

ABSTRACT

The Revolutionary Policies and Leninist Results of Bolshevik Feminism, 1917-1921

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This thesis examines Russian women's experiences during the Bolshevik Revolution and the Russian Civil War. This work identifies what women expected and what failed to happen during one of the most foundational periods of history for modern Russian women. A central figure in the work is a leading socialist women's activist, Alexandra Kollontai, who aimed to liberate women by pressing the state to provide women economic independence. Her writings demonstrated forms of self-censorship, which signify the many hopes, which were never fulfilled.

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THE REVOLUTIONARY POLICIES AND LENINIST RESULTS OF BOLSHEVIK

FEMINISM, 1917-1921

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	iii
Introduction	1
Chapter One: Criticizing and Theorizing the Path to Liberation	8
Chapter Two: Mobilizing and Agitating Women Workers Toward Liberation	21
Chapter Three: Revising and Retrenching the Narrative of Emancipation	47
Conclusion	64
Bibliography	68

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INTRODUCTION

The centennial of the Russian Revolution has now passed and a recent wave of scholarship examining its lasting legacy has emerged. Scholars continue to explore the topic of gender within society to identify patterns and shape their narrative. Pre-Cold War scholarship tends to fall among greater ideological lines that do not consider women's role as significant as post-Cold War scholarship that focuses more on the complexity of meanings and emphasizing the role of gender differences in politics and society.

The stories and voices of women who shaped and experienced the revolution are a vital component of this work. This work examines the topic of Bolshevik Feminism, the Marxist-Leninist understanding of liberating women through communist practices which attempted to minimize the burden of daily domestic labors. Bolshevik Feminism in its infancy did not look to challenge male hegemony but rather viewed its movement as a facet of the larger proletarian class struggle. This work finds that during the Civil War, women activists shifted their understanding of their identity within the Bolshevik Feminist movement to view themselves as a distinct unit within the proletariat in hopes of proving more effective in advocating for social reforms that advanced women's interests. Rochelle Goldberg Ruthchild in her work *Equality and Revolution: Women's rights in the Russian Empire 1905-1917* examines the movement for women's equal rights in Russia and women's civil participation in the lead up to 1917 and in 1917.¹ This work further expands upon Ruthchild's findings to examine the principles and experiences of

¹ Rochelle Goldberg Ruthchild, *Equality and Revolution: Women's Rights in the Russian Empire 1905-1917* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010), 8.

Bolshevik Feminism during the Civil War period. This paper attempts to argue for a more nuanced interpretation that the many women who were fiercely committed to promoting and achieving emancipation were in part so driven by those ideas due to the revolutionary policies the Bolsheviks so profusely provided. The communist, revolutionary policies focused on the grievances of women workers, which centered on greater protections and institutions for maternal care, proved the Bolsheviks to be contradictory and hypersensitive to women's influences on male family members and their past record of spontaneous mobilization; leaving a legacy of empty promises.

Scholars like Elizabeth A. Wood, Mark D. Steinberg, Shelia Fitzpatrick, Richard Pipes, and Rochelle Goldberg Ruthchild have all given attention to presenting the new course of history Russia embarked upon in 1917. This work aims to examine the relationship between the Bolshevik revolutionary policies and the results of Bolshevik Feminism with an emphasis on incorporating the perspectives of women. This thesis documents the Russian Revolution during the years of 1917-1921. 1917 marks the beginning of the revolution as the monarchy fell and new political systems were introduced. 1921 marks the end of the revolution as many scholars consider the year to be when the Civil War concluded, and the Bolsheviks had consolidated their authority across the country.

In modern Russian history, women are often placed within these categories. In looking to provide the critical element of including women's voices, this thesis has used Mark Steinberg as a model in regard to searching for experience. Mark Steinberg centers his approach as a historian by situating his argument among valuing "the variety and complexity of meanings in every historic situation, about the diversity and instabilities of

human experience, about the dangers of simple patterns and final conclusions.”² This work does not seek to generalize or simplify women’s perspective but rather provide a glimpse into the complexity of emotions and understandings that were present among one of the most foundational, historic events of the twentieth century.

This work aims to reexamine Bolshevik Feminism under Ruthchild’s understanding of Russian feminism that has been inappropriately viewed through the lens of privilege. Ruthchild finds that the current portrayal of Russian feminism by scholars depicts the movement as separate and monolithic which she rebukes with her findings centering on the period of 1905-1917 which was marked by activism of working-class women seeking tangible changes to their situation. Ruthchild writes: “The history of Russian feminism in the prerevolutionary period is part of the lost and repressed tradition of civic activism in the Russian Empire. This history can provide positive role models for Russians and renew the links to an oft-overlooked part of the global history of women’s movements.”³ Ruthchild compares with this work as her scholarship is rooted in giving attention to unheard voices amidst often a flawed portrayal. Ruthchild writes “Reexamining Russian feminism and the women’s suffrage movement challenges the almost unanimous current portrayal of Russian feminism as a separate and monolithic movement of privileged women seeking rights primarily for themselves.”⁴ This thesis concurs with Ruthchild’s findings but adds the expanded timeline to include the Civil War which is imperative in reaching the conclusion that working women came to view early Bolshevik policies as

² Mark Steinberg, *The Russian Revolution 1905-1921* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 350.

³ *Ibid*, 247.

⁴ *Ibid*, 7.

empty words. Russian feminism has been overlooked and the importance of listening to the voices that have been muffled by state authority and cultural discomfort is vital to providing a more holistic historic narrative. This thesis stresses the voice of Kollontai- raised with a privileged background-coupled with individual stories of ordinary women in an extraordinary time and attempts alongside Ruthchild to defy the conventional telling of Bolshevik feminism.

In examining the Communist vision of women's liberation, the Bolshevik party argued their identity was rooted in serving as the government of the Russian workers and peasants. Communist women found hope in the policies proposed by the Bolsheviks, as women workers viewed a government that based its identity within a class framework far more advantageous to representing their interests than bourgeoisie parties and interests. Alexandra Kollontai, a leading communist female activist, argued that the Bolsheviks should be supported as their social reforms showed "concern for the poorest and most deprived members of the population."⁵ Many female activists viewed their status as women to fall within the category of 'deprived' which made Bolshevik policies appeal to working women's desire for targeted social reforms that granted greater economic prosperity and fewer burdens found within the home. Kollontai's and the Marxist's view on 'the woman question' argued that pre-revolutionary focuses on suffrage and equal rights was not an adequate approach to solving many women's immediate problems. Kollontai believed those demands were too far removed from the needs and desires of the impoverished female masses. The movements to advance women's rights prior to the

⁵ Alexandra Kollontai, "Why the Bolsheviks Must Win", Marxists.org, December 1917, accessed February 4, 2019, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/kollonta/1917/bolsheviks-win.htm>.

October Revolution, when the Bolsheviks staged a coup and forcibly obtained authority, were primarily instigated by the female intelligentsia. Whereas, Kollontai fiercely championed the Marxist view on ‘the woman question’ that would allow women workers to seek economic reforms which she thought to be much more advantageous for women over equal rights.⁶

Kollontai serves as a key figure in this work as she provides valuable insight into Communist women workers expectations, concerns, optimism, disappointments, and disillusionment. Kollontai also provides critical insight for understanding Bolshevik party lines and revolutionary intended policies. She tenaciously pursued issues relating to the ‘woman question’ on various fronts, including economic and social. She held prominent roles within the government. By 1917, Kollontai was a household name in Russian society, and she was looked upon with reverence by many working women. She, like many Russian women of her time, was inspired by Marxist ideals and sought to transform society to lift many women from sufferings in the home and in the workplace. In 1917, she served as the Commissar of Social Welfare and in 1919 she helped found the Zhenotdel, the women’s section of the Communist Party. During the Civil War, Kollontai manifested the encouragement many women found from greater advancements institutionally and legislatively for women. She attempted to wield her influence to facilitate radical change for working women. Her Civil War works are evidence of the obstacles found in incorporating greater women into the party, despite their growing presence in industry. She continued to find resistance among party leaders and

⁶ Ruthchild, *Equality and Revolution*, 8.

deliberately chose to focus her writings on places where achievement was more noticeable.

In examining Russian women's transition into the public space in the early twentieth century, Ruthchild attributes raising gender consciousness as a pivotal component of breaking down barriers to begin the struggle for equal political rights.⁷ This thesis finds that the intention to raise gender consciousness continued to be evident in Kollontai's work to advocate for social reforms and throughout the programs which the Zhenotdel promoted throughout the Civil War. Though less focused on political rights, Kollontai served as the primary driver of raising consciousness and paving the way for organizational frameworks that supported activism and liberation. Her Civil War writings present her unfailing view of Russian working women's contribution to raising class and gender consciousness. Her later Civil War works (1919-1921) point to forms of self-compromise and deliberate obfuscation when she wrestled with the limited efforts of the Bolsheviks to lift the burden of motherhood while balancing the work of being a member of the proletariat that the regime had promised to reconcile in 1917.

In addition to the emphasis on Kollontai's writings and her role formulating the early Bolshevik Feminist movement, this thesis utilizes the Harvard Project on the Soviet Social System Online (HPSSS) as source to promote the voices of Russian women speaking to their hopes and subsequent dissatisfaction in relation to early Bolshevik policies. The HPSSS is a digitized collection of interviews conducted with Soviet refugees in the 1950s.⁸ The interviewees were part of a project commissioned by the US

⁷ Mark Steinberg, *The Russian Revolution 1905-1921*, 39-40.

⁸ David Brandenberger, "A Background Guide to Working with the HPSSS Online," library.harvard.edu, accessed May 3, 2019, https://library.harvard.edu/collections/hpsss/working_with_hpsss.pdf.

Air Force alongside Harvard scholars to study the USSR during the early years of the Cold War. The participants were recruited primarily: “among ethnic Russians, Ukrainians, Belorussians and other former Soviets.”⁹ The HPSSS offers a unique opportunity to study many perspectives and various social backgrounds that were too often neglected to history. HPSSS interviewees offer valuable contributions in identifying what women expected from the rise of the Bolsheviks and how even their most vocal supporters moved to view Bolshevik policies as empty promises. This source is important in hearing from a variety of women speaking to their experiences and perspectives. The comments from interviewees provides significant value by presenting a greater representational portrait of Soviet society and overarching obstacles to women’s entrance into the public sphere.

This thesis is a study of the perception of women on the ground towards the Bolshevik goals for women. The goals of the Bolsheviks are portrayed through their policies which centered on their social reforms, adherence to communist practices, and legislative enactments. This work examines women’s evolving perception of those policies from the time of the revolution through the conclusion of the Civil War. The Bolsheviks were never fully committed to advancing women’s interests and promoting full emancipation under the proletarian understanding. This impacted women’s expectations and experiences to view their agency as limited and to view the state as providing platitudes with no transformational aspects for women on the ground.

⁹ *Ibid.*

CHAPTER ONE

Criticizing and Theorizing the Path to Liberation

The year 1917 seemed to many Soviet women a blossoming, time full of promise. The rise of the Bolsheviks brought a revived sense of urgency to include women in revolutionary efforts and the crafting of political reform. After centuries of Tsarist authoritarian rule, rural and urban women found such speech inviting and liberating. The ideologies of traditional Marxists revolution and the pressing discussions mandating modernization were brewing among the intelligentsia, circles that had been circulating since the turn of the century. In the 1880s and 1890s the intelligentsia identified the proletariat as a newfound hope to cast off a dictatorial regime and subsequently usher in a new era of Russian history¹⁰. The intelligentsia would later play a critical role in championing values of the proletariat and creating social upheaval.¹¹ Elizabeth Wood in her work *The Baba and the Comrade: Gender and Politics in Revolutionary Russia* found that though ambivalence in Marxists circles towards women's political involvement was pervasive, the numbers of women within the working class was staggering in the late nineteenth century. Wood states that women were "now a significant part of the working class. According to the fact inspection report of 1885, women were 22 percent of the factory force in Russia, a portion that grew steadily to 32 percent in 1914, when there

¹⁰ Elizabeth A. Wood, *The Baba and the Comrade: Gender and Politics in Revolutionary Russia* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 27.

¹¹ Richard Pipes, *A Concise History of the Russian Revolution* (New York: Random House, 1995), 30.

were about 660,000 women workers in the whole empire.”¹² Though emerging political parties centered their focus overall on class struggle, predominately centering on the working class, gender was understood to be a tenet of the Russian Marxist paradigm. Women operated at the forefront of the discussions and revolutionary fervor building to the revolutions in 1917.

Despite women’s substantial involvement in the work force, women continued to be viewed through the lens of backwardness and ignorance. This posed an area of tension as women were referenced in Marxists writings as a player in revolution. The Russian Marxist movement viewed women’s position “in society: only through revolution and dictatorship of the proletariat could women be freed from exploitation and injustice; progress in that revolutionary effort could best be measured by women’s condition.”¹³ Lenin believed industrial development to be an imperative step for women because it would disengage women from the home and their constant interaction with detrimental patriarchal relationships. This understanding defined a new realm for women to experience liberation and socialism. In 1899 Lenin wrote: “Large-scale machine industry, which concentrates masses of workers who often come from various parts of the country, absolutely refuses to tolerate survivals of patriarchalism and personal dependence, and is marked by a truly contemptuous attitude to the past.”¹⁴ Lenin stressed that to embark upon a path towards greater independence for women, it would take the society’s push to industrialization that severed domesticity and produced direct participation. This would

¹² Wood, *The Baba and the Comrade*, 37.

¹³ *Ibid*, 27.

¹⁴ Vladimir Illyich Ulyanov, “From the Development of Capitalism in Russia,” 1899, https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/subject/women/abstract/99_dcr7.htm.

result in the essential step of shattering tsarist cultural norms of backwardness and dependence.

These revolutionary views were circulating as the Russian autocracy continued to present one blunder after the other. From the failure of the Russo- Japanese War in 1904 and the peasant uprisings in 1905, the public was losing faith in the regime. In order to compete against other political parties and to capitalize upon the civil unrest, the Bolsheviks began to reach out to women in the years before the revolution.¹⁵ Though the Bolsheviks were unsure of how to tackle the woman question, there was an emphasis to address the issue at hand with dubious intentions.¹⁶

Amidst the humiliation of World War I, the elite distanced itself from the tsarist regime and the regime found itself most vulnerable.¹⁷ In February 1917, the autocracy fell. Rioting on International Women's Day, women poured into the streets protesting the food shortages and devastating hardships from the current involvement in World War I. Alexandra Kollontai, a leading socialist women's rights activist wrote of the activism:

“This was certainly the first show of militancy by the working woman. Men stayed at home with their children for a change, and their wives, the captive housewives, went to meetings. During the largest street demonstrations, in which 30,000 were taking part, the police decided to remove the demonstrators' banners: the women workers made a stand. In the scuffle that followed, bloodshed was averted only with the help of the socialist deputies in Parliament.”¹⁸

The demonstrations primarily were marked by the intent to protest the war's drastic effects at home but the crowd of women was remarkable to all. The women demonstrated

¹⁵ Wood, *The Baba and the Comrade*, 33.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Shelia Fitzpatrick, *The Russian Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 39.

¹⁸ Kollontai, “International Women's Day,” Marxists.org, 1920, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/kollonta/1920/womens-day.htm>.

from diverse experiences and differing classes but illustrated remarkable solidarity. Some viewed the opportunity and mobilization to draw attention to the issues of suffrage and equality. During the march, women shouted: “It’s our holiday! Let us be the standard bearers!” and banners demanding equal rights stating: “If woman is a slave there will be no freedom. Long live equal rights for women.”¹⁹ In March of 1917, women proved to be political actors with urgency as they continued to move into the public space. As workers and soldiers protested amidst looming anarchy, Tsar Nicholas II was faced with but no choice he felt but abdication. After his brother refused, 300 years of the Romanov dynasty came to a crashing halt.

Following the fall of monarchy, in February the Provisional Government with no electoral or popular mandate became the ruling body in Russia. Despite the ephemeral nature, the Provisional Government presented sweeping reforms. Mark Steinberg called the Provisional Government “surely the most liberal government in the world at that time, and in actions not only words.”²⁰ Following widespread activism, the fervor for democratic reforms was mounting across the nation, and women were a driving force in that activism. An agent of the Petrograd Okhrra wrote about working-class women in February 1917 “These mothers, exhausted from standing endlessly at the ends of lines, and having suffered so much in watching their half-starving and sick children, are perhaps much closer to a revolution than Messrs. Miliukov, Rodichev, and Co. and, of

¹⁹ Rochelle Goldberg Ruthchild, *Equality and Revolution: Women’s Rights in the Russian Empire 1905-1917* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010), 212.

²⁰ Mark Steinberg, *The Russian Revolution 1905-1921* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 72.

course, much more dangerous.”²¹²² The Provisional Government was quick to implement some reforms, like political amnesty and freedom of speech, but was more hesitant on issues regarding women. This hesitation sparked women’s demonstrations on March 19, 1917 with an estimate of thirty-five to forty thousand women took part to demand suffrage in the public arena. The women’s march signified mobilization and the pervasiveness of the suffrage movement and revolutionary ideas. On July 20th, the Provisional Government fearful of a backlash quickly granted women the right to vote and hold office. Unlike Western democracies at the time, the Provisional Government was comprised of many socialist revolutionaries who were not actively opposed to women’s suffrage, just more hesitant despite their liberal agenda. The Provisional Government would leave a legacy of being the guarantors of women’s suffrage.

The Provisional Government’s hesitation laid the foundation for their eventual unravel. Like their hesitancy to suffrage, the body delayed further elections and faced great challenges in solving the land problem, economic crisis, and involvement in the war. Their inability to act quickly and execute proclamations laid the groundwork for the Bolsheviks to exploit the gap between the demand for greater female equality and the absence of strong reform. The Provisional Government held elections, to form the Constituent Assembly, women over the age of twenty could vote for the first time and this is regarded by many historians to be the freest elections held in Russia until after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Despite the obstacles of some resistance among lower classes and intimidation from men, large numbers of women seized the opportunity to

²¹ Messers, Miliukov, Rodichev, and Co were members of a rival liberal political party- the Kadets.

²² Mark Steinberg, *Voices of the Revolution, 1917* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 52.

exercise their new right. The Provisional Government placed no barriers or formal restrictions on women, presenting genuine openness to the newfound right of citizenship for women. The Provisional Government, even without the popular mandate, embodied democratic ideals in as much practice as possible. Even with such commitment to liberal reforms, the actual practice could not extend far since the Provisional Government had limited authority to execute enacted reforms. Leaders of the Provisional Government, idealists as they were, had minimal experience in administrative affairs, an issue that would hinder the Bolsheviks as well. The temporary government aimed to cripple tsarist practices and implement strong, democratic reforms but offered no institutions to uphold their agenda and the populace's judgments. Richard Pipes writes:

“The Provisional Government issued countless laws intended to rectify the abuses of the old regime, but it never created a set of new institutions to replace those it has destroyed. The Provisional Government legislated profusely: the legislative industry was the most productive sector of the Russian economy. Unfortunately for it, while laws granting new freedoms were promptly acted on, no one paid attention to laws that imposed new obligations.”²³

In examining the February Revolution, rhetoric did in fact transform gender realities but it was severely limited. Suffrage was granted yet women continued to address the discrepancies in political and civil rights.²⁴ The Provisional Government was continuing to delay decisions that were high profile for many citizens and various revolutionary parties were vying for their place on the political stage. Some young women found themselves hopeful for a new, responsible government that would carry out egalitarian policies while many working women continued to feel that the concept of citizenship was not being administered fully by the Provisional Government and spoke out for other laws

²³ Pipes, *A Concise History of the Russian Revolution*, 92-95.

²⁴ Mark Steinberg, *The Russian Revolution 1905-1921*, 30.

specially applying only to women to be presented.²⁵ Women were at the center of the activism that played a prominent role in engendering the February Revolution and were key players in identifying the changing tides of a cultural and social phenomenon, while being dismissed as backward and timid. With social and economic upheaval engrossing the nation, women did not have the opportunities to find themselves fulfilling their liberation to the greatest degree possible. Socialist women who believed in further social reforms and state institutions to lift many daily burdens began to lend their support to the Bolsheviks who championed immediate and radical actions. The woman question would come to meet the Marxist ideology in practice.

By 1917, the Bolsheviks were an established, controversial Marxist party on the scene. Political groups planned coordinated attempts to attract women to their party and ideology in order to secure the mass voter base. The Bolsheviks centered their ideology on the proletariat, at the time women consisted 40 percent of the workforce in large-scale industry.²⁶ The Bolsheviks identified an opportunity to address the plight of women for their own advantage, rather than for primarily ideological or ethical reasons. The threat that various socialist factions presented served as a main motivating factor in the women focused rhetoric and propaganda that the Bolsheviks produced in the early twentieth century. Wood writes: “Ultimately Bolshevik attention to the woman question was not primarily focused on women themselves but rather on competition with other groups in society for the allegiances (and in these early years, the votes) of a new group in

²⁵ HPSSS, Harvard Project on the Soviet Social System. Schedule A, Vol. 21, Case 423 (interviewer J.B., type A4). Female, 57, Ukrainian, Teacher in Tekhnikum. Widener Library, Harvard University, 97, <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:FHCL:958339>.

²⁶ Wood, *The Baba and the Comrade*, 38.

society.”²⁷ Many of Lenin’s writings, which centered of issues regarding women, addressed other parties with direct criticisms and allusions to the failure in their approaches to fulfilling socialism. Lenin wrote that the Bolsheviks were willing to offer more than the competing parties and repeatedly called out these other groups, in hopes of drawing greater women to the party. A group that championed advocating for the masses worked in reaction to threats, this behavior and would later convey a strong pattern for Soviet history.

The Bolshevik’s motivations in advancing the woman question played a key role in their later apathy and negligence of women’s issues, which they themselves brought to the forefront when fighting for authority. The Bolsheviks did not view it as much as their responsibility to uplift women but rather socialism and industrialization would be the main driving force. Lenin, propelling the Bolshevik rhetoric and policy objectives, voiced ramping up production as the main agent in freeing women. Along with undermining opposition, Lenin spoke in terms of ideology when discussing women’s issues. Lenin wrote:

“By destroying the patriarchal isolation of these categories of the population who formerly never emerged from the narrow circle of domestic, family relationships, by drawing them into direct participation in social production, large-scale machine industry stimulates their development and increases their independence, in other words, creates conditions of life that are incomparably superior to the patriarchal immobility of pre capitalist relations.”²⁸

Production and industrialization, components of a socialist society, would launch women into a more liberated state. This language had no political bearings and situated women

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Ulyanov, “From the Development of Capitalism in Russia,”16.

only in working conditions. Lenin placed women's rights and their independence within the context of industry while continuing a competitive tone. Placing women in the context of the working people, did indeed work in several instances for propaganda purposes. In an age where the advent of the middle class was becoming noticeable and more and more women felt adamantly opposed to the war, many women began to resonate with the Bolsheviks. Women wrote letters encouraging other women to speak of their troubles and their antipathy of the war. The Smolenski Initiative Group of Women and Mothers wrote a letter titled "To All Russian Women and Mothers" that was printed in the independent socialist newspaper in May 1917 stating:

"We, a group of Russian women and mothers, are joining the protest of the working people against the war. We are also extending our hand to women and mothers the world over. Enough blood. Enough of this horrible bloodshed, which is utterly pointless for the working people. Enough of sacrificing our sons to the capitalists' inflamed greed. Instead, let us safeguard our sons for the good of all the working people...And let us, Russian women and mothers, be proud knowing that we were the first to extend our brotherly hand to all the mothers the world over."²⁹

If Lenin was not countering competing groups, his rhetoric was assiduously refuting the capitalist or tsarist way of life. Lenin aimed to shape the growing women's momentum into Bolshevik's rising momentum. The Bolsheviks did not see themselves as the driving agent in women's affairs and placed the issue within the narrative of competition. These motivations can be seen as a strong reason that the Bolshevik's commitment to women was limited to mainly propaganda. The Bolsheviks recognized that under the provisional government women were given a taste of the public sphere by the grant of suffrage and believed that the Bolsheviks would continue progress by providing greater reforms that affected every day life. Woods writes: "Real issues that

²⁹ Mark Steinberg, *Voices of the Revolution, 1917*, 98.

Russian women dealt every day (sexual harassment, job discrimination, overcrowded housing, lack of child care), issues which they raised in letters to the Social Democratic press, were passed over in silence.”³⁰ Despite the rhetoric and policy decisions, the rhetoric and legislation primarily served as propaganda. Trotsky wrote years later about Lenin’s purpose of the new reforms: “to unfold the party’s platform in the language of power... The decrees were really more propaganda than actual administrative measures. Lenin was in a hurry to tell people what the new power was, what it was after, and how it intended to accomplish its aims.”³¹ The decrees were in fact gender neutral and appeared to be making great strides for women but their motivations were rooted in attempting to consolidate authority over their rivals and their legislative work did not focus on implementation or long term execution.

In response to the Bolshevik’s rhetoric, women met the new reforms with newfound hardships. Many women found that the shift in roles or the Bolshevik appearance of such ‘equality’ was an actual detriment to women. In the Harvard Project on the Soviet Social System, a female Russian accountant stated: “Yes, there is equality in regard to the choice of work, but I feel that this equality placed women actually in a more difficult position. She had both, to work outside and her home. She had a harder time”³² (36). Though the rhetoric and policies promoted socialist, egalitarian reforms in reality women found themselves grappling with the changes. Soviet women were left to find themselves adopting new roles and responsibilities without a firm sense of liberation.

³⁰ Wood, *The Baba and the Comrade*, 38.

³¹ Wood, 49.

³² Harvard Project on the Soviet Social System. Schedule A, Vol. 5, Case 51 (interviewer E.H., type A3). Female, 30, Great Russian, Accountant/assistant bookkeeper. Widener Library, Harvard University, p.36, <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:FHCL:941014>.

A Russian seamstress stated: “There is equality between men and women in Russia, that means that the women work as hard as the men, and the men show no consideration for the women.”³³ Women viewed the equality brought by the Bolsheviks as a negative entity that only added to their burdens. For soviet women, equality was often in terms that were tied to labor and suffering. When asked about social equality, one woman responded: “No. Women are in a worse position, worse than they have ever been. They are in a much worse position.” Despite the aims of the Bolsheviks regime to shift roles in class and gender in a positive manner, women convey that hardships were brought from such changing gender norms. In 1918, the Bolsheviks passed the Family Law that instated further reforms that granted a much more achievable divorce, addressed illegitimacy, and various other family rights that aimed at women’s liberation (website cite). Despite such legal changes, women still found themselves receiving the shorter end of stick.

The subversive and competitive motivations that compelled the Bolsheviks to raise attention to the state of women’s backwardness showcased the fear of rival groups and can explain why their rhetoric never was fully actualized. At the same time the Bolsheviks were producing language and decrees on the issues, they were also silencing women. Devoted to retaining the authority just sieged, the Bolsheviks began to disband feminist organizations and feminist journals.³⁴ The Bolsheviks publicly promoted their rhetoric which centered on their great achievements in liberating women, while stifling any autonomous gatherings or progress. As early as October of 1917, the Bolsheviks

³³ Harvard Project on the Soviet Social System. Schedule A, Vol. 7, Case 100 (interviewer S.H., type A4). Female, 49, Great Russian, Seamstress. Widener Library, Harvard University, p.31, <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:FHCL:942113>.

³⁴ Ruthchild, *Equality & Revolution*, 235.

began to clamp down on independent outlets, which suppressed many feminist groups that emerged under the Provisional Government.³⁵ The Bolsheviks no longer held the liberal Constituent Assembly, an agent in the rise of socialism, limiting women and men's ability to speak into public affairs. As early as late October 1917, Lenin's growing, established party was consolidating authority while building a one-party government that began to ignore women's conditions and pleas. Steinberg writes on the early authoritarian practices: "The Bolsheviks began suppressing opposition voices even before the dramatic move against the democratic body that most Russian socialists and liberal had long viewed as the holy grail of democratic revolution. The Decree on the Press, in late October, closed many newspaper including liberal and socialist ones, that might incite 'resistance or disobedience'".³⁶ Operating with the competitive mindset, the Bolsheviks pursued practices that surrounded the priority of retaining authority. Women's advocacy was a mere threat to the regime and their loud disapproval of the war conditions and failed policies only amplified the views of many women posing a threat in the view of the Bolsheviks. Unlike the Provisional Government that did not have the means to implement reforms, the Bolsheviks actively pursued means to enforce oppression of women.

The Bolsheviks exploited the gaining momentum and progress created by the Provisional Government along with the dire situations produced by the First World War and tsarist policies. Proposing that revolution would serve as the catalyst for the transition to liberation while focusing primarily on repressing disassociated institutions left women

³⁵ Ibid, 243

³⁶ Mark Steinberg, *The Russian Revolution 1905-1921*, 96.

with not only empty rhetoric but also greater strife. Women played a prominent role in bringing practical issues and awareness to the table, which played a role in the crippling of one of the longest reigning autocracies. Women then played a prominent role in speaking into the plight of women, which garnished attention with the provisional government and their liberal agenda. In 1917, Soviet women aided the rise of socialism with their eagerness to form institutions and groups centered on liberating women. After October, the Bolsheviks stifled all women's momentum, which was used to boost the party's position. Beyond suffrage, the February Provisional Government produced genuine rhetoric but lacked greater implantation of initiatives while the Great War and other factors significantly contributed to the lack of efficiency in the temporary governing body. The Bolsheviks rather presented rhetoric to boost their standing and then implemented greater measures of oppression.

CHAPTER TWO

Mobilizing and Agitating Women Workers Toward Liberation

During the Russian Civil War, the Bolshevik rhetoric of equality and emancipation presented to the Russian people and the world was a direct contradiction of the followed priorities and pursuits by the regime. In examining Kollontai's writings of the early 1920s, she referred to more ideological goals that were considerably less measurable than previously stated reforms to be adopted by the Bolsheviks. Following the 1917 decrees which reassured working women of the Bolshevik's commitment to providing economic independence to women, many Bolshevik women expected significant follow through in the form of funded programs of socialized institutions (children's homes, laundries, cafeterias.)

The Bolshevik rhetoric served as primarily empty promises, which is evident by the lack of resources allocated to pursuing further liberation for women. This absence of funding and Kollontai's shift in narrative illustrates the divide between the Bolshevik's primary interests, labor productivity³⁷, and women workers' interests that centered on domestic assistances. The Russian Civil War is a critical period to examine as it points to the issue of the Bolshevik's dedication to implementing emancipation. This period mobilized millions of women, which placed women more firmly into the category of "proletariat." This value determined by class was perceived by many women to be the greatest asset to obtaining liberation under the Bolsheviks. The Bolsheviks continued to

³⁷ Elizabeth A. Wood, *The Baba and the Comrade: Gender and Politics in Revolutionary Russia* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 49.

publish decrees in the early 1920s as well as promote the 1917-1919 proposals, which led some Bolshevik women, raise questions regarding follow through. The Bolsheviks begun to fear women as a distinct group their agency over men at the front, and their perceived counterrevolutionary propensities.

While rhetoric on the issue of empowering women in the name of revolution was rampant, the need to continue mobilizing women was a distinct goal of the Bolsheviks. Following the Bolshevik's seize of power, Russia was thrown into a bloody civil war from 1917 to 1921. The Bolsheviks sought to destroy the old order and craft a socialist state based on the dictatorship of the proletariat. As violence erupted across the fragmented state, the Bolsheviks sought every avenue to continue solidifying authority and silence opposition. Steinberg found that the Bolsheviks promoted repression as a means to hold on to state power that included measures such as mass arrests, summary executions, and terror."³⁸ Lenin perceived all traditions of the imperial order that casted doubt on the party as blatant threats to the revolution that could only be responded to with force. He valued the use of violence in a revolution in order to achieve overthrowing capitalist institutions and inciting political change. While the Bolsheviks consolidated power and then carried out their coup successfully, the First World War was still raging across Europe. The Provisional Government continued Russia's involvement in the war, and the Bolsheviks vehemently opposed as a capitalist, imperialist war. The state had mobilized millions of women in Russia, which for a short period the Bolsheviks used for their own advantage to spur on the effects of revolution. Women's mobilization played a

³⁸ Mark Steinberg, *The Russian Revolution 1905-1921*, 92.

key role in the Bolsheviks' rising fear of the extent of women's agency and their ability to threaten the stability of the regime.

The First World War brought great change to women in terms of mobilization that led directly into the effects of the Russian Civil War. Shortages and the plight of families promoted women to move into roles of political actors. The drastic effects of war prompted women to move further into the public sphere. The First World War engaged an unprecedented number of combatants that required a much greater demand for labor. This led to the steady increase of women into industry provided new opportunities for women.³⁹ Women, often marginalized and viewed as distinctly backward, were mobilized in great numbers to lead the state towards victory. Women felt compelled to take up the cause to defend the motherland.

The feminist movement comprised of intelligentsia and radical students, in the early years of the war quickly adopted war efforts with alacrity in hopes of achieving further equality by women presenting their capacity to serve the state just as well as men. Feminist publications argued for women to support the war with their labor and aid the military effort in any possible fashion.⁴⁰ Feminist groups argued that women's greater move from domesticity to the labor pool would show men and the regime that women could fulfill the ideal citizen. One major feminist publication, *Zhenskoe Delo* [The Women's Cause], pressed for women to mobilize in order to seize on the opportunity to present their deserving service which would result in greater equality under the law and in the eyes of men. The paper wrote: "in such a great patriotic moment, the Russian

³⁹ Rochelle Goldberg Ruthchild, *Equality and Revolution: Women's Rights in the Russian Empire 1905-1917* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010), 212-213.

⁴⁰ Ruthchild, *Equality & Revolution*, 213.

women should show herself to be a true citizen” and that such mobilization suited women and their gendered role “not with death-dealing weapons, but with works of love and mercy.” Women would mobilize and encompass a new facet of their identity or role within the state that would further expand their equality in the eyes of those whom women viewed as withholding opportunity. In 1914, a woman wrote to the publication: “that in the end women would see the success of that equality which progressive women all over the world hope to achieve.”⁴¹ Women entered a new era that focused on self-reliance, which they believed ought to be recognized and valued by the world. Women entered the public sphere to achieve political ends that would resonate positively with the regime. Activists argued that women must defend the motherland to witness greater freedoms for women. Women defended the motherland and aimed to showcase that such service demanded political equality. The feminist activist Maria Blandova wrote in 1916: “thanks to this monstrous war, the last argument against equal rights for women put forth by the enemies of women’s freedom has fallen.”⁴² Articles argued that women’s self-sacrifice would produce lasting political change that would make such efforts worthwhile for generations to come. Maria Ivanova in *Zhenskii vestnik* [Women’s Herald] stated, “She discovered women can be as smart, as hard workers as their husbands, fathers, brothers.”⁴³ The language of discovery points to many women’s experience of mobilization that allowed them to view liberties in a new light. Women experienced first hand many responsibilities that their male counterparts solely held previously which

⁴¹ Ibid, 214.

⁴² Ibid, 216

⁴³ *Ibid.*

translated to their own realization of their deserving political status. The mobilization of the First World War further clarified women's abilities to women themselves and provided a distinctive opportunity for women to prove their dedication to the motherland, which merited equal rights for women.

When examining women at the front during the First World War, the lines of distinction based on gender were not so apparent and consistent with traditional understandings of masculinity and femininity. Laurie S. Stoff in her work *Russia's Sisters of Mercy and the Great War: More than Binding Men's Wounds* finds that women acting as nurses during the First World War in imperial Russia were "sometimes required to perform tasks clearly outside the conventional purview of early twentieth-century female roles. They acted in dynamic, forceful, and sometimes even aggressive ways. Women's wartime nursing activity also obscured the separation between gendered conceptions of public and private spheres."⁴⁴ Russian nurses served very close to the fighting and many of the nurses desired to serve at the front themselves. Stoff finds that Russian women in medical service during the First World War shared elements of the male combat experience and their writings reflecting the conflict were similar to male forms of recollection. Like the *Zhenskoe Delo* articles discussed, gendered role still existed as wartime nursing and combat had distinct differences, mainly as nurses had the purpose of healing and nurturing. Stoff argues that the notions of nurturing and motherhood were taken out of its domestic context and defied categories and traditional notions.⁴⁵ The First World War and Stoff's findings demonstrate the "uphill" struggle of women in imperial

⁴⁴ Laurie S. Stoff, *Russia's Sisters of Mercy and the Great War: More than Binding Men's Wounds* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2015), 113.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 138.

Russia to inch towards an emancipated life. Women's participation in the First World War and their expectations for further social and political reforms played a role in the extraordinary achievements they made in 1917. Stoff speaks to motivation of many women in joining the medical service as it offered "the opportunity to shake their financial dependence", "make their own decisions about their lives", and "considerable freedom of movement that would have been difficult for young women in early twentieth-century society."⁴⁶ These motivations align with Kollontai's urge for economic independence that define her understanding of emancipation. By considering women at the front, it is evident that preexisting notions of gender became further blurred. This presented women in imperial Russia an opportunity for a greater discovery of their abilities and desires, which played a key role in the developments in 1917 and even sets its roots to be seen throughout the Civil War period.

As women argued that the First World War would offer the opportunity of equality both politically and economically, this desire served as a key motivation in bridging the gap for political organizing on the brink of the Civil War. As hopes were set at a high bar during the Provisional Government's time of governance, the economic situation increasingly worsened as the war prolonged and stagnated. Women continued to mobilize and the issues both at home and at the front grew dire. Women looked to the Bolsheviks for answers to the shortages and solutions for their starving children. Bolsheviks, with no governmental or bureaucratic expertise, took the helm of a ship with numerous unsolved crises that included war, inflation, and domestic unrest.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 116.

The Bolsheviks presented substantial claims that their party would serve as the primary supporter of women workers. Lenin was a primary driver of the party's rhetoric and commitment to advancing agendas that advocated for working mothers. Alexandra Kollontai officially joined the Bolshevik party in 1915 and by 1917 had established herself as a prominent leader of the Bolshevik Women's Department (Zhenotdel), following her work with the women's publication *Rabotnitsa*. She argued that the achievement of suffrage under the Provisional Government did not grant full emancipation for women.⁴⁷ Viewing the suffering of women to balance labor and motherhood, she argued that the origin of liberation did not lie with the grant of political equality under the law in which Russia led the world in 1917, but that it must go further to grant the protections of the workingwoman. Kollontai insisted that genuine emancipation was found in the changes that affected everyday life, beyond the voting booth, writing: "The revolution had brought rights for women on paper, but in fact had only made life more burdensome for them."⁴⁸ In her 1916 work entitled "Working Woman and Mother" she wrote: "The first thing that can be done and the first thing that working men and women are doing in every country is to see the law defends the working mother. The very least that can be done is to make sure that hired labor does not become the 'grave of maternity.'"⁴⁹ In 1918, she spoke to the question of how to liberate women to the degree sought by so many: "To attain legal rights is insufficient; women

⁴⁷ Alexandra Kollontai, "V.I. Lenin and the First Congress of Women Workers," Marxists.org, 1918, accessed November 5, 2018, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/kollonta/1918/congress.htm>.

⁴⁸ Carol Eubanks Hayde, "The Zhenotdel and the Bolshevik Party," in *Russian History*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (1976), pp. 150-173, 155.

⁴⁹ Alexandra Kollontai, "Working Woman and Mother," Marxists.org, 1916, accessed November 5, 2018, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/kollonta/1916/working-mother.htm>.

must be emancipated in practice. The emancipation of women means giving them the opportunity to bring up their children, combining motherhood with work for society.”⁵⁰ Kollontai provided a new framework that focused on presenting practical solutions to the Bolshevik regime that was paramount to working women. Practical solutions that sought to mitigate the issues related to serving the new society as proletarian workers as well as the duty of motherhood. As Kollontai viewed Marxism as the solution to the woman question, she viewed the practical element of liberation to not be understood in relation to privilege or charity. She wrote:

“These measures must not be stamped with the bitter label of ‘philanthropy.’ Every member of society – and that means every working woman and every citizen, male and female – has the right to demand that the state and community concern itself with the welfare of all. Why do people form a state, if not for this purpose?”⁵¹

Kollontai presented the perspectives that the concepts of emancipation were not found in decrees or rhetoric, but measurement would be defined by the practical applications of ideology and commitment.

Just as Russian women strove for involvement in the First World War were seeking an opportunity to illustrate their demand for political equality, Kollontai and others socialist women were urging the Bolshevik Party to take an interest in organizing women. This was a consistent appeal from Kollontai throughout her advocacy, even well in late 1920s. A task that did not seem too large, as the Bolsheviks had administered a wealth of propaganda on their political analysis of the woman question founded on Marxist theory.⁵² Truly revolutionary for 1917, the Bolsheviks came to power arguing

⁵⁰ Kollontai, “V.I. Lenin and the First Congress of Women Workers.”

⁵¹ Alexandra Kollontai, “Working Woman and Mother.”

⁵² Carol Eubanks Hayde, “The Zhenotdel and the Bolshevik Party”, 151.

that they were a group that believed the interests of women workers were “identical with those of the proletariat as a whole” and quite distinct from the bourgeois understanding.⁵³ The Bolsheviks clearly articulated that women workers were subject to the dual oppression of household drudgery and wage slavery; they were discriminated against on the job, in the family, and in terms of social and political rights.”⁵⁴ In her work focusing on the Zhenotdel, Carol Eubank Hayden examines the Bolshevik language on women, finding that such language was centered on the belief that women held the special position as the most oppressed sector of the exploited masses as a whole, and of the working class in particular. Women activists saw the rhetoric as another incredible opportunity to seize and advance the interests of working women under a seemingly more open and free government.⁵⁵ Kollontai, a source of trust for many women workers, confirmed that Lenin believed in the same understanding by writing:

“Vladimir Illyich believed that women should be given the possibility of working in the state apparatus while simultaneously able to be mothers. Women are a valuable creative force, but they also have the right and duty to be mothers. Not only the women of the Soviet Union, but women throughout the world should know Vladimir Ilyich laid the foundations of female emancipation.”⁵⁶

Working to create emancipation through practice, Kollontai wielded her influence with Lenin and other high level leaders by establishing various conferences and commissions to examine the plight of the female masses. In 1918, Kollontai assembled the first

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Alexandra Kollontai, “V.I. Lenin and the First Congress of Women Workers.”

conference of the representatives of women industrial workers in Russia.⁵⁷ She argued that the state should quickly adopt legislative measures to protect working women and their children in order to lighten the burden of motherhood.

Working with Kollontai, the Soviet government quickly established institutions and legislation that aimed to protect women and their distinct contribution to the new society. In 1917, the government established The People's Commissariats for Welfare and The People's Commissariat for Labor, both seen as imperative from Kollontai and her supporters. The commissariats wrote up a series of social legislation that covered children's homes and sought to advance Kollontai's objective of creating motherhood to become "a great joy and a great pride" for working women.⁵⁸ Kollontai contended that such creations of specific commissions highlighted the commitment of the Bolsheviks while arguing that "The People's Commissariats carried through the measures designed for mothers."⁵⁹ Yet, Kollontai did not reference such commissariats in detail of their accomplishments in that specific writing nor later in other of her prominent writings. Rather, she provided that "the People's Commissariat concentrated organization and reorganization of those institutions." The emphasis on success was found rather in the continuation of organizing plans and bureaucratic advancements. Kollontai viewed the creations of commissariats as the state assuming responsibility in the socialization of household labor, something at the core of her advocacy since only socialism could conditions of economic independence for women. Kollontai found that the 1917

⁵⁷Alexandra Kollontai, "The First Steps Towards the Protection of Motherhood." Marxists.org, 1918, accessed November 5, 2018, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/kollonta/1918/steps-motherhood.htm>.

⁵⁸ Alexandra Kollontai, "Working Woman and Mother."

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

commissariats focusing on motherhood and labor were incredibly promising and believed that follow through was imminent.

Promise was evident, but was it probable? Tricia Stark, in her work *The Body Soviet: Propaganda, Hygiene, and the Revolutionary State*, argues that such legislation and focus on organization was a concern for the overall health of a nation in a devastated condition rather than a targeted effort to combat issues among the challenges women faced while building the new Marxist state.⁶⁰ It was a societal norm to view women as the gatekeepers to the domestic life that governed the inner workings of the home and family. In the same commissariats stressed by Kollontai and the Bolsheviks to address working women, Stark writes:

“Revolutionaries pledged to provide the people with better living quarters, improved working conditions, and universal medical care. Reforms moved workers from overcrowded barracks into confiscated bourgeois housing. The government enacted protective legislation, and in 1918 the Narodnyi komissariat zdavookhraneniia (People's Commissariat of Public Health; hereafter Narkomzdrav) began a quest to protect the health and welfare of all citizens.”⁶¹

Kollontai stated that it was her agency that led to the creation of the commissariat and that “the first concern” of the commissariat was to supervise work being done to promote and protect mother and child as increasing demand and workload grew in the Civil War.⁶² The evidence of direct accomplishment appears to be at best murky and interpretations for the aim of the commissariat are also dubious.

⁶⁰ Tricia Starks, *The Body Soviet: Propaganda, Hygiene, and the Revolutionary State* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008), 16.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² Kollontai, “The First Steps Toward the Protection of Motherhood”.

Breaking out in the spring of 1918, husbands and brothers went off to fight the opponents of the new regime which left women at home grumbling, and this began to worry the Bolsheviks.⁶³ The Bolsheviks had been preaching the message of greater prosperity and the freedoms associated with Bolshevik authority. The Bolsheviks proclaimed a “food dictatorship” due to the severe problem of accessing food.⁶⁴ A female student wrote: “The worst bother came from the fact that I was always hungry. People, who have not been hungry, do not know what it means. Food becomes the most important thing in life, almost. [...] We just existed. The students were ill very frequently.”⁶⁵ Three-quarters of the population were starving from 1919- 1923.⁶⁶ Conditions grew more dire as women witnessed and wrote about the destruction. A great level of uncertainty plagued the Bolsheviks, as disorganization and instability became the norm. A Ukrainian file clerk discussed the sufferings and terror found in the beginning of the Civil War, writing: “With the coming of the Bolsheviks we got deprivation, terror, material shortages, and repression. This was a general manifestation with everyone.”⁶⁷ Anna Andzhievskaja, a young socialist fighting white coalitions in the North Caucasus region, wrote about her experience during the damaging health crisis of the Civil War while providing great sacrifices to defend the regime. She wrote:

⁶³ Shelia Fitzpatrick, “PART I Introduction” In *In the Shadow of the Revolution: Life Stories of Russian Women from 1917 to the Second World War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 31.

⁶⁴ Steinberg, *The Russian Revolution*, 99.

⁶⁵ HPSSS, Harvard Project on the Soviet Social System. Schedule A, Vol. 32, Case 642/(NY)1109 (interviewer M.S., type A4). Female, 25, Great Russian, Student. Widener Library, Harvard University. <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:FHCL:962303>.

⁶⁶ Starks, *The Body Soviet*, 3.

⁶⁷ Harvard Project on the Soviet Social System. Schedule A, Vol. 7, Case 95 (interviewer M.L., type A4). Female, 43, Ukrainian, White-collar file clerk. Widener Library, Harvard University, 12. <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:FHCL:942108?n=12>.

“In the following months the front line continued to draw closer and closer. There was not enough food to feed the population. The town was decimated by typhus. The sick lay in corridors, on floors, and even on the ground in the courtyards. The epidemic had spread to the civilian population. The fight against it was made more difficult by the lack of medications, food, and medical personnel.”⁶⁸

Andzhievskaja presents that the conditions at the front only grew more dire and her unit began to retreat. After a substantial portion of her writing focused on relaying the struggles, she mentions that she is pregnant. She further illustrates the sacrifice of a dedicated female Bolshevik revolutionary in her work to defend the cause and embody motherhood. The conditions drove more and more women to a state of desperation. This can be seen by Andzhievskaja’s writing about her experience with her child: “I took Nadezhda to the station. I had to drag her along the ground because I did not have the strength to lift her. Then I ran back for the sick comrade.”⁶⁹ She represents one of many women who was utterly committed to the cause and worried about such issues of health and prosperity for women. She was acting and serving the regime while operating in some of the worst conditions in modern Russian history while attempting to raise a child. Women like Andzhievskaja, provide a glimpse of the struggle that Kollontai was speaking on to raise the standards and seek emancipation through practice.

Even while many women were destitute of adequate provisions during this period, the Bolsheviks still continued to have a hold on popular support among working women. The narrative that only Marxist-Leninism could create the critical conditions that provide economic independence was continuing to resonate among working women seeking the

⁶⁸ Anna Andshievskaja, “A Mother’s Story” In *In the Shadow of the Revolution: Life Stories of Russian Women from 1917 to the Second World War*, Shelia Fitzpatrick (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 77.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 78.

state to provide relief. A young female socialist, Anna Litveiko, wrote in her memoir about her experience telling her sister why the Bolsheviks were the party to follow, stating: “If we, the workers, take over power, we’ll build a good life for all working people, but if you allow freedom for the bourgeoisie, there won’t be any freedom for the people.”⁷⁰ Many women workers believed in the Bolshevik message and were seeking verification on the promises that had been so rampant in their speeches and writings. One strength of the Bolsheviks consisted of their ability to continue advancing their propaganda and keep a grip on the populace by expanding organizations to engage workers without clear results emanating. Ekaterina Olitskaia, an early supporter of the regime and a deep believer in socialism, wrote about the constant organizing stating:

“While some things were falling apart, others were being organized. Unions, committees, and associations were springing up everywhere. Even the thieves were organizing themselves. All over town rallies- planned and spontaneous-were taking place. People were making speeches from trucks, balconies, hilltops, and the bases of statues. All kinds of exciting news kept arriving.”⁷¹

Mobilization was reaching women not only within the factories and the labor industry, but such mobilization was touching every aspect of life. Yet despite the noise and hopes of many, daily life increasingly became a challenge. The Civil War swiftly engulfed the nation and a military conflict ensued for years. In March, the Bolsheviks withdrew from the war with Germany and insisted that efforts focus on eradicating imperialist, capitalist campaigns in Russia.⁷² Shortages began to become more severe than during the tsarist

⁷⁰ Anna Litveiko, “In 1917” In *In the Shadow of the Revolution: Life Stories of Russian Women from 1917 to the Second World War*, Shelia Fitzpatrick (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 51.

⁷¹ Ekaterina Olitskaia, “My Reminiscences” In *In the Shadow of the Revolution: Life Stories of Russian Women from 1917 to the Second World War*, Shelia Fitzpatrick (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 36.

⁷² Steinberg, *The Russian Revolution*, 97.

period with women workers beginning to press on the Bolsheviks for a response. Women began to feel the immense suffering that follows the consequences of a state torn from internal struggles for power. Olitskaia, once such a firm believer in the socialist pursuits of the Bolsheviks, wrote:

“I observed life around me with silent indignation. Instead of a bright world of peace and liberty I saw a world of violence and bitter fighter. People who had until recently freely expressed their hopes and ideas were becoming secretive. Instead of improving, the material situation was getting worse all the time. One kind of injustice had been replaced by another.”⁷³

The leap to a new society was proving costly emotionally and economically for even the staunchest supporters. The messages of prosperity and socialization that deeply appealed to working women continued to be delayed with minimal prospects of progress.

Hearing such stories of suffering, Kollontai renewed her efforts to stress practical emancipation for women. In the same decree on the first steps that she addressed as imperative for the state to identify and rectify, Kollontai recognized that providing greater medical treatment was vital to ensure the protection of working motherhood. She found the implementation of socialized medicine would create lasting change for women workers. Socialist medical practices were viewed as instrumental in raising the standard for working women and reducing the gap between impoverished and affluent women.⁷⁴ The People’s Commissariat continued to expand its offices and created a Department for the Protection of Mother and Child that encompassed a network of institutions and overarching organizations that were designed to centralize the work that was near and dear to the hearts of millions of women. The commissariat issued decrees reorganizing in

⁷³ Olitskaia, “My Reminiscences” In *In the Shadow of the Revolution*, 42.

⁷⁴ Kollontai, “The First Steps Toward the Protection of Motherhood.”

late 1917, which legally recognized maternity as one of the social functions of women. In January 1918, a decree was published emphasizing the expansion of institutions regarding lying-in hospitals, clinics, and midwifery which ordered medical services for expecting mothers be organized that focused on the civic duty of motherhood.⁷⁵

Of course, not all women fully embraced the identity of socialist motherhood. Many women, traumatized by the Bolshevik ideology and brutality, did not welcome government intrusion into the family. The concerns about children and health within the family unit were still a major concern. The Ukrainian clerk mentioned:

“The material situation was such that both parents had to work left their children unguarded and hungry, half dressed, going around bare-foot and not dressed. This led to delinquencies among the children. Children who were 13 or 14 wanted to eat better, they began to steal. As regards respect, they respected no one since they have no family. The Bolsheviks boast that they were juvenile delinquents who became successful writers and engineers, especially those who had gone to the specific children’s home. But these were rare cases, one out of a thousand became successful.”⁷⁶

This respondent came from a family of high social origin prior to the October Revolution, which furthered her dissatisfaction with the Bolsheviks. Her response provides valuable insight into the women who found themselves alienated by the Bolshevik regime that aimed to rid all values from her class and upbringing. She provides a glimpse of how all women, even the women who directly contrasted socialist aims, were deeply affected and worried about the conditions of their family and themselves. She had been placed into a working role in order for her family to survive among the calamitous circumstances. Her

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶Harvard Project on the Soviet Social System. Schedule A, Vol. 7, Case 95 (interviewer M.L., type A4). Female, 43, Ukrainian, White-collar file clerk. Widener Library, Harvard University, 12. <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:FHCL:942108?n=12>.

distrust of the regime only expanded and further solidified over the course of the Civil War, so marked by cruelty and empty rhetoric.

As Kollontai stressed the Bolsheviks' commitment to providing solutions to mitigating the plight of women in practical approaches, indeed more and more was being organized and institutionalized. Yet, she did not continue to communicate the success or measures introduced following the announcements of the greater centralization and efforts. The celebration was found within the plans and dedication authorized by the regime. Lists, decrees, and boards continued to expand twofold, unmatched in the West, but where were the results that so many women depended on? Starks sheds light on this subject, stating that the Department for the Protection of Motherhood and Infancy supervised an expansive array of protections like orphanages, nurseries, homes for mother and children, and maternity homes.⁷⁷ Stark further argues the lack of execution following organization was due to the lack of resources dedicated to such issues that women deeply advocated for and mobilized on. Starks finds that due to budgetary constraints, the Bolsheviks turned to greater propaganda as the viable, cheaper alternative. Hygienists could not provide the services without the necessary resources and turned to propaganda in the form of literature and presentations.

The departments were involved in a great number of activities and services but the top leaders of the party prioritized other interests.⁷⁸ Bolsheviks continued to appeal to women and provided instruction and advice of greater hygienic practices to balance their sacrifice of working and motherhood. Resources did not follow; propaganda was the

⁷⁷ Starks, *The Body Soviet*, 139.

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 140.

Bolsheviks preferred option, which further conveys their perceived commitment or more accurately absence of commitment. The issues of high priority for many women were a low priority for the regime. The Bolsheviks were not leaning on the understanding of emancipating women through practical concerns. The Bolsheviks were discussing and creating, but deliberately advancing other interests which began to become noticeable to women, especially working women. Olitskaia wrote about the summer of 1918:

“The city was tense, and so was our house. We pledged to keep everything until life returned to normal. The city grew silent as people waited for what would happen next. Grand announcements by our new master were posted on walls. People read them but kept their doubts to themselves. Everyone was skeptical of these new promises.”⁷⁹

Women began to acknowledge the discrepancy between objectives that were championed by the Bolsheviks as pressing issues that mattered greatly and the lack of follow through beyond constant decrees and organizing. The difference between action and speech became more and more apparent, especially when Kollontai a year prior so fiercely argued that follow through was both key to success and also imminent. As women began to distinguish and raise questions on priorities, the Bolsheviks grew uneasy.

This uneasiness may have been building since the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks in October 1917. Immediately after consolidating power in the fall, the Bolsheviks immediately cracked down on all independent publications and organizations, directly impacting feminist groups.⁸⁰ As the Civil War raged, conditions worsened and the fighting only grew more severe. As the conflict proved to not be a short campaign, the Bolsheviks grew more intolerant of expression. By 1920, the Bolsheviks had a

⁷⁹ Olitskaia, “My Reminiscences” In *In the Shadow of the Revolution*, 42.

⁸⁰ Ruthchild, *Equality & Revolution*, 235.

heightened sense of concern for women's perception of the regime beyond the concern of managing dissent amidst the Civil War. Wood argues that the leadership became "extremely sensitive to the moods of the country. Women's moods in the rear, they knew, affected the moods of the soldiers at the front."⁸¹ Bolshevik women played a key role in altering the behavior of the Bolsheviks to concentrate their worries on the opinions of women. Food insecurity played a pivotal role in the outcry from women that was seen by members of the Bolshevik leadership as a defining factor in the Tsar's abdication. Women had exercised political authority only a few years prior with even less of a position in industry and among less severe conditions. The Bolsheviks began to worry that the urgency and mobilization seen by women in 1917 would showcase itself under the Bolsheviks.

Throughout the Civil War, the Bolsheviks praised the proletariat, which would spearhead the transition to socialism. Two years into the conflict, the bulk of the working people, the language and ideology that was fundamental, consisted of women. Men were at the front, in government positions in national or local government, or in the rural countryside.⁸² Women, on the other hand, were continuing their mobilization in large-scale industry, extending their agency by presenting they deserved greater emancipation. Woods writes: "Women had been 25 percent of the workers in large-scale industry in 1913, they were 40 percent in 1917, and 46 percent by 1920."⁸³ The Bolsheviks were

⁸¹ Wood, *The Baba and the Comrade*, 44.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ *Ibid.*

pursuing too few plans to mitigate the troubles of a significant portion of their ideal group (the proletariat).

Kollontai, a source that gave a glimpse into governing policies and decision-making, writings began to take a shift in the later years of the civil war. Her writings that early on in 1917-1918 emphasized the new state's dedication to practical changes in daily life were absent and rather cultural and moral objectives took their place.⁸⁴ This shift is considerable for one who was the trusted source by both the state and the masses to present accurate ambitious and desired initiatives for the stability and longevity of both sides. Kollontai found that emancipation was found in practice yet in the 1920s her pursuits shifted dramatically to less measurable. Kollontai continued to stress the state's responsibility in ensuring the success and protection of women and motherhood with the overarching focus on principles and functions of government.

Her writings in the pre-revolutionary and revolutionary period centered on what actions needed to be taken by the state, Kollontai's mid Civil War writings deviated to more ideological viewpoints. In her 1921 essay entitled: "The Labor of Women in the Evolution of the Economy", she focused more on the issue of the women needing to recognize the importance of bringing up children is a function of the state and must be seen in a new light.⁸⁵ The more ideological viewpoints differed from her previous perspectives as well as the Bolsheviks' promises. Kollontai moved the discussion to the unfinished work, which relied heavily on the people's end. She provided the justification

⁸⁴ Alexandra Kollontai, "Communism and the Family." Marxists.org, 1920, accessed November 8, 2018, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/kollonta/1920/communism-family.htm>.

⁸⁵ Alexandra Kollontai, "The Labor of Women in the Evolution of the Economy." Marxists.org, 1921, accessed November 9, 2018, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/kollonta/1921/evolution.htm>.

that following party lines would entail the promised prosperity. It is apparent in Kollontai's early 1920s writings that she can be seen rationalizing on part of the regime, she included. After stating that motherhood needed to be examined in a new light among women, Kollontai drew back on initial workings that showed promise Kollontai attempted to refer back to a time where promise was still popular and incited hope like early 1917-1918, writing: "Soviet power, basing itself on this principle, has outlined a number of measures to shift the burden of motherhood from the shoulders of women to those of the state. Soviet power takes responsibility for the care of the baby and the material provision of the child."⁸⁶ Kollontai used language of principles, functions, and measures but omitted language on how improvements would be further addressed or steps to be taken in the future. Kollontai began to push for more issues that provided fewer opportunities to legislate and more issues that were instead intended to clarify understandings for women.

Kollontai's shift in rhetoric does not fully present why the Bolsheviks viewed women as a distinct threat to the regime but it is apparent that as women continued to press for answers, their advocate began to shift her narrative. In addition to women increasingly filling the proletariat role, the Bolsheviks were concerned that women were more prone to counterrevolutionary elements.⁸⁷ The Bolsheviks viewed women as more subject to thwarting the regime by their tendency to rely on their strong ties to religion and family roots. The Bolsheviks feared that women would take instruction from their priests or various elites that promoted messages that were not aligned with the Bolshevik

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ Wood, *The Baba and the Comrade*, 44.

agenda. Wood argues this fear of the Bolsheviks writing: “If women were not won over to the Bolshevik side, it was argued, they would hinder efforts to spread revolution within the country. Incidents did take place in which women played a ‘counterrevolutionary’ role.”⁸⁸ Wood then uses the example of Kollontai in 1918 attempting to appropriate a monastery to house revolutionary soldiers but was met with large demonstrations by women to block such a measure.⁸⁹ In the Civil War, Wood writes that women “often joined the party when it supplied their neighborhood with food but then left as soon as the food supplies were no longer forthcoming. Gaining women’s support was thus, at a minimum, a question of supporting the extension of the new party and state.”⁹⁰ Rather than the woman issue being addressed, the lack of addressing the issue gave rise to the Bolsheviks’ added alarm.

Kollontai further supports this claim of the fear of counterrevolutionary propensities among women. Kollontai remembers Lenin’s words on such a worry among women and her direction to warn off the counterrevolutionary tendencies of women.

Kollontai wrote that Lenin said:

“If even the most resolute and courageous fighter on the civil war front returns home and has to listen day after day to the grumbles and complaints of his wife and face in her, as a result of her lack of political consciousness, an opponent to the continuing struggle for Soviet power, the will of even a valiant warrior hardened in battle may weaken, and he who did not surrender to counter-revolution may surrender to his wife and come under her harmful influence. Therefore,’ said Vladimir Ilyich, ‘we must mould the female working masses into a solid bulwark of Soviet power against counter-revolution. Each woman must understand that, in fighting for Soviet power, she is fighting for her own rights and for those of her children.”⁹¹

⁸⁸ Sanborn, *Drafting the Russian Nation*, 163.

⁸⁹ Wood, *The Baba and the Comrade*, 45.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ Alexandra Kollontai, “V.I. Lenin and the First Congress of Women Workers.”

The leader of the regime felt women held innate qualities that made them more susceptible to counterrevolutionary efforts and had the ability to sway their male counterparts. This skepticism lay at the heart of efforts towards women and made the regime more sensitive to the reactions of women in the form of further repressive resolutions. Trotsky illustrated this fear in his refusal of women to serve in the army, as their service would undermine the men's efforts. Kollontai herself can be viewed as a perpetrator of counterrevolution. Kollontai toed the line of threat and dissident closely along her role as a worthy contributor to the regime, as some of her fiercest criticisms appeared in the 'Workers Opposition' pamphlet. Kollontai also drove the narrative of a female subverting men from the glory of the Bolsheviks as she fell in love with a man who mutinied against the Bolsheviks, which was later heavily repressed by Trotsky.⁹² Kollontai's words had significant weight with the Bolsheviks as well as with the masses that looked for her to alleviate their strife. The dynamic of her own personality and life choices played a role in shaping the Bolsheviks preexisting paternalistic attitudes. The viewpoint that women were more subject to fall to counterrevolutionary elements played a role in the Bolshevik's added fear for women's reaction.

Even more evident beyond the rhetoric shift focusing on more cultural elements, Kollontai became more apologetic in her writings. Kollontai addresses the shortcomings in policy and in permitting resources with a tone of rationalizing on her part. In 1921, four years after her distinct rise in the party and prominent stature among revolutionaries, she writes: "In its search for new forms of economy and of living economy and of living

⁹² Alexandra Kollontai, "Women Workers Struggle For Their Rights." Marxists.org, 1919, accessed November 11, 2018, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/kollonta/1919/women-workers/index.htm>.

which meet the interests of the proletariat, the Soviet Republic has inevitably committed a number of mistakes, and has a number of times had to alter and correct its line.”⁹³ She clearly articulated that the party has not addressed issues that she most actively pursued in the interest of those who depended on her. Rather than to state that her push would continue on to directly affect the issues and conditions that have yet to become a priority, Kollontai referred back to the initial successes of the institutions and creations of so many decrees and guarantees. Kollontai pressed on the achievements of the intent and creations found in 1917 by the Bolsheviks writing: “But in the sphere of social upbringing and the protection of motherhood, the labor republic from the first months of its existence has marked out the right direction for developments to take. And in this sphere, a deep fundamental revolution of morals and attitudes is being achieved.”⁹⁴ She still did not write that yes not now but soon. She focused on communicating the past achievements of just the creations of such bureaucratic measures that did not amount to much or even a relative priority to the number of women demanding such emancipation in practice. The resources in forms of greater daycares, working conditions, medical practices, special food rations for the young, and more all fell short because the Bolsheviks refused to subsidize. Kollontai spoke to the failures and blatant lack of commitment that she was entrusted to ensure by writing:

“All these projects are far from having been realized in full; in practice we have covered only a narrow section of the population. However, we have so far failed to relieve the couple from all the difficulties of bringing up children. The general direction of the policy on maternity is correct. But our lack of resources hinders us. So far, experiments have only been carried out at a fairly modest level. Even

⁹³ Alexandra Kollontai, “The Labor of Women in the Evolution of the Economy.”

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

so, they have given results and have revolutionized family life, introducing fundamental changes in the relationships between the sexes.”⁹⁵

Kollontai worked to address the failures in the state’s execution in providing pivotal resources and programs that were essential to Kollontai’s understanding of emancipation illustrate that women workers were beginning to question the commitment of the Bolsheviks. She conceded that the progress has impacted only small pockets of the country and that the restrictions imposed by being provided limited resources halts their vision for working women. Still greatly popular among working women, Kollontai in 1921, the last year of the Civil War, began to solidify her efforts on sexual liberty and issues that she would have more concerted authority over.

Her rhetorical changes are aligned with the historical events of Russia. Kollontai’s rhetorical shift connects with the timeline of the growing Bolshevik anxiety over women’s moods. In the midst of Civil War, the Bolsheviks felt that such a group could under no circumstance tamper with the morale of men fighting and allow for such a detriment to the state in counterrevolutionary stunts. Her works centered on sexual liberation were viewed as impractical to the immediate concerns and began to lose the favor of the working women, her base.⁹⁶

The mobilization of women in the Russian civil war played a key role in prominent women leaders, such as Alexandra Kollontai, seeking and defining a new expectation for emancipation. Mobilization promoted women to further fulfill the role of the proletariat while serving the social obligation of motherhood, which prompted women

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ Alexandra Kollontai, “Sexual Relations and the Class Struggle.” Marxists.org, 1921, accessed November 7, 2018, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/kollonta/1921/sex-class-struggle.htm>.

to seek greater results from the regime. As conditions of inflation, shortages, and starvation struck the nation, women aimed to see the organizations and institutions adopted in the regime's infancy to produce results that would mitigate their struggles and align with their rhetoric. The regime refused to allocate resources, which engendered Kollontai and other trusted leaders to rationalize and speak to past successes in relative terms. Women were barred from serving in the army and the message of equality increasingly lost its promise and weight during the span of the Civil War.

CHAPTER THREE

Revising and Retrenching the Narrative of Emancipation

In the final years of the Civil War (1920-1921) as the Bolsheviks consolidated authority across the country and began to transition to an established state, both Alexandra Kollontai and the Bolshevik party leadership began to revise their narrative involving emancipation. Rather than affirming the commitment to combating the concrete problems and conditions for women, Kollontai presented a shift in writing that focused on the failings of capitalism and how little was changing in the west. As challenges arose that posed obstacles to the male dominated party leadership, Kollontai offered rhetoric that closely conformed to the overarching party narrative.

This shift is most evident in her 1920-1921 works but it appears in many of her 1919 articles when she recognized failures and struggled to rationalize minimal progress with the definition of emancipation that focused on practical improvements and state intervention. In May 1919, Kollontai wrote *What Are We Fighting For?* a work emphasizing the evils of capitalism to instill elements of reinsurance among a civil war trodden audience. As Kollontai's audience primarily targeted working women, she offered language to assure them that the violence erupting across the state is justified and much better than the alternative.⁹⁷ She began her work acknowledging the circulating questions and doubts about the continual war, as she continued at this time to serve as an approachable source in the party form which to draw answers. As opposed to highlighting

⁹⁷ Alexandra Kollontai, "What Are We Fighting For?", Marxists.org, 1919, accessed February 4, 2019, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/kollonta/1919/fighting.htm>.

progress made by the party to address the woman question, she avoided those arguments entirely. Instead, she presented the violence as solely perpetrated by the capitalists,

writing:

“The imperialist predators are not afraid of blood, and place no value on human life. They needed war, and therefore the bourgeoisie of every country mounted repeated attacks upon Soviet Russia and the Soviet Ukraine from outside, while inside the country they encouraged kulak action against the workers and peasant. A new battle front took shape-not Russians against Germans or Ukrainians against the allies, but 'Reds' against 'Whites', i.e. the working people against the bourgeoisie.”⁹⁸

Her description of the purpose behind the fighting contrasts her previous statements from two years early in her work *Why the Bolsheviks Must Win* which argued that women ought to support the Bolsheviks due to their firm commitment to radical social reforms.⁹⁹ In the 1917 account, Kollontai contended that support for the Bolsheviks is advisable due to the incredible measures the party has supported that she and her constituents view as priorities, such as education and housing. In the 1919 account, specific issues were absent and replaced with a strong position of slander towards the West. Her early works did provide staunch criticisms of bourgeois practices and beliefs, but these points were specifically addressing “the major capitalists and industrialists” in Russia and the corrupt tsarist regime.¹⁰⁰ In her works beyond 1918 when Kollontai began to wrestle with the limitations at hand, the narrative shifts to assigning blame and attributing fear to Western forms of imperialist, bourgeoisie influences. The Bolsheviks are only mentioned once in the 1919 work while each paragraph in the 1917 work is fully centered on their needed

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ Alexandra Kollontai, “Why the Bolsheviks Must Win”, Marxists.org, December 1917, accessed February 4, 2019, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/kollonta/1917/bolsheviks-win.htm>.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

support due to their incomparable work and values that serve workers' interests.

Kollontai pivoted her stance to offer attention to the struggles her audience would encounter if they opted to support contrary regimes:

“The worker would understand that the return to power of the bourgeoisie would mean a return to lack of rights, to the exploitation of labour, the abolition of the 8-hour working day and unemployment benefit, that it would lead to the expulsion of the working people from their light and healthy flats to be chased back into damp cellar. It would mean a return to slavery and hired labor.”¹⁰¹

Rather than attempting to offer legitimacy to the regime she was committed to serving, her work stressed the wrongs of capitalism as a whole. This work would not be as significant if solely analyzed for its time, during the Civil War, but in context with previous works draws an interesting conclusion. Kollontai's absence of promoting specific Bolshevik policy initiatives, a major facet of her most prominent writings, shifts to contend that the state of affairs is much more advantageous than the capitalist appeal serves to signify her changing role within the party apparatus and the evidence of her choosing compromise over her loyalties.

In examining possible concessions prior to 1919, few of her works explicitly mentioned the West's advancement of the woman question. Her objectives were focused on defending the interests of working women in Russia. In 1919, she wrote “Forms of Organization of Women Workers in the West” outlining the struggles and limited progress of proletariat women in Western nations. She follows Marxist ideology closely by suggesting that soon the West will further produce their own proletarian revolutions and that women workers will play a role in those movements but addresses the greater obstacles at play in the West. Kollontai focused on the progress and structural changes in

¹⁰¹ Kollontai, “What Are We Fighting For?”.

the years leading to the First World War but provided no commentary on the work being pursued following the war.

“In conclusion, one cannot help noting that in every country (except Germany) the majority of women’s cells (commissions, bureaux, and so on) within the party structure are of very recent origin, having crystallised during the five or six years immediately before the war. The progress made during these last years in drawing women workers into the party is all the more striking and the Women Workers’ Conference in Copenhagen was a bright testimony of this. There is no doubt that with the help that the work among the female proletariat is now receiving from the Social Democrats, the involvement of the women workers in the class struggle will go forward at an even faster rate...”¹⁰²

Kollontai cited progress even so far back as 1894 and in the lead up to the war, but offered no evidence for signs of greater involvement in the West in recent years. She made the case for imminent revolution despite the apparent absence of contemporary movements. She provided language on the obstacles that prevent the looming revolutions such as “indirect influence of bourgeois feminism”, “Western indifference”, and the need “to awaken women’s consciousness.”¹⁰³ By shedding light on the hindrances found in the West, Kollontai offered a form of deliberate obfuscation. Rather than highlighting the gaps needing to be addressed in the Soviet system, she emphasized the shortcomings in the West in order to avoid speaking to the difficulties found at home. In her earlier works, she never strayed from speaking out to the injustices and hindrances found within Russia. This change could be attributed to her form of self-censorship as her role within the party in 1919 started to lose standing. The content variation matches the time period when Kollontai’s policy initiatives were met with less consideration.

¹⁰²Alexandra Kollontai, “Forms of Organisation of Women Workers”, Marxists.org, 1919, accessed February 6, 2019, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/kollonta/1919/women-workers/ch02.htm>.

¹⁰³*Ibid.*

In facing the obstacle of meeting more criticism within the party, this obstacle grew for Kollontai when Iakov Sverdlov died in 1919. Sverdlov was one of Kollontai's closest allies within party leadership. She viewed his death as an enormous loss to her advocacy within the party and a blow to the greater advancement of liberation for working women. The loss of one of her key allies within the party contributed to her self-censorship. Kollontai vehemently advocated for the Bolsheviks to commit themselves to bringing women into the party.¹⁰⁴ The lack of implementation and resource commitment compelled her to continue to fight for her values. That mission increasingly became a taller task beyond identifying specific bureaus to engage major social reforms as she lost one of her strongest allies within party leadership, Yakov Mikhailovich Sverdlov. In her work *Whom Did the Working Women Lose?* Kollontai writes an emotional letter on Sverdlov's work to champion the liberation of women working that encompassed proposals to organize and involve female forces within the Central Committee.¹⁰⁵ In the letter, Kollontai felt the loss of such a staunch defender demanded women workers continued to strive to make a change upon their priorities, writing:

“But time is not for grief and silent tears of loss. The memory of Sverdlov's unremitting capacity for work and energy forces those who remain closer to join the ranks so that in a concerted effort to win that great goal — the liberation of working women and workers from the yoke of wage labor — for which Yakov Sverdlov lived and worked without sparing his strength.”

This appeal and tribute concluded her letter to women workers as she sought to find greater purpose following his death. Yet, this appeal presented a contrast to her self-censoring later civil war works, which omitted such specific language on particular

¹⁰⁴Beatrice Brodsky Farnsworth, “Bolshevism, the Woman Question, and Aleksandra Kollontai,” *The American Historical Review* 81, no. 2 (1976): 296.

¹⁰⁵ Kollontai, *Whom Did the Working Women Lose?* 1919

objectives and priorities. Sverdlov's death plays a key role in this transition. Sverdlov served as a key supporter that drove some of the early actions and formations that Kollontai viewed as success, such as the Congress of Working Women and subsequent departments focusing on bringing current living conditions to socialist standards. Sverdlov aided Kollontai in securing the party's pledge at the Eighth Congress in 1919 to introduce communal facilities in eating, laundry, and maternal and child care.¹⁰⁶ Kollontai believed Sverdlov to be a crucial male ally in the party, which she badly needed as the civil war continued and the Woman Question was found to be less and less pertinent to solve for the male dominant leadership.

Despite the 1919 advances in communicating the need to grow the movement of female workers, Kollontai found the Bolshevik Party met her work with greater reluctance to solving the issues she so fiercely defended. Sverdlov's death served a greater blow to Kollontai advocacy effort as the significance prompted her to write a letter to women workers. His death coincides with her transition to fixating on the failures of the West and the crimes of capitalism. Rather than the initial focus on presenting what achievements can be made and taking this farther to attempt to initiate greater reforms, Kollontai roots her arguments within the context of the possibility that the capitalists will destroy all the Bolsheviks have gained and the practical improvements they have brought to women workers will be lost. Her self censorship aligns with the feeling of severe loss following Sverdlov's passing and the increasing sentiment that providing policy on practical improvements for women will be a more arduous task.

¹⁰⁶ Farnsworth, *Bolshevism, the Woman Question, and Aleksandra Kollontai*, 296.

In addition to Kollontai 'sself-censorship manifested in her work to emphasize the evils of capitalism and minimal work found in the West, her work shifts to focus on the history of women activism in Russia. Shying away from the current efforts and obstacles, Kollontai works from 1919-1921 present a narrative that compromises her activist objectives with a focal point of Russian women's historical and progressive activism. In her work entitled "On the History of the Movement of Women Workers in Russia", Kollontai referenced impressive efforts by women workers even so far back as the early 1870s, mentioning the worker revolts and commenting on the strength of the women worker under the tsarist, imperial regime. She makes a concerted effort to highlight the remarkable activism of women, which engendered successful policy changes under the tsar seen by her writing:

"They were involved in the strike in 1878 at the New Cotton-Spinning Plant in Petrograd and led the weavers' strike in the famous workers' demonstration in Orekhovo-Zuyevo, during which factory buildings were wrecked. As a result, the tsarist government was compelled to hurry through its legislation prohibiting night work for women and children, which came into force on 3 June, 1885."¹⁰⁷

These spontaneous strikes were located within the textile industry which was composed of cheap female labor at a time when women were particularly discontent with economic reasons especially unemployment, which Kollontai mentions. Yet unlike previous writings, this would have been an opportune time for her to make the connection between acting on the grievances of practical and economical in the 1870s and the current state of affairs. Instead, she takes the narrative in another direction championing the historic events as women opposed the "power of the bosses" and the "enslavement of capital"

¹⁰⁷Alexandra Kollontai, "On the History of the Movement of Women Workers in Russia", Marxists.org, 1919, accessed February 22, 2019, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/kollonta/1919/history.htm>.

under harsh conditions.¹⁰⁸ This historical example was strikingly similar and applicable to current conditions that she wrote under in 1919. In the Sokoloniki neighborhood in Moscow, working women led a strike in protest over food shortages in the summer of 1919. In September 1919, local women's sections began to complain extensively about central authority ability to "convince the Central Committee and local party committees of the importance of this work so they would not have such a constant struggle for survival."¹⁰⁹ Even the most dedicated supporters, those that committed their time to defending the interests of working women, felt their efforts were neglected. One provincial women's section leader castigated the highest leadership for who she believed were not issuing enough directives and focusing on significant campaigns.¹¹⁰ Women continued to be frustrated not only at the limited social reforms regarding women that the state offered but began to criticize the women's sections ability to usher in the effort. Kollontai conveniently chose to be silent on the current conditions that provided a framework under the war effort that solidified historic gender roles.¹¹¹

Though her self-censorship becomes increasingly evident in her later works, her history of women's activism does distinctly differ from party lines. The Bolshevik rhetoric commented on the liberation of women workers through the lens of backwardness and a lack of proletariat consciousness that created potential barriers to men and the growth of the party. Kollontai reinforced the narrative that women workers

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ Wood, *Baba and the Comrade*, 96.

¹¹⁰ Wood, *The Baba and the Comrade*, 96

¹¹¹ Wood, 59.

indeed were the initial catalyst that raised class consciousness within the proletariat in Russia. Kollontai wrote:

“The beginning of the movement of women workers in Russia coincides with the first signs of the awakening self-consciousness among the Russian proletariat, and with its first attempts, by means of combined pressure, strikes and walk-outs, to achieve more tolerable, less humiliating and miserly conditions of existence.”¹¹²

Her work pivoted her activist agenda to reflect on the historical successes but continued to rely on the message of women’s role in raising the necessary consciousness. This stance, though briefly addressed in this work, demonstrated her commitment to advocacy of women’s distinct and critical role in advancing socialism, which then could serve as justification for greater involvement and merit of demands.

This commitment to advocacy appears in her 1920s writings but the language continued to center on the historical activism of women in the West and within Russia. In her 1920 work entitled “International Women’s Day,” she commemorated and examined the leading events in Russia and the world that contributed to making the holiday feel “special for all the proletariat.”¹¹³ After describing obstacles found within the West that were absent in Russia, she provided an entirely new narrative that centered on success. In previous works she would often offer commentary on specific success found within legislation, mobilization, and dissenting tactics but the 1920 work commented on the obtainment of political and civil rights without further clarification:

“Working Women’s Day was first organized ten years ago in the campaign for the political equality of women and the struggle for socialism. This aim has been achieved by the working class women in Russia. In the soviet republic the working women and peasants don’t need to fight for the franchise and for civil rights. They have already won these rights. The Russian workers and the peasant

¹¹² Kollontai, “On the History of the Movement of Women Workers in Russia.”

¹¹³ Kollontai, “International Women’s Day,” Marxists.org, 1920, accessed February 23, 2019, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/kollonta/1920/womens-day.htm>.

women are equal citizens- in their hands is a powerful weapon to make the struggle for a better life easier- the right to vote, to take part in the Soviets and in all collective organizations.”¹¹⁴

This appeared to be a more possessive take on the historical account, as the attainment of the vote and greater civil liberties was found under the provisional government. This position centered on widespread success was a dramatic shift from her previous stances, potentially pointing to acquiescence towards male members. She redirected her work to underscore the limits found in the West and the success found at home, which was not customary for her advocacy.

Her writings pointed to her steadfastness in her understanding that gaining civil liberties was not enough to improve conditions. Despite her attempts to shed light on previous successes that tried to quiet concerns or grievances while efforts stalled, in the same work she wrote:

“But rights alone are not enough. We have to learn to make use of them. The right to vote is a weapon which we have to learn to master for our own benefit, and for the good of the workers' republic. In the two years of Soviet Power, life itself has not been absolutely changed.”

Though she tried to make greater efforts to point out more visible successes than found in her earlier works, she did not try to make the case that all was perfect and continues to be unwavering to the belief that liberation is tied to improving conditions for working women. This proved consistency in one of her most important messages in retaining her presumed audience, who would possibly have found reinsurance in the commitment to improve the plight of many beyond just receiving political tools.

By 1920, Bolshevik women could no longer argue that that conditions brought by the 1917 October Revolution would solve issues of inequality. Leaders of the women’s

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

sections began to struggle to reconcile their previous stances that October was the sole catalyst to free women of their domestic slavery. Bolshevik women began to argue that from experience it had been made clear only through “special work” among women that liberation was attainable.¹¹⁵ In the fall of 1920, Kollontai altered her narrative that women’s organizations were inseparable from the larger class context and should be viewed in relation to the proletariat and peasantry. Like many of her Bolshevik women peers, she began to insist on the work to emancipate women needed to come from women themselves. By 1920, she had been arguing to party leadership for years that there were not enough women in the party and spheres of public life (factory management, soviets, trade unions, and government.) Kollontai was frustrated to see that women composed of fewer than 10 percent of the official delegates to the National Congress of textile unions, one of the most female dominant industries, and women consisted only of 9-10 of party leadership.¹¹⁶ This led her by 1920 to pursue a new approach to liberation, arguing that women’s sections were only able to represent women’s interests. She argued that only women in the party could advance women’s issues and bring forth solutions. In 1920, she produced many statements defending women’s sections as independent and vital institutions that are solely responsible for addressing “the specificities of the female sex” which included issues related to maternal and infant health, the protection of female labor, and abortion.¹¹⁷ In 1920 leading up to the Third National Zhenotdel Conference, Kollontai repeatedly rejected the view that women’s sections “existed simply to

¹¹⁵ Wood, *The Baba and the Comrade*, 100.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 102.

popularize party propaganda for consumption by the female masses.”¹¹⁸ Due to a common sentiment that women’s sections were created for a form of “parallelism,” she began to further stress the importance of women’s sections as the only approach to solving the issue of emancipation of women. She looked to women themselves to restructure daily lives, as it became painfully evident that the revolution itself had not brought the conditions she fiercely championed. By the mid Civil War, it was up to women to illustrate their sections as distinct and decisive organizations. Kollontai found that women knew their needs best and it was now up to women to produce the change in society and the party.

Kollontai’s apparent shift in responsibility of addressing daily concerns moves away from the party to women directly is evident in her 1920 “International Women’s Day” article. By assigning greater responsibilities for women to make the adequate changes, it relieved pressure and attention from the party to reform. This theme of transferring responsibility from the state to the women themselves, she wrote:

“The shackles of the family, of housework, of prostitution still weigh heavily on the working woman. Working women and peasant women can only rid themselves of this situation and achieve equality in life itself, and not just in law, if they put all their energies into making Russia a truly communist society.”¹¹⁹

Kollontai began to assert that in order to overcome the injustices and discrimination that were being acknowledged, that working women themselves would bring liberation to full realization. She left no room for the party to interfere in the lives of working women, she attempted to make that case that women just needed to do more and speak up less. That argument was an absolute transition in her policy beliefs and statements, which earlier

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ Kollontai, “International Women’s Day”.

contended that the state was the primary executor in reform and construction of the state. This appears to be a direct correlation with her diminishing influence among the party and the loss of allies for her advocacy of working women causes. Building off the historical narrative of women raising the class conscious, she used that theme to serve as a basis for the rest of her civil war works. Working women were encouraged to continue the work to raise political consciousness among the labor force, which would produce a more harmonious and collaborative society that would then engender positive, practical life changes.

This shift in responsibility did prove briefly effective for Kollontai and the women's sections, as peacetime and the summer of 1921 brought renewed challenges. Women's section sought to address the issues that were not legislated during the early Bolshevik decree period (1917-1918) mainly examining labor conscription, abortion, prostitution, and trade union organizing. As the Bolshevik state focused on war communism, Kollontai argued that this period was an opportunity to defend the interests of women by women. In reality, this was an example of Kollontai attempting to enact change with her Plan B approach of working directly through women as a result of the state choosing to prioritize efforts they deemed more important. The early legislation (1917-1918) greatly emphasized as Wood states "women's equality with men and their fundamental identify before the law" but in 1920 women's sections now stressed women's difference and distinctive functions within the new state.¹²⁰ Working women sought to attain their vision of economic independence by stressing their fundamental differences with men. As their attempts to showcase their identify as the proletariat

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

provided minimal advancements, Kollontai moved the narrative to presenting women as the sole group to be the agent of change. Kollontai and women's sections were able to argue that highlighting the distinctiveness of women's advocacy had resulted in significant success in 1920. Kollontai spoke to the official success of women in carrying out such a breakthrough through initiatives like placing Zhenotdel representatives in leading commissariats of the government and sending instructors to local regions. Yet, throughout 1920 she continued to stress "the importance of lobbying on women's behalf, of defending their interests" and she designated the responsibility to "lobby the party and governmental authorities for legislation on behalf of women workers."¹²¹ Even after shifting her position to argue that woman alone could answer the question of women's emancipation, Kollontai designated the women's sections to lobby men's help. She strayed from her socialist vision of viewing the society through a class lens and began to portray women as a group that fundamentally differed from men which proved briefly effective in moving more women in the public sphere to addresses challenges that were left unanswered by the party. This came at a cost to Kollontai's own socialist beliefs and it proved continually contradictory when she called up women's sections to appeal to men for their interests.

In examining her move to revise the notions of emancipation and encourage women to take greater matters into their own hands, she began to instruct women to pour their energies and support towards specific initiatives that would later produce those desired outcomes working women sought for her to address. Her work began to center on local efforts, like transportation and personnel shortages, as they had a greater probability

¹²¹ *Ibid*, 120.

of reaching some success in various areas.¹²² She incorporated the historical narrative as a form of compromise to modify the responsibility away from the state and to the working women themselves to improve their lives and the overarching society. In the article, “The Labor of Women in the Evolution of the Economy” Kollontai focused on the advancement of the state and working women’s ability to cultivate progress she found that by tapping into the unproductive labor pool and engaging these resources more effectively would guarantee population increase. After these elements were accomplished then she argued, “The question of the emancipation of women from the burden of maternity solves itself.”¹²³ In a period of instability, pointing to the undesirable economic conditions became a convenient tool to blame for the lack of progress. Both Kollontai and the Bolsheviks argued that once the national economy was thriving then specific and pressing issues for working women, like maternity, would begin to see desired results. The state was committed to stabilizing the national economy and was continuing to commit resources to produce that effect. Following the revolution and especially in the later years of the Civil War, the narrative on when and how emancipation was to come to fruition can be seen with a level of retrenchment. Introducing the element of calming the economic crisis appeared to be an adequate solution to reassign obligations and roles when the women’s sections of the party were facing incredible obstacles like small budgets, a lack of proper training, and widespread disillusionment among the most fervent early supporters.¹²⁴ Though incorporating economic stability within the narrative

¹²² Wood, 97.

¹²³ Alexandra Kollontai, “The Labour of Women in the Evolution of the Economy, Marxists.org, 1921, accessed March 6, 2019, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/kollonta/1921/evolution.htm>.

¹²⁴ Wood, 98.

later becomes even harder to argue when NEP practices are implemented bring a new flurry of anxieties among working women.

Accompanying the shift of responsibility, Kollontai began to focus on the shift of “morals and attitudes” that women needed to adopt following those necessary reforms in production and the overall economy.¹²⁵ The emphasis on the ethical tasks for working women also falls closely with the consciousness narrative. She asserted that motherhood continued to be a social obligation for the state that involved education and provided protections but stressed that it was not achievable without women first putting forth efforts to build the new society by aligning their convictions and thwarting off bourgeois propensities. In the text emphasizing the evolution of the economy, she does acknowledge the limited results in the transformation of living conditions as she stated:

“Russia now has 524 protection of motherhood and social education section. This is, nevertheless, insufficient. The transitional nature of the dictatorship places women in a particular difficult situation; the old is destroyed but the new has not yet been created. The Party and Soviet power must during this period pay increasing attention to the problem of the maternity and the methods of solving it. If the correct answers are found to these questions, not only women but also the national economy will gain.”¹²⁶

This section resembled her early works calling upon the state to take action, yet the article continued to rely on working women to further commit themselves to the party in order to provide that “fundamental transformation of living.” She provided language like “communist emotion” and “understanding” that concentrated on behavioral and habitual aspects that working women needed to alter or adopt in order to bring about their anticipated society that would remove significant burdens. In terms of bringing up children, in this article she encouraged women to end their “egoistic and anti-social acts”

¹²⁵ Kollontai, “The Labour of Women in the Evolution of the Economy”.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

and look to advancing the labor republic by being a mother to all in the society. Again, this is one more demonstration of Kollontai's move in her Civil War works that mark a compromise and example of compromise.

It is evident in Kollontai's 1919-1921 works she offered forms of self-censorship and compromise. She spoke to the history of success within Russia and focused on the limited opportunities for advancement found in the West. Kollontai praised working women's continual work to raise class-consciousness but promoted the objective within a more party driven narrative. Most striking, she shifted further responsibilities from the party itself to working women directly clearly indicating that her initiatives were becoming less desirable by the party leadership.

CONCLUSION

In response to the Civil War, it was made abundantly clear to working women that the state was not willing to allocate resources to implement social reforms. When forced to prioritize during the Civil War, the party prioritized initiatives that did not center on the protection of working mothers. This proved a time that shattered many working women's assumption that the Bolshevik state would transform 'the woman question.' As Kollontai's work with the women's sections revealed in 1920, the narrative that their organizations alone would create lasting emancipation for women began increasingly more challenging to argue after the fighting of the Civil War concluded. During the spring of 1921, Lenin moved the state to a more mixed economy that focused on relaxing some state controls for levels of stability and intended economic prosperity that was known as the New Economic Policy.

Bolshevik women since the revolution had depended on their socialist vision of emancipation becoming a reality by their labor and service in the public sphere. Following the end of the Civil War, men's unemployment was prioritized which placed many women struggling to find jobs and increased their dependence on men.¹²⁷ Activists in women's sections began to worry their hard work to address women's participation in labor was to be even further sidelined during peacetime. Their proposals regarding, nurseries and greater protections of mothers, all centered on the idea that women played a vital role in the proletariat which should be coincided with social factors and interests. As

¹²⁷ Farnsworth, *Bolshevism, the Woman Question, and Aleksandra Kollontai*, 300.

the Bolsheviks transitioned from a regime in its infancy to a newly established state, the state focused on productivity and began to further undermine social welfare goals of the revolution.¹²⁸

By 1921, the government significantly reduced its investment in childcare, which many working women perceived as severely damaging to their goals. Bolshevik women, especially Kollontai, began to feel uncertain about the prospects of social institutions, like daycares, which they had been advocated for since 1917. Kollontai continued to stress that the “economic role “women experienced and their “independent involvement in production” would weaken traditional and as she viewed “hypocritical “ideas, like sexual morality and women as backward in relation to men.¹²⁹ Hundreds of thousands of women were unemployed and began to view the new era of the established state as no longer upholding their social contract and even further lessening their commitment to emancipating women.

The Civil War began the process of eroding the initial Leninist view of solving ‘the woman question’ that was addressed in 1917. The women’s sections were intended to be an avenue within the party apparatus to identify solutions to improve the lives of women across the nation. The state in the postrevolutionary period altered the purpose of the women’s sections to “help women learn about ‘their own interests’ through study circles excursions, service, and *praktikantki* (interns).”¹³⁰ During the Civil War, the women’s section were viewed as one of the last avenues to achieving the policies proposed in

¹²⁸ Wood, *The Baba and the Comrade*, 124.

¹²⁹Alexandra Kollontai, “Sexual Relations and the Class Struggle,” Marxists.org, 1921, accessed April 7, 2019, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/kollonta/1921/sex-class-struggle.htm>.

¹³⁰ Wood, *The Baba and the Comrade*, 218.

1917. Following the Civil War, the state used the women's sections as a tool to bring women workers and peasants "up to" the level of males and "to correct understanding of party policy."¹³¹ The initial Leninist understanding of 'the woman question' treated it as an extension of the overarching problems of the oppressed worker. The Civil War provided a framework of slowly rolling back that understanding and provided justification for not implementing that vision. Following the Civil War, the state revised their understanding. In Wood's conclusion, she writes:

"As the 'woman question' evolved from a nineteenth-century idea and practice among equals within the intelligentsia to an official part of Bolshevik ideology and practice, it took on the character of 'state feminism' or 'feminism from above.' This evolution was parallel to the evolution of the Bolsheviks from a party of underground professional revolutionaries to 'an organized of party state functionaries.'"¹³²

The Civil War provided the framework to alter the understanding of Bolshevik Feminism as a movement for the women workers to claim their liberation and seek economic independence. The state assigned a new purpose to the woman's sections and utilized the organizations to mold women workers into actors that were favorable to state interests.

The Civil War alienated women from identifying with the larger proletariat and then once peace had come, 'the woman question' had a new meaning. The Bolsheviks argued that the special work among women were not labor focused but rather more "conscious" focused, seeking to compel women to be supporters of the Communist Party and the already prioritized interests. As men were at the front during the Civil War, women experienced further agency within the women's sections to attempt to pursue greater reforms but were aware that decision makers from the top were not too inclined to listen proving further erosion from the initial positions of the party. Then following the

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

¹³² *Ibid.*

Civil War, as men returned, the understandings of the fundamental principles were altered and the purposes of the women's sections, few by many as the last hope were stripped of their purpose and agency. This was felt as a devastating loss for many working women looking to advance their interests, including Alexandra Kollontai.

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