Women and the Bolsheviks

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Introduction

The woman question had a rich history in Russia. It developed from the 1830s and 1840s on when the works of Charles Fourier was read in Russian intelligentsia circles. Charles Fourier proclaimed the equality of men and women. George Sand was also influential.

As discussion of the woman question continued into the 1860s, a fundamental split emerged between two groups: the reformers and the revolutionaries. The reformers thought of education as a means to emancipation, peaceful change was a means. This led to Russian feminism, which aimed at female equality with men. By the turn of the twentieth century, the Russian feminism was very similar to feminism elsewhere in Europe: it thought of reform as superior to revolution, aimed at education, then civil rights. The revolutionaries thought of feminism as something dangerous to struggle for the common cause. Feminism was regarded as an self-interested effort by b bourgeois women to catch up with bourgeois men. They believed, that women would be only free when all people were liberated and that this was to accomplished through the abolition of private property.

In this paper I will try to show the role of women in the Bolshevik period. For this purpose, I will first look at the life of women in this period. Women were seen as the baba, the housewife that was genuinely passive and highly religious. Her role was entangled with the description of a woman. Females were firstly allowed to get a good education, whereas before they had to spend their youth in special institutes where they were trained as housewifes and mothers and only learned some socially accepted skills. They could not make a living out of this education.

I will go on in showing the role of women in the Bolshevik party. They had their own sections, from where they struggled for influence and independence. Alleksandra Kollontai was the first female person to take up the struggle for women in the party. For the party, the

„woman question“ was ambiguous. Women struggling for a better position in society were influencing their struggle for a betterment of society as a whole. When women concentrated on the female question, did that mean, that the class struggle was posed behind this? This was the main concern for the party and the reason for the party to hinder the development of female power in the organization.

I will go on exploring the role of feminism for the women in the Bolshevik era. Feminism was suspicious, as see from the eyes of the Bolsheviks. They were seen as having a common cause with the bourgeoisie. But still, the feminists did some things to further the womens´ cause that the Party could not and did not want to do.

Finally, I will have a look at women in the working space. What did change for women in the working space under the Bolshevik era? Were they tried to be integrated or did the struggle persist in this area? I will try to show the influences described above in this case study. This is with regards to the main question of this work; What influence did the Bolsheviks do have on the womens´ cause and did they further their struggle and help them or hinder any efforts for womens emancipation?

Female life before the Bolshevik era

„A dominant element in the worldview of Bolsheviks and of the Russian population as a whole was the notion of women as more backward (*otstaltyi*) than men.“ (Wood 15) Women were seen as staying behind the men in the struggle to change the society. There were a wide range of negative qualities ascribed to women, such as illogicality, confinement, and small-mindedness. Due to this, the women were mainly confined to the household and the bearing of children. Her religiosity strengthened the role of the church and was thus to struggle against.

The impulses of self-emancipation in Russia appeared first among educated gentry-women. Women were educated according to status. Special institutes existed, where the females would get access to due to the ranks and efforts of their parents. If the father had some military successes to prove, she was accepted before one who had no such father. If the father was a merchant, for example, he had to pay high tuition fees to get her educated in such an institute.

Women were at first educated separated from men. They went to these special institutes, where they learned the pianoforte and French: „It is a well-established fact that a proper upbringing is obtained in boarding schools at which three subjects are considered the foundation of all human virtue: the French language, indispensable to family happiness; the pianoforte, to afford pleasant moments to one`s spouse; and, finally, the subject which touches directly upon the running of one`s future home – the knitting of purses and other presents with which to surprise one`s husband“, (Stites 4) as one contemporary notes about these institutes. The whole education was aimed at creating women that distrusted their own

abilities and find satisfaction only in marriage. This was to prepare them for marriage where they had to give up their individuality to man`s demands because that was what was in the interest of society „as if she herself has no value, as if her personality was measured only in relation to her husband´s.“ (Clements a, 71) She was taught the virtues of passivity: modesty, chastity, spirituality, and acquiescence. The emphasis was on obedience, strict adherence to the curriculum, and parietal rules. If one did not coiffure the hair in the appropriate manner, one was not allowed to see the parents the next weekend. By this means, the will of the female was to be broken to turn her into a subservient wife of her future husband. There was an article from the 1836 Code of Russian Laws that exactly described this: „The woman must obey her husband, reside with him in love, respect, and unlimited obedience; and offer him every pleasantness and affection as the ruler of the household.“ (Sites 6) She was not prepared for the life afterwards. Instead, she turned into a „bread and butter-miss“, a lady who would enjoy festivities and wait for the arrival of a man to take her away. This led to the perception of women as backwards, and indeed they were. Only a few of them transcended their education into something worthwhile, by reading the right literature and study on their own. They lay the foundation for the women`s movement, as they encountered the writings of Marxist and socialist writers and absorbed them and found answers to their dilemma.

In Russia, as in the most of Europe, the woman question did not emerger from the population as such. Peasant and working women had nothing to do with it in the beginning except that they were the distant objects of revolutionary vision. The female masses at the bottom of the social order played almost no role in the women`s movement until the beginning of the twentieth century.

The working women instead were mostly illiterate. They worked alongside with men, but were paid much less. They worked for the same long exhausting time at the machines, but

after work they would run home to their children, pots and diapers. When the children got sick, the working women had to leaven them to the care of their landladies. They couldn´t stay with them during the working hours. If they did, their pay would be reduced or they would be fired altogether. When the children were sick, the working women`s sleep was reduced to a couple of hours, she stayed awake with the children in order to go to the machines the next morning. Such was the working women`s life and it did not change. It started at a fairly young age, with ten or twelve, and went this way day in, day out, year in, year out.

Women were allowed to possess their own property. They could inherit from their husbands one-seventh of his real and one-fourth of his moveable property. They even could inherit as daughters. Still, they were not allowed to move. A wife was bound to her husband to follow him, wherever he went. Only he had a passport that allowed him to move. The only exception was, if he was deprived of his civil rights and sent to Siberia. Then she did not have to follow him. That was the only exception apart from death. There was also divorce, but the conditions were so strict, that it nearly never happened.

Women and the Bolsheviks – a struggle for power

Any investigation of the Marxist theory of the woman question must begin with August Bebel`s Woman and Socialism (1879). Marx and Engels did write about the issue of women, but they were much more concerned with the class struggle itself, than with solving the woman question. Bebel believed in the full equality of women in law and work under socialism: „The complete emancipation of woman, and her equality with man, is the final goal of our social development, whose realization no power on earth can prevent, - and this

realization is possible only by a social change that shall abolish the rule of man over man – hence also of capitalism over working man. Only then will the human race reach its highest development.“ (Clements a, 54) Maternity would be considered a social function, and thus the health services for pregnant women would be ensured. Education would be available for all. The family would continue to exist and the parents would have time to spend with their children. They would also have democratic control over the institutions caring for and educating those children. Bebel referred to women as fighting side by side with their male comrades. He dwelt on their efforts to win legal rights, professional opportunities and even political equality. „What is right for the working class ... cannot be wrong for women“ (Stites 235), he thought. Still, as women suffered under the double burden of economic dependence and dependence of their husbands, it was the first, that had to be solved, before women could be freed. The women had to join the proletarian movement in its struggle in order to find allies in her fight for equality and freedom: „The woman ... must seek allies, and she will find them naturally in the proletarian movement. The conscious proletariat began a long time ago ist storming of the fortress of the class state which shelters within its bastions the system of the dominion of one sex over another.“ (Stites 235). Bebel wanted special attention given to the woman question, but he thought it wrong to devise special measures and institutions to them. Him followed Clara Zetkin, born in Germany, who went to Russia with her husband. She wrote about the rights for woman, addressing the woman question in the following way: „the liberating character of work, public life, and political activity for women; the inability of women`s rights movements to bring about full emancipation; and the need for special organization of political work among women within the socialist movement.“ (Stites 236). She argued for the full suffrage of women. This was a clear reaction to and rejection of Bebels arguments. Still, she thought, that the battle of the sexes should not be put first before the class war. When the party split up into the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks, leaders like Lenin, Martov and Dan continued to espouse the principle of equality of women within the labor

movement. Dan, for example, used the concept of the citizen mother to declare, that the working mother had to possess proletarian consciousness so that she could pass it on to her sons. The female was once again seen as the mother, the housewife and the bearer of the children.

The Bolsheviks saw themselves as promoting the emancipation of women in Russia: „Within European Russia itself, a focus on women`s backwardness allowed the new leaders to position themselves as representatives of a tutelary state committed to the enlightenment and emancipation of the whole population.“ (Wood 3). The Bolsheviks claimed that they would transform the social structure up into the sphere of daily life itself. That the women were perceived as backwards opened them the entree into the private sphere of life, into the family. As everywhere, Bolsheviks occupied each open space to inflate their fight for social change. „In different ways women were viewed as raw material on which aspiring reformers could work their transformations. At the same time women were the citizen-mothers who could transmit a new culture to later generations.“ (Wood 15)

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In the sphere of politics, though, women were not as welcome. The struggle for change in social relations, politics and the state demanded the whole population concentrating its powers on the issue. Women were seen as backward and when they were not, they were perceived as infiltrating gender issues into the fight for equality and justice and thus spoil it. If women could be freed from special feminine demands, they could join the class struggle for a better society. But „any `special` programs, institutions, and social benefits ... were considered suspect“ (Wood 15). Freedom was not to achieved as freedom for women but as freedom for all humankind from the control of capitalism.

First attempts were made by Russian women to establish women's departments in the party structure, but the party did not support this. Instead, they were seen as separatists.

The proletarian women`s movement in Russia emerged at two distinct stages. The first of these was led primarily by Aleksandra Kollontai and endured from 1905 to 1908. It was marked by more or less spontaneous responses to the efforts of feminists and by sharp disagreement within the party itself about the value of political work among socialist women. The second of these was led by Inessa Armand, Krupskaya and others from abroad. It lived from 1913 to 1914. The first of them had much in common with female activists of other nations. They rejected lives of domesticity, sought work in the wider world, and drew on feminist and socialist texts for inspiration. They battled traditional restrictions on women that prevailed not only in the larger society but within their own movement. In 1917, revolution swept away all the liberals and feminists and empowered another group of females activists: the Bolsheviki. These women then played a central part in formulating and implementing Soviet programs of women`s emancipation. The Bolsheviki served not in the upper structures of the party, but in the lower ranks of the organization. Their office-holding peaked in 1917, and during the civil war it declined rapidly. This resulted from the militarization of the party culture and from the accompanying transformation of the party into a governing regime.

In the 1920`s the discussion went on to reject women`s departments in the party structure. Reasons for this were the following: „weaknesses in the women`s sections; parallelism with the work of other groups ... ; alienation of the women`s section from the rest of the party; inability of the party committees to take work among women seriously; ... provincial committee views that the women`s sections were outmoded since the introduction of the NEP [new economic policy] or that they were fundamentally unnecessary under any circumstances; difficulties in doing work among women because of the social upheaval still rampant in some parts of the country.“ (Wood 134).

Feminism in Russia

Feminists did not call themselves feminists. In terms of activity, they were apolitical. Sometimes, they were called progressive, but this term was also used for nihilists. The Russian feminist leaders all came from well established families, from the privileged class, when they began their work. That may be the cause for their refusal to break entirely with the past, with traditions and customs and with the family. It was often assumed, that feminism sprang from psychological instability or sexual frustration. But this may be a myth. As to the sexual question, many of the feminists leaders were married, even if not always happily.

Feminist searched for solutions within the framework of the Russian social system. They did not want to go against its basic assumptions, just wanted to change certain aspects without total renovation or reorganization. Their outlook was liberal and moderate; their goal was gradual, peaceful and legal reform of the status of women. They were concerned particularly with their economic and educational position. They were not as concerned with questions of sex, marriage and the family, these were not parts to be changed in the Russian society. That is why one can call them moderate. In most parts, the Russian feminists resembled their counterparts in Europe and America throughout the nineteenth century. They went different ways than the nihilists and revolutionaries. Their heroines were Clara Balfour and other English feminists, with whom they shared the belief, that first of all the women`s mission was to improve the women`s cause by women themselves. They needed to develop self-help, as Balfour put it. By this, they wanted to cultivate concern for the more unfortunate members of the female family by the more fortunate ones. The unfortunate women were seen as not different from Negro-slaves, beggars, savages, lunatics, orphans and drunks. By helping them, women could better their moral performance here on earth. The feminists introduced an element of genuine enthusiasm for charity: „Membership in it was *comme il faut. Grandes*

dames wearing a sympathetic smile would say `my poor`, `I must go and visit my poor`, and `oh please contribute something for my unfortunates`. The feminists` attitude was something quite different. At the bottom of all was the unfeigned respect for those visited and helped, and an interest in their physical and intellectual condition.“ (Stites 65). After a while, women were departed from the company of Negro-slaves and others.

The feminists began with charity, using the talent of some women for the betterment of the situation of others. This was not helping the women`s movement as such in large scale, but it did provide experience in leadership, nurtured the feeling of self-respect and aroused consciousness of women`s ability to function in public life. Most important, these activities brought together women from similar background and got them out of the salons, where they normally spend their free time. Their efforts were directed at helping women to work, study and live. The purpose behind this was to bring women from different backgrounds into a democratic atmosphere together. A Vologda Women`s Club was founded in order to „bring together educated women without distinction of class or condition into a single society for inexpensive entertainment.“ (Stites 68). The same groups founded a Cooperative for women to test their creative abilities: writing, copying, translating and editing and at the same time producing something valuable for the younger generations to read. This Cooperative was a success because it offered engaged women a possibility to express themselves and to experience the atmosphere of a cooperative without having to join the nihilists and the revolutionaries. Another society was founded to help women get work. The society was to act as an employment agency for women, to open the fields of work to them. They established schools were workers and others were allowed to study on Sundays.

The feminist movement gained prominence in the phase of the civil war (1914 – 1918), when the Bolshevik women nearly ceased to exist. Women were concerned about the war and its

consequences. They did not understand the New Economic Policy, introduced by the Bolsheviks and ceased to act in the women`s sections established by the Bolshevik women. They did not understand why there was a shortage of food, why they themselves, their husbands and brothers had to hunger. This was the reason for women to turn to the feminist movement and join it in large scale. The Bolsheviks did not appreciate this development. For them, the feminists should join the universal struggle for all mankind and not put such emphasis on women`s liberation issues. Still, they could not do anything against it.

An All-Russia Women`s Society was founded, later renamed the National Council of Women. This Council engaged in the struggle for universal suffrage, had a program of labour and land reforms, a democratic republic, and war to victory. The feminists had become political in their own right.

Women workers and the Bolsheviks

The Bolsheviks enabled the women to work. They could work in female professions as journalists, in the medical professions and as teachers, for example. Still, unemployment, especially in the wake of the NEP (New Economic Policy) posed a serious problem. Here is, where the women`s section in the party, the zhenotdel, stepped in.

As it was clear that te New Economic Policy affected unemployment with women workers, activists in the party considered controlling the labour market and do so by administrative measures from above. Rather, than letting market forces rule from below. In February 20, 1922, the government issued a decree making it illegal to discriminate on gender basis:

„Given equal productivity and equal skill levels women workers are to be laid off in cases of general staff reductions on a general basis“ (Wood, 162). Even if this measure was perceived as murky and undefined, other measures to protect women in the labour market followed.

There was a zhenotdel conference where recommendations where passed, regarding the involvement of the zhenotdel in the labour market. The included the following:

„(1) to have zhenotdel staff participate in the exchanges and in the publication of circulars against discrimination on the basis of sex; (2) to include them in commissions to determine women workers` skill levels as a means to ensure that women were not being fired indiscriminately; and (3) to organize workshops (artels) for the unemployed at the local level.“ (Wood, 163). The zhenotdel thus intervened on its own in the labor market and searched for measures to protect women. The zhenotdel considered to establish special labor aid in the form of workshops for unemployed women to solve the unemployment question, but this proposal was laid off due to many difficulties that encountered this proposal. This could not be considered a long-term solution, for example. If the government could not afford to maintain its support for the heavy industry, many felt that it certainly could not afford to create public works and workshops for the unemployed.

Another topic was the issue of welfare for some categories of unemployed women. On May 5, 1992, the Labor Commissariat issued a decree concerning the establishment of special job placements for pregnant women and wives of Red Army men, widows with many children and single women with children. The Social Welfare Commissariat promised all organizations, trade unions or governmental, which were trying to organize work for unemployed women aid. In regions, where unemployment was particularly high, there were emergency measures taken, like the establishment of dormitories, lodgings and overnight shelters. (Wood 164).

In August 1922 there was a decree from the Labor Commissariat reinforcing the existing non-discrimination against women workers. It stated that pregnant women were to be fired only in exceptional cases and only with special permission from the factory labour inspector or the Conflict Commission of the labour division. There were other changes as well, providing for more protection of the women in workspace. For example, in case of labour exchange the

employers had to find work for widows of insured workers and single women as well as pregnant women. Kuibyshev, a leading member of the party, worked together with the zhenotdels in order to find other ways in which to support women in the workspace, especially married nonpregnant women, which were excluded from the benefits. Their proposal was, that zhenotdel members should be present at the board of the Labor Exchange to supervise their practices.

These decrees, however, couldn´t do much for the economic position of women. Some employers even stopped to hire women workers due to the circumstances and regarding, that they may become pregnant. They would be difficult to fire then.

The women´s section of the party hoped for more governmental intervention in the labor marked to the women´s cause. They wanted more control of the labor market, in a time when women worker´s were fired to unprecedented numbers. The women´s sections themselves did not have influence over the process of hiring and firing.

The difficulty of these issues was the values involved. The struggle was about a value of production and profitability against the value of welfare. Women were regarded as less productive then men, they were regarded as weak and backward in their intellectual development. They seemed therefore less profitable. But this wasn't to square with political and social values, for which the revolution had fought for. Still, the zhenotdel lost this struggle over values against the industry.

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