USA, international women's day was celebrated for the first time on 19 March 1911 in Austria, Denmark, Germany, and Switzerland. As more women from more countries joined in, 8 March became established as the international women's day. A third international women's conference was planned to coincide with the tenth international socialist congress, scheduled for Vienna in August 1914. However, both foundered on the outbreak of the First World War.¹⁸

Bebel had referred to bourgeois feminists as "enemy sisters" and this was reinforced by the hostility they expressed towards the SPD. In 1903, Anita Augspurg, president of the German Union for Women's Suffrage, denounced the SPD, preferring to support the liberal People's Party and other bourgeois parties. However, Kollontai was aware of the growing bureaucratisation of the SPD, which she denounced in her book, *Around Workers' Europe* (1912). Although the SPD had around 175,000 women members by 1914, (around 16%), it had closed the women's bureau. Zetkin continued to insist that the socialist women's movement still required "a certain measure of independence and freedom of movement". Despite these reversals in Germany, the seeds of an autonomous working-class women's movement had been planted internationally.¹⁹

Kollontai explained the organisational lessons she had learned from the international experience in her *Social Basis of the Woman Question* (1909). She wrote that "we must ask ourselves whether a single united women's movement is possible in a society based on class contradictions". She argued that "the women who take part in the liberation movement do not represent one homogeneous mass". Rather, women are divided (like men) into two camps: "the interests and aspirations of one group of women bring it close to the bourgeois

class, while the other group has close connections with the proletariat, and its claims for liberation encompass a full solution to the woman question". Although both camps called for women's liberation, "their aims and interests are different. Each of the groups unconsciously takes its starting point from the interests of its own class, which gives a specific class colouring to the targets and tasks it sets itself".

Kollontai's view was nuanced, recognising that they were living through a period where a broad social movement of women was taking place. She accepted that in certain circumstances short-term campaigns and demands made by women of all classes could coincide. However, "the final aims of the two camps, which in the long term determine the direction of the movement and the tactics to be used, differ sharply". While feminists believed that the achievement of equal rights with men within the framework of the contemporary capitalist world represents a sufficient end in itself, "equal rights at the present time are, for the proletarian women, only a means of advancing the struggle against the economic slavery of the working class". The feminists saw men as the main enemy, for men had "unjustly seized all rights and privileges for themselves, leaving women only chains and duties". Working class women had a different attitude. They did not see "men as the enemy and the oppressor; on the contrary, they think of men as their comrades, who share with them the drudgery of the daily round and fight with them for a better future". Kollontai accepted that "several specific aspects of the contemporary system lie with double weight upon women". However working-class woman and her male comrade "are enslaved by the same social conditions; the same hated chains of capitalism oppress their will and deprive them of the joys and charms of life". If that was true, then "a woman can possess equal rights and be truly free only in a world of socialised labour, of harmony and justice" — in other words, a socialist society. This final aim did not prevent working-class women from fighting "to improve their status even within the framework of the current bourgeois system". However, they also recognised these efforts are "constantly hindered by obstacles that derive from the very nature of capitalism". The feminists were "unwilling and incapable of understanding this". In such circumstances, unity with the feminists was not possible.²⁰

However, Bolshevik women also faced opposition and indifference by their own male comrades towards their organising efforts. Again Kollontai confronted the attitudes of some working-class revolutionaries, who contested the need for a women's socialist movement. They asked: "What is a women workers' movement? What are

its tasks, its aims? Why can't it merge with the general movement of the working class, why can't it be dissolved in the general movement, since the social democrats deny the existence of an independent women's question? Isn't it a hangover from bourgeois feminism?" Kollontai replied that "a woman worker is not only a member of the working class, but at the same time she is a representative of one entire half of the human race". Socialists, demanding equal rights for women in state and society, "do not shut their eyes to the fact that the woman's responsibilities towards the social collective society, will always be somewhat different to men's. The woman is not only an independent worker and citizen — at the same time she is a mother, a bearer of the future". Kollontai recognised that while working-class women were exploited in the same systematic way as working-class men (although frequently more savagely exploited), the role of the family and the state towards women, as well as bourgeois ideology, gave rise to specific forms of oppression. Separate women's organisation (through intra-party collectives, commissions, women workers' bureaux and so on) should carry out "special agitational work adapted to the level of the questions women want to have answered" so as to recruit women to revolutionary struggle, as well as putting forward demands that tackle the specific forms of oppression faced by women as women in capitalist society.²¹

The *Bolshevichki* almost certainly would have rejected the title "Bolshevik feminists", although in our time this label appears apposite. Bolshevik women may have baulked at the epithet not because they were opposed to women's liberation, but because the meaning of "feminism" in the epoch they grew up in was different to the modern connotation. In their time, there was no mass women's movement, of the kind that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s in many parts of the world. Feminism in the early twentieth century meant mostly the campaign by upper and ruling class women to gain equal rights for themselves — although many of the women from this social layer, suffering a lack of status in society, would be drawn into radical politics. However, the organisations of bourgeois feminists were implacably hostile to these social democratic parties, did not make alliances with them, nor seek to vote for them where they operated in conditions of legality. And the socialist movement that Bolshevik women were part of was very different from today's fragmented left. Therefore the hostility towards "feminism" and the scepticism about separate women's organisation have to be seen in that context. Bolshevik women also faced indifferent and at times hostile male socialists who dominated the parties they belonged to. The argument at

the time was about the political independence of the mass working-class movement and the tactics of how a mass working-class political party with power foreseeable and in sight should relate to other organisations. They would not concede ground to those that opposed them organisationally, politically and ideologically. Bolshevik women had to navigate between the perils of bourgeois feminism and socialist "economism" to carve out their autonomous organisation. They came to their conclusions based on their own experience and the best international examples — notably from Germany.

In 1914, the Bolshevik faction decided to begin publication of the women's paper *Rabotnitsa*, on the initiative of Inessa Armand. The general upsurge in the strike movement after 1912 was reflected in greater militancy among working-class women. *Rabotnitsa* was designed to be a legal publication to help with the tasks of organising women workers. The editorial board was arrested on the eve of the first issue, but Anna Elizarova succeeded in editing and then printing 12,000 copies. The journal appeared seven times, between February and June 1914, before it was banned. The editorial of the first issue declared that women's place in society was determined by class divisions rather than sexual differences. Thus, the woman question centred on how to make women "comrades in the common struggle quickly. The solidarity between working men and women, the common cause, the common goals, and the common path to these goals: such is the resolution of the 'woman question' for the working class". But the journal also pointed to the double burden of women's work, being responsible for the housework as well as having a job outside the home. Although Armand was critical of the contents of the first issues and of the decision to print Menshevik reports, the paper was a breakthrough in putting the woman question on the party's agenda.²²

Russian women's organisation during 1917

After the overthrow of the tsar, the Petrograd committee of the Bolshevik party decided to organise systematically among working women. The publication of the journal *Rabotnitsa* resumed, although local party leaders stressed that it was not an independent women's organisation. Liudmilla Stal noted that despite the German model, the women experienced some resistance from some male party workers. When Kollontai argued for a dedicated women's bureau at the April Bolshevik conference, the party prevailed on her to withdraw the resolution. As the economic situation worsened after June, with

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falling wages, spiralling inflation, and increasing unemployment, *Rabotnitsa* upbraided some factory committees that tried to force women workers whose husbands, brothers or fathers worked in the same factory to leave their jobs. According to McDermid, “the Bolsheviks argued in terms of class solidarity, wanting the men to treat the women as equal members of the working class”. Krupskaya and Armand addressed women in special pamphlets and at meetings, as well as through the pages of *Rabotnitsa*, on the need for female involvement in the struggle against counter-revolution.

The editors of *Rabotnitsa* in Petrograd called a conference of working women for 25 October 1917, but it was postponed because of the seizure of power. The conference took place on 12 November when more than 500 women — many of them not belonging to the Bolshevik party — showed up to approve the Bolshevik regime. Armand attempted to call an all-Russian congress of working women in February 1918, but it was postponed until May and then downgraded to a Moscow city conference when only 130 attended. *Rabotnitsa* ceased publication in January 1918, so the Bolshevik women’s movement did not have its own paper for two and half years. Instead it had to make do with special “women’s pages” in the regular party press. However, the first all-Russian working women’s conference convened in November 1918 was a great success, with more than 1,100 delegates arriving, when only 300 had been expected for accommodation.

In 1918, the party established the new central commission for agitation and propaganda among working women, chaired by Armand and assisted by Kollontai and Samoiloova. In August 1919 the party leaders decided to replace the commission with a new women’s section of the central committee (*zhenotdel*) and to make Armand its first director. In spring 1920, Armand prepared a new monthly publication, entitled *Kommunistka*. The first double issue of 30,000 copies came out in July 1920. During the civil war, *zhenotdel* concentrated on winning the support of women for the Red Army and the party. During the famine of 1921, it focused on relief work. McDermid argues that “*zhenotdel* was not simply a proletarian version of the pre-revolutionary feminist philanthropy”.

It sought above all “to raise women’s consciousness, to educate them and to make them active participants in their own right, and on a massive scale, in the knowledge that they had the full support of the state”. *Zhenotdel* published simply-worded magazines addressed specifically to women. It also set up day-care and eating facilities, as well as organising consumer and producer cooperatives. By 1928

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“zhenotdel had offices in every region of the Soviet Union. It had even penetrated the Soviet East where the opposition to the emancipation of women was fierce and often savage”.²³ In the space of a decade, the Bolshevik feminists had built a vibrant working class-based women’s movement within the ruling workers’ party and within the Russian workers’ state.

The communist women’s movement

The *Bolshevichki* were internationalists to the core and their success in Russia meant they simultaneously helped to create the international communist women’s movement. Armand and Kollontai had been instrumental in helping Zetkin to call the international women’s conference in March 1915, the first official gathering to oppose the First World War. Hundreds of thousands of working-class women around the globe rallied to the Russian revolution and, despite the efforts of the great imperialist powers and the old tsarist army, the workers’ state survived. The founding congress of the third, communist international in March 1919 passed a resolution written by Kollontai, which stated that “the dictatorship of the proletariat can be won and maintained only with the energetic and active participation of working-class women”.²⁴

The first international conference of communist women was held on 30 July-2 August 1920, during the second Comintern congress. Armand organised the conference, drawing up the agenda, drafting the resolutions and writing a background brochure for delegates. However, Elwood describes the event as a “small and undistinguished gathering in Moscow. Kollontai, Krupskaja, Balabanoff and Zetkin... were conspicuous by their absence”. The 21 delegates who did attend the opening ceremony in the Bolshoi theatre “were outnumbered by the women factory workers observing the proceedings from the surrounding balconies”. The theses ‘For the communist women’s movement’ were drawn up for presentation to the world congress but were considered instead by the ECCI, which published them later in 1920. The appeal ‘To the working women of the world’ condemned the triple slavery faced by the majority of humanity, with women burdened “by the cares of housework, cooking and child rearing”. It also praised the soviet republic for creating thousands of crèches, nurseries, children’s homes, canteens and kindergartens. The ‘Theses on the development of work among women of all countries’, edited by Zetkin, argued that the communist international carried forward “on a higher historical plane” the work that “the Second International began but was unable to carry out consistently”. Communist parties

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were instructed to take special measures and establish special institutions to reach women. These included women's agitation committees in branches (with men allowed to join), a women's page in every party newspaper, a national women's secretariat, a regular theoretical women's magazine and a national women's conference. An international women's secretariat was established and associated with the executive committee of the Comintern, with its own publication and structures.²⁵

The second international conference of communist women was held in Moscow, on 9-15 June 1921, on the eve of the third Comintern congress. Zetkin made a report to the Comintern congress, explaining that 82 delegates from 28 countries had attended the women's gathering. She reiterated the arguments made at previous conferences: "There is no special communist women's organisation. There is only a movement, an organisation of communist women inside the communist party, together with the communist men"; "we do not in the slightest lose sight of the common interests and struggle of proletarian men and women"; "we welcome it when the women's committees include men, with their greater political experience and knowledge". She criticised the bureaucratic leaders of the socialist parties and trade unions, who had "triplely betrayed the interests of employed women", by abandoning the struggle for 'equal pay for equal work', for approving the expulsion of women from employment after the war and for failing to struggle against the "crying injustice" of less unemployment compensation for women. Kollontai also spoke about women's distinctive role in society and pointed to the example of Soviet Russia, where the task was "training women to undertake active, creative work and placing them in responsible posts".

The third Comintern congress approved the 'Theses on methods and forms of work of the communist parties among women' on 8 July 1921. The main resolution stated that "there is no special women's question, nor should there be a special women's movement". Communism would be won "not by the united efforts of women of different classes, but by the united struggle of all the exploited". It continued that the Comintern "is strongly opposed to forming separate, special women's associations within the party or the trade unions, or in the form of a special women's organisation. However, it nonetheless recognised the need for the Communist parties to use special methods of work among women. It therefore recognises that it is appropriate to create special organs to carry out this work inside all Communist parties".²⁶ This seemed like a step back from previous modes of organisation.

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The fourth Comintern congress discussion on women in 1922 was brief and did not raise any significant new theoretical questions. However, the speeches explained how the women's section's work was to be integrated with other party work. Zetkin spoke once again of the need for autonomous organisation, reflecting that "however much communist work among women must be firmly linked ideologically and organically to the life of each party, we nonetheless need special bodies to carry out this work". She argued that "every man is welcome to take part in the special communist work carried out among women. That applies to our committees as well as to our entire activity in its various expressions and arenas". Zetkin approved of the work of women comrades in Italy, who she lauded for having founded groups for "sympathising women". And she argued that it was vital for communist parties in colonial and semi-colonial countries to carry out this work.

The German communist Hertha Sturm gave a sober assessment of the unhappy state of the international's women's work. She told the congress, "we have a certain gauge in the number of women members in the communist parties... perhaps ten per cent". She advocated small party schools for women comrades and pointed to an extensive women's press in the International, mentioning *Communist Women's International*, the Dutch *De Voorbode* [*The Herald*], *Žena* [*Woman*] in Czechoslovakia, *L'Ouvrière* [*Woman Worker*] in France and *Compagna* [*Woman Comrade*] in Italy. Sturm urged delegates to carry out "the decisions of the women's conference last year and the world congress, women's supplements must be added to all party publications". Other speakers explained what women's organisations had done in Russia. Sofia Smidovich recalled the role of women's publications in 1917. The Russian Communist Party central committee was publishing two magazines for women workers. Varsenika Kasparova reminded delegates that women across the globe suffered from "particularly oppressive subjugation". She said the Comintern was about creating "an intelligentsia of revolutionary women" to fight for women's liberation and socialism.²⁷

As historian John Riddell argues, the Comintern women's journal, *Communist Women's International*, "was a formidable educational tool that published 1,300 pages over its five years of existence. No advice on childcare here; no recipes. Each issue contained several articles on the women's movements and women's rights activity both within and without the communist international, as well as analysis of working-class politics as a whole". The work of the women's movement centred on two main world campaigns: to build international

women's day, and to support International Workers' Aid for Soviet Russia, particularly its aid to Soviet women. Large numbers of women were recruited. The proportion of women among party members ranged from a high of 20% in Czechoslovakia and Norway down to about 2% in France and Italy. In Germany and Russia, it rose gradually in the 1920s to 17% and 14% respectively. The absolute numbers were high: more than a hundred thousand women were members of the communist international.²⁸

The Comintern also directed how women should seek to organise in Asia, in societies at very different stages of development and where traditional patriarchal relations were particularly entrenched. At the third congress, the Comintern urged communist women's commissions to "conduct a vigorous struggle against all prejudices, customs, and religious practices that bear down on women. This agitation should also be addressed to men". However, the sections "must strictly avoid tactless, inappropriate, or rude attacks on religious beliefs or national traditions, while still resisting the influence of nationalism and religion". At the fourth congress, Zetkin was candid about the challenges faced. She argued: "In the countries of the East, women live and work overwhelmingly under patriarchal and pre-capitalist forms of social life, bending under prejudices grey with age, oppressed by social institutions, by religion, customs and habits".²⁹ Like the work of the *zhenotdel*, these steps were often tentative and fraught with contradictions and mistakes. But they nevertheless underlined the commitment to make women's work truly internationalist as well as liberationist in every part of the globe.

Theorising women's oppression

Kollontai contributed numerous books, articles and pamphlets spelling out her commitment to women's liberation, basing herself on a realistic assessment of the women's oppression at the time. She expanded Marxist theory in a number of important respects, building on the work of Marx and Engels, Bebel and Zetkin, notably on domestic labour, what she called women's "second shift" in the family and most of all in the realm of sexual politics. Kollontai articulated the co-constitution of a classless society and the liberation of women, when she argued that "If the emancipation of women is unthinkable without communism, then communism is unthinkable without the full emancipation of women". But Kollontai was no idle dreamer: she assessed the role of women at work and in the family under capitalism, how pregnancy and childbirth were managed and the significance of politics rights. She also highlighted the subordinate status

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women endured in sexual relations in general. Her views also evolved, spurred on by the experience of the Russian revolution, from the orthodox imitation of the German SPD model to a more libertarian Bolshevik stance. This was a gulf she described as "a whole geological shift in the field of social and economic relations". It was this originality, emerging out of the Marxist tradition, that makes Kollontai's Bolshevik feminism so relevant to subsequent feminist thought.³⁰

Kollontai believed the growth of industry and the incorporation of masses of women into the labour force was itself revolutionary. Despite the horrors of industrialisation, Kollontai believed the enforced trend of women's work outside the home, as the only way to raise their consciousness and to make them independent. She argued that "It is the universal spread of female labour that has contributed most of all to the radical change in family life". Kollontai believed that women only became aware of their needs when they became an integral part of the labour force. However, it was her sharp assessment of the nexus of waged work and family life for women that gave Kollontai's analysis its resonance. Kollontai was explicit that "the woman is oppressed not only as a seller of her labour, but also as a mother, as a woman". Capitalism had placed a "crushing burden" on woman's shoulders: it has made her a wage-worker without having reduced her cares as housekeeper or mother. Woman "staggers beneath the weight of this triple load". She emphasised that "the modern family structure, to a lesser or greater extent, oppresses women of all classes and all layers of the population".³¹

Kollontai was incisive in her description of the realities of women under capitalism. She stated that "the ceremony of marriage, even among the working class, is a funeral service said over the corpse of dead feelings". The burden of housework was similarly disparaged. She wrote: "Even if a working woman were to live a thousand years... There would always be a new layer of dust to be removed from the mantelpiece, her husband would always come in hungry and her children bring in mud on their shoes". Lenin echoed these sentiments, arguing that even in Soviet Russia women continued to be a "domestic slave", because "petty housework crushes, strangles, stultifies and degrades her, chains her to the kitchen and the nursery, and she wastes her labour on barbarously unproductive, petty, nerve-racking, stultifying and crushing drudgery". Kollontai was damning about the provision of services for pregnant women, pointing to the exceptional Swiss example, where eight weeks maternity leave for the working mother was made compulsory in 1878. Finally, Kollontai was also scathing about the way "the personality of a woman

is judged almost exclusively in terms of her sexual life". She savaged the sexual harassment and abuse of women in the workplace, condemning "all those gentlemen owning and administering industrial enterprises who force women among their workforce and clerical staff to satisfy their sexual whims, using the threat of dismissal to achieve their ends" and those "masters of the house" who "rape their servants and throw them out pregnant on to the street".³²

How did Kollontai break new ground theoretically? She demonstrated that women's oppression could not be reduced to economic factors alone, but rather was a function of a range of deep seated political, cultural and ideological practices. She made women's liberation an integral part of the revolutionary theory of Russian Marxism and posited the conception of a new woman with a new morality as a crucial part of that theory. This gave her Marxism a libertarian edge that went beyond the conventional personal politics of her contemporaries, even those from the socialist movement.

One of Kollontai's major contributions was her recognition that division of labour itself, rather than just private property as Engels saw it, carried the potential of women's oppression. Engels had painted a rosy picture of women's status prior to the emergence of private property, while Kollontai pointed to a tendency to devalue women's work even in traditional communal economies. She wrote that "many consider that the enslavement of women, her rightlessness, was born with the establishment of private property. Such an attitude is mistaken". The enslavement of women was "connected with the moment of the division of labour according to sex, when productive labour falls to the lot of men and secondary labour to the lot of women". As historian Karen Field argued, the recognition "permitted her a broader view of women's oppression than was available to most left theorists. It allowed her to recognise that it was not only the proletarian woman who was oppressed, but women everywhere... although quite differently in kind and degree".³³

Kollontai also elevated the importance of the family in the Marxist theory of women's oppression. She argued that "for women, the solution of the family question is no less important than the achievement of political equality and economic independence". Kollontai recognised women's obligation under capitalism to take responsibility for the "second shift" of the household duties which must be done when their shift in the workplace is over. Although Engels and others had alluded to this double burden, Kollontai spelt it out. She wrote: "The woman who is wife, mother, and worker has to expend every ounce of energy to fulfil those roles". She has to work "the same

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hours as her husband in some factory, printing-house, or commercial establishment, and then on top of that she has to find the time to attend to her household and look after her children". But she also saw that the traditional family was changing, and most significantly, the dominant trend was "towards the transfer to the social collective (community) of those tasks and duties that hitherto were considered to be the inalienable functions of the members of individual families."³⁴

However, perhaps the most significant theoretical breakthrough made by Kollontai concerned the realm of sexual relations. As the Bolshevik regime consolidated itself in the aftermath of the civil war, Kollontai argued that "the sexual act must be seen not as something shameful and sinful but as something which is as natural as the other needs of a healthy organism, such as hunger and thirst. Such phenomena cannot be judged as moral or immoral". This was very much a development of the advanced position held by Bebel, who stated that "how I eat, how I drink, how I sleep, and how I dress is my own personal business, just as my relations with the person of the opposite sex is also my own business". Kollontai celebrated sexual diversity, claiming that history had never seen such a variety of personal relationships as in Soviet Russia — "indissoluble marriage with its 'stable family', 'free unions', secret adultery; a girl living quite openly with her lover in so-called 'wild marriage'; pair marriage, marriage in threes and even the complicated marriage of four people — not to talk of the various forms of commercial prostitution". With these conceptions, she opened a wider vista for the exploration of sexual relations, connecting the fight for a workers' government with the fight for sexual freedom in a way scarcely conceived of by previous Marxists.³⁵

Kollontai laid out a coherent vision of women's liberation. She argued that "with the change of economic conditions, with the evolution of the production relations, the inner physiognomy of woman also changes". The new woman could emerge as a type "only with the growth in the number of women who were earning their own livelihood". With workers' rule and evolving social relations of production, the social relations of the family would also change. She believed that "under the dictatorship of the proletariat, the material and economic considerations in which the family was grounded cease to exist". The economic dependence of women on men and the role of the family in the care of the younger generation would disappear, and with the obligation of all citizens to work, "woman has a value in the national economy which is independent of her family and mar-

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ital status". The economic subjugation of women in marriage and the family is done away with and "responsibility for the care of the children and their physical and spiritual education is assumed by the social collective". And the changes would continue:

Under communism everyone will be able to eat in the communal kitchens and dining-rooms. The working woman will not have to slave over the washtub any longer, or ruin her eyes in darning her stockings and mending her linen; she will simply take these things to the central laundries each week and collect the washed and ironed garments later. That will be another job less to do. Special clothes-mending centres will free the working woman from the hours spent on mending and give her the opportunity to devote her evenings to reading, attending meetings and concerts. Thus the four categories of housework are doomed to extinction with the victory of communism. And the working woman will surely have no cause to regret this. Communism liberates woman from her domestic slavery and makes her life richer and happier...

Just as housework withers away, so the obligations of parents to their children wither away gradually until finally society assumes the full responsibility.³⁶

In her futuristic vision, projecting forward from 1922 to 1970, she advocated a set of living arrangements in which "people do not live in families but in groups, according to their ages. Children have their 'palaces', the young people their smaller houses, adults live communally in the various ways that suit them, and the old people together in the 'houses'". "Those parents who wish to participate in the education of their children will by no means be prevented from doing so... the joys of parenthood will not be taken away from those who are capable of appreciating them". However, she foresaw social arrangements aimed specifically at lifting the difficulties surrounding pregnancy, childbirth and childcare that she understood were central to women's oppression in class societies. As a first step socialist society would guarantee "the possibility of giving birth to her child in healthy conditions, with the appropriate care for herself and her child, the possibility of looking after the child during the first weeks of its life, the possibility of feeding him herself without the risk of loss of pay". The state would provide "refuges for expectant and nursing women, to provide medical consultations for mother and child", as well as "a broad network of crèches, nursery schools and children's centres". Legislation would establish "a short working day, break periods for nursing mothers and a shortened day for young

girls". The state would also guarantee sufficient material assistance to mothers during pregnancy, birth and the nursing period.³⁷

Kollontai also had the vision to imagine very different sexual relations in the future socialist society. Even before the revolution, she posed the question of whether "free love" was possible. Her answer was that "only a whole number of fundamental reforms in the sphere of social relations — reforms transposing obligations from the family to society and the state — could create a situation where the principle of 'free love' might to some extent be fulfilled". By this she meant revolution, as "only the fundamental transformation of all productive relations could create the social prerequisites to protect women from the negative aspects of the 'free love' formula". Only when women were "relieved of all those material burdens which at the present time create a dual dependence, on capital and on the husband", can the principle of 'free love' be implemented". Crucially, as she made clear in countless interventions after the October revolution, women must be as free as men to initiate and enjoy sexual encounters.³⁸

Altogether, these theoretical conceptions laid the basis for the Bolshevik workers' government policies in the spheres of waged labour, family relations of marriage and divorce, childcare, communal eating and living facilities, reproduction rights and greater sexual freedom. The Bolsheviks did not merely permit the revolution in women's lives because they had to out of necessity. They did so because they had theorised these changes in advance and, in the shape of Kollontai in particular, gone far further than other pioneers in extending the boundaries of women's freedom. The party leadership, both women and men, shared common assumptions about the importance of women's liberation to the socialist project and these conceptions informed their practice when they came to power.

The limits of Bolshevik feminism

Bolshevik feminism and the international communist women's movement flourished from 1917 until the early 1920s. The marginalisation of the *Bolshevichki* can be seen as an important early part of the communist party's retreat from its democratic commitments. They were truncated and finally extinguished by the rise of Stalinism. The autonomous women's movement inside and outside Russia was downgraded and then terminated. Stalin's victory over the various oppositions paved the way for a reactionary backlash, what Trotsky called, through an analogy with the decline of the French revolution, "Thermidor in the family".³⁹ The *zhenotdel* was shut down in 1930. The Comintern allowed the women's commissions to wither in com-

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munist parties. In France, for example, the Communists abandoned advocacy not only of women's reproductive rights but even of their right to vote.⁴⁰ By the middle of the 30s, however, Stalinism imposed a return to patriarchy in the USSR. In 1936, new laws made with no public discussion made divorce more difficult, increased penalties for non-payment of alimony, criminalised abortion, and re-criminalised prostitution and homosexuality. The regime glorified the traditional family and bound women into the double burden that Kollontai once railed against.

Kollontai's personal fate epitomised the degeneration. An early oppositionist to the rising bureaucracy, Kollontai was still prepared as late as 1926 to praise Trotsky for his commitment to women's liberation. She was approached by the Left Opposition (the grouping which fought against the bureaucratisation of the Communist Party) but refused from her exile as an ambassador. As the Left Oppositionists were expelled in 1927, Kollontai openly condemned them in the pages of *Pravda*.⁴¹ She would successively distance herself from her radicalism on women's liberation, parroting the traditional virtues during the Second World War. Kollontai would be the only survivor (other than Stalin the perpetrator) from the original central committee that decided on the October insurrection, to live beyond the purges.

Historian Elizabeth Wood argues that the transformation after October 1917 in Russia "was emphatically not a feminist revolution" and that the Bolsheviks always had a negative view of women, as the most conservative part of the working class, backward, passive and a brake on the revolution. Of course it is relatively easy to point to examples where Bolshevik practice was mistaken and just plain wrong, to cases of male obstruction and to the limitations of the practical measures enacted by the new workers' government. The litany of mistakes would include the 1905 cancelled meeting Kollontai recorded in her autobiography, in which some men put a sign on the door: "Meeting for women only called off — tomorrow a meeting for men only," And the Petersburg committee's proclamation that women workers should boycott the women's congress in 1908. In 1917, it was wrong for the Bolshevik men to undermine initial efforts to establish a department for work among women and for the April Bolshevik conference to bureaucratically withdraw the resolution on separate women's organisation. Women remained in a minority at the time of the revolution and afterwards, representing about 10% of the Bolshevik party's membership. Nevertheless, these objections can serve to erase the memory and importance of the cadre of serious, determined, committed and extremely capable women comrades

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who should take their place in the Bolshevik tradition. To say the Bolsheviks only turned to special work among women because of rivalry with Mensheviks and SRs ignores the fact that the Bolsheviks carried out this work more effectively and with more success than these competitors.⁴²

It is possible to pick holes in the early practical efforts of the Bolshevik workers' government to tackle women's oppression, impeded as they were by so many material difficulties. Communal eating facilities did sometimes mean, as historian Sheila Rowbotham put it, the right to "eat shit collectively". True also that abortion rights were motivated by the problems of raising children, rather than concern for women's reproductive rights, but the establishment of abortion rights was a tremendous step forward. Cultural change was inevitably uneven. As Healey argues, in Soviet Russia, "same-sex relations could be harmless in some instances, dangerous in others. Homosexuals had an ambiguous status with both positive and negative political valences". The tolerance of same-sex relations also coexisted with notions of medical and educational interventions, as well as variable law enforcement.⁴³ In the context of civil war and imperialist intervention, never mind the economic backwardness and isolation of the workers' state, huge barriers were in the path of the Bolsheviks. The revolutionaries of 1917 believed they were in transition to socialism, not that they had already created a communist utopia. They were developing their ideas as the revolution unfolded — for example, their support for the German communists who advocated abortion rights in the 1920s under the slogan, "Your body belongs to you". However they recognised that without the material support from other workers' revolutions, their efforts would face insurmountable constraints. A more nuanced historical appraisal would be to compare the record of the Bolsheviks with the best bourgeois democratic regimes of the time and, in this respect, the Bolshevik regime compares very favourably.

Although some of the criticisms have force, it is important to resist anachronism when criticising Bolshevik feminism through the lens of subsequent feminist movements. Context matters. The "feminists" they railed against were not the leaders of mass movements, but mostly women able to function legally in a society that outlawed or heavily restricted the organising efforts of socialist women and men. These feminists were regarded as "bourgeois" not simply for their social origins but because of their politics. They backed bourgeois regimes and bourgeois parties; they explicitly opposed social democratic parties, despite the support these parties gave to women's lib-

eration. Similarly, Bolshevik women did not advocate an autonomous women's movement, because they were already part of a great, mass labour movement that was the insurgent force against the ruling powers and capable of coming to power and enacting emancipatory measures in the near future. In those circumstances, separate bourgeois women's movements did not challenge the powers oppressing them, but weakened the principal forces — the socialists — standing against the ruling classes and for women's liberation.

Even the most advanced thinkers such as Kollontai had some of the theoretical weaknesses and made errors. It is possible to find assumptions of the "mother instinct" and the naturalising of other social attributes. Some Bolshevik writing did portray women as weaker or backward compared to men. Socialists of the time seemed to assume that women would do housework, whether it was women within a conventional family or women as part of a collective, communal (albeit more technological) arrangement. They did not challenge head on the necessity for male behaviour to change if women's liberation were to permeate all the way down. Kollontai was wrong when she called prostitutes in Soviet Russia "labour deserters" — an attitude we would certainly not endorse today. (At the same time, she did oppose criminalising the women involved.) Nor did the Bolsheviks examine the implicit heterosexual orientation behind their pronouncements on sexual freedom. Their language was an aberration and their theoretical development inevitably truncated. But the Bolsheviks had the right method of approach, the right starting point in assessing the many-sided realities of women's lives in the capitalism of their time, the makings of a systemic explanation for women's oppression, political strategies based on actual circumstances to tackle the root causes of that oppression and a vision of an alternative society where women's freedom could flourish.

Conclusion

The Bolshevik feminists constantly repeated the mantra that there was no special woman question, yet they developed both a political practice and an ideological theory that treated women's oppression as distinct and unique — this contradiction defines both the strengths and the weaknesses of their achievements. Yet the Bolsheviks did have an assessment of the specific oppression of women in capitalist society, which was not reducible to economic factors, or to class exploitation, or indeed simply to the bourgeois family. This was a multi-layered analysis of the subordination and domination of women, which took in political, cultural, sexual, personal and other social re-

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lations. The Bolshevichki developed a political strategy and programme for advancing women's freedom, derived from the German SPD model but adapted to Russian conditions, which they proceeded to implement after 1917. From this assessment and strategy flowed special methods of work among women, both as waged workers, but also as women subject to a whole range of social oppression.

The Bolshevik feminists continued the policy of earlier socialists (with Zetkin the most prominent living link), where mass parties included all kinds of sections and sub-organisations, and saw the women's movement as existing with limited organisational autonomy within the party. The Bolshevik perspective was for mass communist parties to build mass communist women's movements, in competition with bourgeois feminist movements. Today, in the absence of mass revolutionary parties and with very different global women's movements, to abstractly proclaim the need for a communist women's movement would be mistaken. On the other hand, to argue that there are "no special women questions" is also wrong — specific oppressions of all kinds outside of the capital-labour relationship exist and are important factors in the way we all experience social life.

A Marxist approach to the women's movement today is very different compared to the 1920s. Today small Marxist propaganda groups support and intervene in the existing amorphous women's movement, arguing for Marxist politics in women's movement campaigns and showing the class nature of "the women question". We fight for a women's movement that is led by class-conscious Marxists, but such a movement would have organisational autonomy from Marxist organisation. Alongside specific political demands, the main transitional demand for this conception is to fight for a mass working class-based women's movement, focusing on the need for the women's movement to orientate to working class women. However the Bolshevik emphasis on separate women's committees and fractions within the party (and by extension within labour movement organisations), women's papers, women's schools, and other measures to create a cadre of Marxist women, retain their full force.