

# **Comrades in Arms**

**Bolshevik Women in the  
Russian Revolution**

**Kathy Fairfax**

# Contents

<b>Bolshevik Women in the Russian Revolution</b> .....	<b>3</b>
Marxism and women's liberation .....	6
Joining the revolutionary movement .....	9
'Work among women' .....	11
Fighting for a new society .....	14
Bureaucratic reaction .....	17
<b>Fighters for socialism</b> .....	<b>22</b>
Inessa Armand .....	22
Evgenia Bosh .....	24
Alexandra Kollontai .....	26
Nadezhda (Nadia) Krupskaya .....	29
Larissa Reisner .....	31
Elena Stasova .....	33
<b>Further reading</b> .....	<b>36</b>
<b>Notes</b> .....	<b>38</b>

# Bolshevik Women in the Russian Revolution

The popular image of the Russian Revolution is of a revolution made by men. Ask the person in the street to name a figure from the Russian Revolution and most could come up with Lenin, Stalin, maybe Trotsky. A few might have heard of Zinoviev, Kamenev or Bukharin. But how many would name Kollontai, Armand or Krupskaya? How many know of the women who helped make revolution in Russia? How many know about the thousands of female Bolsheviks who marched through the streets of Petrograd in 1917 or shouted revolutionary speeches to cheering crowds or wrote and distributed pamphlets calling for revolution? In fact, women accounted for around ten per cent of those audacious revolutionaries who inspired the working class the world over and inaugurated a new era in world history.

These women worked alongside men in all the campaigns that ultimately brought the party state power. For twenty years before the revolution in 1917 they sustained the underground party organisation and agitated for revolution by writing and distributing leaflets and newspapers. After the fall of the tsar they became stump speakers, agitators and party recruiters. During the civil war they fought alongside men to defend their revolution and after the war was over they worked with men to build the institutions of the new society. This, at a time when women in the rest of Europe were still asking for the vote.

Who were these women? Like the male Bolsheviks, they were mostly Russian, from the cities and in early adulthood. Unlike the men though, most women Bolsheviks came from the middle and upper classes. It is not hard to work out why this should be so. Working-class and peasant women had a daily struggle to survive that left time for

---

*Kathy Fairfax* is a longtime feminist and Latin America solidarity activist. She is a member of Socialist Alliance and has been an editor of *Green Left Weekly*. This article is based on a talk given at the 18th Congress of the Democratic Socialist Party in January 1999.

little else, while more affluent women had the leisure to read and think and discuss ideas. As well, Russian society discouraged all women from participating in the male business of politics, and this prohibition was enforced particularly strongly within the working class and the peasantry.

Nevertheless in the first decades of this century so many thousands of women made the dangerous decision to become revolutionaries that Russia ended up with more radical women than any other country. Not all joined the Bolsheviks; some joined the Socialist Revolutionaries, others joined the Mensheviks. There were anarchist women as well. But a majority of women activists chose to join the Bolsheviks.

For many of these women the decision to join the revolutionary movement before 1917 came about because of the political situation in Russia and because the revolutionary movement had always welcomed women into its ranks. For decades the oppression of women had been considered by social critics to be one of Russia's great injustices. Upper- and middle-class women had access to very limited education and employment while most peasant girls never went to school. Women could not separate from their husbands, change their residence, leave the country, take a job or execute a bill of exchange without the permission of a male guardian. Divorce was practically impossible and women had significantly less property and inheritance rights than men.

Underlying these legal restrictions was a patriarchal value system that granted all men power over the women in their families. Whatever her class a woman was expected to marry a man of her parents' choice and live her life as the dutiful wife of an authoritarian, if sometimes benevolent, husband. She owed her husband complete obedience and was compelled by the state to live with him, take his name and assume his social status. Social reformers and novelists such as Chernyshevsky and Turgenev deplored the situation and the small revolutionary organisations of the 1870s welcomed so many women into their ranks that by some estimates one third of their membership was female.

The position of women in Russia was complicated by the political situation. Although reformers from many different quarters were calling for fundamental change in many areas, among them the position of women, the recalcitrant tsarist government refused all possibilities of change. Not for them a constitutional monarchy with an independent parliament as in Western Europe. The tsar maintained a strong autocratic government whose liberal opposition was weak. And if the liberal opposition was weak, the feminists in the liberal intelligentsia were equally weak.

Here we must make a distinction between what we think of as feminism today and how it was viewed at the turn of the century. Feminism is one of the main tenets of our

party. I consider myself a feminist. Probably most of you do as well. But early this century there was a real dividing line between feminism and socialism.

In Russia, liberal feminists called for the government to reform the laws relating to women on the Western European model, so that women would have a few more rights within marriage, could own property and perhaps vote. They had no wish to challenge the capitalist system and the reforms they worked for benefited middle-class and aristocratic women, who were concerned with inheritance and property rights, far more than working-class or peasant women. Like their Western European counterparts, the women's organisations they built urged the opposition liberal parties to include these reforms in their platforms.

The women who joined the Bolsheviks did so because they rejected liberal feminism, condemning it as a bourgeois ideology that overrated the significance of legal gender inequality and ignored the fundamental roots of the oppression of women that sprang from the private ownership of the means of production. For women Bolsheviks, liberation could not be given by governments: it had to be seized by women and men acting together to create a new society of equals.

As Lenin put it in a 1920 discussion with Clara Zetkin:

The theses [on communist work among women] must emphasise strongly that true emancipation of women is not possible except through communism. You must lay stress on the unbreakable connection between woman's human and social position and the private ownership of the means of production. This will draw a strong, ineradicable line against the bourgeois movement for the "emancipation of women". This will also give us a basis for examining the woman question as a part of the social, working-class question, and to bind it firmly with the proletarian class struggle and the revolution.<sup>1</sup>

Although discontent with the government was widespread, very few people, and far fewer women than men, chose a perilous life on the run in pursuit of a popular upheaval that might never come. Those who were willing to live that way were, by definition, exceptional.

Why did they join the Bolsheviks? What was it about this section of the international socialist movement that attracted so many women? To understand what the Bolsheviks offered women activists we have to look at the history of the Marxist movement and its attitudes to women.

## Marxism & women's liberation

The first Marxist work to consider the subject of women and the family was Engels' *The Condition of the Working Class of England* written in 1844. The book dealt at length with the effects of capitalism on the family as women and children were increasingly substituted for male workers at a fraction of men's wages. Capitalism, Engels noted at length, was destroying the traditional division of family labour, where woman was homemaker and man was breadwinner.

Within a year Marx and Engels had made a great advance in their thinking on women and the division of labour in *The German Ideology*. They suggested that the family was not a set of natural or biological relations but a social institution that corresponded to the mode of production. Further, they argued that a communal domestic economy was a necessary prerequisite for women's liberation and that this would lead to the abolition or "supercession" of the family itself. This was an enormous advance on the prevailing attitude that the family was a natural entity and that women's inferior position was biologically determined. In *The German Ideology* Marx and Engels also contrasted the loveless matches of the bourgeoisie with the affectionate matches of the proletariat and decided that property was the main obstacle to relations based on love, equality and mutual respect.

In Engels' catechism of late 1847, "The Principles of Communism", he asks "What influence will the communistic order of society have upon the family?":

It will make the relations between the sexes a purely private affair which concerns only the persons involved, and calls for no interference by society. It is able to do this because it abolishes private property and educates children communally, destroying thereby the two foundation stones of hitherto existing marriage — the dependence of the wife upon her husband and of the children upon the parents conditioned by private property.<sup>2</sup>

This commitment to the liberation of women and children and to the personal and sexual freedom of the individual was a strong current in late 19th century socialism and was part of the deeply felt heritage of the Bolsheviks as well.

Thus, by 1850, Marx and Engels had formulated many of the ideas that would shape the Bolshevik vision. Unlike earlier utopian social theorists — such as Henri Saint-Simon, Charles Fourier and Robert Owen — their vision of the future was based on their understanding of past modes of production and reproduction and their evolution. Recognising the family as a social and not a natural construct, they began to challenge the gender division of labour.

In Volume I of *Capital*, Marx spends a lot of time discussing the factory system, the extensive employment of women and children and the effect this was having on the

family system. But even in the hellish crucible of capitalist industry he saw the germ of something better:

However terrible and disgusting the dissolution of the old family ties within the capitalist system may appear, large-scale industry, by assigning an important part in socially organised processes of production, outside the sphere of the domestic economy, to women, young persons and children of both sexes, does nevertheless create a new economic foundation for a higher form of the family and of relations between the sexes ... It is also obvious that the fact that the collective working group is composed of individuals of both sexes and all ages must under the appropriate conditions turn into a source of humane development, although in its spontaneously developed, brutal capitalist form, the system works in the opposite direction ...<sup>3</sup>

The reality of massive female employment in industry meant that it was imperative that women be incorporated as active participants in political work. Furthermore, as Marx wrote to his friend Ludwig Kugelmann in late 1868: “Everyone who knows anything of history, knows that great social revolutions are impossible without the feminine ferment.”<sup>4</sup>

In 1871, Marx was instrumental in having the International — the International Working Men’s Association or First International — adopt a new rule recommending the establishment of female branches, without excluding the possibility of branches composed of both sexes. The prospects for such a commitment were poor and in any case the International was nearing the end of its life, but Marx’s recommendation did leave an important legacy by establishing in principle the legitimacy of autonomous women’s organisations within the mass movement.

However this did not mean that the socialist workers’ movement in Europe accepted either female labour or equality of women and many early unions excluded women on the grounds that their presence lowered male wages and worsened the material condition of the working class as a whole. Unions demanded a family wage that would enable women to return to their “proper” places in the home.

August Bebel’s famous work *Women and Socialism*, first published in 1879, began the move away from “proletarian antifeminism” and towards a more unifying strategy within the workers’ movement. The book, which by 1910 had gone through 50 editions in Germany as well as numerous translations abroad, became the basis for subsequent social-democratic organising efforts among women. Bebel’s thesis that only through the destruction of bourgeois society would all women be emancipated struck a chord with many women, as did his argument that women’s entry into industry and organisation into unions was a necessary step in the historical process which would terminate in socialism.

For decades Bebel's work was the official line on the role of the socialist movement in women's emancipation. Later criticism of the book revealed its limitations but the central thesis remained valid: "*There can be no emancipation of humanity without the social independence and equality of the sexes*" (emphasis in original).<sup>5</sup>

It had an enormous effect on many of the future women leaders of the international socialist movement. As Clara Zetkin, a leader of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) noted:

The book must not be judged according to its positive aspects or its shortcomings. Rather, it must be judged within the context of the times in which it was written. It was more than a book, it was an event — a great deed. The book pointed out for the first time the connection between the woman's question and historical development. For the first time, there sounded from this book the appeal: We will only conquer the future if we persuade the women to become our co-fighters.<sup>6</sup>

If the work of Bebel was crucial in combating proletarian antifeminism in the workers' movement, so were the practical efforts to implement those ideas by women socialists such as Clara Zetkin. She was a tireless proponent of the rights of working women and her organisational work, speeches, writing, and lifelong commitment to women workers helped to chart a new direction within the European socialist movement. Zetkin repeatedly clashed with the more conservative members of the labour movement who wanted women out of the workforce. If employers insisted on female labour because it was cheaper, her answer was to fight for equal pay for equal work. In a speech to the founding congress of the Second International in 1889 she argued, according to a report, that:

... it is not women's work per se which in competition with men's work lowers wages, but rather the exploitation of female labour by the capitalists who appropriate it.<sup>7</sup>

Zetkin not only defended women's right to work, but said that women's participation in the workforce was a prerequisite for women's independence. "The slave of the husband became the slave of the employer" but women still gained from this transformation.<sup>8</sup>

While Marx and Engels made no distinction between the oppression suffered by women of different classes, Zetkin was the first social theorist to place women's oppression within the different classes of society. In essence she proposed a different "woman question" for every class in capitalist society. Upper-class women wanted freedom to manage and inherit money and property; middle-class women wanted education and job opportunities while proletarian women, compelled to work in the least paid jobs to supplement their families' income, wanted better working conditions for all.



Zetkin's efforts on behalf of women workers received international recognition in 1907 at the first International Conference of Socialist Women where she was elected secretary of the International Women's Bureau. It was at this conference that Zetkin, together with Rosa Luxemburg, proposed to the international socialist movement that March 8 be celebrated annually in all countries as International Working Women's Day.

Attending the Socialist Women's Conference were many Russian women, among them Alexandra Kollontai, who left convinced of the need to begin organising women at home.

In the same year the congress of the Second International endorsed the principle of women's right to work, the creation of special women's organisations within all socialist parties and a position on active organising for women's suffrage. An active strategy for women's full enfranchisement — political, social and economic — was finally in place.

## Joining the revolutionary movement

Many women Bolsheviks recorded in their memoirs how they came to embrace revolutionary politics. The same scenario is recorded time after time. A young girl growing up encounters situations that reveal to her the evils of Russian society, then learns about the revolutionary movement, realises how right the revolutionaries are and joins them. Such memoirs — written in the suffocating atmosphere of the Stalin era — had to be extremely circumspect in what they said and who they mentioned. But such depictions of their early impulses and development are wholly believable. In fact what else could have happened? They did become revolutionaries, and they must have chosen to become politically active because they believed that Russia needed revolutionary change along the lines outlined in the Bolshevik program.

Women Bolsheviks came from many different parts of Russia and became revolutionaries for different reasons. Many of these young women learned to be critical of Russia's political arrangements from their relatives. About one-third of the women Bolsheviks who wrote their memoirs reported that they first heard radical ideas from relatives who were revolutionaries themselves. Rozalia Zemliachka's mother, for instance, hid revolutionary pamphlets printed by her brothers and sisters. Many more families, themselves politically liberal, were sympathetic to the revolutionaries. Elena Stasova's father defended them in court, while Alexandra Kollontai saw her brothers harassed for their political opposition. Evgenia Adamovich wrote: "I passionately loved my mother. Her energy, diligence and attraction to the revolutionary-democratic ideals of the 1860s and 1870s had a decisive influence on the

formation of my worldview.”<sup>9</sup>

For women Bolsheviks from the working class, everyday life alienated them from the state, as they coped with poverty, hardship and the persecution of the authorities. Mera Sverdlova, a Jewish seamstress, recalled: “The influence of my older sister, material need, and clashes with the police from my earliest years turned me against the tsarist regime”.<sup>10</sup>

The women Bolsheviks were also better educated than their male comrades, who in turn were better educated than the average men of their class. Schools and universities were full of revolutionary activity in early 20th century Russia and outside the classrooms radical ideas germinated in the student reading circles and in clandestine meetings. Many future women Bolsheviks had sought an education for more material reasons — spiritual and intellectual liberation, an escape from the traditional customs and control, upward mobility as a white-collar worker and an escape, or at least postponement, of their lives as wives and mothers — only to find themselves caught up in the revolutionary movement.

Many women were forced to sever their family ties when they became revolutionaries. Some, such as Vera Karavaikova, abandoned all contact with their parents when they moved into the underground. Others, such as Inessa Armand, Kollontai and Evgenia Bosh, left husbands who were not revolutionaries. But for many others the process of becoming a revolutionary was long and slow, involving a year or more of studying Marxism before they and the party felt that they understood the world well enough to begin attempting to change it. As Ekaterina Shalaginova, a teacher in Perm, later wrote: “I was drawn to the Marxists but I didn’t have the courage to ask them to give me any work”.<sup>11</sup> Courage was particularly needed by working-class women: any brush with the secret police would leave them without a job or the means to gain another.

So the women who became Bolsheviks before the revolution had spent long hours studying Marxism, attending meetings and distributing illegal literature, had cut the ties to their old lives and created new bonds with their fellow revolutionaries, and had finally felt strong enough to cut themselves loose completely from conventional society and join the parallel universe of the underground movement.

The world of the revolutionaries was a far more egalitarian place than conventional society because the Bolsheviks believed that women should work as men’s equals in the party. The party needed every able-bodied person it could recruit so there was very little gender-based division of labour among the revolutionaries. Women organised printing presses, ran workers’ circles, wrote articles, edited newspapers, gave speeches and learned how to fire guns. Women also served as leaders on party

committees and some — such as Inessa Armand, Evgenia Bosh, Alexandra Kollontai, Nadia Krupskaya and Elena Stasova — at various times played important central leadership roles.

### ‘Work among women’

While women Bolsheviks did much the same work in the underground as men, they did have one independent pursuit before 1917: “work among women.”

After the 1905 revolution, which had featured strikes by women workers and had seen women elected to the soviets, women Bolsheviks established contacts with proletarian women through the newly legalised unions and workers’ clubs. They recruited female textile workers and attempted to set up unions among the unorganised seamstresses, laundresses, shop assistants and even domestic servants. In 1907 Alexandra Kollontai set up the first women’s club in St. Petersburg, offering cultural activities such as lectures, concerts and museum tours.

Other clubs followed and by 1914 their success, together with the party’s successes in organising women workers into unions, led to the establishment of a newspaper for women, *Rabotnitsa* — *Woman Worker*. This newspaper developed from a column established in 1913 by Konkordia Samoiloiva in *Pravda* entitled “The Labour and Life of Women Workers”, which contained articles on conditions in the factories. The eager response of the newspaper’s female readers to this column convinced Samoiloiva that a newspaper devoted to working-class women would have a wide circulation.

The project received the personal support of Lenin and the party agreed to finance it. The first issue was due out on International Women’s Day 1914. The editorial board had just finished polishing the final copy for the first issue when police arrived to arrest them all for membership of an illegal organisation. One member escaped arrest and managed to put out seven issues of *Rabotnitsa* before it was banned altogether with the outbreak of war later that year.

Short-lived though *Rabotnitsa* proved to be, it did bring together Armand, Krupskaya, Kollontai, Samoiloiva, Ludmila Stal, and Praskovia Kudelli, who would formulate the party’s policy on women and lead the Soviet program for women’s emancipation after the revolution. They realised that women were an increasingly important part of the workforce but were difficult to mobilise because they feared the consequences of political activism. Publications like *Rabotnitsa* and meetings aimed specifically at women, such as International Women’s Day, were the only way to raise women’s consciousness and involve them in the revolutionary movement where they would participate as men’s equals.

As Zlata Lilina, who later married Grigori Zinoviev, wrote in the second issue of

*Rabotnitsa*: “Since the Social Democratic Party is the only party that demands women’s equality and fights for it, the female working masses should be in the ranks of this party and should strengthen the ranks of the fighters for freedom and equality of all humanity by walking hand in hand with their comrades, male workers.” Properly educated, women workers would “strengthen the ranks of the fighters” but, left in ignorance, they would weaken the fighters and undermine support for the cause among men.<sup>12</sup>

This policy was proved correct when on International Women’s Day in 1917 women textile workers went out on strike in Petrograd. Shouting their demands — for bread, against the autocracy and against the war — they marched through the working-class suburbs of the city calling on the people to come out and support them. This they did in their thousands, and day after day more and more people gathered to protest against the war and the tsar’s policies. After a few days the troops sent to disperse the crowds mutinied and eventually the military high command turned against the tsar. He was forced to abdicate and the Russian Revolution had begun — sparked by women workers.

The revolution energised the people of Russia. In the course of the next few months demonstrations became a daily event, women’s clubs sprang up, trade unions became more active and assertive and soviets directly and democratically representing the workers and soldiers formed.

In his “Letters from Afar”, written from exile in Switzerland shortly before his return to Russia, Lenin stressed the necessity of drawing women into political activity:

If women are not drawn into public service, into the militia, into political life; if women are not torn out of their stupefying house and kitchen environment, it will be *impossible* to guarantee real freedom, it will be *impossible* to build even democracy, let alone socialism.<sup>13</sup>

By mid-summer the Russian military machine began to disintegrate as soldiers deserted the German and Austrian fronts to join the peasants who had begun seizing control of their land from the nobility. However the soviets, led by the reformist Menshevik and Socialist Revolutionary parties, refused to assume power and instead ceded it to the Provisional Government, led at first by liberals and later by the right-wing “socialist” Alexander Kerensky. Insistently calling for the soviets to take power in their own name, the Bolsheviks steadily won a mass following. In October they finally overthrew the stumbling and discredited Kerensky regime and seized power in the name of the soviets.

Women Bolsheviks were involved in all the activities that prepared the way for the revolutionary victory. They performed whatever tasks were needed, with little regard

given by the party to their gender. As before the revolution, they made rousing speeches, wrote newspaper articles, served as delegates to the soviets, did clerical work, ran committees and trained with the Red Guards (the workers' militia). The revolution actually intensified the party's long-standing policy of engaging women in all its activities and it was with pride that the party reflected on the number of activist women in its ranks.

It is interesting to note the composition of the party's central leadership in 1917. The Sixth Congress took place in July and elected a 25-person Central Committee. Only one of the 21 full members was a woman — Kollontai — and two of the four candidates — Stasova and Varvara Iakovleva. At the Eighth Congress, held in March 1918 in the aftermath of the inner-party struggle over the Brest-Litovsk treaty, Kollontai and Iakovleva were not re-elected, but Stasova became a full member, the only woman on the central committee.

Central to the Bolsheviks' work among women in 1917 was the revival of *Rabotnitsa* and the creation of a women's bureau to coordinate events. In his later discussions with Zetkin, Lenin pointed out that:



Clara Zetkin

She who is a communist belongs as a member to the party, just as he who is a communist. They have the same rights and duties. There can be no difference of opinion on that score. However, we must not shut our eyes to the facts. The party must have organs — working groups, commissions, committees, sections or whatever else they may be called — with the specific purpose of rousing the broad masses of women, bringing them into contact with the party and keeping them under its influence. This naturally requires that we carry on systematic work among the women.<sup>14</sup>

The new *Rabotnitsa*, with the same editorial board as in 1914, became the voice of the Bolsheviks' agitation among women and the forum in which the place of women in the revolution was analysed. A dynamic magazine containing poetry, fiction, news stories, articles on the history of the revolutionary movement and editorials on political events, it soon found a large readership. By the end of 1917 *Rabotnitsa* had carried the Bolshevik message of freedom and liberation to tens of thousands of women throughout Russia.

### **Fighting for a new society**

That process entered a new stage in December 1917, barely a month after the revolution, when two brief decrees substituted civil for religious marriage and established divorce at the request of either spouse. A complete Code on Marriage, the Family and Guardianship was ratified by the Central Executive Committee of the Soviets in October 1918. This new code swept away centuries of patriarchal and ecclesiastical power and established a new doctrine based on individual rights and gender equality. It was the most progressive family legislation the world had ever seen.

It gave women formal legal equality with men for the first time, made marriage an easy registration process which had to be based on mutual consent, made free legal abortion every woman's right, and made divorce easily possible on the request of one partner, with or without the consent of the other. The code forbade adoption in the belief that the state would be a better guardian for an orphan than a family. In a primarily agrarian society, Bolsheviks feared that adopted children could be exploited as unpaid labour.

It swept away centuries of property law and male privilege by abolishing illegitimacy and entitling all children to parental support. All children, whether born inside or outside marriage, had equal rights. The code thus separated the concepts of marriage from family. In accordance with its belief in marriage as a free union of equals, the code limited the duties and obligations of marriage. Marriage no longer conferred ownership of one spouse's property on the other and a woman retained full control of her earnings and inheritances. Alimony was limited to the disabled poor: the code assumed each party, married or divorced, would support themselves.

But the new law, however comprehensive, could actually promise no more than a program for the activities required to bring about the liberation of Russian women, a framework within which women could improve their position at work and in the family. The chaotic state machinery inherited by the Bolsheviks ensured that the new Family Code was more powerful as a propaganda tool than in reality. The code's important function was to tell the people about the attitude of the new government to equality of the sexes and the rights of women and children, as well as how it intended to accomplish those aims. To help get this message across Kollontai wrote a series of popular novels describing women in a variety of family situations and detailing their new rights and opportunities.

The "Program of the Communist Party" issued in 1919 stated:

At the present moment, it is the task of our party to labour in the field of ideas and in the field of education pre-eminently to this end, that it may effect the final destruction of all traces of the former inequality and prejudice, especially among the backward strata of the proletariat and the peasantry.<sup>15</sup>

Through civil war, social chaos and famine, women Bolsheviks attempted to clarify the position of women in Russia. Forced separations were setting men free to form new liaisons in other towns, leaving women to work, support their children and fight for their rights. State canteens and nurseries were hopelessly inadequate.

The First All-Russian Congress of Working-class and Peasant Women organised by Armand, Kollontai, Samoilova and Nikolaeva in Moscow in November 1918 was a major breakthrough in encouraging women to raise before the party some of the problems besetting them. The popularity of the congress exceeded all expectations: over a thousand women crossed the war zones to attend it. There they listened as the organisers and participants gave rousing speeches on the importance of organising women.

The message of the congress was taken up by the party leaders who attended and it was soon decided that every party organisation should have its own women's commission. Meetings were set up throughout Russia at which women elected party, union and government delegates who learned how the government worked and how to make it work for them. At meetings all over Russia women gradually began to discuss the long-ignored questions of abortion and alimony, venereal disease and prostitution.

The meetings were so well-attended that soon virtually every province of European Russia had its own women's commission. Their popularity led Kollontai and Armand to argue that only a national women's department could effectively mobilise women and in September 1919 the commissions were upgraded to a central Women's

Department of the party — the Zhenotdel from its acronym — directed by Armand and Kollontai.

The civil war that surged across the former Russian empire between 1918 and 1921 was a desperate struggle that the Bolsheviks won only with great difficulty. Women Bolsheviks were engaged in every aspect of the conflict. Stasova served on the Central Committee, Bosh and Zemliachka were commanders in the Red Army and Krupskaya was a leading figure in the education commissariat (ministry). Other women Bolsheviks, such as Larissa Reisner, fought at the front or worked in military supply, factories or government. While famine, disease, war and death made life a daily horror, women Bolsheviks were already laying the foundations for a new socialist society. Now in government, they created new roles for women and through the Zhenotdel recruited thousands of young women into the party.

In 1922, according to one survey at the time, the party had 30,547 female members, of whom 29,172 had joined since the revolution. That is not to say that there were only one thousand Bolshevik women previously, but the figures testify to the death rate during the civil war, from combat, disease and famine. Among prominent women Bolsheviks to die in this period were Inessa Armand, who died in 1920 of typhus, and Konkordia Samoiloova, who died the next year of cholera.

The new women Bolsheviks came from much the same backgrounds as the earlier levies of female revolutionaries, except there were more from the working class, revealing how the revolution had already weakened the social and political constraints on working-class women. In such a politically charged atmosphere these younger women became politicised and joined the party in a much shorter period than their mentors. Many of these young Bolsheviks served as combat troops at the front.

The participation of thousands of young women in the civil war had a positive affect for all women. It proved that women could make a valuable contribution outside their traditional domestic sphere, adding strength to calls for policies that would promote women's work in non-traditional areas after the war. Working with female troops and officers probably also weakened the traditional views of women held by many thousands of men and began their exposure to the Bolshevik vision of women's liberation.

When the civil war ended, Bolsheviks, both male and female, turned their attention to building socialism. The period of the New Economic Policy in the early 1920s was also a time of experiments inspired by the prospects opened by the revolution. Artists, film-makers, architects and designers created a vibrant avant-garde; Moscow developed a cafe society that rivalled Berlin; workers and peasants flocked into the schools and universities; Soviet explorers reached the North Pole and new ways of performing old tasks were tried. In all these pioneering ventures, women, particularly women Bolsheviks,



were heavily involved. All their successes supported their belief that they were building a bright new world.

In the early 1920s the party encouraged an extraordinary social mobility for women. Nowhere else in the world were there so many lawyers, judges, professors, scientists, artists and writers who were women. The party had reached consensus that women's equality was an important goal for the revolution. The government made substantial advances in promoting education and job-training programs, as well as providing child care to assist women entering the workforce. The party's liberationist message went out to millions of women and female Bolsheviks came to occupy positions in government that were monopolised by men everywhere else in the world.

### **Bureaucratic reaction**

The story of Bolshevik women should end here with the victory in the civil war, with thousands of women Bolsheviks participating in all spheres of society, with their own party women's department, looking forward to building socialism. But we all know it didn't end that way.

Even while Lenin was still alive, a process of degeneration of the party and state was taking place. A massive bureaucracy was developing, made up of bourgeois specialists, careerists and degenerated communists. The front person for the new caste of privileged officials, technocrats and managers was the one-time Bolshevik, Joseph Stalin. He represented their interests; above all they wanted peace and quiet to enjoy their elite social position. In the 1920s the communist Left Opposition led by Trotsky was politically defeated; in the 1930s all opposition — in fact, anyone who might conceivably be part of a political alternative to Stalin — was physically exterminated. The names and forms — Communist Party, soviets, etc — were retained but everything was different.

In 1924 Lenin died of a massive stroke. Later that year a million people, who saw it as a good career move, were admitted into the party — the notorious “Lenin levy”. Very few of these new members were women. The other characteristics of the new intake were youth, inexperience and low educational standards. They provided, as Leonard Shapiro says, “a mass of malleable recruits to counterbalance the more intractable older communists”.<sup>16</sup>

The tradition of intra-party democracy and the ideological and theoretical issues, such as the liberation of women, that had so preoccupied the older generation meant little to the newcomers. They were ready enough to accept that the duty of the party member was to support the leadership in its job of building socialism and that in return they would receive certain privileges. Molotov spoke the truth when he told the

1924 party conference, “the development of the party in the future will undoubtedly be based on this Lenin Enrolment”.<sup>17</sup>

In 1926, 620,000 women attended delegate conferences organised by the Zhenotdel across the Soviet Union, *Rabotnitsa* had a fortnightly circulation of 265,000 copies and hundreds of Zhenotdel workers organised new child care facilities, public dining rooms and laundries and spoke to thousands of women about their liberation from household responsibilities.

Notwithstanding these advances, in that same year the Central Committee reduced the funding and priority of the Zhenotdel on the basis that women were now liberated and no longer needed their own department. It continued at reduced capacity for a few more years, operating on little money and with mostly volunteer staff, until in January 1930 it was closed completely.

Nowhere in the world had there been such an organisation: a vigorous section of the ruling party that publicised the importance of women’s emancipation from domestic, civil and economic inequality. It brought the message to millions of women that they were valued members of society who no longer had to live in ignorance and submission. Its lobbying efforts with the party meant that greater attention was paid to women’s problems than would otherwise have occurred. And it was the training ground for tens of thousands of women Bolsheviks, who later looked back on their youth in the department with pride.

The demise of the Zhenotdel was part of a sharp move to the right in official policies on women and the family. In 1936 a reactionary new family code was promulgated. Introduced with a barrage of pro-family propaganda, the new code made divorce much more difficult, abortion a criminal offence, rewarded mothers of seven children or more, increased the penalties for nonpayment of alimony and sang the praises of the working mother. Unlike with previous legislation relating to the family and women, this time there was no discussion, no debate of its merits — just propaganda for the new line.

At the centre of this cult of domesticity was a new model of womanhood which was almost the polar opposite of the woman Bolshevik. This was of woman as supportive wife to the hard-working man. By the mid-1930s the Soviet press was praising the wives of Stakhanovite workers for providing good homes for their busy husbands and children. “The strength, the unity of interests of the members of the Soviet family”, a 1940 pamphlet on women declared, “are the most important factors in socialist construction”.<sup>18</sup>

In 1938, Andrei Vyshinski — the one-time Menshevik and opponent of the October Revolution and now Stalin’s chief prosecutor in the main show trials of the 1930s —

denounced the libertarian early Soviet family legislation as “exceedingly crude perversions” produced “by a group of pseudo-Marxists who have spared no effort to litter our juridical literature with pseudo-scientific rubbish”. Outspoken figures in the heady 1920s debates on progressive family legislation suffered harsh repression. They were branded spies and wreckers who “trod the well-worn path of Trotskyite-Bukharinist perversions”; some were shot; the main author of the 1918 code was committed to a mental institution; and many other pioneer fighters for a new free social order perished in prisons and camps.<sup>19</sup>

Stalinist policy towards women was a grotesque hybrid. Unlike Nazi family policy, Stalinist ideology never held that women’s place was in the home. Rather, alongside the emphasis on strong, stable families, the government continued to encourage women to enter the workforce, couching its appeals in the rhetoric of women’s liberation. Claiming continuity with the Bolshevik ideals of women’s liberation, officials pursued aggressive policies aimed at training, educating and promoting women, proudly maintaining that socialism freed “tens of millions of working mothers for participation in production and social life”.<sup>20</sup>

The reversal in ideology and policy destroyed the possibility of a revolutionary new social order, for which millions had suffered and died. Hiding behind the empty rhetoric of women’s emancipation, the party abandoned its promise to socialise household labour and to foster more equal relations between men and women while continuing to present itself as the heirs of the original Bolshevik vision.

In 1938 Trotsky summarised the process of reversal thus:

The October Revolution inscribed on its banner the emancipation of womankind and created the most progressive legislation in history on marriage and the family. This does not mean, of course, that a “happy life” was immediately in store for the Soviet woman. Genuine emancipation of women is inconceivable without a general rise of economy and culture, without the destruction of the petty-bourgeois economic family unit, without the introduction of socialised food preparation and education. Meanwhile, guided by its conservative instinct, the bureaucracy has taken alarm at the “disintegration” of the family. It began singing panegyrics to the family supper and the family laundry, that is the household slavery of woman. To cap it all, the bureaucracy has restored criminal punishment for abortions, officially returning women to the status of pack animals. In complete contradiction with the ABC of communism, the ruling caste has thus restored the most reactionary and benighted nucleus of the class regime, i.e., the petty-bourgeois family.<sup>21</sup>

Concurrent with this reversal on women and the family were the 1930s purges of old Bolsheviks. Women Bolsheviks who were arrested fell into Stalin’s net for many of the

same reasons as their male comrades: they held important positions in economic management; they were the subordinates, superiors or friends of people who had been arrested; they had once been members of an opposition faction; they had once been Mensheviks or SRs; they had come from the upper or rich peasant classes; or they had been too closely associated with now discredited Bolshevik policies.

But women could also be charged with a crime almost exclusively applied to women. They could be accused of being “a member of the family of an enemy of the people”. In line with the reversal of ideology of the government, Stalin’s secret police arrested women married to suspect men but tended to pass over women Bolsheviks who had been powerful in their own right but were now simply ageing single women.

Women Bolsheviks who were married to prominent male Bolsheviks were particularly vulnerable. The accusations were fabricated — there was no network of spies and terrorists — but in a state-organised terror that fed on guilt by association, wives were naturally suspect. Some wives and children were arrested to keep them quiet; others to intimidate and silence those who were left. In truth many were arrested because they knew their husbands and fathers were innocent and the regime had to silence all opposition, even silent opposition.

The fate of the Bolshevik women mirrored that of their male comrades. A small number played a greater or lesser role in the revolutionary communist opposition to Stalin. One of these, Evgenia Bosh, committed suicide in 1925 in despair at the way things were developing. Some became Stalinists, others even prospered by denouncing their co-workers and taking the jobs of those who disappeared. Many — probably the majority — put their heads down, tried not to draw attention to themselves and hoped the nightmarish storm would pass over them.

The most famous of women Bolsheviks — Kollontai, Krupskaya and Stasova — managed to avoid arrest but were forced to make odious and soul-destroying compromises with Stalinism and endured years of harassment, humiliation and fear.



Today the remarkable female contingent of Bolshevism is almost forgotten — discredited along with the Communist Party in post-Soviet Russia and largely unknown in the rest of the world.

But we should remember them as great revolutionaries. They are among the pioneers of socialism on whose shoulders we stand. Because of their struggle we can see more clearly the road to be followed, as well as the pitfalls to avoid.

The example of the Bolshevik women should inspire us. They ignored convention to follow their political dreams and convictions. They fought and suffered to make the

world's first socialist revolution, marching towards a bright new future in which women and men could be truly free and human. ■



On March 8 (February 23 in the old Russian calendar) 1917, tens of thousands of women took to the streets of St Petersburg carrying banners demanding the tsarist government 'feed the children of the defenders of the motherland'. They were later joined by large numbers of workers calling for an end to the tsarist regime.

# Fighters for Socialism

Below are brief portraits of six of the most prominent Bolshevik women. In a short space we can only indicate some of the highlights of their lives. Those interested in knowing more should consult specialised biographies and other studies, some of which are indicated in the bibliography at the end.

## **Inessa Armand (1875-1920)**

Inessa Armand was born in Paris in 1875 to theatrical parents. At 18 she married Alexander Armand, a wealthy industrialist, but left him 10 years and four children later to live with his brother, Vladimir, with whom she had a fifth child. She remained friendly with her husband for the rest of her life and he both supported all her children and financed her revolutionary activities.



Inessa Armand in 1920, shortly before her death.

The woman question attracted her to socialism. She believed that it was every woman's right to seek self-fulfilment and a socially useful life. Armand later explained to her daughter Inna that she had early acquired "a strong resolution never to become fully feminine, but to remain a person".<sup>1</sup> She concentrated first on the condition of prostitutes, seeing it as a metaphor for women's oppression.

In 1903 Armand became a Marxist. As she recounted in a 1908 letter to her husband:

The fact is that in the first place I came this route later than others. Marxism wasn't an enthusiasm of youth for me but the completion of a long evolution from right to left.

... this last, reactionary year [1907] I spent among the proletariat ... made me firmer.<sup>2</sup>

By 1905 she had been arrested three times and had served more than six months in prison. In 1907 she was sent into exile at Archangel. Vladimir followed her there but in 1909 contracted tuberculosis and left for Switzerland. She escaped to nurse her ill lover but he died two weeks after she arrived.

After a period of study in Brussels, she moved to Paris where she joined the small band of Bolsheviks gathered around Lenin. She quickly became a close associate of Lenin and Krupskaya. Some say she was Lenin's lover.

In 1911 she lectured on the history of the socialist movement at the Marxist summer school in Paris. But a year later Lenin asked her to return to Russia as his representative on *Pravda*. The police soon tracked her down and she spent a year in prison before being bailed out by her husband. She returned to Western Europe where she stayed until 1917, working closely with Lenin. From exile she served on the editorial board of the first *Rabotnitsa*, the party journal directed at women.

Armand returned to Russia with Lenin after the February Revolution in 1917. She might have been considered entitled, by virtue of her years as Lenin's assistant, to a role in the central leadership, but she chose instead to go to Moscow as an ordinary party member involved in grassroots organising.

After the revolution she returned to her first interest, the condition of women, by helping to set up, along with Kollontai and Samoilova, an internal party department for work among women. She was one of a group of Bolshevik women who organised and spoke at the first All-Russian Congress of Working-Class and Peasant Women in 1918, which attracted over 1000 women from all over Russia.

At the same time she was chair of the Moscow Soviet's economic council, the organisation that controlled the economic management of the area, where she proved herself a hard-working and competent administrator. In early 1919 she spent three months in France as part of the Soviet delegation organising the repatriation of Russian prisoners of war.

In May 1919 Armand was appointed head of the Zhenotdel. She brought all her

considerable abilities to bear in creating the new party department, which was staffed by 22 women Bolsheviks and presided over by an unofficial governing body made up of veteran women party cadre. With Krupskaya she edited the department's magazine, *Kommunistka*.

The relentless round of work with its constant 14-hour days soon told on her health. In early 1920 she caught pneumonia but recovered, only to relapse in August. When her son also became ill they went to the Caucasus to recuperate. En route back to Moscow she contracted cholera and died two days later. Her remains were interred in front of the Kremlin Wall, the place of highest honour for fallen communists.

### **Evgenia Bosh (1879-1925)**

Evgenia Bosh was born in 1879 in the Ukraine. Her father had migrated there from Luxemburg and married a Moldavian woman. Her childhood was very unhappy, filled with arguments and fights.

When she was 17 her parents chose as a husband for her a much older nobleman from a neighbouring estate. The wilful daughter rebelled, eloping with Petr Bosh, who owned a small manufacturing business. She soon had two daughters, dabbled in philanthropy and had a limited involvement with the social-democrats but feared to jeopardise her comfortable situation by going further.

However, prodded by the example of her sister Elena, already fully involved with the revolutionaries, Bosh grew increasingly dissatisfied with her bourgeois life. When the police unsuccessfully searched her house for illegal literature in 1906 she decided to leave her husband, take the children and move to Kiev in the Ukraine to become a revolutionary.



Evgenia Bosh (1925)



She soon became prominent in the Kiev underground movement. When her sister and most of the rest of the Kiev group were arrested and exiled in 1910, Bosh tried to hold together the remainder of the small band in conditions of police repression and general distintegration of the movement.

In 1911 Bosh met Yuri Piatakov, who had come to reorganise the Kiev committee, and they soon fell in love. Together they shared the leadership of the Kiev committee and within a year had created an organisation of three local committees and 12 workers' circles. They were arrested in June 1912 and, after 18 months in prison, were exiled to Siberia. Almost immediately they escaped, heading east, and after circumnavigating the globe they joined the émigré social-democratic community in Switzerland.

They soon became embroiled in the disagreements that raked the émigré community. Bosh and Lenin fell out on the national question: with her Ukrainian experience Bosh felt that nationalism thwarted the development of proletarian internationalism while Lenin considered that the nationalism of the oppressed had a revolutionary potential, especially in the tsarist empire.

In 1917 Bosh returned to Russia with Kollontai, carrying back Lenin's call to arms before he himself returned. By March Bosh was back in Kiev ready to reorganise the city committee yet again. There she became a popular and very effective agitator, particularly among the soldiers of the south-western front in the Ukraine. She was so successful in rousing the troops to support the Bolsheviks that in October she managed to lead an army unit into battle against the Provisional Government.

The struggle in the Ukraine was a three-cornered contest between the Ukrainian nationalists (the Rada), the Germans and the Bolsheviks. By the end of 1917 the Rada in Kiev laid claim to control an independent Ukraine but it collaborated with the Germans and the Whites. In January Red forces entered Kiev and Bosh became interior minister in the Soviet provisional government of the Ukraine.

Bosh was outraged when, in March 1918, the Soviet government signed the treaty of Brest-Litovsk with Germany. Left with no choice by the relentless German advance and the disintegration of the old Russian army, the Bolsheviks ceded huge swathes of territory, including western Ukraine. Bosh resigned all her positions in the provisional revolutionary government and, joined by Piatakov and her daughter Maria, enlisted in Antonov-Ovseenko's Red Army operating from eastern Ukraine.

Despite the treaty, they attempted to halt the spread of the German occupation eastwards. It was a fruitless endeavour. For a month they harried the Germans along the railway lines east of Kiev, retreating until they reached Red-controlled territory.

The "frightful chaos" of the revolutionary struggle in the Ukraine, wrote Victor Serge in his superb history of 1918, "demanded an uncommon strength of personality.

In this period a woman emerged as one such figure of distinction, the old Bolshevik militant, Evgenia Bosh ...”<sup>3</sup>

Exhausted and ill, Bosh spent several months in eastern Ukraine recuperating. When she recovered she left Ukraine, volunteering for assignments in Russia.

During the remainder of the civil war she held a number of responsible assignments of a military-political nature. All this took a toll on her health and in 1920 she fell ill with tuberculosis and heart disease. She returned to Moscow filling various minor administrative positions between bouts of ill health.

In October 1923 Bosh was one of two female Bolshevik veterans (the other was Varvara Iakovleva) who signed the “Platform of the 46”, a statement drafted by Piatakov which criticised the economic policies of the party leadership and accused it of stifling the inner-party debate. It echoed the call made by Trotsky for a sharp change of direction by the party.

Bosh then withdrew from active politics, devoting her time to writing a history of the revolution in the Ukraine in 1917-18. Her work was harshly critical of much of the Bolshevik leadership in the Ukraine in this period. The sombre mood of her book reflected her state of mind in 1924 as the NEP threw up new bourgeois and careerist layers and the left opposition within the party was defeated by Stalin’s bureaucratic-apparatus faction.

By early 1925 Bosh had not held a major assignment for five years and could see no prospect of the situation being reversed unless she renounced her views and backed the Stalin-Bukharin leadership. In January 1925, when she heard that Trotsky had been forced to resign as head of the Red Army, demonstrating the rising power of Stalin and the bureaucracy, her despair overwhelmed her and she committed suicide.

The official press paid scant attention to her death, but her friend Evgeni Preobrazhensky wrote a long obituary article, hailing her as one of the heroes of the revolution: “In her character she was made of that steel that is broken but not bent, but all these virtues were not cheap. She had to pay dearly, pay with her peace of mind, her health and her life. Her health was weak, and she paid to the full, with her life.”<sup>4</sup>

## **Alexandra Kollontai (1872-1952)**

Born in 1872 to a wealthy land-owning family, Alexandra Kollontai was raised in both Russia and Finland, acquiring an early fluency in languages which served her well in her later revolutionary work. She began her political work in 1894, when she was a new mother, by teaching evening classes for workers in St. Petersburg. Through that activity she was drawn into public and clandestine work with the Political Red Cross, an organisation set up to help political prisoners. In 1895 she read August Bebel’s *Woman*

*and Socialism*, which had a major influence on her ideas about the emancipation of women.

But she dated her conversion to socialism to an 1896 visit with her husband to a large textile factory, where she saw the terrible conditions in which the working class lived and worked. After this visit she began to study Marxism and economics. She sought out members of Lenin's Marxist Union of Struggle for the Emancipation of the Working Class. Later that year her views further clarified when she became active in a mass textile strike, leafletting and raising money for the strikers.

By 1898 she was fully committed to Marxism. Leaving her husband and child behind, she went abroad to study. (She never returned to her husband.) In 1899 she returned to Russia and began her underground work for the social-democrats.

In 1905 she began the campaign which has most clearly established her place in history — to organise the women workers of Russia to fight for their own interests. Roused by the events of Bloody Sunday and after witnessing the ensuing wave of strikes throughout Russia, she became convinced that women workers must be recruited and mobilised for political action. In 1907, to give women workers a forum to discuss their problems Kollontai established the first women's club, the St. Petersburg Society for Mutual Aid to Women Workers.

In 1908 she was forced into exile, remaining outside Russia until 1917. She worked as an agitator for the German Social-Democratic Party and travelled to England, Denmark, Sweden, Belgium and Switzerland in the years before World War I. During her years in exile she developed a deep and lasting distrust of the reformist policies of the various European social-democratic parties

Kollontai had worked with the Bolsheviks until 1906, then with the Mensheviks.



1920, Second Comintern Congress: (left to right, seated) Clara Zetkin, Klavdia Nikolaeva and Alexandra Kollontai.

But the war and treachery of most of the social-democratic leaderships led her in 1915 to join the Bolsheviks. She became a close supporter of Lenin. Her pamphlet *Who Needs War?*, directed at front-line soldiers, was translated into several languages.

When the February 1917 revolution broke out, Kollontai was in Norway. She delayed her return only long enough to receive copies of Lenin's "Letters From Afar" so she could carry them back to Russia. On arrival in Russia (March 19) she joined Shliapnikov (her then partner) and Molotov in opposing Stalin and Kamenev's conciliatory tactics toward the Provisional Government. She was elected a member of the executive committee of the Petrograd Soviet. From the moment of Lenin's return in early April, Kollontai drew attention to herself as a fervent supporter of his call for "all power to the Soviets".

In 1917 she became recognised as one of the party's most popular and accomplished mass orators, speaking to endless meetings of workers, soldiers and sailors. At the July party congress she was elected a full member of the Central Committee and took part in the famous October 23 CC meeting which took the decision to launch the insurrection.

She was appointed Commissar of Social Welfare in the first Soviet government — the first female cabinet minister in the world. She also played an active role in the left opposition in the party which campaigned vigorously against the Brest-Litovsk treaty with Germany. In the aftermath of this struggle she failed to win re-election to the CC; she also resigned from the government. For the rest of 1918 Kollontai was active as an organiser and agitator and in November helped organise the First All-Russia Congress of Working and Peasant Women.

Throughout 1919, although often ill with heart and kidney disease, Kollontai kept up a gruelling schedule. In the spring and summer of that year she worked as a party agitator in the Ukraine, a seething cauldron of revolution and counterrevolution.

In November 1920, following Inessa Armand's death, Kollontai became head of the Zhenotdel, the newly-formed women's department of the party, which she had played an important role in establishing, along with Armand and Krupskaya.

At the end of 1920 she joined the Workers' Opposition, a tendency within the party alarmed by the increasing bureaucratisation of the party and state, and along with Shliapnikov became its most prominent leader. However, at the 10th Party Congress in March 1921 its proposals were condemned as anarcho-sindicalist.

In 1922 she applied to Stalin for a modest post within Russia and found herself appointed instead to the Soviet legation in Norway and in 1924-25 was the Soviet ambassador there — the world's first female ambassador. She then held ambassadorial posts in Mexico, Norway again and finally in Sweden until her retirement in 1945.

Despite her early oppositional and anti-bureaucratic stance, Kollontai never

associated with the communist Trotskyist opposition. For all her undoubted distaste for what was happening in the USSR under Stalinism, she felt that opposition was hopeless. She effectively withdrew from political life and made the necessary homage to Stalin. As she admitted to a friend: "I have put my principles in a corner of my conscience and I carry out as well as possible the policies dictated to me."<sup>5</sup>

And while the Stalinist terror swirled around her, taking away most of her friends and comrades of the revolutionary years, she managed to survive. In 1938, apart from Stalin and those who died of natural causes, Kollontai was the only member of the October 1917 Central Committee not to have perished in the blood purges. For Stalin, she was a convenient token posing no threat. An Old Bolshevik and a well-known international figure, she could be displayed as a sign of Soviet progress in equality for women.

She died in 1952, forgotten, her ideas ignored but still a supporter of the Soviet Union. She considered it futile to dwell on the deformities of the Stalin era when many core achievements of the revolution remained. She consoled herself by thinking: "Everything is going to straighten out with time. And more humane ideas always win ... Reactionary tendencies don't last long, never. History shows this in all countries and among all people".<sup>6</sup>

The upsurge of the women's liberation movement in the late 1960s and 70s brought a renewed interest in the life and work of this remarkable woman who fought so passionately for socialism and the rights of women.

## **Nadezhda (Nadia) Krupskaya (1869-1939)**

Born in 1869 in St. Petersburg, Nadia Krupskaya became a Marxist in the early 1890s. A teacher, she began her life of service to the cause by giving evening classes in Marxism to workers and later helped to found the Union of Struggle for the Emancipation of the Working Class with Lenin, whom she had met in 1894. During the strikes of 1896 she was jailed for six months and then exiled to Siberia for three years. There she married Lenin. Throughout their life together Krupskaya was his closest collaborator, his secretary and confidante in all his work

In 1901 they were released and left Russia for exile. Krupskaya went on to play a key role in the underground and émigré Russian social-democratic organisation and held various responsible positions over the years. While in exile she continued her strong interest in the theory and practice of progressive education, studying foreign schools and literature.

After the February revolution she returned with Lenin to Russia, where she worked in the Central Committee secretariat until she was elected to the Vyborg district

Duma in Petrograd, where she was active in the department dealing with popular education.

After the October Revolution she played a leading role in the People's Commissariat of Education. Here she took a special interest in adult education. At the same time she helped to organise the Zhenotdel and the youth organisations — the Komsomol and the Pioneers — as well as writing many articles for newspapers and journals.

Although she was a revolutionary before she met Lenin, her political views crystallised after her marriage. Decades of political collaboration had proved to her the correctness of his views and she grew accustomed to trusting his judgement. After his death she found it hard to orient herself in the rapidly deteriorating situation.

Opposed to Stalin, she nevertheless shrank at the prospect of an open split in the party between the revolutionary elements and the careerists. Briefly adhering to the United Opposition with Trotsky and Zinoviev in 1925-26, she then capitulated to Stalin.

Until her death in 1939 she was condemned to a public role as Lenin's widow while in private enduring the humiliation of intense supervision and censorship by Stalin's secret police. She was a powerless witness to the destruction of almost the entire Bolshevik old guard, her friends from the difficult time of the foundation of the party



Nadezhda Krupskaya as a young woman.

and the arduous days of exile.

Krupskaya, Trotsky wrote in an obituary article, “was an outstanding personality in her devotion to the cause, her energy, and her purity of character. She was unquestionably a woman of intelligence ... an irreproachable revolutionist and one of the most tragic figures in revolutionary history.”<sup>7</sup>

### Larissa Reisner (1895-1926)

Larissa Reisner [wrote Trotsky in his autobiography<sup>8</sup>] ... was ... prominent in the Fifth Army as well as the revolution as a whole. This fine young woman flashed across the revolutionary sky like a burning meteor, blinding many. With the appearance of an Olympian goddess, she combined a subtle and ironical mind and the courage of a warrior ... Her sketches about the civil war are literature ... She was anxious to know and to see all, and to take part in everything ... in a few brief years, she became a writer of the first rank.

The daughter of a communist professor, Larissa Reisner was born in 1895 in Poland. She grew up in Germany where her life was dominated by her father’s connection with émigré Russian revolutionaries and German social-democrats. After the 1905 revolution the family returned to Russia where she soon began to display both literary flair and revolutionary ideas. During World War I, with her father she published and wrote for an anti-war journal, *Rudin*, and when it folded she contributed articles to Maxim Gorky’s journal *Letopis*.

After the February Revolution Reisner joined the opponents of coalition with the bourgeoisie. She wrote a sharp article against Kerensky which provoked a broadside from the bourgeois press. She became involved in large-scale workers’ organisations



Larissa Reisner

and educational circles among the Kronstadt sailors. She strongly supported the October Revolution and joined the Bolsheviks the next year.

With the outbreak of civil war in mid-1918 she was immediately sent to the Kazan front, where the newly-formed Red Army was in a desperate struggle with the counterrevolutionary Czechoslovak legion. She became a commissar in the Fifth Army there and fought in the front line. Later she fought with the Red Navy to free the Volga from Czech control, becoming one of the leading commissars of the Volga fleet.

In her book *The Front*, a brilliant portrayal of the civil war struggle, she evokes the idealism of the Red fighters at Kazan:

Brotherhood! Few words have been so abused and rendered pitiful. But brotherhood does come sometimes, in moments of direst need and peril, so selfless, so sacred, so unrepeatabe in a single lifetime. And they have not lived and know nothing of life who have never lain at night on a floor in tattered and lice-ridden clothes, thinking all the while how wonderful is the world, infinitely wonderful! That here the old has been overthrown and that life is fighting with bare hands for her irrefutable truth, for the white swans of her resurrection, for something far bigger and better than this patch of star-lit sky showing through the velvet blackness of a window with shattered panes — for the future of all mankind.<sup>9</sup>

After the civil war Reisner returned to Petrograd to study and write about the life of the factory workers. In 1921 she married Fyodor Raskolnikov, vice-president of the Kronstadt Soviet, and went with him to Afghanistan when he was appointed Soviet ambassador. It was here that she wrote *The Front*.

In 1923, with her marriage over, she was sent to Germany with the dual purpose of reporting the revolution which then seemed imminent and serving as a liaison officer between the Comintern and the local Communist Party. The revolution did not happen but she stayed on, collecting material on the short-lived Hamburg rising and the subsequent repression. Her book, *Hamburg at the Barricades*, was banned and publicly burnt in Germany.

Having barely recovered from her stay in Germany, she toured the Urals to study the living and working conditions of the people there. Her resulting book, *Iron, Coal and Living People*, depicts the Russian proletariat at work.

In 1925 Reisner returned to Germany for treatment for her recurrent malaria. But she also was impelled to study the working class there and the social changes that had resulted from the capitalist stabilisation. Her stay resulted in *In the Country of Hindenburg*, a masterful social and political portrait of a people in struggle.

It was to be her last book. Soon after her return to Moscow she contracted typhus. Her body, still ravaged by malaria, was unable to withstand the illness and she died in



February 1926 in the Kremlin Hospital, aged 30. In Larissa Reisner, wrote her companion Karl Radek, “died a profoundly revolutionary woman, a precursor of the new human type which is born in the throes of revolution”.<sup>10</sup>

### **Elena Stasova (1873-1967)**

Elena Stasova was born in 1873, the daughter of wealthy members of the liberal intelligentsia. While she admired her parents, by her teenage years she knew the life of a lady philanthropist was not for her. She wanted to do socially useful work so she became a teacher of the workers in the city slums. There she met other teachers, some of whom were Marxists.

By 1895 she was smuggling messages to jailed revolutionaries and hiding pamphlets. In 1898 she joined the social-democrats. Shortly after she was asked to take over the finances of the party in St. Petersburg and “from this moment I considered myself a member of the party, and all my previous work was only doing good deeds”.<sup>11</sup> Gradually she took over all the “technical” tasks of the St. Petersburg committee, “that is finding rooms for meetings, secret addresses and beds for a night, receiving and distributing literature, equipping duplicating machines and printing presses, as well as maintaining correspondence with abroad”.<sup>12</sup>

Stasova was an early supporter of Lenin. In 1901 she supported *Iskra* when it took



Elena Stasova (1895)

the line that only by revolution and not by parliamentary democracy could Russia achieve socialism. When the party split in 1903 she again followed Lenin, agreeing with him that the key to a successful revolution lay in building up a cadre party which could lead the working class in the struggle for state power. Lenin and Krupskaya considered her an important ally and she was credited with sustaining support for the Bolshevik position within the St. Petersburg committee between 1901 and 1907.

Between 1907 and 1911 Stasova underwent a political and personal crisis, connected with the demoralising atmosphere after the defeat of the 1905-06 revolution and deepening rifts in her marriage. She dropped out of political activity for a period.

Drawn into party work again, she was arrested in 1912 and after 10 months in prison was sentenced to permanent exile and loss of all legal rights. In 1916 she escaped and returned to St. Petersburg where she continued her party work in the underground. Arrested in early 1917, she was released following the February Revolution and within 24 hours had found the Bolshevik city committee and resumed her work as its secretary.

In April 1917 she was elected secretary of the Central Committee of the Bolshevik Party, a part of the national leadership of a party that was now legal and was large and growing. Her role was to formulate policy regarding party structure and finances, as well as making major personnel assignments.

In 1921 she left Moscow for Germany, where she spent the next five years carrying out underground work with German communists on behalf of the Comintern. On her return to Moscow she joined the Central Committee Information Bureau and in 1928 she was chosen to head the International Organisation for Help to Revolutionaries (MOPR).

Stasova was not a Stalinist but, although deeply troubled by what was happening, she was compromised by it. In 1935 and 1936 she served on various party control commissions and purge committees. In late 1936 she was denounced as a "Trotskyite" but somehow managed to extricate herself from the clutches of the secret police. She watched as many of her old comrades and co-workers at MOPR were arrested on frame-up charges.

In 1938 she left the decimated MOPR and sought refuge in a safe position, as an editor on *Internatsionalnaia literatura* (*International Literature*), a magazine that published foreign literature in translation, where she remained until 1946.

After the 20th Congress of the Communist Party at which Khrushchev made his famous denunciation of Stalin, Stasova regained celebrity as a senior Old Bolshevik and at the 22nd Congress she again attracted attention by a violent diatribe against Stalin.

In spite of all that she had lived through, Stasova never lost her faith in communism.

She urged people to go back to the ideals that had inspired the party before the nightmare of Stalinism set in.

She died at the age of 93 and was buried in the Kremlin Wall. ■

## Further Reading

This list is not meant to be comprehensive but merely the titles I found most useful in preparing this pamphlet. The books by Barbara Clements and Wendy Goldman were invaluable here; they will repay careful study by all who are interested in the problems of women's liberation and socialism.

\* \* \*

**Bolshevik Women** by Barbara Evans Clements (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1997) contains a wealth of fascinating information about the lives of the women who enlisted in the revolutionary movement including a considerable amount of biographical material on a number of prominent activists. It also provides a picture of the pioneering work of the Zhenotdel — the party's Department for Work Among Women — and its foremost cadres. While I am deeply indebted to her study, from which I have drawn freely for this pamphlet, the overall value of Clements' work is marred by her political outlook (liberalism) and theoretical framework (patriarchy).

**Women, The State and Revolution** *Soviet Family Policy & Social Life, 1917-1936* by Wendy Z. Goldman (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1993) is a sympathetic yet critical study of the tremendous struggle of the Bolsheviks to implement their radical program for the liberation of women in a backward, devastated country. It provides a vivid picture of the stormy debates over family legislation following the revolution as well as the Stalinist counterrevolution which came down with full force in the 1930s.

\* \* \*

**Aleksandra Kollontai** by Beatrice Farnsworth (Stanford University Press: California, 1980). A very readable study of Kollontai's life and politics — the dramatic and compelling highpoints of the revolutionary years and the sombre, troubled later decades.

- The Autobiography of a Sexually Emancipated Communist Woman** by Alexandra Kollontai (Schocken Books: New York, 1975). A short but fascinating account of her life written in 1926, detailing her struggle to live a life in which creative work and struggle, rather than personal relationships, were the fundamental elements.
- Bride of the Revolution** *Krupskaya and Lenin* by Robert H. McNeal (University of Michigan Press: Ann Arbor, 1972). Despite the author's conservative politics his book presents clearly the main themes and episodes of her life, including the tragic final chapter.
- Clara Zetkin** *Selected Writings* edited with an introduction by Philip S. Foner (International Publishers: New York, 1984).
- Makers of the Russian Revolution** *Biographies of Bolshevik Leaders* by Georges Haupt & Jean-Jacques Marie (George Allen & Unwin: London, 1974). This collection of short portraits of some of the most prominent revolutionary figures includes material on Krupskaya, Stasova, Kollontai and Reisner which was very useful in preparing the brief biographies above.
- On the Emancipation of Women** by V.I. Lenin (Resistance Books: Chippendale, 2003) is a very useful compendium of material from before and after the revolution. Lenin's post-October addresses emphasise the world-historic advances of women as a result of the revolution. This edition also contains Clara Zetkin's notes of her 1920 discussion with Lenin. It ends with "Thermidor in the Family" from Trotsky's *The Revolution Betrayed* which analyses the effect on women of the Stalinist counterrevolution of the later 1920s and 1930s.
- Women and the Family** by Leon Trotsky (Pathfinder Press: New York, 1986). This short selection provides a vivid picture of the dramatic impact of the revolution on women's lives and the problems faced in continuing to move forward. ■

# Notes

## Bolshevik Women in the Russian Revolution

- 1 In Zetkin, "My Recollections of Lenin" in Lenin, *On the Emancipation of Women* (Progress Publishers: Moscow, 1965), p.110.
- 2 Marx & Engels, *Selected Works*, Vol. 1 (Progress Publishers: Moscow, 1969), p. 94.
- 3 Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1 (Penguin Books: Harmondsworth, 1976), pp. 620-621.
- 4 Marx & Engels, Letter 129, *Collected Works*, Vol. 43 (Lawrence & Wishart: London, 1988), p. 185.
- 5 Bebel, *Woman Under Socialism* (Schocken Books: New York, 1971), p. 6.
- 6 Foner ed., *Clara Zetkin. Selected Writings* (International Publishers: New York, 1984), p. 79.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 45.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 47.
- 9 Clements, *Bolshevik Women* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1997), p. 38.
- 10 *Ibid.*, pp. 39-40.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 49.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 105.
- 13 Lenin, "Letters from Afar", *Collected Works*, Vol. 23 (Progress Publishers: Moscow, 1964), p. 329.
- 14 In Zetkin, "My Recollections of Lenin" in Lenin, *On the Emancipation of Women* (Progress Publishers: Moscow, 1965), p.110.
- 15 "Program of the Communist Party of Russia" in Bukharin & Preobrazhensky, *The ABC of Communism* (University of Michigan Press: Ann Arbor, 1966), p. 381.
- 16 Shapiro, *The Communist Party of the Soviet Union* (Eyre & Spottiswoode: London, second edition, 1970), p. 314.
- 17 Quoted in Bullock, *Hitler and Stalin: Parallel Lives* (Fontana Press: London, 1991), p. 188.
- 18 *Bolshevik Women*, p. 275.
- 19 Goldman, *Women, the State and Revolution* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1993), p. 340.

- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 343.
- 21 Trotsky, “Does the Soviet Government Still Follow the Principles Adopted Twenty Years Ago?”, *Writings of Leon Trotsky (1937-38)* (Pathfinder Press: New York, 1976), p. 129.

## Fighters for Socialism

- 1 *Bolshevik Women*, p. 42.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 111.
- 3 Serge, *Year One of the Russian Revolution* (Allen Lane The Penguin Press: London, 1972), p. 181.
- 4 *Bolshevik Women*, pp. 238-239.
- 5 Farnsworth, *Aleksandra Kollontai* (Stanford University Press: California, 1980), p. 381.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p 404.
- 7 Trotsky, “Krupskaya’s Death”, *Writings of Leon Trotsky (1938-39)* (Pathfinder Press: New York, second edition, 1974), pp. 197-198.
- 8 Trotsky, *My Life* (Pathfinder Press: New York, 1970), p. 409.
- 9 Reisner, “Svyazhsk” in *Leon Trotsky: The Man and His Work* (Merit Publishers: New York, 1969), p. 114.
- 10 *Makers of the Russian Revolution*, p. 408.
- 11 Clements, *Bolshevik Women* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1997), p. 23.
- 12 Quoted in Haupt & Marie, *Makers of the Russian Revolution* (George Allen & Unwin: London, 1974), p. 269. ■

At the end of the 19th Century and in the early 1900s, thousands of young women joined the Russian revolutionary movement to fight against both the brutal tsarist autocracy and the harsh capitalist system which was developing. They saw achieving the liberation of women and better life for all as indissolubly bound up with the socialist revolution and the building of a new society.

Along with their male comrades in Lenin's Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (the Bolshevik Party), these women militants came to know both triumph and defeat as the first socialist revolution in history succeeded against all odds but later succumbed to the Stalinist bureaucratic counterrevolution.

Kathy Fairfax gives an inspiring overview of the contribution of these revolutionary women and enables us to see more clearly their full stature and the continuing relevance of their struggle.

*Resistance books*



