

International Women's Day

March 8th

Much has been written on the history of this important day for women. In this issue we thought that it would be a good idea to reprint an article by the well-known Anna Louise Strong, who lived in the USSR from 1929 to 1949 as a journalist. Although controversy surrounded her so-called "expulsion from the Soviet Union," the consequence seems to prove that Anna Louise Strong was used by enemies of socialism. We hope that you will get an insight into these years.

Women in

The Stalin Era

By Anna Louise Strong

The change in women's status was one of the important social changes in all parts of the USSR. The Revolution gave women legal and political equality: industrialization provided the economic base in equal pay. But in every village women still had to fight the habits of centuries. News came of one village in Siberia, for instance, where, after the collective farms gave women their independent incomes, the wives "called a strike" against wife-beating and smashed that time-honored custom in a week.

"The men all jeered at the first woman we elected to our village soviet," a village president told me, "but at the next election we elected six women and now it is we who laugh." I met twenty of these women presidents of villages in 1928 on a train in Siberia, bound for a Women's Congress in Moscow. For most it was their first trip by train and only one had ever been out of Siberia. They had been invited to Moscow "to advise the government" on the demands of women; their counties elected them to go.

The toughest fight of all for women's freedom was in Central Asia. Here, women were chattels, sold in early marriage and never thereafter seen in public without the hideous "paranja," a long black veil of woven horsehair which covered the entire face, hindering breathing and vision. Tradition gave husbands the right to kill wives for unveiling; the mullahs -- Moslem priests supported this by religion. Russian women brought the first message of freedom; they set up child welfare clinics where native women unveiled in each other's presence. Here, the rights of women and the evils of the veil were discussed. The Communist Party brought pressure on its members to permit their wives to unveil.



When I first visited Tashkent, in 1928, a conference of Communist women was announcing: "Our members in backward villages are being violated, tortured and murdered. But this year we must finish the hideous veil; this must be the historic year." Shocking incidents gave point to this resolution. A girl from a Tashkent school gave her vacation to agitating for women's rights in her home village. Her dismembered body was sent back to school in a cart bearing the words: "That for your women's freedom." Another woman had refused the attentions of a landlord and married a Communist peasant; a gang of eighteen men, stirred up by the landlord, violated her in the eighth month of pregnancy and threw her body in the river.

Poems were written by women to express their struggle. When Zulfia Khan, a fighter for freedom, was burned alive by the mullahs, the women of her village wrote a lament:

*"O, woman, the world will not forget your fight for freedom!
Your flame -- let them not think that it consumed you.
The flame in which you burned is a torch in our hands."*

The citadel of orthodox oppression was "Holy Bokhara." Here, a dramatic unveiling was organized. Word was spread that "something spectacular" would occur on International Women's Day, March 8. Mass meetings of women were held in many parts of the city on that day, and women speakers urged that everyone "unveil all at once." Women then marched to the platform, tossed their veils before the speakers and went to parade the streets. Tribunes had been set up where government leaders greeted the women. Other women joined the parade from their homes and tossed their veils to the tribunes. That parade broke the veil tradition in Holy Bokhara. Many women, of course, donned veils again before facing their angry husbands. But the veil from that time on appeared less and less.

Soviet power used many weapons for the freeing of women. Education, propaganda, law all had their place. Big public trials were held of husbands who murdered wives; the pressure of the new propaganda confirmed judges who gave the death sentence for what old custom had not considered crime. The most important weapon for freeing women was, as in Russia proper, the new industrialization.

I visited a new silk mill in Old Bokhara. Its director, a pale, exhausted man, driving without sleep to build a new industry, told me the mill was not expected to be profitable for a long time. "We are training village women into a new staff for future silk mills of Turkestan. Our mill is the consciously applied force which broke the veiling of women; we demand that women unveil in the mill."

Girl textile workers wrote songs on the new meaning of life when they exchanged the veil for the Russian head-dress, the kerchief.

*"When I took the road to the factory
I found there a new kerchief,
A red kerchief, a silk kerchief,
Bought with my own hand's labor!"*

*The roar of the factory is in me.
It gives me rhythm.
it gives me energy."*

One can hardly read this without recalling, by contrast, Thomas Hood's "The Song of the Shirt," that expressed the early factories of Britain.

*"With fingers weary and worn,
With eyelids heavy and red,
A woman sat, in unwomanly rags,
Plying her needle and thread.
Stitch, stitch, stitch, in poverty, hunger and dirt,
And still, with a voice of dolorous pitch,
She sang the song of the shirt."*

In capitalist Britain, the factory appeared as a weapon of exploitation for profit. In the USSR, it was not only a means to collective wealth, but a tool consciously used to break past shackles.