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Emma Davis

A Rebel's Guide to Alexandra Kollontai

Review by Alexandra Day

■ Alexandra Kollontai was a revolutionary socialist and Marxist-feminist at the outset of the twentieth century. She is most well-known for her participation in the Russian revolutions of 1905 and 1917, as well as her role in establishing International Working Women's Day. She was also known for her work as Commissar for Social Welfare and her strong opposition to the First World War. Throughout her career, Kollontai located the struggle for women's liberation at the centre of the struggle for socialism and demonstrated how intertwined these issues were.

In her early writings, she presented a world where socialism could free women from their 'double labour' as both workers and mothers through communal facilities. She believed that were revolution to succeed, women's independence and autonomy was of great importance.

Emma Davis's newest entry in the *Rebel's Guide* series presents the case why Kollontai is a relevant figure for our times. Her legacy has been hotly contested in the decades since her death. Some have argued that she was 'only' a feminist, who believed in the separation of men and women's organising, while others have seen her as a forebearer of concepts like privilege theory and intersectionality. Her later career and writings under Stalin have also caused some to overlook the body of work she completed in the early twentieth century. Nevertheless, Davis makes the compelling argument that we should appraise Kollontai as a Marxist. Davis outlines how Kollontai understood the connection between women's liberation and the struggle of ordinary working people against capitalism. Furthermore, she also highlights the class divide which existed within the women's movement. Kollontai and other revolutionaries knew that bourgeois feminists and working-class women's goals were unaligned, yet they continued to involve themselves in the same struggles as they saw their potential for radicalising more people.

These two lessons are essential for socialist campaigns on women's rights such as Repeal, though they are also applicable to other struggles, like the climate movement. This is a struggle which can only be won if individual issues like plastic consumption and fossil fuels are tied to the capitalist system behind them, rather than viewed as free-floating issues which, once eliminated, will not require any substantial system change. Furthermore, the movement is one which encompasses individuals from diverse social backgrounds. This must be considered when making arguments from a socialist perspective and organising within the broader movement.

Kollontai was born in St. Petersburg in 1872 to an aristocratic yet relatively progressive family. She grew up alongside the emergence of industrialisation in Russia, which drastically changed the experience of working life as millions of peasants moved from field to factory. This change was not for the better, as conditions in factories were brutal. Women workers were even worse off than their male counterparts. They often worked fourteen-hour days and earned as little as one-fifth of the average male wage. Sexual harassment and rape at the hands of managers were also commonplace. Women who remained peasants did not have a better lot in life. They continued to face gruelling conditions working on farms as well as immense sexual control. Peasant families were routinely fined if their daughters were not married by the age of seventeen.

For women of Kollontai's upbringing, the pressure to "marry well" was the dominating factor in their lives. When Kollontai chose an engineer, Vladimir Kollontai, as her lover, her parents were disappointed with what they felt was a socially 'inferior' match.

It was during the trip across Europe organised by her parents to dissuade her from a marriage that Kollontai first encountered Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels' *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) and Engel's *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884). For Marx and Engels, women's oppression was from the beginning an integral component of their analysis of class society. These writings were to influence Kollontai's understanding of how the struggle for women's freedom was bound to the struggle against capitalism. Though Kollontai later married Vladimir, she did not find the happiness she expected from married life. She later recalled that "the happy life of a housewife and spouse became for me a cage".

It was in 1894 that things changed. Kollontai was inspired by the strike of two thousand women at the Laferme Cigarette Factory against the barbaric treatment of the working class by Tsar Nicholas II. Furthermore, the conditions she witnessed in the factories owned by her husband made the horrors of daily life for workers clear to Kollontai. She later reflected that "I could not lead a happy, peaceful life when the working population was so terribly enslaved. I simply had to join this movement". Amidst the strikes waves that dominated the years from 1896 to 1898, Kollontai was inspired by the presence of women workers at the forefront. She joined other revolutionaries, such as Nadezhda Krupskaya, in spreading illegal pamphlets, raising strike funds, and offering evening classes for women. Kollontai recognised in her 1919 collection *Women Workers and the Struggle for Their Rights* that the women's movement was inseparable from the general workers' movement, with both men and women taking an equal role in factory riots. Working women could find greater solidarity among working men than with ruling-class women. This facet of Kollontai's argument positioned her against other feminist trends which called for female separatism. This position is particularly relevant today in a world where companies applaud themselves for having female CEOs, and 'women billionaires' make news, while millions of women in the global south work in sweatshop conditions and female homelessness remains epidemic worldwide.

By 1905, it became clear that the women's movement was far from homogenous. Though the movement encompassed women of all social backgrounds, Kollontai was not convinced that fighting for middle-class women would benefit working-class women. Though she recognised that all women experienced sexual oppression, not all women experienced oppression in the same way. Class shaped the material differences between their experiences of oppression. Voting rights did little to lessen the economic and domestic burdens placed on the shoulders of working women. However, she still insisted that socialists must be involved in the struggle for equality, including the right to vote, on the principle of standing up to all forms of oppression. Kollontai helped organise groups of working-class women to discuss their specific needs and provide material support, such as childcare and laundry facilities, alongside evening classes. Bourgeois feminists feared working-class women taking political leadership would allow the movement to become more radicalised.

Alexandra Kollontai 1922

In 1908, they (unsuccessfully) requested that the Tsar's police keep Kollontai and other revolutionary feminists out of the first All-Russian Congress of Women. At this conference, one bourgeois feminist argued that political parties should be kept out of the women's movement. A Bolshevik woman countered that women of different classes had drastically differing demands and should be allowed to organise themselves in a manner befitting this. Furthermore, she noted that working-class women should be allowed political autonomy and the right to affiliate with a working-class party. Later, Kollontai spoke of the need for *revolutionary* feminism. She argued that there was no independent 'woman question' but a question which arose as a component of contemporary social problems. In her words, "the liberation of woman as a member of society, a worker, an individual, a wife, and a mother is possible only together with the solution of the general social question, with the fundamental transformation of the present social order".

These disagreements led to the working-class delegates being chased from the conference, with twelve being arrested the following day.

The conference had revealed the stratification of the women's movement - for bourgeois feminists, equality within the existing system was enough. For working-class women, the existing system would never provide liberation. Kollontai responded to the events of the congress in her 1909 book, *The Social Basis of the Woman Question.* In this, she further demonstrated how the women's movement could unite around certain questions, but ultimately its interests were divided. For bourgeois women, equality with men would afford them a greater opportunity to exploit working people whereas for working-class women, "equal rights with men would mean only an equal share in inequality". She also further developed the theories of Engels in demonstrating how women's oppression was not based in their biology, but in the rise of class, private property and the hierarchal family structure. Kollontai concluded that the full socialisation of labour at home and complete political, educational and workplace equality for women was essential for women's liberation - this was only possible through revolution.

Time was to prove that revolution was less than a decade away. With so many men sent to the front, women were dominant in the workforce. They were at the heart of the strikes and protests of spring 1917. The women textile workers of Petrograd, described in early 1917 by a Tsarist official as a “store of combustible material”, were the first to strike and take to the streets on Working Women’s Day, calling on their male counterparts to follow their lead. They were marching against the brutal First World War which had already claimed so many lives and sparked famine conditions across Russia. In the days that followed, more and more workers left (or were locked out from) major factories across the city and joined the strikes, joined by housewives. Their banners read, “Down with war! Down with high prices! Down with hunger! Bread for the workers!” Many women workers who were the wives of soldiers even entered barracks, demanding that soldiers joined the strikes and laid down their arms. This was a significant blow for the Tsar’s police, who had relied on soldiers to beat down the uprising. The workers acted as a finely-oiled machine, with Bolshevik women such as Nina Agadzhanova and Alexandra Singer taking the reins of freeing political prisoners, organising communication and setting up armed groups of workers (Red Guards) to monitor the streets. Tsar Nicholas II swiftly abdicated and was replaced by the “dual power” of a Provisional Government and the Soviets.

Kollontai, who was exiled to Norway in early 1917, upon hearing of the revolution returned to Russia by train and by sledge. She brought a telegram from Lenin entitled *Letters from Afar,* which warned revolutionary workers from forming alliances with the liberal, capitalist classes that made up the Provisional Government. On arrival, Kollontai joined the protests of soldiers and soldiers’ widows and wives, which demanded an end to the war. Her experiences of the women’s movement, along with her reading of the *Letters from Afar,* led Kollontai to disagree with the editors of the party newspaper, Josef Stalin and Lev Kamenev, on what direction the revolution should take. They argued that the revolution in Russia should stop at a bourgeois stage, so that capitalism could fully develop in Russia and allow the working-class to become ‘ready’ for socialism. Kollontai insisted that the fight could not cease and had to press on to build a new Russia. Her arguments resonated with the workers who had been on the frontlines struggling for change and she was appointed delegate for the Petrograd Soviet in March of that year. Following the October insurrection against the Provisional Government, Kollontai helped organise a Peasant and Working Women’s Congress in which over 500 delegates discussed what women hoped to see emerge from the new Russia. Despite their role at the forefront of the revolutionary movement, decades of oppression meant that men still occupied the majority of positions in leadership bodies. Marx envisioned how this “muck of ages” (sexism, racism and bigotry) could be eventually shed by the working class through revolution. Kollontai continued to argue in this time that the party must include women’s needs in its programme and that their participation in the struggle was essential for their own emancipation. She was elected Commissar for Social Welfare at the end of 1917 and began drafting decrees alongside other female revolutionaries which were to break down numerous barriers for women. Divorce was legalised, hereditary laws were abolished and the legal distinction between ‘legitimate’ and ‘illegitimate’ children was dissolved. Women were also given four months maternity leave and equal pay between men and women was established. These decrees helped to lessen the grip of the family unit on women’s lives throughout Russia. Furthermore, women’s domestic burdens were dealt with practically. Kollontai helped set up communal nurseries, canteens, laundries, schools and even the first state run maternity hospital. These facilities helped to lift women’s work from the home. These changes were not evenly accepted by working women, who feared ‘losing’ their children or partners. Many women had internalised dominant bourgeois ideas about sex and the family, and these ideas proved difficult to shift. Nevertheless, persistent debate and positive experiences of socialised facilities made the decrees successful. The tremendous work which bringing these facilities to fruition entailed caused Kollontai to suffer a heart attack in January 1919, which limited her political activity in the following months. The latter years of Kollontai’s political career are not dealt with in the same detail by Davis. This is somewhat disappointing, as her later conservative ‘turn’ deserves to be grappled with if we are to learn from it. Following the turmoil suffered by the Bolsheviks during the civil war, Stalin formed a faction within the party based on bureaucracy, which eventually selected him as the leader of the party in 1923. The only thing which could have thrown a lifeline to the Russian revolution at that point was a revolution in another country, which Stalin’s bureaucracy opposed.

In 1922, Kollontai was relocated to Norway as an ‘overseas ambassador’, a position which effectively excised her from the party’s activities. Her acceptance of this position, perhaps a reflection of the retreat of revolutionary Russia, meant that the gains made for women in the previous two decades were eroded. Sexual freedoms were deemed ‘bourgeois degeneracy’ and ‘anti-Marxist’ by the new regime. The necessity of workers for the state machine meant that marriage and the nuclear family were promoted to increase birth rates. Divorce was made prohibitively expensive and abortion was banned. State propaganda further promoted the role of mother to women, offering prizes for those with many children. This was a sad departure from the liberating direction which the women’s movement had taken a mere decade earlier.

Though Kollontai withdrew from her post as diplomat during the 1936 Moscow Show Trial in protest, she largely continued to work on behalf of the Stalinist state. In 1948, Kollontai penned an article speaking of the woman’s “natural duty” to be a mother and the “mistress of her own home”. Such writing was a far cry from her dedication to the cause of liberating women from the home and sexual oppression. Davis's reluctance to devote much time to this makes some sense as the general purpose of the *Rebel's Guide* series is more to reframe historical figures for our own times. As such, it can be argued that it is not the point of the work to engage with this aspect of Kollontai's life too deeply.

The evolution of Kollontai's political career demonstrates the tragic shadow cast by Stalinism onto the legacy of the 1917 Revolution. Nevertheless, there is much to be taken from her activism and writings for the modern day. Much like the other entries into the *Rebel's Guide* series, Davis spends the greater part of her work framing Kollontai's activities and writing in a modern context as opposed to producing a pure biography. In a world where austerity has thrown millions into unbearable poverty, women still face the disproportionate burden of the cuts. Women are still paid less than men across the board. Kollontai's arguments for collective struggle remain true and powerful to this day. Revisiting her work demonstrates how sexism and inequality can only be overcome by a socialist revolution - one which is as urgently needed in 2019 as it was in 1917.

Introduction Paul O'Brien,
Afterword Paul Foot

Shelley's Revolutionary Year: The Peterloo writings of the poet Shelley

Review by Ciarán O'Rourke

In the aftermath of the Peterloo Massacre of 1819, in which over seven hundred unarmed civilian demonstrators were injured and eleven killed, by cavalry sent by local magistrates to disperse the crowd, Percy Shelley's impulse was to mourn the "people starved and stabbed in the untilled field". Comparing "England" to an "old, mad, blind, despised, and dying king", Shelley excoriated those actual "Rulers who neither see, nor feel, nor know, / But leech-like to their fainting country cling" – sucking the blood, like Marx's later "vampire" capitalists, of the working people whose labour they both demanded and disdained. Later, Shelley addressed the survivors themselves, and in terms that connected the oppression they suffered as a group with the work they performed and the distribution of wealth that resulted:

Men of England, wherefore plough
For the lords who lay ye low?
Wherefore weave with toil and care
The rich robes your tyrants wear?

Wherefore feed, and clothe, and save,
From the cradle to the grave
Those ungrateful drones who would
Drain your sweat - nay, drink your blood?

Peterloo had unleashed the poet into something close to a class analysis of his society, governed increasingly by force under Lord Liverpool's Tory administration.

The event stands in history as an emblematic and explosive manifestation of the abhorrence of establishment elites for the democratic rights of a subjugated majority; it was a singular atrocity, but also an omen, in which "the painted veil" of social relations was momentarily lifted, revealing the violence beneath. Indeed, as Paul O'Brien notes, versions of "Peterloo" have "been played out on many occasions in the past two hundred years", including on "Bloody Sunday in Derry in 1972" and in "the battle of Orgreave during the miners' strike in 1984." In this respect, the massacre may be understood as holding out to us today that same question which Shelley was clear in answering in 1819: which side are you on? As this selection of the poet's writings from that year makes plain, the brutality of the Peterloo attack and the pervasiveness of the subsequent cover-up was in fact a catalyst for one of the most productive and incendiary creative periods of his life – and as such serves to foreground the political impetus of a figure too often portrayed as an imaginative if overly earnest dreamer, or the prodigal literary son of the (ultimately reactionary) William Wordsworth. This book serves as a corrective to both of these interpretations.

Born in 1792 into a minor aristocratic family, expelled from Oxford for publishing a pamphlet on atheism, obsessed with French revolutionary discourse and the relatively recent rebellions in Ireland, Shelley burned bright and died young (in a boating accident in 1822): he is known today, after decades of critical near-invisibility, as one of the most gifted English poets of the nineteenth century. He was also the most radical.

If Shelley's instinct in life was to resist all forms of entrenched authority (religious and political), his distinction as a Romantic was to crystallise this rebellion into an often heart-quickening poetry and an incisive style of prose argumentation that together – and despite the occasional limitations of his perspective - sought without fail to kindle and keep alive the revolutionary promise of his times. As Paul Foot helpfully summarises, "Shelley's enormous talents were used not to butter up the rulers of society", as has been the case of many other prominent writers, then and now, "but to attack those rulers from every vantage point." If Shelley sometimes vacillated on questions that later socialists have held dear – questions of universal suffrage, the roles of capital and private property in society, or the validity (and methods) of revolutionary insurrection over political reform – his concern was always to unmask the structures of power that dominated his society. He set out to find in nature, in the upsurge of democratic and nationalist movements across Europe, and in the individuality of his own sensations, the stirrings of a world-transforming change, both spiritual and material.

In this sense, the Shelley of mystical visions, celebrated by W. B. Yeats, and the Shelley of inspired insight and radical action, beloved of Karl and Eleanor Marx, among many others, were inseparably the same – as this book valuably reminds us.

For all his sweeping intuition as to the spiritual unity of the universe ("The One remains, the Many change and pass"), Shelley was incapable of imagining the world without also recognising the social antagonisms of human society as such. What is slavery, he declares:

'Tis to work and have such pay
As just keeps life from day to day
In your limbs, as in a cell
For the tyrants' use to dwell,

So that ye for them are made
Loom, & plough, & sword,& spade,
With or without your own will bent
To their defence & nourishment.

'Tis to see your children weak,
With their mothers pine & peak,
When the winter winds are bleak,—
They are dying whilst I speak.

Shelley's hatred for the institutions and privileges of his own class, his insistent recognition of the vicious force with which these last were defended, could also at times shapeshift into a sense of personal isolation and despondency – a feeling all "Me", as he once wrote, "who am as a nerve o'er which do creep / The else unfelt oppressions of the earth". More often, however, Shelley presented a vision of the earth in motion, in which the turning seasons and the all-too-palpable pains of social oppression could both be galvanised "to repeal / Large codes of fraud and woe" – a vision in which the "sneer of cold command" of ruling elites was by its very nature vulnerable to these "boundless", surging forces of transformation the poet discerned. Amid all the destruction of his times – from the bloody final acts of the French revolution, to the unfettered butchery of the Napoleonic and Peninsular wars, to the savage repression enforced against Irish and domestic populations – Shelley had an uncanny ability to draw the outlines of a new society, urging rebels the world over "To defy Power, which seems omnipotent; / To love, and bear; to hope till Hope creates / From its own wreck the thing it contemplates". As in this passage, there are moments in the sweep and rush of Shelley's writing that seem the very distillation of revolutionary struggle.

Of course, in re-claiming the work from a politically anemic and largely conservative literary tradition, there is always the risk of heroising the poet into another kind of myth – of erecting an image of radical purity in place of the much messier reality that was Shelley's life and personality. Here, for instance, the furious compassion and searing political fire of "Ballad of a Starving Mother" is praised by the editors (and quite rightly, too), and yet the powerful and even callous solipsism that at times defined Shelley's own marital relationships, first with Harriet Westbrook and then with Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, goes unmentioned. Such qualities were erratic, and were perhaps intensified by Shelley's youth; and yet it is surely difficult *not* to perceive Shelley's sometimes extreme self-absorption at the emotional and physical expense of the women around him as a reflex of his status as a man of many entitlements in an intensely gender-divided society – a society of which, as we have seen, Shelley was an outspoken critic. Such biographical complexity is lacking from the portrait of the poet we receive in this volume, which seems a loss: partly because socialists deserve a fuller picture of the past and the literary figures whom they are encouraged to quote, and partly because a socialism sanitised of human contradiction will surely fail to live up to its name. This would be a final defeat, for us and for Shelley, the poet who dedicated his work to the winds and "Wild Spirit" of renewal, "Destroyer and preserver" both – and who met, in the "Autumn" of world history in which he lived, the vista of "Pestilence-stricken multitudes" with his own enduring challenge: "Be through my lips to unawakened earth // The trumpet of a prophecy! O, Wind, / If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?"

Jeffrey Leddon

The Labour Hercules: The Irish Citizen Army and Irish Republicanism 1913-23

Review by Paul O'Brien

Labour and Republicanism

History has not been kind to the Irish Citizen Army. Therefore the publication of this extensive survey of the movement is to be welcomed. This is a scholarly exploration of the ICA that has utilised the recently released Military Service Pension Files to examine the military and political evolution of the movement. The core of the book is about the relationship between Labour and Republicanism and this is its most interesting and contentious element. The emphasis on the events surrounding the ICA's participation in the 1916 Rising and Leddon's contention that by March 1914 the ICA espoused a republican ideology and evolved into a republican army overlooks the labour and working-class origins and ethos of the organisation.

The ICA was born out of the events surrounding the Dublin Lockout in 1913. After Bloody Sunday in August 1913 both Larkin and Connolly were convinced that workers needed an organisation of their own to protect picket lines and union meetings from assault by the police and the hired thugs of the employers. That November Captain Jack White proposed a drilling scheme for locked out workers. Within a fortnight the first 'red army' anywhere in the world had been formed; 1,200 had enrolled and drilling had commenced. In reality the difference between those who enrolled in a fit of enthusiasm and the numbers who turned up for training was substantial. The ICA was not exactly a 'Red Army' perhaps a 'Red Guard' is a more apt description. Ledden illustrates the way that both Larkin and the ITGWU embraced republicanism and separatism from the very beginning and this reflected a deep seated tradition held by the most political section of the working-class in Dublin. Working-class republicanism was an essential component of Larkin's politics. In the first issue of the *Irish Worker* Larkin outlined a statement of principles that gave almost equal weight to the nationalist and socialist ideals of the ITGWU. If the red banner was flying over one corner of Liberty Hall, the green banner was flying just as prominently over the other corner.

The Citizen Army was never central to the lockout; even if it made the police more circumspect about attacking the workers. As the dispute petered out in early 1914 attendances at parades diminished and the organisation was practically moribund. Up to this point a number of ITGWU members had hoped that Connolly's slogan 'the cause of Ireland is the cause of labour, the cause of labour is the cause of Ireland' could unite the red and green in a fight for a new Ireland based on the principles of Tone, Mitchell, Lalor, and the socialist ideals of Larkin and Connolly. But the leadership of the Volunteers feared that support for the strike would cause divisions in the movement; others, who were employers themselves, were openly hostile to the ITGWU.

Defeat and Reorganisation

In late January 1914, as the strike petered out, it seemed to a number of activists that the ICA had ceased to be relevant. In the changed circumstances a number of workers transferred their support from the ICA to the Volunteers. The decimation of the ITGWU in the course of the lock-out took its toll on the union and its leaders. Given the dearth of working class militancy Larkin's republican politics came to the fore.

The resurgence of the ICA coincided with an upturn in the political atmosphere. Opposition to the war was growing, especially as the threat of conscription in Ireland became a possibility. The split in the Volunteers had convinced the Irish Republican Brotherhood that now was the time to strike against the old enemy. A hint of rebellion was in the air and Connolly in the pages of the *Workers' Republic* fanned the flames.

Captain White tried to smooth the strained relationship between the Citizen Army and the Irish Volunteers. In April 1914 White made an offer on his own initiative to place two battalions of the Citizen Army at the disposal of the Volunteer executive, if they would allow them to remain an independent body, affiliated to the Volunteers. When this was refused White tendered his resignation as chairman of the ICA and Jim Larkin was elected to take his place. White's resignation was an indication of the tensions within the ICA between those who believed that it should be a 'Red Guard' for the labour movement and the republican current who wanted the ICA to play a part in the broader nationalist movement.

After Larkin's departure for America in In September 1914, Connolly took command of the ICA. Connolly's pamphlet *The Reconquest of Ireland,* which was published by the ITGWU in 1915,is the key to understanding the direction in which Connolly took the Citizen Army. His aim was to put labour in the forefront of the national struggle. Given the crisis thrown up by the war in Europe the ICA could be the catalyst that could unite all sections of the nationalist movement in a revolutionary fight against the British presence in Ireland, while maintaining its political independence within the broader movement. This was a difficult position for Connolly to sustain. The danger of liquidating the labour movement into the broader nationalist camp was always present, or of making political concessions that marginalised the labour programme in the name of unity. Despite his Marxist background, nowhere in Connolly's writing is there a fundamental critique of republican ideology, at most there is tactical advice offered to the republicans about the need to engage in open political activity.

`The weakest section of the book deals with the role of the ICA in the period after the Civil War and the decline and eventual dissolution of the ICA in 1934. The concluding chapter on the legacy of the ICA offers little of political interest. Nevertheless, this is a book worth reading and an important addition to the history of the period.