

# Alexandra Kollontai, The Russian Revolution and Women's Liberation

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Alexandra Kollontai

## Introduction

To understand the role of women in the Bolshevik revolution one must understand the conditions in which women lived in Tsarist Russia. Women, after their marriage (many of which were arranged), were regarded as the property of the husband, there was no divorce and no abortion. Women didn't have the right to vote in the limited Duma elections and there were no women elected representatives. There was virtually no social welfare system and any woman who happened to have a child out of wedlock was likely to end up in the dreaded workhouses.

The choices that existed for women were extremely limited; marrying into a decent family and to a husband who treated you well would be regarded as a 'success'. But many women were rebelling against their lack of freedoms compared to their male counterparts. Middle class women were

looking to make their way into professions and gain employment with the economic freedom that would follow. Working class women, on the other hand, were already in employment, many as domestic servants but also in factories in the big cities like Petrograd. The problems faced by women workers, in addition to the questions of suffrage and moral standards, were those of low wages, poverty and destitution.

On top of this, World War 1 and the subsequent war years added further hardship to the women of Russia. Their husbands, brothers and sons were drafted into the army and sent away to the front to die in their millions, while at home the women had to make do with what little rations they got- which were not enough to feed their families. It was under these conditions that women in Petrograd on International Women's Day February 1917 marched under the slogan of 'Land, Bread and Peace' and kicked off a revolution which would change the course of history.

## Kollontai

One of the many women rebelling against oppression was Alexandra Kollontai. As a young woman her refusal of the marriage arranged by her parents was the beginning of a life filled with rebellion and revolution. Although not well known today, Kollontai was a pioneer in terms of women in politics. She was one of the first female elected representatives, the first female Minister and member of Cabinet in a Western government and subsequently the first female Ambassador. Her journey in politics is not one marked by personal ambition but rather one inseparable from the journey of the Bolshevik party and the movement of the working class.

Kollontai was born into a family of old Russian nobility. She was the youngest child and in her own words 'the most spoiled, the most coddled member of the family'. She was never sent to school but home taught by a female private tutor. At the age of six-

teen a young woman was expected to begin the life of a 'young society woman'. Kollontai's parents expected her to marry well to someone arranged by them, just like her sister had done at the age of nineteen - marrying a man who was nearly seventy. But she refused and decided to marry her cousin, a young love that lasted about three years.

Kollontai began to attend illegal Marxist circles, and began reading any Marxist literature that she could get her hands on. She decided to leave her husband and child and left Russia for Zurich to study political economy, she joined the Russian Social Democratic Party in 1899. By the revolution of 1905 Kollontai had become a popular speaker at meetings and rallies. She was a supporter of the Mensheviks, however, she later joined the revolutionary Bolsheviks. The defeat of the 1905 revolution led to the exile of many of the most well-known socialists, including Lenin and Trotsky but also Kollontai. In 1908 she was forced to leave Russia and lived in exile in Scandinavia and the USA until 1917.

## The Dream Imagined

Kollontai began her political life with a revolt against the societal norms which restricted the lives of women and many of her writings are related to the fight for women's liberation and the relationship between that fight and the workers' movement.

In the years following the 1905 revolution she wrote significant contributions on the question of the oppression of women and the fight for liberation. Her writings were not divorced from activity. She spent her time organising women workers into Working Women's Clubs, and she organised interventions by women party members to conferences organised by the suffragette movement. Many young women workers who joined at that time became leading members of the Bolshevik Party throughout the years of the revolution.

In 1909 Kollontai wrote the short but influential pamphlet *The Social Basis of the Women's Question*. She argues clearly that

in order to win liberation from oppression women must join with the worker's movement in the fight against a system of production from which women's oppression stems. She says:

The women's world is divided, just as is the world of men, into two camps; the interests and aspirations of one group of women bring it close to the bourgeois class, while the other group has close connections with the proletariat, and its claims for liberation encompass a full solution to the woman question. Thus although both camps follow the general slogan of the 'liberation of women', their aims and interests are different. Each of the groups unconsciously takes its starting point from the interests of its own class, which gives a specific class colouring to the targets and tasks it sets itself.<sup>1</sup>

She argued that regardless of the intentions of bourgeois feminists their aims and interests are different from working class women, because they belong to a class whose interests lie in maintaining the status quo. At times, the struggle of both groups may coincide but in the long term the women of the ruling class will be satisfied with the equality of their own class. In practice this becomes an equal opportunity for women and men of the ruling class to engage in the exploitation of workers in the process of production. As we know today, a female Minister of the ruling class is just as likely to impose austerity measures that disproportionately affect women as her male counterparts.

Does this mean that women's questions should be ignored by socialists? On the contrary, Kollontai argued clearly that there must be specific agitation by the Party amongst women workers on the question of women's rights. She also took inspiration from the socialist movements in Europe, specifically Clara Zetkin in Germany,

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<sup>1</sup>Alexandra Kollontai *The Social Basis of the Woman Question* 1909 <https://www.marxists.org/archive/kollonta/1909/social-basis.htm>

and organised clubs for socialist education of women.

It is natural that even the psychology of a woman, under the influence of century-long slavery, is different from that of a working class man. The man worker is more independent, more decisive, and has more feeling of solidarity; his horizon is wider because he is not confined within the framework of narrow family relationships; it is easier for him to become aware of his interests and to connect these to class problems. But for a woman worker to reach the maturity of the views of an average male worker – that means a complete break with the tradition, the concepts, the morals, the customs, which have become part of her since the cradle. These traditions and customs, attempting to retain and hold onto a type of woman produced by past stages of economic development, turn into almost insuperable obstacles in the path of the class-consciousness of the woman worker. From this the conclusion is clear, that one can arouse woman's sleeping brain, and bring to life her will, only by means of a special approach to her, only by using specialised methods of work among women.<sup>2</sup>

In this passage Kollontai argues that women in the early 1900's had been so indoctrinated with Victorian values and morals that it would require a specific tactical approach to engage women in the socialist struggle. In the hundred years that have passed since, women have moved from homes into workplaces and though there are still issues that mainly affect women, such as reproductive rights, there is not the same

need for 'special tactics'- especially if they lead to separatism.

Whilst understanding the necessity of drawing in women workers through the Women's Clubs she argued strongly against the separation of women in to 'women only' parties and trade unions. She said:

Trade union organisations have a definite task- to struggle for the economic interests of the members of the working class; moreover, it is precisely these, that is the economic interests, which for the representatives of the proletariat of both sexes are the same and inseparable. On this point any separation on the basis of sex is artificial; it runs absolutely counter to the interests of the worker and can only damage the immediate aims of the trade union struggle.<sup>3</sup>

Her arguments surrounding the woman's question were built on the writings of Marx and Engels on the role of the family under capitalism. Both wrote extensively on the family and the role of women, Marx in *The Holy Family* and Engels in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*. Engels tracked the development of class society from tribal 'primitive communism' to capitalism and argued that the role of women was dramatically transformed by the emergence of class society.

The transition from hunting and gathering to agriculture over a long period of time led to the gradual removal of women from public life through increased childbearing and the subsequent reduction women's participation in productive labour. Engels described this period as 'the world historical defeat of the female sex'. This placed the oppression of women in a historical context, in opposition to the common biological determinism which argued that women's oppression was caused by the biological differences between men and women. The consequence of the Marxist position was that

<sup>2</sup>Alexandra Kollontai *Women Workers Struggle For Their Rights* 1919 <https://www.marxists.org/archive/kollonta/1919/women-workers/ch01.htm>

<sup>3</sup>Alexandra Kollontai *Women Workers Struggle For Their Rights* 1919 <https://www.marxists.org/archive/kollonta/1919/women-workers/ch02.htm>

the oppression of women was historical and could therefore be not only fought against but eliminated, through revolution and the destruction of class society.

## The Dream Realised

Kollontai had begun her political journey by revolting against the lack of rights and choices for women and had quickly come to the conclusion that the only solution was a revolutionary overthrow of the capitalist system by the working class. Like many of her comrades, she dreamed of a different kind of society where men and women could live as equals. In 1917 for the first time in history, there was an opportunity to realise that dream.

In February 1917 the women of Petrograd lived in hardship under the yoke of Tsarist dictatorship, war rations and extreme poverty. On International Women's day women workers poured onto the streets to protest with demands for 'Land, Bread and Peace'. They marched to the factories where the men were working, threw snowballs on the windows and called on their husbands, fathers, brothers and friends to join them. These events unleashed a strike wave which forced the Tsar to abdicate from the throne and began the winding road to October. (The events of the revolution will be discussed in detail in other articles in this journal so I will not deal with them here)

During her years in exile Kollontai had become a celebrated orator. She travelled extensively throughout Europe to various congresses and conferences. With the outbreak of World War 1 Kollontai immediately took a strong position against the war. Living in 'neutral' Sweden, she worked closely with the left Social Democrats Zeth 'Zäta' Höglund and Frederick Ström agitating against the war.

As she explains: 'So long as the war continued, the problem of women's liberation obviously had to recede into the background since my only concern, my highest aim, was to fight against the war and call a new Work-

ers International into being.' The majority of Socialist parties in Europe had taken an active or passive position in favour of the War, leading to splits to the left in most parties around this time. Kollontai has been described as hugely influential in encouraging left split in the Swedish Social Democratic party.<sup>4</sup> In June 1915 she officially joined the Bolshevik Party because of their anti-war position and following extensive correspondence with Lenin.

The moment Kollontai received news of the outbreak of the February revolution she travelled from Norway to Russia through Northern Sweden. At the border she was greeted with joy by the young soldiers. During the months of the revolution Kollontai worked tirelessly as an orator, a writer and an agitator. She was elected to the Soviet executive in April, she helped publish the weekly newspaper *The Women Workers* in May and took part in strikes by women laundry workers. *The Women Workers* actively encouraged women to take part in the revolutionary activity, as seen in this article by Kollontai: 'We, the women workers, were the first to raise the Red Banner in the days of the Russian revolution, the first to go out onto the streets on Women's Day. Let us now hasten to join the leading ranks of the fighters for the workers' cause, let us join trade unions, the Social-Democratic Party, the Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies!' <sup>5</sup>

The work carried out by the women members of the Bolshevik party was certainly not in vain. Russian women were for the first time drawn into civic and political life in their masses. Women workers attended the meetings of the Soviet in the cities while peasant women took part in the movement against the landlords in the countryside. We can only imagine the energy and enthusiasm that must have been flowing from the masses of women who were transforming from mothers and wives to activists, fighters and decision makers. Women were throwing off the yoke of slavery and becoming independent members of society.

<sup>4</sup> Alexander Kan *Hemmabolsjevikerna*, p. 79

<sup>5</sup>Alexandra Kollontai 'Our Tasks' *Woman Worker* 1917 <https://www.marxists.org/archive/kollonta/1917/tasks.htm>

By October 1917 Kollontai had been elected to the Central Committee of the Bolshevik Party and she states proudly in her autobiography that she voted for the policy of an armed uprising. With the formation of the Soviet government following the successful insurrection in October Kollontai was appointed People's Commissar of Social Welfare, the first woman in history to occupy a Ministerial post. Now there was a real opportunity to put into practice the ideas of equality and fairness promoted in her writings and speeches. However, there was significant resistance by the officials with open sabotage against the new government forcing Kollontai to set up an auxiliary council of workers with experts such as physicians and teachers represented. New officials were employed, without experience but with extraordinary enthusiasm.

The diverse work of the Department is evident in the first act by Kollontai as People's Commissar, which was to compensate a small peasant for his requisitioned horse. There was an enormous amount of work to be done in order to transform Russia into a socialist country. There were decrees to improve care for disabled soldiers, abolish religious instruction in girls' schools, set up homeless hostels, bring in maternity and infant care and introduce a free public health care system.

However, Kollontai understood that 'To attain legal rights is insufficient; women must be emancipated in practice. The emancipation of women means giving them the opportunity to bring up their children, combining motherhood with work for society.'<sup>6</sup>

In November 1918 she helped organise the first Congress of Women Workers and Women Peasants which was the beginning of a programme of education and involvement of women into societal tasks. They included the establishment of communal kitchens, communal laundries and children's day care with the aim of drawing women out of the home and into working collectively for the

good of society. In addition, there was an enormous effort made to educate working and peasant women, many of whom were illiterate.

By 1919 abortion had been legalised and several world conferences of women communists had been organised including working with the Muslim women of the Eastern regions of Russia. This extensive work was undertaken despite the extremely difficult period of civil war, hunger and poverty. In 1920 Kollontai wrote an article on 'Communism and the Family' where she discussed the role of the family under feudalism, the changing role of the family under capitalism and the possibilities of a new family under Communism. She argued that the patriarchal family under feudalism was a sphere of production where women produced cloth, leather, wool and preserved foods in the home. This division of labour meant that women were excluded from production outside of the home and subsequently civic life. Capitalism, however, changed the role of the family from a productive unit to one of consumption:

The housework that remains consists of cleaning..., cooking..., washing and the care of the linen and clothing of the family... These are difficult and exhausting tasks and they absorb all the spare time and energy of the working woman who must, in addition, put in her hours at a factory. But this work is different in one important way from the work our grandmothers did: the four tasks enumerated above, which still serve to keep the family together, are of no value to the state and the national economy, for they do not create any new values or make any contribution to the prosperity of the country.<sup>7</sup>

What Kollontai argued is not that housework is not necessary or important for soci-

<sup>6</sup>Alexandra Kollontai *V.I. Lenin and the First Congress of Women Workers* <https://www.marxists.org/archive/kollonta/1918/congress.htm>

<sup>7</sup>Alexandra Kollontai *Communism and the Family* 1920 <https://www.marxists.org/archive/kollonta/1920/communism-family.htm>

ety, but that it does not produce any new value and can't be sold as commodities on a market. This means that under capitalism women are left with the double burden of working outside and inside the home. In addition to the family serving as a unit of consumption under capitalism it also plays an ideological role. Kollontai says:

For the capitalists are well aware that the old type of family, where the woman is a slave and where the husband is responsible for the well-being of his wife and children, constitutes the best weapon in the struggle to stifle the desire of the working class for freedom and to weaken the revolutionary spirit of the working man and working woman. The worker is weighed down by his family cares and is obliged to compromise with capital.<sup>8</sup>

For Kollontai this meant that the new communist Russia had to take steps towards eradicating the old family and creating a new type of family based on equality between the sexes and the responsibility of the state for the wellbeing of children, the elderly and housework. She says:

In Soviet Russia the working woman should be surrounded by the same ease and light, hygiene and beauty that previously only the very rich could afford. Instead of the working woman having to struggle with the cooking and spend her last free hours in the kitchen preparing dinner and supper, communist society will organise public restaurants and communal kitchens.<sup>9</sup>

Kollontai also takes on the arguments propagated by the opponents of the Bolsheviks that they were breaking up the family and tearing children away from their parents.

Communist society has this to say to the working woman and working man: 'You are young, you love each other. Everyone has the right to happiness. Therefore live your life. Do not flee happiness. Do not fear marriage, even though under capitalism marriage was truly a chain of sorrow. Do not be afraid of having children. Society needs more workers and rejoices at the birth of every child. You do not have to worry about the future of your child; your child will know neither hunger nor cold.'<sup>10</sup>

The short article clearly spells out what plans Kollontai and the Bolsheviks had to create a new type of family for the new socialist society. It includes descriptions of already attained demands- many of which we still have not won today- such as 'free school meals for children', 'free textbooks', 'free shoes and clothing for children' and of course the communal laundries and restaurants. This new family would not be a unit of production or consumption but rather a unit formed by love and equality between two partners. The achievements in the first few years following the revolution are absolutely extraordinary, especially when you take into account the hardships of the civil war period.

## The dream crushed

By the end of the civil war Soviet Russia was all but destroyed. Millions of workers had perished in the fighting or from disease, factories had been closed down, large sections of the most fertile grain-producing land had been lost and productivity had plummeted. Many of the leading Bolsheviks had died fighting against the White Army. In an article written by Kollontai in 1927 her description of the many leading women members of the Bolshevik Party during the October Revolution, and the number of them who died 'performing their revolutionary duties'

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

was heart-breaking. By the death of Lenin in 1923 the party was growing into a bureaucracy. Kollontai had earlier raised concerns of lack of democracy as part of the Workers Opposition, however the grouping offered no way forward or realistic alternative to the existing strategy. In 1922 Kollontai accepted the appointment of Soviet Ambassador in Norway. She was the first woman ever to hold this position and she found herself overwhelmed by work on treaties and trade agreements. By the late 1920's Stalin and his loyal supporters had secured control of the Soviet government and in 1928 Trotsky was exiled. There was a distinct lack of writings by Kollontai from 1929 onwards. It's unfortunate and tragic that she never criticised the Stalinist regime, even writing a terrible endorsement of Stalinist policies in the 1940's - which included giving medals to women who had many children!

By that time many of the laws and decrees enacted by Kollontai herself were being eroded by the Stalinist regime. One can certainly be disgusted by the (at the very least) passive support of Kollontai to the dictatorship, however one must also consider the enormous pressures on her and many others to surrender. Those who had opposed Stalin had ended up exiled or murdered in show trials, while their families often suffered similar fates.

The fact that the dreams of Kollontai and the Bolsheviks were ultimately crushed

under the boot of Stalinism shouldn't discourage us from taking inspiration from what they accomplished in those short years following the October Revolution. Never in history had women achieved so much in such a short space of time, not only by legal decrees but through the actions taken by women revolutionaries. These changes came through the struggle of working men and women united through their own actions and guided by the Bolshevik Party.

The notion, prevalent in some liberal and feminist circles, that the ruling class will grant us gradual progressive change is made redundant when you study the October Revolution and its effect on the lives of women in Russia. A revolution of working class women and men was able to win rights we still haven't won today in the 21st Century. It pays to rebel. Revolutionaries should work in broad campaigns and with people fighting for any change that benefits women, but in those campaigns we should point out that only a revolution can fully liberate women. As James Connolly wrote:

'Be moderate,' the trimmers cry,  
Who dread the tyrants' thunder.  
'You ask too much and people By  
From you aghast in wonder.'  
'Tis passing strange, for I declare  
Such statements give me mirth,  
For our demands most moderate are,  
We only want the earth.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>James Connolly 'We Only Want the Earth' *Songs of Freedom* 1907 <https://www.marxists.org/archive/connolly/1907/xx/wewnerth.htm>