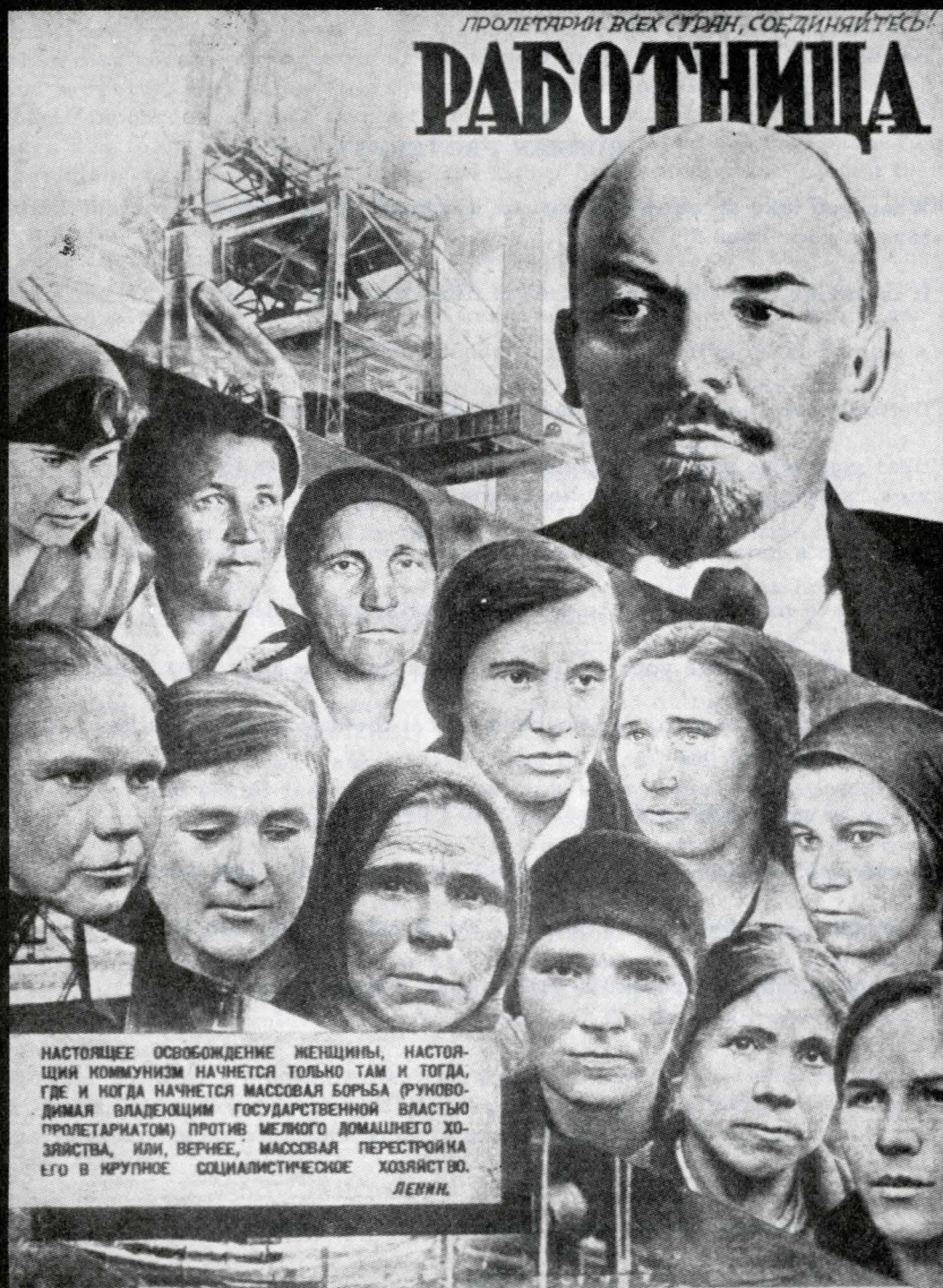


# How the Russian Revolution Failed Women



Dale Ross Rubenstein



## HOW THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION FAILED WOMEN

### RUSSIAN PROVERBS

"When you take an eel by its tail or a woman by her word, precious little stays in your hand."

"It is easier to manage a sackful of fleas than one woman."

"A woman is an evil no household should be without."

"Better go to sea in a leaky boat than trust a woman with a secret."

"Beat your wife with the butt-end of an ax; if she falls to the floor and cries, she is fooling — give her some more."

"A woman's hair may grow long, but her common sense stays short."

"There are more twisting to a woman than a path in the forest."

"Love your wife like your soul, and shake her like your pear tree."

"A wife is very dear to her husband twice: the day he marries her and the day he buries her."

"A dog is wiser than a woman: he won't bark at his master."

"A wife isn't a jug — she won't crack if you hit her a few times."

"I thought I saw two people coming, but it was only a man and his wife."

"A chicken isn't a bird and a woman isn't a human being."

## HOW THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION FAILED WOMEN

### INTRODUCTION

In the stone age when the land was the common property of all the members of a clan, there was equality between the sexes. Women played an important part in economic life. Through the discovery of copper, tin, bronze and iron and through the invention of the plow, agriculture began to be practiced on a larger scale. Now intensive labor was called for to clear woodlands and cultivate fields and now, for the first time, man had recourse to slave labor to exploit and protect his property -- his private property. It was at this historical moment, when man became the master of slaves and property, that he became the master of slaves and property, that he became the master of women, also. Women's work -- housework -- became inconsequential in comparison with the productive labor of man. Maternal authority gave way to paternal authority and property, which had hitherto passed from the mother to her clan, was now inherited from the father by his son, which meant that legitimate paternity assumed a new significance and had to be protected by the sexual exclusiveness which each man now demanded of his woman.

This is the description of woman's loss of equality set forth by Frederick Engels in The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State. His conclusion was that woman could not regain her equality until she broke out of her traditional family role and began to participate once again in general social production:

....to emancipate woman and make her the equal of the man is and remains an impossibility so long as the woman is shut out from social productive labor and restricted to private domestic labor. The emancipation of women will only be possible when woman can take part in production on a large, social scale, and domestic work no longer claims anything but an insignificant amount of her time.<sup>1</sup>

This theme was reiterated by every revolutionary group in Russia prior to 1917 and was voiced by Lenin innumerable times in speeches and publications.

With the coming to power of the Bolsheviks a genuine effort was made to honor their pledge regarding the emancipation of the Russian woman. Women were accorded full political and legal rights and assured access to all economic and cultural spheres. The State also attempted to destroy the traditional family as an economic enterprise and to replace its petty housekeeping functions with progressive institutions of social welfare, including creches, social dining rooms and social laundries. These measures helped to free women from their ancient slavery within the household and to enable them to take their places as valuable contributors to production. At the same time, enlightened legislation concerning marriage, divorce, illegitimacy, and abortion gave Soviet women more control over their bodies than women had ever before enjoyed in any modern society.

A momentous beginning had been made. The new Soviet Government attacked the problem of woman's inequality with a thoroughness and enthusiasm which left no doubt as to the seriousness of its commitment; but despite the fact that it has never officially abandoned this commitment, it is clear that the Revolution has failed women. The Russian woman today remains unequal and unliberated.

How did this happen? Could an American socialist revolution result in the same failure for women -- and, if so, what is the point of women engaging in political struggle? This paper will address itself to these questions and try to suggest some answers.

### HOW IT FAILED.....

Popular Russian proverbs like the ones quoted above aptly express the contempt in which

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick Engels, The Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State, pp. 147-148.



many women were held by their husbands under the old regime. Not only custom, but law, kept women in a subservient position. According to the Holy Law of the Russian Empire, women were commanded to "submit... (to)... the head of the family, to live with him in love, honor and unlimited obedience, to render all pleasure and devotion as the mistress of the house."<sup>2</sup>

Upon marriage, all of a woman's property and money came under the control of her husband and she was obliged to follow him wherever he went. If, on the other hand, she left him, he had the right to have her returned by the police. An unfaithful wife could be imprisoned. A wife was not allowed to obtain passport, take a job, or attend college without her husband's consent.

Divorce in old Russia was decided by ecclesiastical court and was permitted only on very limited grounds, primarily adultery, proved by witnesses. This meant, in effect, that divorce was the privilege of the wealthy, because lawyers and "witnesses" were expensive. The law so favored men that it was almost unthinkable for a woman to institute divorce proceedings, while it was not at all uncommon for her to be judged unfaithful and deprived of her children.

Under the new laws promulgated by the Soviet Government, marriage became a matter of mutual verbal consent before a registrar. No waiting period was required, provided that the man was at least eighteen years of age and the woman sixteen. The couple could choose the surname of either of them or a combined name. In a simple ceremony, the bride and groom gripped the corners of the Soviet Flag and declared their mutual willingness to enter conjugal life.

Marriage, under the new laws which came into existence on December 19, 1917, could be dissolved almost as easily as it could be contracted. If there was mutual consent to divorce, it took place immediately. If desired by only one party, there was a minimum waiting period of two months. Custody of the children and the obligations of the parents were decided upon by the officiating judge or registrar.

The revolutionizing of the marriage law resulted in an enormous increase in the number of marriages and the new government held out the hope that they would be very different from the man-dominated traditional marriages of the past:

On the ruins of the former family, we shall soon see a new form rising which will involve altogether different relations between men and women, and which will be a union of affection and comradeship, a union of two equal members of the communist society, both of them free, both of them independent, both of them workers. No more domestic "servitude" for women. No more inequality within the family.<sup>3</sup>

These changes in the concept of marriage were particularly striking in a country where women had only relatively recently emerged from the "terem," an upstairs chamber of the house where they were kept secluded and veiled all their lives, a country where wife beating was taken so much for granted that the presentation of a whip from the father of the bride to his new son-in-law was commonly included in the marriage ceremony, a country where, particularly in the Eastern regions, polygamy and child marriage were still widely practiced at the time of the Revolution.

But attitudes did change and marriage relationships, even in remote peasant villages, were altered:

Bit by bit Father stopped beating Mother, but sometimes he threatened her that he would beat her, even though he would be put in prison for it. He would shout, "If they put me in prison I will rest there from you!" But even at such shouting she would say, "We are equal."<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> "Holy Law of the Russian Empire," article 108, ch. 1, vol. 10, quoted in Jessica Smith, Women in Soviet Russia, pp. 4-5.

<sup>3</sup> Alexandra Kollantai, quoted in Rudolph Schlesinger, The Family in the U.S.S.R., pp. 56-58.

<sup>4</sup> Pearl S. Buck with Masha Scott, Talk About Russia, p. 26, quoted in David and Vera Mace, The Soviet Family, p. 93.



For a number of years the Soviet concept of marriage remained that of a contract between individuals based on the complete liberty of the husband and wife, but in the thirties this concept was challenged and the marriage and family laws established by the Revolution were replaced by legislation bearing a striking resemblance to that of the bourgeois countries.

The legal changes were accompanied by a vigorous campaign in the press bent on obliterating the old Bolshevik ideals of woman in her role as wife in a socialist society. Unlike the literature of the twenties, which demanded the participation of women in life outside the home, the literature of the thirties condoned and even glorified the full-time housewife who dedicated herself to the care of her husband and home. The following characteristic excerpt is taken from an article entitled "Socialist Society and the Family" which was published in 1936 in the philosophical organ of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union:

.... The housewives of yesterday, in the old sense of the word, who were often politically backward... have stepped out of the limits of the narrow family hearth and become participants in the cultural construction of our country.

As a result of this, the wives of the leaders of heavy industry say: "The large world of interests in which our husbands live has become ours, too."

It is true that so far we are witnessing only the beginning of this movement of the housewives. It should embrace thousands and millions of the wives of Stakhanovites, shock-workers and the rank and file of workers.

But even at this stage it would be wrong to think that only a few wives of the leaders of heavy industry are being drawn into the social life of our country....

But does this mean that the housewives, while taking an increasing part in the life of our country, should forget their children, neglect them and pass them completely into the hands of the State? Far from it! In their conference the wives of the leaders of heavy industry said: "The Family! We never forget it or our children and husbands. We realize how greatly we are responsible for the education of the children. They must grow up into proud Soviet patriots, physically and spiritually hardened, knowing no fear -- true Stalin children...."<sup>5</sup>

At the same time, divorce was made more difficult and expensive. The old belief in the eventual withering away of the traditional family was replaced by an effort to bolster it and keep it intact.

By 1943, the concept of the inequality of the sexes in marriage had become accepted to such a degree that co-education was abolished in the schools and replaced with separate education designed to prepare boys and girls for their different roles in marriage. Girls were taught needlework, domestic science, personal hygiene, and the care of children, while the boys were given courses in handicrafts, electronics, and mechanics. The change was defended as necessary for strengthening the family:

In the phase that is past, the Soviet State has fully and speedily eliminated from people's minds all idea of the social inequality of the sexes, and all expression of this idea from daily life. We now face a new and no less im-

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<sup>5</sup> V. Svetlov, "Socialist Society and the Family," Pod Znamenem Marxisma, quoted in Schlesinger, pp. 327-328.



portant task. It is, above all, to strengthen our primary social unit, the socialist family, on the basis of full development of the characteristics of masculinity and femininity in the father and mother, as heads of the family with equal rights.

Education in our schools was formerly co-educational in order to overcome as quickly as possible the social inequality of the sexes, rooted in the centuries. But what we must have now is a system by which the school develops boys who will be good fathers and manly fighters for the socialist homeland, and girls who will be intelligent mothers competent to rear the new generation.<sup>6</sup>

Trotsky had reason to lament the disintegration of so many Soviet families where the husband, in his role as party member, trade unionist, military commander or administrator grew and developed, while the wife, crushed by the weight of petty drudgery within the family, remained on the same old level.<sup>7</sup>

A new law, which went into effect on October 1, 1968, simplifies divorce procedures somewhat in those cases where both partners agree to the divorce and where there are no minor children. In all other cases, however, divorce remains an involved and expensive court procedure.

Many students of Russian culture have pointed out the centrality of its mother image and its tendency to visualize women in the role of strong mother figures who bear up under suffering in order to hold the family together. Russia itself came to be thought of less as a geographical or political area than as a common mother. G. Fedotov writes: "Earth is the Russian 'Eternal Womanhood,' not the celestial image of it; mother, not virgin; fertile, not pure...."<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps this imagery contributed to the abundance of measures undertaken by the Soviet Government specifically for the alleviation of the burdens of motherhood. The majority of legislation dealing with women was, in fact, directed toward this end. What was probably of even more importance for the development of this policy was the historical commitment of Marxists to the emancipation and equality of women. As far back as 1866 at the first Congress of the First International in Geneva, Marx had insisted on equality for women and State protection of motherhood. He pointed out at that time that unless women were freed from their old forms of bondage, the struggle of the working class against capitalism would be unsuccessful.

Unlike the Kerensky Government, which understood the emancipation of women primarily in terms of suffrage, the Soviets' first bills immediately after coming to power dealt with the abolition of illegitimacy, the establishment of mother and child welfare centers, the creation of day nurseries, and the liberalization of abortion laws.

The few welfare institutions that had existed under the Tsar were taken over and attached to the People's Commissariat of Social Welfare under the direction of Alexandra Kollontai. Between 1918 and 1921 hundreds of institutions for maternal and infant welfare were established in Soviet Russia:<sup>9</sup>

	1918	1919	1920
Factory and district day nurseries	78	126	565
Mothers' and infants' homes	10	17	99
Infants' asylums	92	121	370
Childrens' consultations	39	58	133

At the instigation of Kollontai, the Institute for the Protection of Motherhood and Children was founded under the direction of Vera Lebedyeva, a physician and professor of medicine. "The task which we have now set ourselves," she told the first All-Russian Conference

<sup>7</sup> Leon Trotsky, The Revolution Betrayed, p. 156.

<sup>8</sup> G. Fedotov, The Russian Religious Mind, vol. 13, quoted in James Billington, The Icon and the Axe, p. 20.

<sup>9</sup> Jessica Smith, Woman in Soviet Russia, p. 177.



of Working Women in November, 1919, "is principally to train the mother as a citizen and to set the working mother free from the care of her child."<sup>10</sup>

The new regime, in urgent need of the labor of women, found it necessary to quickly free mothers from the burden of their household duties by providing as many corresponding communal services as possible. These services were eagerly accepted by most families. In Petrograd during 1919-1920, for example, almost ninety per cent of the population was fed communally.<sup>11</sup>

With illegitimacy abolished by law and with part of the financial responsibility for the child delegated to the biological father — or, in cases where paternity was in doubt, distributed among several possible fathers<sup>12</sup> — many women who might have sought abortions under the old regime, opted to have their babies. Unwed mothers no longer suffered the loss of prestige that they had in the past, and in fact received special State benefits to help them raise their children.

Nevertheless, in a country where birth control was practically unheard of, many women made the right to abortion their first demand after the Revolution and on November 18, 1920, it was legalized. While the government viewed the operation as a social evil, it realized that combatting it by punishing women had only driven the practice underground and made the women victims of mercenary and often ignorant quacks. It was determined to put an end to this persecution of women and to carry on the struggle against abortion by eliminating the social causes which made it necessary. "Improvements of general living conditions, and particularly the protection of mother and child and the public education of children," wrote Krupskaya, "will remove this main cause which at the present time forces women to violate their natural instincts, renouncing motherhood, that greatest of joys."<sup>13</sup>

Official attitudes toward women as mothers, like those toward women as wives, began to change fundamentally in the thirties. On May 26, 1936, the draft of a law amending many important aspects of Soviet family legislation was published with an appeal for public (but not parliamentary) discussion of its contents. Included in the new law was the prohibition of abortion and it was this issue that most Soviet citizens considered to be of central importance. The following exchange which appeared in "Izvestia" was typical of the widespread debates preceding the inevitable enactment of the new law:

#### LETTER FROM A STUDENT ("I OBJECT")

I have read in the press the draft law on the prohibition of abortion, aid to expectant mothers, etc., and cannot remain silent on this matter.

There are thousands of women in the same position as myself. I am a student reading the first course of the Second Moscow Medical Institute. My husband is also a student reading the same course at our Institute. Our scholarships amount jointly to 205 rubles. Neither he nor I have a room of our own. Next year we intend to apply for admission to a hostel, but I do not know whether our application will be granted. I love children and shall probably have some in four or five years' time. But can I have a child now? Having a child now would mean leaving the Institute, lagging behind my husband, forgetting everything I have learnt and probably leaving Moscow because there is nowhere to live....

In five years' time when I am a doctor and have a job and a room I shall have children. But at present I do not want and cannot undertake such a responsibility.

K. B.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Alexandra Kollantai, Women's Labor in Economic Development, quoted in Schlesinger, p. 49.

<sup>12</sup> Subsequent experience showed that it was destructive to the child to indicate whole groups of men as their fathers and in 1926 the law was changed so that the court had to recognize only one man as the father.

<sup>13</sup> Nadezhda Krupskaya, "War and Childbirth," Communistka, no. 1-2.

<sup>14</sup> Schlesinger, pp. 255-256.



## ANSWER TO STUDENT

Your paper recently published a letter from a student, K.B., in which she raised objections to the prohibition of abortions. I think the author of the letter "I Object" has not grasped the full significance of the projected law.... The main mistake K.B. makes is, in my view, that she approaches the problem of childbearing as though it were a private matter. This would explain why she writes: "I shall have them (children) in four or five years' time." She hopes by that time to have completed her studies, obtained a medical diploma and found both a job and a room. But one must be logical! If during these years K.B. intends to have recourse to abortions, who can vouch that by the time when she desires to have children she will still be able to do so? And for a normal woman to be deprived of having children is as great a misfortune as the loss of a dear one.

I used to study in the factory and received a very small allowance while bringing up my small son whom I had to bring up on my own. (His father was dead.) It was a hard time. I had to go and unload trains or look for similar work that would bring in some money... that was 1923. Now my son is a good, tough Komsomol and a Red Army soldier in the Far East. How great are my joy and pride that I did not shun the difficulties and that I managed to bring up such a son.....

G.F.<sup>15</sup>

The new legislation was defended by the government in terms very similar to those of G.F. We enjoy a free and happy life, it was asserted. Why, then, should women deprive themselves of the joys of motherhood? Furthermore, it was argued, abortions are harmful to the woman's health. Old women were produced who, when interviewed, related their great happiness at having had numerous children. What was not often mentioned publicly was that illegal abortions increased once again, resulting in danger, suffering and exorbitant fees. Those who felt the brunt of this legislation most keenly were, of course, the poorest women.

From 1936 on, the State focused an increasingly benevolent attention on mothers and housewives. Unlike their predecessors, who had declared their intention to set working women free from housekeeping and child care, Soviet spokesmen in the late thirties proclaimed motherhood to be a laudable profession and one to be explicitly encouraged by the State, even when carried to a point which made it virtually incompatible with any other form of activity.

In 1944, a series of laws was passed which increased State aid to pregnant women, mothers with more than two children, and unmarried mothers, levied a tax on single citizens and citizens with small families, made divorce even more difficult, and deprived de facto marriage of legal recognition. It was also at this time that the title "Heroine Mother" was established and that the order "Motherhood Glory" and the "Motherhood Medal" were instituted. A law was also passed on July 8, 1944, making persons liable to prosecution for "insulting and debasing the dignity of woman and mother."

As Simone de Beauvoir points out, there is no way of directly compelling women to bear children, but the Soviet Government, beginning in the thirties, did everything in its power to put them in a position where there was virtually no alternative to maternity. The law and social custom encouraged marriage, abortion was prohibited and divorce was discouraged. Under these circumstances the old paternalistic concept of marriage and the family revived.<sup>16</sup>

More recently, Soviet wives have been advised to pay more attention to their clothes, use make-up, walk with a "feminine gait", and flirt with their husbands in order to retain

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid, pp. 256-258.

<sup>16</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, The Second Sex, p. 53.



their interest and stimulate their desire.

It is, perhaps, as workers that Russian women have been most successful in achieving equality with men. Women currently constitute about one half of the labor force in the Soviet Union and make up approximately twenty-nine per cent of the students majoring in engineering, twenty-five per cent in agriculture, fifty-two per cent in medicine, sixty-four per cent in the cultural-educational fields, seventy-five to eighty per cent in biology, more than sixty-five per cent in chemistry, forty to fifty per cent in mathematics, and twenty-five to forty per cent in physics, geology, and agricultural science. Approximately twenty per cent of doctoral degrees in the Soviet Union are held by women.<sup>17</sup>

Moreover, it must be said that the credit for this belongs largely to the government and the Party which were responsible for encouraging and educating women as well as for passing legislation providing for equal job opportunities with equal pay, paid maternity leaves, and child care for working mothers.

These achievements notwithstanding, however, the history of the Soviet Union in relation to the working woman, just as to the wife and mother, must be regarded as a history of unfulfilled promises and forgotten hopes — a history of failure.

The new government faced its initial challenge to women workers at the end of the war, when many women were losing their jobs because of general unemployment and the return of the soldiers. In 1917, for example, the printing and paper industries decided to dismiss all women. In Petrograd six hundred married women were forced to create jobs for the returning men.

The government successfully met the challenge at that time. In April, 1918, the Petrograd Council of Trade Unions addressed the following appeal to all workers and factory committees:

The question of how to combat unemployment has come sharply before the unions. In many factories and shops the question is being solved very simply... fire the women and put men in their places. With the transfer of power to the Soviets, the working class is given a chance to reorganize our national economy on a new basis. Does such action correspond with this new basis?... The only effective measure against unemployment is the restoration of the productive powers of the country, reorganization on a socialist basis. During the time of crisis, with the cutting down of workers in factories and shops, we must approach the question of dismissal with the greatest care. We must decide each case individually. There can be no question of whether the worker is a man or a woman, but simply of the degree of need.... Only such an attitude will make it possible for us to retain women in our organizations and prevent a split in the army of workers....<sup>18</sup>

This attitude was upheld by the other unions and the dismissal of women from industry was, in fact, checked,<sup>19</sup> although their standards of pay often remained lower than the men's.

The legislation passed in 1920 reiterated that women were to receive equal pay for equal work, but it also included output quotas and stated explicitly that pay depended on work performed. Since women tended to be less productive and less skilled than men, earnings were rarely equal.<sup>20</sup>

The Eighth Congress of Soviets, which met in 1920 at the end of the Civil War, strongly urged that women be recruited into all economic organizations, factory administrations, and trade unions, noting the need for the efficient use of female labor. They also charged the local Soviets with providing such facilities as laundries, creches, and dining rooms, so that

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<sup>17</sup> Norton T. Dodge, Women in the Soviet Economy.

<sup>18</sup> Smith, pp. 15-17.

<sup>19</sup> Idem.

<sup>20</sup> Dodge, pp. 58-60.



women would be sufficiently relieved of household duties to enter the labor force.<sup>21</sup>

Between 1926 and 1931 working women advanced in every field. The government assisted this advance by making systematic attempts to provide them with opportunities for acquiring higher qualifications. Even at this early stage, however, the enduring inequality of the working woman's position was becoming apparent. Except in the textile and graphics industries, some branches of teaching, and the medical profession, women's numbers never came close to those of men with similar qualifications. Women also came up against the practical difficulties involved in fulfilling the functions of motherhood while remaining employed.<sup>22</sup>

In the thirties, as we have seen, this function of motherhood was increasingly emphasized as a social duty. The government never discouraged women from working, but urged them to fulfill traditional family roles, as well. The following speech by Josef Stalin, which was delivered at a reception given by the leaders of the Party and government to women collective farm shock workers in sugar beet growing in 1935 rather crudely suggests that women should work hard in order to amass enough wealth to attract a man:

... Before the work-day all are equal -- men and women. He who has most work-days to his credit earns the most. Here neither father nor husband can reproach a woman with the fact that he is feeding her. Now if a woman works and has work-days to her credit she is her own master. I remember conversing with several women comrades at the Second Collective Farm Congress. One of them, from the Northern Territory, said:

"Two years ago no suitor would even set foot in our house. I had no dowry! Now I have five hundred work-days to my credit. And what do you think? Suitors give me no peace; they want to marry, they say. But I will take my time; I will pick out my own young man."

The collective farm has liberated woman and made her independent by means of the work-days.... the collective farm system makes the working woman the equal of every working man.<sup>23</sup>

The prospects for women entering and succeeding in professional careers in the Soviet Union today are far more favorable than in the United States or other Western countries, but their prospects for advancement have not been equally favorable. The proportion of Soviet women in administrative and professional occupations tends to decrease with each increase in rank. One example of the tendency of women to remain in the middle and lower echelons is the small number of women among Party professionals.

Recent Soviet practice has also departed from the policy of equal opportunity between the sexes with regard to education. Since it is believed that the productivity of women is likely to be somewhat lower on the average than that of men, Soviet admissions standards have been set higher for women. Practical considerations of efficiency have been given priority over the principle of equality.

#### .....AND WHY

The failure of the Russian Revolution for women has the most serious implications for the women's liberation movement today. That a socialist revolution is an absolute prerequisite for the liberation of women -- as of men -- seems obvious, but the Russian experience also makes it clear that such a revolution is no guarantee of liberation. Although a structural change in productive power would surely give rise to a drastic transformation in social relations, there is no reason to expect that this transformation would be either immediate or automatic. American revolutionaries, like Russian ones, will be faced with an enormous task of eradicating centuries of bigotry and ignorance -- a task which even under the best condi-

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<sup>21</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>22</sup> Schlesinger, p. 21.

<sup>23</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, pp. 37-38.



tions may require several generations to accomplish. Russia, after fifty years, has still not accomplished this task and has, as we have seen, regressed in many ways from its initial position. It is therefore critical that we understand and appreciate the history of this failure, for without this understanding and appreciation we will be more likely to repeat the same old mistakes.

Far from despairing of ever liberating American women, though, we must develop ideologies and tactics which will insure the success of the American Revolution and thereby set the scene for the complete liberation of women.

We must, at the outset, develop and propagate a strong consciousness of women's oppression similar to the one developed by Blacks. This is not to argue for a women's movement involved in a struggle separate from the common struggle of all workers, but for an awareness of our own position and the special forms of oppression to which we are subject. We must, for example, recognize the crucial role played by the traditional family in the continuing oppression of women and the need for encouraging the natural development of alternative institutions.

With this well developed consciousness, it will be difficult for any group to wipe out the gains of an American Revolution for women in a manner similar to what happened in Russia.

It is encouraging to realize, in this regard, that a careful examination of events in Russia indicates that the failure of the Revolution for women has rested ultimately on the peculiar conditions which arose out of the attempt to establish socialism in one isolate, impoverished and underpopulated country in 1917 — conditions which would not exist in the wake of an American revolution today.

In the United States, our wealth would tend to inhibit the development of a bureaucratic caste. In a rational society where there are enough consumer goods for everyone, the emergence of such a group is far less likely, because much of the basis for its privilege will have been removed.

Moreover, it is highly unlikely that an American revolution would be an isolated event. With the United States occupying the key position in the capitalist world, it is probable that a revolution here would be but one expression of a worldwide upheaval of capitalism.

Such was not the case with revolutionary Russia, however, where the Communist Party failed to provide the leadership which would have enabled the Soviet Union to overcome its material difficulties while still adhering to a revolutionary course. Instead, the State came under the control of a privileged bureaucracy, rather than the control of the working class.

Internationally, the prestigious Communist Party actually used its power and influence to cause the failure of other revolutions. At home, disastrous mistakes were made. The masses were gradually deprived of actual participation in the leadership of the country. In 1926, Krupskaya remarked: "If Ilyich were alive, he would probably already be in prison."<sup>24</sup>

It is easy to blame Stalin for the degeneration of the Party and the bureaucratization of the State, but one must take into account the historical forces at work which encouraged the development of a counter-revolutionary tendency. As Trotsky points out, Stalin was carefully checked out and selected by the bureaucracy even before he had formulated any plans for the future. He was selected not only because of his prestige as an old Bolshevik and his strength of character, but also because of his close bonds with the already existing political machine and his dependence on it as the sole source of his influence.<sup>25</sup> In other words, the bureaucracy was called into being by the historical processes then in operation, not by the despotism of one man.

The entrenchment of a privileged bureaucratic group led naturally to all kinds of corruption, much of which directly affected the liberation of women. One example, noted by Trotsky, was the need of the bureaucracy, if it was to retain its power, for a stable hierarchy of relations and for the disciplining of youth through the support of authority and power, which served as the most compelling motive for the restoration and support of the traditional family.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Trotsky, p. 94.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, p. 93.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 153-154.



But it is impossible to understand the failure of the Revolution for women without understanding the general betrayal of the Revolution itself. The counter-revolutionary tendency was able to develop with the aid of two major constellations of events. No single factor can be said to be the cause of the failure, but working together, affecting each other over a period of time, these factors were crucial to its degeneration.

The first set of events led to the state of extreme crisis which existed during the Civil War immediately after the revolution. Many outstanding Communist cadre were killed during the Civil War. The loss of these and many rank and file Bolshevik workers weakened the Party considerably. The Red Army had to defend the Revolution against troops from more than ten different capitalist countries which invaded the Soviet Union. There was intense competition for the painfully scarce consumer goods. Special measures were taken to alleviate the crisis situation which curbed democracy both inside the Party and out. For instance certain opposition parties were banned after they carried out sabotage including attempts on Lenin's life. These measures were viewed as temporary only. The pressures of the day did not allow for the practice of actual Soviet democracy. But this lack of democracy did not become a principle until after 1923, the year of Lenin's illness and the failure of the German revolution.

The second constellation of events led to the isolation of the revolution and the principle of "socialism in one country." The new Soviet state desperately needed material aid to alleviate the crisis. It simply did not have the economic base to carry itself through this crisis. A revolution in an advanced capitalist state would have provided that aid. In 1923 an opportunity for making the socialist revolution in Germany was missed largely because of the failure of the German Communist party to lead the seizure of power. The leadership of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union considered the success of the German revolution essential to prevent complete isolation of the Soviet Union in that period.

A section of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union began to develop which adapted to this isolation by the espousal of a certain kind of nationalism, later summed up in the phrase "socialism in one country." This section argued that since the revolution had failed in Germany and no other capitalist country seemed to be on the brink of a revolution, the primary task for the Soviet Union was simply to do whatever necessary to defend and maintain itself. Thus it was necessary for the Communist parties in the capitalist countries which took leadership from the CPSU to refrain from stirring up trouble which would turn their government against the Soviet Union. The interests of the Soviet state, when divorced from those of the rest of the international working class, seemed to lie with remaining on good terms with the capitalist world, both to avoid being militarily attacked and to gain whatever material good could be gained. By taking this road the party lost the only chance it had of helping a true socialist society to be established.

As the bureaucracy solidified various processes took place within the party. Revolutionary slogans were raised but in a distorted way and these were applied in the interests of maintaining the bureaucracy rather than building socialism. The bureaucracy exercised power from above as opposed to the soviet system, which organized the power of the working masses. Thus the bureaucracy was separated from and out of touch with the working class and the peasantry. Education and raising of consciousness were not in and of themselves in the interest of the bureaucracy. Since the people did not actually take part in decision making it became unnecessary and even dangerous for consciousness to be raised. For this reason such backward ideas as male chauvinism, widely held by the Russian masses, were attacked only when it happened to serve the interests of the bureaucracy. When there was a need for women in the work force then propaganda stressed the independence of women as workers, but when a population growth was needed women were shunted back to the home with cliches about the beauties of motherhood and the socialist principles of equality were forgotten.

The overwhelming majority of the bureaucracy in the thirties was composed of individuals who had either fought against the October Revolution or had remained neutral and their wives were often former members of the aristocracy.<sup>27</sup> The inevitable result was a group of privileged Russian "ladies" with values and perspectives that were quite removed from those

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid, pp. 93-103.



of the common working woman:

The social differentiation obliges us to distinguish the various conditions of Soviet women. The upper strata of society, especially numerous in the centres, have produced the type of elegant and indolent lady who follows the fashions, the theatre, the concerts, who is desolated when she is unable to get the latest dance records from abroad, who tans herself every year on the beaches of the Crimea or the Caucasus....

Below this feminine aristocracy is the average housewife of modest means, as needy as she is everywhere else. Still lower — and she constitutes the majority — is the woman of the people, a worker or peasant, who does the washing, goes for water to the fountain or to the river (in winter, it is to a hole punctured in the ice), takes care of the animals, raises the children, receives the drunken man at the end of the week, stands in line in front of the stores, buys a few metres of satinette in order to resell them and, thanks to this brilliant stroke of business, is able to provide shoes for the youngest. The foreign litterateurs do not come to question here while travelling. Disfigured and aged at thirty-five, she sometimes takes to drink. Then you hear her — on the revolutionary holidays — singing in a discordant voice the old popular plaints.<sup>28</sup>

Engels had simply predicted that a socialist economy would lead to the withering away of the traditional family, but this has obviously not happened in Stalinist Russia. Instead, the Soviet Government has increasingly supported it. A prime factor underlying this support has been the chronic Russian problem of underpopulation. The immediate needs of production in the Soviet Union have been in constant competition with those of reproduction and the excessive demands made on motherhood — the necessity of encouraging women to bear ten or more children, for example — made the preservation of actual equality in employment impossible. What was possible was a consciousness of these extreme measures as temporary expedients, rather than principles; but such an understanding ran counter to the interests of the bureaucracy.

When, in 1936, the Soviet Union officially abandoned the concept that the primary function of woman, as of man, is social production and asserted instead that it is motherhood, the basis of sexual equality was shattered.<sup>29</sup> This is not necessarily to argue that there was any practical alternative under the circumstances, although, again, there was certainly an alternative in terms of consciousness, but only to suggest that sexual equality is simply not compatible with the demand for a birth-rate higher than working women can reasonably achieve and higher than social institutions and services can deal with:

One sees very well, alas! the reasons for this policy of natality, based upon the calculations of military experts who will tell you without blinking an eyelid how many millions of lives will have to be sacrificed in two years of war.<sup>30</sup>

The laws which made divorce increasingly difficult and which made abortion illegal, as well as the view of the family as the elementary cell of society all arose in response to this problem of underpopulation, and the problem still remains unsolved. On January 22, 1969, a letter appeared in the "Literaturnaya Gazeta," the newspaper of the Writers Union of the

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<sup>28</sup> Victor Serge, *Russia Twenty Years After*, pp. 25-26.

<sup>29</sup> Schlesinger, p. 396.

<sup>30</sup> Serge, p. 24.



Soviet Union supporting the proposal of V. Perevedintsev, a noted Soviet economist. The following excerpts taken from this article reveal the degree to which Soviet thinking on the role of woman in society has degenerated since the Revolution:

#### WHAT IS MOST ADVANTAGEOUS TO SOCIETY

We are concerned about the low birth rate of the last few years, and demographers believe that we must take immediate steps to remedy the situation....

As women more and more actively participate in the productive sphere (in the USSR women make up 50% of the work force) conditions encouraging large families become less favorable. This is the most fundamental reason for the drop in the birth rate.

For some strange reason, bringing up children is not considered socially useful work....

Thus we have a paradox: if a mother works, she has a double burden; if she stays at home with her children, she is not doing socially useful work and is not paid for it. Given this situation, it is much simpler for a woman to have no children, or perhaps only one.

This problem could be resolved -- in the interests of the family and the state -- if parents were reimbursed for their expenses in raising young children.

Some might object at this point that if this were to be implemented, labor resources would be cut, since several million women would leave the labor market. But we must remember that the privileges given to these mothers now will encourage population growth and in time, the general growth of labor resources in this country.

Until then, we have reserves to tide us over....

Why is the state holding back? What would happen if part of the population abandoned work temporarily?....

At present, when a mother works, the state spends a sum equal to the cost of one worker plus the cost of space in child care centers. The mother receives a salary both while she is working and while she is on maternity leave. We must add to this the general expenditures incurred by child care centers....

A concrete economic approach to the problem shows that a working mother "costs" society more than a non-working mother receiving a grant for child-rearing.<sup>31</sup>

Instead of openly admitting: "We have proven still too poor and ignorant for the creation of socialist relations among men, our children and grandchildren will realize this aim," the leaders made a virtue of necessity and proclaimed the traditional family to be the sacred nucleus of triumphant socialism.<sup>32</sup>

The extremely low wages earned by the vast majority of women forced many of them, like their sisters in capitalist countries, to seek out husbands who were well paid. Money, connections, and rank acquired more and more significance in the choice of a marriage partner. The mere struggle for a room united (and divorced) innumerable couples every year.

The failure to break down the traditional family stemmed not so much from the fact that

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<sup>31</sup> K. Vermishev, "What is Most Advantageous to Society," Literaturnaya Gazeta, Jan. 22, '69.

<sup>32</sup> Trotsky, p. 151-152.



the people were unwilling, as from the fact that the society was simply too poor. Even the best plans and intentions of the Communist Party might have been unrealizable when they did not correspond to the actual resources of the state, and in its now deformed condition, these plans were not even proposed.

Alexandra Kollontai had depicted the ideal Soviet woman as living alone, doing social and political work, and enjoying sexual love. Her meals were eaten in a communal dining room, her children were happy in a State nursery, and her home was cleaned, her laundry done, and her clothes mended by State-supported workers; but the practical realization of these goals in a period of economic underdevelopment was utterly impossible. The society was just incapable of taking these family services upon itself, so they devolved once again upon the women.

The Communist Manifesto had stated clearly that bourgeois family life would be abolished simultaneously with capitalism. Engels had guaranteed that the domination of women in marriage would vanish once women began to participate in social production. Lenin had recognized that legal measures could not assure the genuine liberation of women as long as they continued to be slaves to domestic labor; but, as Trotsky observed, it is impossible to "abolish" the family — it must be replaced — and it is impossible to replace it in the basis of "generalized want."<sup>33</sup>

It appears that Marx was correct when he predicted that following a revolution occurring in a country with a low technological basis "only want will be generalized, and with want the struggle for necessities begins again and all the old crap must revive."<sup>34</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, p. 145.

<sup>34</sup> Quoted in ibid, p. 295.

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