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# Working-Class and Peasant Women in the Russian Revolution, 1917–1923

Barbara Evans Clements

Scholars studying the history of women in revolutions, especially in twentieth-century Marxist revolutions, have usually begun by examining the ideology of the revolutionary leaders and the programs they established to accomplish women's emancipation.<sup>1</sup> This is a logical and easily justifiable approach. But crucial also is an analysis of the attitudes and behavior of women themselves. The female masses play an often overlooked part in shaping a revolution's course and results; and, equally important, women's responses to revolution reveal much about their beliefs, loyalties, and fears and about their position and roles in the social system.

The study of the female masses in the Russian Revolution is only beginning. Published materials and archives that hold the record of women's experience in the years 1917–21 have yet to be explored in depth. This article therefore offers a preliminary examination of some of these documents, suggesting interpretations that may prove useful as guides to deeper analysis.

The period of the Russian Revolution was for women, as for men, a time of paradox, in which the lavish promises of the new government were accompanied by enormous deprivation and frightening social disintegration. However, the chaos of revolution held a particular danger

1. See, e.g., Richard Stites, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Russia* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1978), pp. 317–421; Gail Warshofsky Lapidus, *Women in Soviet Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978); Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal, "The Role and Status of Women in the Soviet Union: 1917 to the Present," *Women Cross-culturally, Change and Challenge* (The Hague: Mouton, 1975), pp. 429–55; Sheila Rowbotham, *Women, Resistance and Revolution* (New York: Vintage, 1974); Elisabeth Croll, *Feminism and Socialism in China* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978); *Studies in Comparative Communism* 14, nos. 2 and 3 (Summer/Autumn 1981): 106–218.

for working-class and peasant women, because it threatened to strip away all their traditional defenses, leaving them—often illiterate and burdened with children—to cope with a world at war. Whether these women chose to preserve traditional institutions as a defense against the chaos or to accept the Bolshevik vision of emancipated womanhood was of consequence to the final outcome of the revolution itself. Only a small minority of women, motivated by conviction or by the lack of defenses in traditional society, followed the Bolsheviks. Most women preferred to cling to the time-honored patriarchal forms of the family and village. Their ostensibly self-defeating response to revolution was seen by the Bolsheviks as proof of their backwardness. In fact, these Russian women were behaving in their own interests, but their motives can be appreciated only by examining the revolution as they themselves experienced it.<sup>2</sup>

The revolution began in February 1917 with demonstrations in St. Petersburg that led to the abdication of Nicholas II. After the tsar's fall, a thoroughgoing assault on the old regime spread outward from the cities to the countryside. Attacks on the ruling class took a variety of forms, from the symbolic destruction of statues of the tsars, to more substantive acts of property confiscation. The peasants, who constituted 85 percent of the population, began the revolution in rural areas by seizing the aristocrats' land, land which they believed God had created for the people's use but which, according to the same mythology, the idle nobles had usurped. For centuries, rumors had circulated among the peasants that the tsar was planning to correct this ancient injustice by giving all the land to the people. But these rumors had always proved false. Suddenly in 1917 the tsar was gone, and the peasants began to rectify the situation themselves. There are indications that some peasant women joined men in looting houses, butchering livestock, and drinking the liquor that had been locked up since Nicholas declared prohibition in 1914. Women did not play a role in the peasant committees that led the land confiscation, however, for those committees were composed of the leaders of the village communes. The commune, or assembly of village men, had for centuries periodically redivided the land into strips, which they then assigned to individual households for cultivation. Thus in 1917 the peasants naturally used this assembly to distribute the nobles' land and to govern the villages.<sup>3</sup> Having seized the landlords' property, most peas-

2. This article concentrates on Great Russian women, those who lived in the central provinces of the Russian Empire and who belonged to the nation's dominant ethnic group. The other nationalities of the empire, whose experiences differed in many respects from those of the Great Russians, deserve detailed study far beyond the scope of an article. For the only such study in English to date see Gregory J. Massell, *The Surrogate Proletariat* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1974).

3. Graeme J. Gill, *Peasants and Government in the Russian Revolution* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1979), pp. 30, 36, 151; Teodor Shanin, *The Awkward Class: Political Sociology of Peasantry in a Developing Society, Russia 1910–1925* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), pp. 160–61.

ants were then satisfied to see the revolution go no further. They had little interest in changing the customs and organization of village life.

The village, with its communal, patriarchal values, was the only world the majority of peasants knew. Indeed the Russian word for village—*mir*—also means “world.” And it had always been a harsh world. Until 1861 the peasants were serfs bound in lifetime service to the nobility, or to the government if they lived on land belonging to the crown. After emancipation they continued to labor under crushing burdens, for they were required to pay for the land they had received when they were freed. Furthermore, they were unproductive farmers, ignorant of modern agricultural methods and lacking the means to buy the livestock and tools necessary to improve their output. To cope with poverty and an oppressive ruling class, the peasants had developed strong communal values. Submissiveness to the group supported the collective labor system considered essential to village survival and produced the solidarity needed to deal with the landlord and the tax collector. Faced with constant insecurity and hardship, the peasants had built a society which, often defensively, clung to its collective identity and to all its other traditions.

Central to these traditions was the division of power between the sexes. The peasant woman worked with the men, doing all but the heaviest chores, such as plowing the fields. She also tended the household vegetable garden, made milk into butter and cheese, cooked, cleaned, made and washed the clothes, manufactured small articles for sale in town, bore and reared children. Her endless labor, essential to family survival, was valued by the peasants, but the labor of men was valued more. A woman was taught from childhood to submit to the power of men, to accept their right to command obedience as heads of the family and leaders of the village commune. It was God's will that she do so, she was told, just as it was God's will that she endure the privations of her life. If she accepted her lot, if she was hardworking and married to a hardworking man, a peasant woman had the most she could expect from her society: food, family, and a respectable place in the village.

The revolution removed the landlords who oppressed her people, and for that the peasant woman was grateful. She soon found, however, that the revolution would not leave her family in peace to farm its newly enlarged lands. In 1917 a vast movement of people was underway: soldiers coming home from the front, factory workers circulating between the cities and villages where they had relatives, revolutionaries fanning out to rouse the peasants. All these drifters brought with them drunkenness, random violence, continuing attacks on the aristocracy, speeches about revolution, even occasional looting of churches. This new-found freedom of expression and movement could be exciting, but for peasant women it was probably also alarming. There was further cause for alarm in the gradual disintegration of the Russian economy, already weakened by years of war. Fewer and fewer manufactured goods were available,

and inflation was destroying the value of the ruble. With so little to buy in town, the peasants stopped taking their crops to market, falling back instead on subsistence agriculture and black-market dealing. By the fall of 1917, therefore, village stability was threatened by the weakening of authority and order throughout society and by economic collapse.

In the middle of this crisis, in October 1917, the Bolsheviki seized power in Petrograd and Moscow. The relationship between the new rulers and the peasants was difficult from the first, in part because neither group trusted the other. The Bolsheviki considered the peasants to be backward and conservative, the peasants saw the Bolsheviki as city folk, outsiders. Often peasants responded to the Soviet officials who first ventured into the countryside with much the same contempt they had shown tsarist or Provisional Government officials. The peasants understood, to some degree, that the Bolsheviki differed from the former rulers in that they were revolutionaries who approved of the destruction of the nobility and who called for a government that would help the people. But the peasants were not sure what the latter proposal would mean in practice, and their suspicions were heightened in the summer of 1918 when civil war erupted, and the Bolshevik government began requisitioning grain and drafting peasant men into the Red Army.<sup>4</sup>

To this scene of social disintegration and peasant distrust came word of the Bolshevik goal to grant women full equality; newspapers and pamphlets, pro-Bolshevik speakers, Red Army soldiers, and city dwellers returning to their native villages began to announce the party's commitment to and plans for female emancipation. Shortly after seizing power, the Bolsheviki had instituted civil marriage and no-fault divorce and had declared the full legal and civil equality of women. They were also promising to provide equal educational and job opportunities for women, as well as publicly funded maternity care and day care.

How quickly news of this Bolshevik program reached the countryside is difficult to determine, since the party's penetration of rural areas was generally haphazard, especially in the first months of its rule. One of the earliest indicators of peasant awareness that the Bolsheviki were proposing to change the position of women in society is a letter that a group of peasant men wrote to Maxim Gorky in the spring of 1918. The peasants asked the writer to tell them "by registered letter or in detail in a newspaper, how we are to understand the proclaimed equality of women with us and what she [*sic*] is going to do now. The undersigned peasants are alarmed by this law from which lawlessness may increase, and the village now is supported by the woman. The family is abolished,

4. For discussions of peasant attitudes toward government officials and other outsiders during the revolutionary years, see Marc Ferro, *October 1917: A Social History of the Russian Revolution*, trans. Norman Stone (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), pp. 112–39; Gill, pp. 154–57, 170–73; Shanin, pp. 177–99, esp. pp. 185–90.

and because of this the destruction of farming will follow.”<sup>5</sup> These peasants saw quite clearly the connection between woman’s place in the family, the structure of that family as an institution, and the economic organization of peasant society. “The village now is supported by the woman,” they argued plaintively, referring to the increased importance of women’s labor following the call-up of men into the army since 1914. These men were probably not alone in fearing that women’s emancipation would “abolish” the family and lead to the “destruction” of the village.

Peasant men no doubt also felt that any change in the position of women threatened male power and status; in their view they had much to lose and little to gain from these Bolshevik proposals. Thus the negative response of peasant men, of which this letter is but one example, was to be expected. More perplexing is the reaction of many peasant women: they too rejected the message of female equality. The best evidence of this response is their refusal to attend meetings organized by the Bolshevik Woman’s Bureau (the Zhenotdel) in 1919, 1920, and 1921. The women were told that the meetings were held to inform them about Bolshevik plans to improve their lives, and yet they would not come. For example, in 1921 only 14,709 peasant women attended Woman’s Bureau meetings in fifteen of the central provinces of Russia, where the population numbered in the millions.<sup>6</sup> Admittedly, this low attendance can be explained in part by the small number of organizers from the Zhenotdel working with peasant women. But those workers who were active in the countryside freely acknowledged that, despite their best efforts, they were able to persuade very few women to come to the meetings. Occasionally a group would show up to protest against government policies, but more commonly women stayed away and ostracized those who did go.<sup>7</sup>

The peasants also expressed their fears of the Bolshevik program for female emancipation by accusing the party of trying to undermine village morality. The Bolsheviks were city people, women said, loose-living atheists whose women bobbed their hair and smoked cigarettes.

5. Maxim Gorky, *Untimely Thoughts: Essays on Revolution, Culture and the Bolsheviks, 1917–1918*, trans. with an introduction and notes by Herman Ermolaev (New York: Eriksson, 1968), p. 56.

6. B. Kanatchikova, “Svodka raboty zhenotdelov po 15 guberniiam,” *Kommunistka*, 1921, no. 11–12, pp. 40–41.

7. For discussions of women’s response to meetings, see Putilovskaia, “Vovlechenie rabotnits i krest’ianki v obshchestvenno-politicheskuiu zhizn.” *Kommunistka*, 1920, no. 5, p. 15; Inessa Armand [E. Blonina], “Volostnye delegatskoe sobranie krest’ianok,” *Kommunistka*, 1920, no. 1–2, pp. 34–35. Women also refused to vote in elections for the soviets in the first five years of the revolution. See P. Zaitsev, “Krest’ianka v sovete,” *Kommunistka*, 1924, no. 4, pp. 14–15. Women constituted 10 percent of those voting in village soviet elections in 1924, 1–2 percent of those elected to these soviets, and .5 percent of those elected to the executive committees of the soviets. Figures for the civil war years were even lower.

Bolshevik women were said to have sexual designs on the married men of the village; some peasants charged that the party was even trying to destroy marriage itself. Stories circulated of good family men who had gone to town to work with the Bolsheviks, and who then took up with young women and refused to support their country-bound wives and children. It was also rumored, not entirely inaccurately, that the Bolsheviks wanted to take children away from their parents and put them in nurseries. In 1921 one meeting of peasant women unanimously passed a resolution vowing “to refuse to open and organize kindergartens and nurseries, since among us there are no mothers who would give up the rearing of their children.”<sup>8</sup>

This resistance suggests that many peasant women agreed with village men that talk about female emancipation threatened morality, religion, and the survival of village life. And in fact it did. The Bolshevik party was committed, at least on paper, to the root-and-branch destruction of the patriarchal structure of the peasant family, Orthodox Christianity, and private land ownership—in short, to the abolition of the traditional village. The peasant women who criticized the revolutionaries may have understood few of the specifics of the Bolshevik program, but their hostility indicates that they grasped, or at least suspected, the ultimate purpose. Thus they responded to any attempt to draw them into organizational meetings or into other nontraditional activities by raising their traditional defenses: staying at home, censoring association with outsiders, and accusing the outsiders of immorality and godlessness.

Realizing that women were frightened by talk of emancipation, the Woman’s Bureau organizers tried to reassure them that the party was not planning to destroy village life. Zhenotdel workers were instructed to avoid speeches on communist ideology, which, in the words of Konkordiia Samoilova, a leader of the Woman’s Bureau, peasant women feared “like the boogeyman.”<sup>9</sup> The organizers were told to concentrate instead on “practical” measures of immediate, tangible benefit, such as teaching the women more efficient farming techniques. They were also to promise that when the civil war was over, the party would bring schools, hospitals, and manufactured goods to the countryside. Any possibility of winning the women over by giving them social programs, however, foundered on the Bolsheviks’ inability to finance even the most modest projects during the crisis of war. The new leaders were reduced to promises, and the suspicious peasants had heard promises before. Sometimes peasant women would quote for Bolshevik organizers a Russian proverb: “Don’t promise us a crane in the sky, give us a titmouse in the hand.”<sup>10</sup> Bolsheviks soon learned that they should never announce a

8. O. Sokolova, “Opyt vovlecheniia krest’ianok Penzenskoi gubernii v Sovetskoe stroitel’stvo,” *Kommunistka*, 1921, no. 12–13, p. 67.

9. K. Samoilova, “O rabote sredi krest’ianok,” *Kommunistka*, 1920, no. 7, p. 33.

10. *Ibid.*

project they could not see through to completion, for any failure only strengthened peasant women's hostility. The few organizers working in the countryside kept trying to break through what one called "the Chinese wall" of women's resistance,<sup>11</sup> but the Woman's Bureau as a whole concentrated its attention on city women. Its leaders did not want to squander their meager resources on the rural women who were so difficult to reach, both physically and spiritually.<sup>12</sup>

Peasant women's resistance to the Bolsheviks may have been heightened by the increasing hardships of their lives. The early, triumphant, land-grabbing days of the revolution had given way in 1918 to an often unintelligible, and frequently brutal, civil war. The death toll mounted, the economy continued to deteriorate, life became a primitive struggle to survive. Had the revolution stirred in peasant women a desire to break out of traditional social constraints (and there is no available evidence that it did), the crisis of the civil war would have quelled that desire by making family and village solidarity more essential than ever. Only the cooperative efforts of the peasants could keep the land cultivated. Without the family and the village, a peasant, especially a peasant woman, was adrift in an often lethal chaos.

The upheaval of the civil war not only increased some women's need for traditional institutions, but also created a group of women who could not rely on those same traditional institutions. These were the millions of soldiers' wives who farmed their households' lands alone while their husbands were away at war.<sup>13</sup> Occasionally women had farmed without their husbands during the prerevolutionary period, when it was fairly common for young men to leave their families for seasonal, or even full-time, work in the cities. According to custom in most provinces, a woman had every right to continue to work the family allotment in her husband's absence. Before 1914, however, widows who had tried to farm alone had consistently failed, in part because they did not have the strength to shove the plows into the soil or to chop wood, but also because the men of the village often forced them to give the land up. Communal traditions of the prerevolutionary years did not extend to

11. Putilovskaia, "Vovlechenie rabotnits i krest'ianki . . .," p. 15.

12. V. Golubeva, "Ocherednye zadachi otdelov po rabote sredi zhenshchin," *Kommunistka*, 1921, no. 10-11, p. 28; V. Moirova, "Rabota sredi krest'ianok," *Kommunistka*, 1924, no. 3, p. 24; A. Galina, "Itogy raboty sredi krest'ianok," *Kommunistka*, 1923, no. 10, p. 28.

13. There were some divorced women among the women farming alone, but limited figures available indicate that the rural divorce rate was low (Rudolph Schlesinger, ed., *The Family in the U.S.S.R.* [London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1949], pp. 118, 150-51). Woman's Bureau organizers never mention divorced women, although they discuss widows and Red Army wives at length. The debate on the marriage law in 1925 contains lengthy statements from peasants who were worried about the effect of divorce on the peasant household, but they expressed more fears of the possibility of widespread divorce than complaints of its already existing (Schlesinger, pp. 81-153).



helping women to keep land that men could use. The land-hungry peasants believed that a woman alone or with young children could not farm as productively as a family in which there were adult men, so villagers not only refused to help single women but also often contrived ways to make their lives more difficult. Peasant men would charge women for lending a hand with heavy chores, or would refuse such aid altogether. A peasant with strips bordering a single woman's allotment might volunteer to repair her fence, and in the process move the posts so as to enlarge his field, a Russian custom known as "curving the line." Some provinces did not permit women to speak at commune meetings, so such depredations often went unchallenged; in provinces in which women did enjoy the right to speak, their complaints were often shouted down. Women with young sons might hope to hold out until the boys became men and could prove themselves to the commune. Women whose husbands came back to the village to defend them had an even better chance of keeping their land allotment. But many widows, defenseless without men, capitulated and either married again, moved in with relatives, or left the countryside.<sup>14</sup>

The revolution and civil war transformed occasional incidents of conflict between single women and village men into a common phenomenon. During the period 1917–21, more women than ever before were attempting to farm their family's allotment, at the same time that more men than ever before were demanding allotments of their own from the village's holdings. The revolution had released millions of soldiers from the tsarist army, while the ensuing civil war drove millions more people out of the starving cities and back to their native villages. The men of this great migration joined in a chorus of demands for allotments that forced village leaders to spend years of the revolution dividing and redividing the land.<sup>15</sup>

In trying to satisfy their male claimants, the commune leaders resorted to the time-honored tactic of victimizing the most defenseless, and, according to legend, least productive landholders—single women. Single women were pressured to accept diminished allotments or less fertile fields. A peasant wrote to Maxim Gorky in 1918, "I declare to you, a friend of the people, that a lot of nonsense is going on in the villages because soldiers' wives are allotted land which is bad and good for nothing, and they are howling like mad. When their husbands come back from the war, you can be sure there will be a good fight because of this."<sup>16</sup> Other women found themselves in a struggle to keep their holdings from being taken away altogether.

In desperation, some of these single women sought help from the

14. Shanin (n. 3 above), pp. 85, 81; V. Romanov, "Krest'ianka i derevenskii 'mir' ," *Kommunistka*, 1922, no. 8–9, pp. 35–36.

15. Shanin, pp. 152, 157.

16. Gorky (n. 5 above), pp. 57–58.

Bolsheviks. Significantly, it was primarily widows and soldiers' wives who attended the Woman's Bureau meetings in the countryside and who came to Woman's Bureau offices to ask for the establishment of nurseries, courses in farming, and other social services. A few of these women became supporters of the work of the Zhenotdel, a handful growing so bold as to stand for election to the local soviets.<sup>17</sup> It took great courage to take these steps, however, especially to appear at soviet elections or commune meetings. The men there ridiculed the women or cursed at them in order to frighten them back into silence. Cursing seems to have been especially effective, for it was both a threat of more violent punishment if the women persisted and an offense to their modesty. One woman told a Woman's Bureau organizer, "You stand up to speak, they curse at you. I stood it. I stood it. I spoke once. But then I became frightened and I began to hand in applications." She had given up attempting to press her claims before the commune, deciding instead to rest her hopes with less effectual requests for government aid. She knew the government would be unable to persuade the commune leaders to treat her more justly. What she needed, she told the Woman's Bureau worker, was for the army to return her husband, so that he could speak for her, but there was no application she could file that would bring him home.<sup>18</sup>

Despite the single women's efforts to defend themselves, many could not keep their land in the face of village harassment and the difficulties of farming alone. By 1924 most peasant women who were heads of household had no land at all; they and their children worked as day laborers. One 1924 study discovered that 23 percent of landless families in thirty-four provinces of central Russia were headed by women. In contrast, women headed 16 percent of small-holding households and 8 percent of those with moderate allotments. There were no women recorded among the heads of the most prosperous peasant households.<sup>19</sup> It is likely that the mischievous "nonsense" mentioned by Gorky's correspondent, the rather predatory engrossment of single women's lands during the years 1917–21, was primarily responsible for the growing poverty of single rural women. If not for this factor, the

17. Local organizers' reports to Moscow frequently refer to the wives of Red Army soldiers and widows as the women attracted to Woman's Bureau projects. See, e.g., Butsevich, "Krest'ianka i sel.-khoz. obrazovanie," *Kommunistka*, 1921, no. 1, p. 10; A. Kravchenko, "O nashei rabote sredi krest'ianok," *Kommunistka*, 1922, no. 3–5, p. 33; N. Alekseeva, "Rabota sredi rabotnits i krest'ianok v Donbasse v 1923–24 godu," *Kommunistka*, 1924, no. 4, p. 32. See also Shanin, pp. 175–76.

18. Sokolova, "Opyt vovlecheniia krest'ianok Penzenskoi gubernii v Sovetskoe stroitel'stvo," p. 67. For male pressure on women at meetings, see also A. Unskova, "Rabota vologanizatora v derevne," *Kommunistka*, 1922, no. 1, pp. 24–25; "Iskru derevne," *Kommunistka*, 1922, no. 8–9, p. 35; O. Sokolova, "Oдна iz ocherednykh rabot," *Kommunistka*, 1923, no. 8, p. 6.

19. Moirova, "Rabota sredi krest'ianok," p. 23.

statistics for female landholders would correspond much more closely to the norms for the peasant population as a whole, in which the typical household farmed an allotment of moderate size.

This demonstration of the single woman's vulnerability was doubtless not lost on women living with their husbands. The importance of having a man to provide for and defend the family was clearer than ever before. Married women probably tried to help their less fortunate friends, but they could not save them from the actions of the commune or from the special hardships of farming without a man. They may even have been afraid to try; there were reports of peasant girls and married women fleeing in fear from meetings when the Red Army wives present began to speak angrily about the hard times they were having.<sup>20</sup> Such circumstances could only work to strengthen, rather than loosen, the chains of conformity anchored in the world of peasant tradition.

The fate of single women points to several other explanations for peasant women's conservatism. Not only were peasant women suspicious of strangers' proposals to reform the village, not only did they face a major crisis in which survival seemed to demand reliance on traditional institutions, but they also saw the woman who tried to farm alone mistreated and then humiliated when she protested. This example of failure would remind peasant women of their powerlessness and of the possibility of punishment from men if they strayed into association with outsiders or considered new ideas. Incidents were reported all over Russia of women being beaten or even expelled from their homes when angry husbands or fathers discovered that they had had even fleeting contact with the Bolsheviks.<sup>21</sup> Such violence no doubt played a part in the conservatism of peasant women, as it always had.

Although it is possible to identify reasons why peasant women clung to traditional village life during the revolution and civil war, it is not possible to determine which reasons affected them most strongly. The women's deep loyalty to familiar values, their struggle to survive, the Bolsheviks' inability to woo them with beneficial programs, the fear of punishment from men—all combined to keep peasant women firmly bound to their often abusive but also protective world. Their seemingly reactionary responses to the chaos around them should not be seen simply as unenlightened, ignorant behavior. Such responses, though rooted in customary behavior, may be seen also as rational choices, a deliberate embrace of trusted institutions that could support peasant women in a time of frightening change and great danger.

In contrast, one might expect that working-class women would have been more open to the Bolshevik calls for emancipation. They lived in the cities, where modernization had weakened traditional values and

20. Alekseeva, "Rabota sredi rabotnits i krest'ianok . . .," p. 32.

21. Armand, "Volostnye delegatskoe sobranie krest'ianok," p. 34.

where deep indignation against the old regime had stirred the working class to revolution. The urban world accepted change more readily than did the village. Furthermore, after the revolution had brought the Bolsheviks to power, the party expended far more effort on winning over proletarian women than it did on peasant women. The Bolsheviks had reason to believe, therefore, that working-class women would look on them as liberators and would flock to support them.

Censuses from the period 1897–1914 indicate that there were approximately 20 million women in the paid labor force of the Russian Empire. Large numbers of women were employed as day laborers in agriculture and a few more in semiprofessional and professional jobs, but almost half of all women working for wages were domestic servants (approximately 10 million), and one-fifth were industrial workers (approximately 4 million before 1914). This category of industrial workers included women working in factories, in sales and service industries, and in communications and transportation. During the decade before 1917 and especially during the war, the number of women in industry grew steadily, until by 1917 the 7.5 million women so employed made up 40 percent of that segment of the labor force.<sup>22</sup>

Work in the new enterprises of Russia's industrialization and life in the urban milieu had not been enough to destroy the peasant values of working-class women. Many were originally from the countryside, and, like many new factory workers during the early stages of modernization in Western Europe, remained very much under the influence of the traditional society they had left. Thus, for the most part, these women workers did not participate in the political parties and trade unions that were the organizational expressions of working-class radicalism, because politics was considered men's business. As in the village, women's business was to work for the family.<sup>23</sup> There were a few women unionists, primarily among the thousands of textile workers, who were active in protest before the revolution; but most city women—uneducated, badly paid, overworked, responsible for children, and subject to abuse from men—stayed away from unions and revolutionaries.<sup>24</sup>

22. These figures are extrapolated from several sources: Michael Paul Sacks, *Women's Work in Soviet Russia: Continuity in the Midst of Change* (New York: Praeger Pubs., 1976), pp. 16, 25; Rose L. Glickman, "The Russian Factory Woman, 1880–1914," *Women in Russia*, ed. Dorothy Atkinson, Alexander Dallin, and Gail Warshofsky Lapidus (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1977), pp. 67–71; *Izmeneniia sotsial'noi struktury sovetskogo obshchestva, Oktiabr' 1917–1920* (Moscow: Mysl, 1976), p. 127.

23. Joan W. Scott and Louise A. Tilly have analyzed the limited impact of early industrialization on women's roles in the family in "Women's Work and the Family in Nineteenth-Century Europe," in *The Family in History*, ed. Charles E. Rosenberg (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1975), pp. 145–78.

24. The literacy rate among urban women in 1897 is estimated at 45 percent, compared with 12 percent for rural women (Norton Dodge, *Women in the Soviet Economy* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1966], p. 141).

Then in February 1917, as inflation and food shortages made life increasingly difficult, the poor women of Petrograd grew angry enough to hurl rocks at the closed door of a bakery or to join a demonstration. As these protests swelled, many women found a new, exhilarating, somewhat frightening freedom. Typical of such neophyte demonstrators was Aleksandra Rodionova, a twenty-two-year-old tram conductress. Much later she described the mood that gripped her and many other women of her class in those days: "I remember how we marched around the city. The streets were full of people. The trams weren't running, overturned cars lay across the tracks. I did not know then, I did not understand what was happening. I yelled along with everyone, 'Down with the tsar!', but when I thought, 'But how will it be without the tsar?' it was as if a bottomless pit opened before me and my heart sank. Nevertheless I yelled again and again, 'Down with the tsar!' I felt that all of my familiar life was falling apart, and I rejoiced in its destruction."<sup>25</sup>

The assault on the old order spread from the streets into the homes and businesses of Petrograd because it touched deep feelings of injustice in many working-class Russians, even in old women who had spent their lives in submission. One such woman, Polia, was a servant in a military hospital. She could not read nor write, and she probably learned about voting for the first time when she was elected to the executive committee of her hospital employees' soviet. When she went to Red Cross headquarters with the other members of the Soviet executive committee to ask that the hospital matron be arrested for treating the employees unfairly, she was in fact wearing a hand-me-down dress that the matron had just given her. Polia believed that the revolution was being made for the people, and despite or perhaps because of her years as a servant, she felt that she had little to lose and something—if only dignity—to gain. It is probable that Polia, like the peasants, had formerly accepted Russia's injustices as customary and hence inevitable. In 1917 she no longer had to, so with a few fearful and guilty backward glances at the authorities she had served so long, she joined "the people."<sup>26</sup> All over Petrograd, then all over Russia, working women did the same: going to meetings, listening to proclamations, condemning the *burzhui* (bourgeoisie), and exulting, like Rodionova, in a revolution which seemed to promise an end to misery.

The euphoria of March subsided somewhat in April, but working women seem to have continued to support the destruction of the old

25. A. I. Rodionova, "Semnadsatyi god," in *Zhenshchiny goroda Lenina* (Leningrad: Lenizdat, 1963), p. 89.

26. Irina Skariatina, *A World Can End* (New York: Jonathan Cape & Harrison Smith, 1931), pp. 108–17. The demand for dignity was also commonly heard from male workers. See Robert James Devlin, Jr., "Petrograd Workers and the Workers' Factory Committees in 1917: An Aspect of the Social History of the Russian Revolution" (Ph.D. diss., State University of New York at Binghamton, 1976), pp. 50–59.

regime. They avoided full-time absorption in politics, attending instead to their work and their children, but they were willing to join demonstrations. Some women also began to seek higher wages through organizing. For example, thousands of soldiers' wives in Petrograd held a march to demand an increase in military allotments, and laundresses launched a strike that won them higher wages and better working conditions. Women also voted in elections for the soviets and municipal dumas, but in lower percentages than men, for voting still seemed to many of them a venture into the male sphere of politics. The women had changed their lives with the revolution by ending their submission to the upper class and scrambling for their share of the food, but they shrank from political parties and continued to work for their families.<sup>27</sup>

Unlike noblewomen and peasant women, working-class women became the object of great Bolshevik solicitude. They were, after all, members of that proletarian class which held the starring role in Marxist ideology—and on which Bolshevik survival actually depended. The support of working women was important; so the government gave them, and their men and children, rations of the best food available, promised them publicly funded medical care and child care, and encouraged them to organize cooperatives and work for the soviets. In 1918 Aleksandra Kollontai and Inessa Armand organized the First All-Russian Conference of Working Women and Peasant Women; the next year they established the Woman's Bureau within the Communist Party to coordinate work among women. Motivated by genuine concern for the welfare of the working-class woman, Kollontai, Armand, Nadezhda Krupskaja, Konkordiia Samoiloa, and the hundreds of Woman's Bureau workers under them sought to involve the working-class woman in her own emancipation, which they believed required the transfer of all house-keeping and child rearing to public institutions, the legalization of divorce, and the education of women to work as men's equals.

Thousands joined the projects organized by the Woman's Bureau.

27. For the soldiers' wives see *Pravda* (April 12, 1917); Nina N. Selivanova, *Russia's Women* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1923), p. 198; M. P. Dvoret'skaia, "Soiuz soldatok," *Zhenshchiny goroda Lenina* (n. 25 above), pp. 77–86. For the laundresses, see V. R. Novik-Kondrat'eva, "Slovo o prachkakh," *Leningradki: Vospominaniia, ocherki, dokumenty* (Leningrad: Lenizdat, 1968), pp. 61–69. On female voting patterns see Diane Koenker, "The Evolution of Party Consciousness in 1917: The Case of the Moscow Workers," *Soviet Studies* 30, no. 1 (January 1978): 49–50, and Koenker's study, *Moscow Workers and the 1917 Revolution* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1981), pp. 203–4, 207. See also Pauline S. Crosley, *Intimate Letters from Petrograd* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1920), p. 221, for a discussion of a maid's attitude toward voting in November 1917. There is abundant evidence about working women's attitudes toward women's emancipation, especially in the writings of Bolsheviks. See, e.g., Aleksandra M. Kollontai, "Kak i dlia chego sozvan byl I vserossiiskii s'ezd rabotnits," *Izbrannye stat'i i rechi* (Moscow: Politizsat, 1972), pp. 254–59; Inessa Armand [E. Blonina], "Rabota sredi zhenshchin proletariata na mestakh," in *Kommunisticheskaia partiia i organizatsiia rabotnits*, Vserossiiskaia kommunisticheskaia partiia (bol'shevikov) (Moscow-Petrograd: Kommunist, 1919), pp. 12–16.

But millions more did not, still intent on private concerns that they saw as unrelated to, or unalleviated by, Bolshevik promises. What little they understood of the Bolsheviks' plans for their emancipation, they often did not accept. Like the peasants, some women of the proletariat muttered that the Bolsheviks were godless people who wanted to take babies away from their mothers and encourage men to abandon their wives.<sup>28</sup> Embracing the Bolsheviks' vision of emancipation meant renouncing religious beliefs and social traditions more deeply rooted than their faith in the tsar and the nobles had ever been. To take that step, a woman needed courage—and a new Bolshevik faith to replace the one she rejected. Increasingly in 1918, working-class women, like the peasants, were more and more critical of the Bolsheviks.

The distrust many felt initially was increased in 1918 by the steadily worsening economic conditions. The country had already been at war for four years and was entering a devastating period of civil war which would last another three. Even women who had taken part in Soviet projects now concentrated all their free time on the search for food and greeted Bolshevik organizers with demands that they produce the promised better life. Aleksandra Kollontai wrote of Moscow in 1918, "There was hunger here. Oh, what hunger! The people didn't remember anything like it. They didn't take into account the reasons for the hunger, they forgot that under the tsarist regime they had died from hunger. . . . They felt only that there wasn't any bread, and there wasn't. Who was guilty?"<sup>29</sup> Many women believed that the Bolsheviks were. They were the government, they had promised food, and the people were starving. The fact that the party was struggling with a devastated economy in civil war was not a sufficient excuse. The red banners hung everywhere might proclaim (in strange foreign words like "republic") the dawn of a new world, but the new world did not feed hungry children. Nor did the party's many declarations of its intention to establish decent dining rooms and nurseries and to raise wages after the war was won.

The reality which the Bolsheviks could not change required that women work all day, then search for food in government stores or on the black market. They also had to scrounge for fuel with which to cook their food and heat their wretched rooms. They had to barter for cloth-

28. Aleksandra M. Kollontai, "Iz vospominanii," *Oktiabr'*, no. 9 (1945), pp. 88–89; R. A. Kovnator, "V obshchem stroiu," *Zhenshchiny goroda Lenina* (n. 25 above), p. 124.

29. Aleksandra M. Kollontai, *Rabotnitsa za god revoliutsii* (Moscow: Kommunist, 1918), p. 19. For evidence of women's criticism of the Bolsheviks, see also *Pravda* (May 8, 1919), p. 4; (July 3, 1919), p. 4; (July 17, 1919), p. 3; (March 20, 1921), p. 4; (March 27, 1921), p. 4; P. Vinogradskaiia, "Odna iz ocherednykh zadach," *Kommunistka*, 1920, no. 3–4, p. 31; "Chetyre goda raboty," *Kommunistka*, 1921, no. 16–17, p. 3; M. N. Sveshnikova-Vydrina, "V organizatsii—silai!" *Zhenshchiny goroda Lenina* (n. 25 above), pp. 96–97.



ing or find ways to mend what they had. They had to struggle to keep their children in school while hoping that they would not contract typhus, diphtheria, or cholera from other children. Like peasant women, working-class women also might suffer punishment from men or other women if they participated in politics. Given their burdens and the risks of political activity, it is hardly surprising that these tired and hungry women did not rush to join in Saturday work projects or volunteer to aid the war effort in other ways. Some charged that the only people who were living better since the revolution were the Bolsheviks themselves.<sup>30</sup> Worn out, thousands, perhaps millions, of women finally abandoned the cities and returned to their native villages where food could still be found.

A small minority of women did respond favorably to the appeals of the Bolsheviks. They attended the meetings organized by the Woman's Bureau, sent their children to day-care centers, joined factory committees, served as "delegates" working in government offices, and did volunteer work to aid the army. There were thousands of such women in 1918, tens of thousands by 1921. They were primarily industrial workers—factory hands and those employed in transportation and communication. The other working-class women of the cities—housewives and the few remaining domestic servants—proved more resistant to Bolshevik overtures.<sup>31</sup> By comparison, factory women were exposed to revolutionary ideas in a milieu where such ideas were accepted. They were also the women that Zhenotdel organizers made the greatest effort to reach, by working in the factories themselves and addressing most of their meetings, conferences, speeches, and written propaganda to these working-class women.

In order to win the support of proletarian women, the Woman's Bureau's pamphlets and articles stressed that the party had already given women a great deal—political equality, equal pay for equal work, protection from dangerous working conditions, and legalized divorce so that they could escape cruel husbands. In the future, after the war was won, the party would make widely available the social services—day care, public dining rooms, laundries—which would free women from housework. Rarely mentioned in the propaganda addressed to proletarian women was the Marxist hostility to religion and to the nuclear family, even though the ideology denounced both institutions as sources of

30. *Pravda* (October 16, 1919), p. 4.

31. For representative figures on attendance at meetings and other such activities, see *Kommunisticheskaia partiia Sovetskogo Soiuza, Zhenotdel, Otchet o deiateľnosti Otdela Ts.K.R.K.P., po rabote sredi zhenshchin* (Moscow: Gosizdat, 1921), pp. 19–22; "Otchet otdela Ts.K.R.K.P. po rabote sredi zhenshchin," *Izvestiia Ts.K.R.K.P.* (March 1922), pp. 45–53. On the resistance of housewives and servants, see B. Sadovskaia, "Rabota sredi domashnikh khoziaek," *Kommunistka*, 1920, no. 7, pp. 42–43.



female inequality.<sup>32</sup> The leaders of the Woman's Bureau understood what a storm of criticism could be unleashed at a meeting of factory women if a speaker proclaimed the Bolsheviks' intention to change women's roles in the family or to abolish Russian Orthodoxy. Nor did the Zhenotdel want to stir up the anger of proletarian men or run the risk of rousing opposition from the party rank and file by calling for the abolition of the family.<sup>33</sup> Choosing their words carefully, the propagandists fashioned a message tailored to appeal to factory women's needs without challenging their basic beliefs. The advocacy of women's emancipation from family and religion was usually saved for a more educated audience, women who were communists or communist sympathizers and secondary-school and university students.

Despite the moderation of the Bolshevik appeal, most factory women avoided Zhenotdel projects. Therefore, there must have been particular characteristics that made the women who did participate receptive. One such characteristic was kinship ties. Some of those who came to meetings did so because other members of their families already were allied with the new regime, for example, the wives of Red Army soldiers and the relatives of Communist Party members. These women might have picked up a smattering of communist ideology; at the least they would be less inclined than other women to see the new government as a threat. Another compelling reason to respond positively to the Bolsheviks' appeals was need. There is impressionistic evidence from 1920 that the majority of urban women who attended meetings were mothers in their late twenties and thirties who needed the services the party promised more than did younger women without children. It may be the case, as some Bolsheviks believed, that their maturity made them more

32. This summary is based on the following pamphlets: Ekaterina Arbore-Ralli, *Mat' i detia v Sovet. Rossii* (Moscow: Gosizdat, 1920); Aleksandra M. Kollontai, *Kak bor'bitsia rabotnitsa za svoi prava* (Moscow: Izd. VTsIK, 1919), *Rabotnitsy, krest'ianki i krasnyi front* (Moscow: Gosizdat, 1919), and *Sem'ia i kommunisticheskoe gosudarstvo* (Moscow: Kommunist, 1918); Z. I. Lilina, *Nuzhna li rabotnitsam i krest'iankam sovetskaia vlast'*? (Petrograd: Gosizdat, 1921); K. Samoilova, *Krest'ianka i sovetskaia vlast'* (Moscow: Gosizdat, 1921), and *Rabotnitsy v rossiiskoi revoliutsii* (Petrograd: Gosizdat, 1920). It is also based on two Zhenotdel broadsides reprinted in G. D. Kostomarov, ed., *Golos velikoi revoliutsii* (Moscow: Politizdat, 1967), pp. 203–7, 210–14; and on the column "Stranichka zhenshchiny-rabotnitsy," *Pravda*, 1919–21. There were individual differences in the agitators—Inessa Armand and Kollontai were more feminist than Krupskaja or Unskova (the last one was one of the main contributors to the *Pravda* column)—but these differences did not alter the central thrust of the agitation. The published materials used here cannot be augmented with speeches made to delegate meetings, a major form of mass agitation, because usually only the titles, not the content, of those speeches were reported in the press. For a fascinating example of a dialogue between a party leader and a conference of women on the subject of religion, see A. Lunacharskii, "O religii," *Pravda* (October 2, 1919), p. 2.

33. These fears are expressed in *Pravda* (July 31, 1919), p. 4; Samoilova, "O rabote sredi krest'ianok," p. 33; and in a speech by Aleksandra M. Kollontai at the Eighth Party Congress, in KPSS, *Vos'moi s'ezd, mart 1919 goda* (Moscow: Politizdat, 1959), p. 300.

politically sophisticated and more willing to defy convention.<sup>34</sup> One may also surmise that many of these women were living without men, although there is no firm evidence to support this conjecture. It seems probable, however, that being single brought greater difficulties and also greater freedom to women in the cities, as it did in the countryside. And finally some women were certainly receptive to the Bolshevik message of emancipation for personal reasons. The wife of a profligate and abusive husband, for example, would have a powerful incentive for seeking ways of living without him. This mixture of private and collective motives brought thousands of working-class women to the Zhenotdel looking for help and hope.

Some working-class women took the Bolshevik call for women to emancipate themselves so seriously that they organized female unions. Evidence about these groups is very fragmentary, so it is impossible to say how many there were, or how many women participated. However, a number of women's unions are known to have existed in 1919 and 1920, probably in provincial cities away from Moscow and Petrograd. Perhaps established with the encouragement of non-Bolshevik feminists or even of the Woman's Bureau workers themselves, they seem to have been composed mainly of working women who felt that the male-led unions did not treat their female members fairly. Withdrawing from the men, these women banded together to form unions that would represent their members in the labor movement and speak for them to the government. A representative of one such group in the city of Tsivilsk, in Kazan province, explained the complaints of women in her locality to a soviet congress in 1919. Although the revolution had declared female equality, she said, women were still not being treated as equals: "We don't have the strength [as individuals] to throw off such views of men and the habit of some women to humiliate us and consider us untalented creatures." Such prejudices had in fact led to the creation of her union. Upon hearing about the meeting of women workers in Moscow in November 1918, the Tsivilsk women had decided that the solution for them was to establish a woman's group. "And now," the speaker concluded, "we organize our union to protect the interests of women with our common strength. Its goal is the unity of all the women of the city."<sup>35</sup>

If this woman's speech and her union were typical, then these unions represented a spontaneous effort by working women to set up their own representative organizations to defend their interests. Such democratic, liberationist activity was common in the revolution; men of the lower classes had been establishing such organizations—factory committees, soldiers' committees, and the soviets themselves—since February 1917. Independent, grass-roots groups did not find favor with the

34. R. A. Kovnator, "Krasnyi ugolok," *Kommunistka*, 1920, no. 1-2, p. 38; Vinogradskaia, "Odna iz ocherednykh zadach," p. 31.

35. *Pravda* (June 3, 1919), p. 2.

Bolshevik government, however; the party was attempting to harness the revolution's spontaneity by establishing control over such organizations. Furthermore, women's unions were particularly objectionable, because the Bolsheviks had always condemned female separatism. Women were told to find equality by participating with men in working-class organizations, not by setting up separate groups to pursue their own self-interest. Separatism was also undesirable from the party's point of view because it encouraged women to view men as the source of their oppression. This was seen as wrongheaded and self-defeating, for the enemy of women was not men, but the class system, which would only be overcome by the cooperation of both sexes in the construction of socialism. Many Bolsheviks, because of their opposition to separate women's organizations, distrusted the Zhenotdel, even though the bureau's official purpose was to draw women into the proletarian movement. The party certainly had no intention of allowing women to set up segregated, autonomous unions.<sup>36</sup>

When the Central Department of the Woman's Bureau in Moscow learned of the women's unions in 1919, Inessa Armand, then head of the bureau, sent out instructions that the groups were to be disbanded. Exactly what happened next is as uncertain as the number and strength of the unions themselves. The only solid evidence of their existence presently available is the series of announcements in *Pravda* that the unions had been abolished. The first such announcement appeared in June of 1919, the second in October of the same year, and the third in June of 1921.<sup>37</sup> Apparently some women's unions survived two years of party pressure. They probably did not survive much longer, however, for by 1921 the Bolsheviks had established control over the cities, and had either repressed or brought under party leadership the most independent proletarian organizations. The response to the women's unions demonstrates the limitations of the Bolshevik conception of female emancipation and, indeed, of the party's emerging vision of the emancipation of all Russian society. If women wanted to change their position in Russia, they would have to do so in ways approved and controlled by the Communist Party.

Thousands of women welcomed that opportunity and became communists. Most working women who participated in Bolshevik-led projects probably did so in hopes of receiving desperately needed government help. They got very little, primarily because the government had so little to give them. There were few day-care centers, and those that were established were badly supplied and run. The public dining rooms served execrable food, and the employees of the government

36. For a discussion of Bolshevik attitudes toward "female separatism," see Barbara Evans Clements, *Bolshevik Feminist: The Life of Aleksandra Kollontai* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), pp. 156–58, 210–14.

37. *Pravda* (June 3, 1919), p. 2; (October 24, 1919), p. 5; (June 5, 1921), p. 2.

laundries stole as much as they cleaned. Thus the privations of the civil war could be mitigated for working women only by Bolshevik promises of a better future.

Many did not find the promises appealing. The benefits of a new life seemed remote, the risks great, and those who vowed to lead women to a better world had yet to prove themselves trustworthy. Although proletarian women were not as hostile to the Bolsheviks as peasant women, they were as burdened by the hardships of war. They were also still loyal enough to traditional values to be suspicious of a party that criticized the family and the church. Like peasant women, most working-class women survived the civil war by relying on themselves and on their relatives for food and survival, coping largely through traditional means. The war crisis tore apart many families, but there is little evidence that proletarian women took advantage of the unstable situation to assert their independence or to demand better treatment from their spouses.

The women who profited from the Russian Revolution were those who were willing to reject tradition and join the Bolshevik Party. Of the 30,000 women who were party members in 1923, 19,000 (62 percent) were from the central, Great Russian region of the empire. Most of these women (80 percent) were of lower-class origin, although they were more likely than male Bolsheviks to come from the skilled, better-educated ranks of the proletariat and from the *sluzhashie*, or clerical and semi-professional lower-middle class. Only 5 percent of female Bolsheviks in 1923 were peasants. Ninety-five percent had joined the party after February 1917.<sup>38</sup>

Like the other women who attended Bolshevik meetings, communist party women had been exposed to the radicalizing influences of the urban areas, and their higher levels of education and status probably made it easier for them than for poorer women to reject convention. They usually entered radical politics in their late teens or early twenties, often supported in their decision by radical teachers, fellow students, co-workers, or siblings. This radical community replaced the traditional one they had left. In some instances these women were initially attracted to politics because they had received particularly brutal treatment from the old regime. Some of them were also rebelling against private despots—husbands or fathers—while others were following fathers, husbands, brothers, sisters, or children into the revolutionary movement. What the communist women shared was a deep sense of grievance against the old order and a willingness to reject the taboos against female participation in politics. Communist ideology then legitimated their grievances and elucidated the means for rectifying them. L. Ded, an apprentice who became a Bolshevik in 1917, wrote that after she heard a

38. E. Smitten, "Zhenshchiny v R.K.P.," *Kommunistka*, 1924, no. 4, pp. 8–10. The women made up 7.8 percent of the party membership.

Bolshevik speech, "Everything became clear and understandable to me." An unnamed hospital employee echoed these sentiments in a letter to *Pravda* in 1919. "I am a worker," she wrote, "and only now do I see who buries our rights deep and does not want us to be free."<sup>39</sup>

The civil war years were difficult for female Bolsheviks, as they were for all Russian women. Communist party women fought at the front as political officers, nurses, and, rarely, as combat soldiers, or they worked behind the lines for the government or the party. Most of them held lower-echelon, essentially clerical, jobs or served as administrators in the government's health, education, or journalism departments. Only the women of the Woman's Bureau ever reached party leadership positions, because the party made no genuine effort to promote women within its ranks and because the women themselves shrank from political leadership. Nonetheless, after the civil war Bolshevik women were better off than the masses of Russian women. They enjoyed material benefits—the best food, clothes, housing, and transportation available. Ambitious women also now had the opportunity to make careers for themselves, an opportunity which many of them eagerly seized. After attending secondary school and university at government expense, they became physicians, scientists, engineers, academicians, and industrial managers. Their lives were hardly glamorous, but they had the best that Soviet Russia could provide, and they had the very real satisfaction of participating in a movement they believed in.<sup>40</sup>

Thus the women who benefited most immediately from the Russian Revolution were those with the daring and the opportunity to move into the new elite. Most Russian women had little of either. Instead, they coped with revolution by relying, when they could, on old, protective institutions, a sensible strategy given the regime's inability to help them survive the chaos. But in turning to the only defenses they trusted—marriage, the family, the commune—women acted directly and indirectly to preserve the institutions that were the source of their subordinate position in Russian society.

Of course, women's conservatism alone does not explain the persistence of patriarchal values in the Soviet Union. Russian men were defenders of the traditional relationship between women and men, and so was the Bolshevik government, although in a subtle circumspect manner and only after the civil war. An analysis of the progress of women's emancipation during the rebuilding of society in the postrevolutionary period lies beyond the scope of this article. Suffice it to say that in the

39. *Pravda* (October 9, 1919), p. 3; (July 17, 1919), p. 4.

40. These generalizations are drawn from a study of eighty-four Bolshevik women, sketches of whose lives appear in *Leningradki; Vospominaniia, ocherki, dokumenty; Slavnye bol'shevichki* (Moscow: Politizdat, 1958); *Pravda, stavshaiia legendoi* (Moscow: Voenno, izd. Ministerstva oborny SSSR, 1964); *Zhenshchiny goroda Lenina; Zhenshchiny russkoi revoliutsii* (Moscow: Politizdat, 1968). See also A. Merezhin, "Rabotnitsa v upravlenii gosudarstvom," *Kommunistka*, 1922, no. 3–5, pp. 45–46; and E. Smitten, "Zhenshchiny v R.K.P.," pp. 8–10.

1920s, the Bolsheviks had the opportunity to provide women with education and with services that would have enabled them to revolutionize their family roles. Yet in that decade the party began to retreat from its commitment to abolish patriarchal institutions. The leadership came to believe that the family could contribute to the preservation of social stability in a time of rapid modernization. Nor are the Russians alone in this compromise: the Chinese Communists also abandoned their earliest, most radical attempts to revolutionize the family.

This preliminary examination of the Russian experience suggests that the patriarchal family survived the buffetings of change because it served the needs of the people and of the elite during a time of crisis. The leaders, who shared to some extent the conservatism of the masses but who also advocated a true emancipation of women, at first reluctantly compromised with the masses. Later, as the established governors of a postrevolutionary society, they too found patriarchal structures an attractive defense against social instability. Thus through a complex interaction between the values and needs of the masses and those of the leadership, the urban, nuclear, but still patriarchal family became the foundation of Russia's modernized autocracy.

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