
THE BOLSHEVIKS AND THE GENEALOGY OF THE WOMAN QUESTION

Every age in Russian history has had its "woman question," even before the term itself was invented. Peter the Great (1682–1725) forcibly insisted that noble women attend official balls, thus integrating the two sexes in public for the first time after centuries of upper-class women's seclusion. Catherine the Great (1762–96) tried to institute equal education for girls and boys so that young women could become better wives and mothers. The nineteenth-century intelligentsia dreamed of liberating women so they could join in the common cause of reform and revolution.

The history of the woman question in Russia has usually been written as if it were about real women. Yet it is really about myths, different myths at different times, but nonetheless provocative, tenacious, contradictory myths. In order to understand the Bolsheviks' entrance onto the political stage in 1917, some of these myths should be examined to show that whatever genuine idealism was at work, the ideals of "liberating" women, including them in the public sphere, always contained a degree of instrumentalism, a sense that transforming women's place in society and the state represented an opportunity that was only partially about women themselves.

This chapter throws the Russian woman question back on itself in order to highlight some of the roots of ambivalence which were to plague the Bolshevik leaders once they assumed power in 1917. Why were women the question? Who were the questioners? How did this question relate to other dilemmas facing the Bolsheviks, not only as leaders of a ruling party but also as leaders of a revolutionary state? In what ways was the creation of the "new woman" essential to the creation of the "new man" and the new political order? Yet in what ways was it shunted aside as a lesser issue, one which could always be solved later?

This chapter does not attempt to provide a comprehensive history of the woman question before the Bolshevik Revolution.¹ Rather it explores several arenas in which gender issues presented themselves: in everyday language and proverbs, in state policy, and in the political writings of revolutionaries. Whereas previous historians have tended to focus on concrete political movements and on women activists themselves, I suggest that we need to look between the lines at the *myths* of women's emancipation and how these were constructed. As I will try to show, gender difference was a subject of much ambivalence for Russian thinkers in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries because it invoked not only a hope that women would join in the revolutionary struggle but also a fear that they would sabotage that struggle or that in attending to their needs and interests the movement would become divided. Revolutionaries of all stripes in the late nineteenth century found differences of any kind problematic because of the paramount importance attached to unity and discipline in the face of the overwhelming might of the tsarist autocracy. Highlighting or even attending to gender differences ran the risk of distracting participants from the "important" issues of the day.

The Bolsheviks themselves, with the exception of Aleksandra Kollontai, the foremost Bolshevik theoretician of women's issues, wrote virtually nothing original on the subject of women's emancipation before 1917, choosing instead to borrow from the canon of contemporary Marxist thinking.² They were also quite late in coming to this arena. As Kollontai noted, they had done virtually nothing by the time of the 1905 revolution, and it can readily be shown they did not really get work under way for women until after 1913, when demographics, economics, and political pressures combined to force them to take up these issues lest others steal a march on them.

Yet they existed in a revolutionary culture saturated with references to the woman question. That women should be included in the revolution and emancipated through wage labor became one of the orthodoxies of the revolution. However, along with formal ideas of women's emancipation, the intelligentsia which came to power in 1917 also imbibed unspoken assumptions from Russian culture and native revolutionary traditions. These included particularly a tendency to make *revoliutsionnerki* (revolutionary women) into political saints and a deep-seated, unexamined aversion to the "female" (including the woman question itself, which in Russian is literally "the female question") because it was either frivolous or less than human or distracted from the "larger" cause of the moment.

There are thus two main arguments in this chapter. One suggests that the Bolshevik interest in transforming gender relations had roots deep in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century dreams of Westernizing and engineering human souls. In different ways women were viewed as raw

material on which aspiring reformers could work their transformations. At the same time women were the citizen-mothers who could transmit a new culture to later generations.

The second argument suggests that nineteenth-century social thinkers incorporated into their ideals about women a profound misogyny concerning traits and attributes marked as female. The highest ideal of even the most "feminist" advocates of women's emancipation in the nineteenth century centered on the notion that, in the words of M. L. Mikhailov, "there should be nothing feminine in women except their sex"; women should be emancipated to live "purely human" lives.³ If the fetters of "femininity" and female existence could be removed, then women could be freed to become full members of the society and the body politic. The highest ideal was to integrate women into society and the state, not to work separately on their behalf. Any "special" programs, institutions, and social benefits (beyond a few obvious ones like pregnancy and maternity leaves) were considered suspect.

The Bolshevik approaches to the woman question which emerged in the 1920s carried the signs of this combination of revolutionary orthodoxy (everyone knew that any proper revolution had to liberate women) and deep ambivalence (but very few people wanted to devote time, energy, and resources to this project). In part because of this combination of orthodoxy and ambivalence, the Bolsheviks turned to special efforts among women workers only when they most needed their "elemental" energies and when they finally could see that the revolution under way would not be complete without women's involvement as citizens and comrades.

Language and Gender

A dominant element in the worldview of Bolsheviks and of the Russian population as a whole was the notion of women as more backward (*otstalyi*) than men. Literally "staying behind," this meant that they were failing to keep up with the changes of a society that was gradually modernizing and Westernizing. A man from the lower classes, many felt, might have served in the army; he might have traveled on the railroad; he might have been to the city. But what of the peasant or working-class woman? She remained more closely tied to traditional village life even if she was in the city—hence more likely to be illiterate, superstitious, religious, and attached to older ways of doing things and to older kin relations.

Lenin railed on many occasions against the "patriarchalness" of Russian life. He denounced "patriarchal immobility" and "personal dependence." In typical Marxist fashion he saw the development of industry as positive

— for women because it would both increase their mobility and decrease their dependence on their husbands and fathers.⁴

— One of the most enduring legacies that the Bolsheviks had to contend with were entrenched popular notions of gender difference and its immutability. This certainty of the nearly unbridgeable gap between males and females can be seen in proverbs and phrases used every day:

- I thought I saw two people, but it was only a man [*muzhik*] and a woman [*baba*].
- A chicken is not a bird and a woman [*baba*] is not a person.
- Mariia is no comrade to Ivan.⁵

— Peasants ascribed a wide range of negative qualities to women: gossip, nagging, emotionality, illogicality (or "female logic," as it was known in Russian), confinement ("a woman's path runs from the stove to the threshold"), and small-mindedness ("Let a woman into heaven and she'll take her cow with her").

At the same time, however, many proverbs conveyed a complementarity between men and women and praised women's resourcefulness. The wife should be a hard worker ("Let the wife be like a cow so long as she is strong") and a good housekeeper ("Not the dress but the housekeeping makes the girl beautiful"). A good wife brought immeasurable value to a household: "God help the bachelor, the wife will help the married man"; "The yard is crying for a master, the house for a mistress"; "If there is a housekeeper [*khoziaika*], there is no fear of the beggar's bag"; "The wife does not beat her husband but brings him under her disposition."⁶

Russian Orthodox Church sources also insisted on women's leading role in the family. While public life was primarily men's sphere of activity, domestic life and family were women's: "Here she is in her native element, her kingdom; here she is mistress [*gospozha*] and cannot be replaced by anyone; all her virtues reveal themselves. Without a woman the house is cold, arid, lacking in warmth from the heart; the family is a discordant and haphazard conjuncture of people."⁷

While Russian popular life had strong notions of male-female difference and even of separate spheres, there was not a "cult of domesticity" in the West European and American sense that women were perceived as helpless, incapable, angels in the home, while men were businesslike, external-minded, and so on. Although upper-class women did have to fight against being treated like "dolls" or "butterflies" with no important social role to play, upper-class men faced a similar problem of idleness and irrelevance in the larger society. In the lower classes both men and women worked long hard hours in the field and the factory; in the upper classes both men and women lived off the revenues from their estates. For this reason gender differences were much less pronounced than class differences. This was

undoubtedly one reason few Russians turned to feminism. As many members of the intelligentsia commented in the late nineteenth century, the two sexes shared an "equal rightlessness" under the rigid hand of the autocracy.⁸

However much women might be respected for their resourcefulness and their managerial capabilities in the home, no man wanted to be called a baba. "Who has close ties with a baba becomes a baba himself," common wisdom pronounced. "A baba's the same as a devil. They have the same weight." In one of Russia's most famous folk songs the Cossack rebel Stenka Razin throws his new bride overboard into the Volga River rather than let his comrades accuse him of being too attached to her and hence a baba.⁹ In one of Alexander Blok's poems, soldiers taunt their comrade as a baba when he shows too much emotion over the death of his girlfriend.¹⁰ As another character in a nineteenth-century play comments, "If a man weeps, they call him a baba, and this nickname is worse than anything the human mind can invent."¹¹ When writers wanted to criticize the weakness of the Provisional Government, which immediately preceded the Bolshevik seizure of power, there was no more damning term than to call it a "lemonade government," implying that it was too soft to rule effectively.¹² A baba thus could not remain a baba and still be a comrade. As we will see, for all these reasons the baba served as an important foil to the comrade for both women and men, marking behaviors and attitudes which were not considered sufficiently revolutionary and dedicated to the cause of building a new order.

State Involvement in Integrating the Two Sexes

Russian historians have long agreed with Pavel Miliukov, an important turn-of-the-century liberal, that "in Russia the state exerted enormous influence upon the social organization whereas in the West the social organization conditioned the state system."¹³ No history of the woman question can begin without attention to the ways in which questions of transforming gender relations originated at the state level long before they were taken up by the intelligentsia in the nineteenth century. Eighteenth-century tsarist rulers intervened in matters of gender for basically the same reasons that the Bolsheviks did, namely, to break the power of kin relations, to increase the loyalty of individuals and groups toward the state, and to undermine the power of the primary competing organization, the Russian Orthodox Church.

Peter the Great, the renowned "tsar transformer" and "civilizer" of Russia, made a concerted effort to change not only the forms of government but also social relations more broadly. In one of his first acts upon returning

to Russia from Europe in 1698, Peter lopped off the beards of his male courtiers so they would appear more Western. If only they looked more European, more practical, more "modern," then maybe he would be able to instill a Western work ethic and values.¹⁴

Decrees of 1702 and 1714 freed Russia's subjects to make their own choices in marriage (rather than having them dictated by their parents and relatives) but stipulated that noblemen could not marry until they learned geometry and basic arithmetic while noblewomen could not marry until they had learned to sign their names. In 1718 Peter's chief magistrate of police, Anton Divier, announced a new decree on *assemblées* designed as gatherings "not only for amusement but also for business." All ladies over the age of ten in the capital city were required to attend these *assemblées* under threat of punishment.¹⁵ Through this new decree Peter broke with centuries of traditional gender segregation in which women of the upper classes were secluded in the *terem*, or upper part of the house.¹⁶

Throughout the nineteenth and into the twentieth centuries notions of women's "emancipation" rested firmly on this principle of integration. Any attempts to separate women from men, even in the interests of providing them with special attention, were perceived as a return to the *terem* and women's isolation from current events in the public sphere. In addition, Peter's decrees paved the way for thinking that the state had a responsibility to legislate ostensibly private matters such as dress and beards, marriages, and social occasions.

A half century later the government of Catherine II (1762-96) and her education minister, Count Ivan Betskoi, sought to create more active social involvement in the public sphere through changes in education. This was the beginning of the famous concept of the "engineering of the human soul." The environmentalism of Betskoi's reforms remained relatively unchanged under the Bolsheviks. The main motor for social change, educators argued consistently from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries, lay in changing the environment in which children were raised and particularly in taking them away from their natal environment, which could provide them only with "unhealthy" instincts.¹⁷

Since part of Catherine's goal was to pass on certain "rules of upbringing" to posterity, she considered the education of girls as important as that of boys. Initially she in fact envisaged a curriculum no different for girls than for boys. In time, however, this came to seem utopian. A later government commission determined instead that the goal of upbringing for young women should be to make them "good homemakers, faithful wives, and caring mothers."¹⁸ The poet Sumarokov praised the cultured mothers from Catherine's Smolnyi Institute for Girls, writing of the "enlightened offspring" they would produce.¹⁹

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Companionate Marriage and Integration into the Intelligentsia

The notion that a wife could be not only a housekeeper but also a companion began to appear in the highest reaches of Russian society as early as the middle of the eighteenth century. Evidence of this can be seen in the "Testament" left by Russia's first historian, Vasily Tatishchev, to his son: "Remember that your wife is not your slave, but your comrade [*tovarishch'*], your assistant [*pomoshchnitsa*]." For the educated classes isolated from the vast majority of their countrymen by differences of language and custom, maximizing the numbers of educated women in their midst thus became an important goal in and of itself. That this desire to include women was fraught with ambiguity can be seen, however, in the amendment Tatishchev added: "In order to preserve yourself, you must not be under your wife's power."²⁰ As we shall see, the history of later efforts to emancipate women were also much informed by this triangular representation of women as comrade and assistant, yet also potential threat.

The initial appearance of "gentry revolutionaries" in Russia, the famous Decembrists, was marked by a strong separation of the sexes. None of the Decembrists' secret societies extended membership to women. Nor did they plan to allow women voting rights in their ideal society, though they did expect them to take the oath of allegiance to the state. One society, the Union of Welfare, however, considered giving them an auxiliary role in organizing "philanthropic and private societies" and in attending to the education of their children "in accordance with the principles of virtue and faith."²¹

Women gained fame in the Decembrist movement, as students of Russian history well know, only after the principal male actors had been tried and sentenced to exile in Siberia. The recognition the women achieved (including poems and eulogies, both contemporary and posthumous) was based not on their own revolutionary actions so much as on their relations to their menfolk as the "Decembrist wives" (*zheny dekabristov* or *dekabristki*). In following their husbands into exile, they made a principled statement which separated them unequivocally from "fashionable women" and brought them up to the level of revolutionary, heroic men. By raising some traditional gender attributes (such as subservience to their husbands) to new heights yet subverting others (taking independent action instead of bowing to convention), the Decembrist wives began a tradition of women's entry into the canon of political saints' lives. This mixture of independence with subordination in the name of supporting the "larger" goals of others became emblematic of the roles women revolutionaries were supposed to play for the next hundred years. Even a century later, one Russian revolu-



tionary woman wrote of "the fascinating image" of these women "shining now with unfading brightness."²²

In the early part of the nineteenth century a number of ideas emerged which directly fostered a concern with women's emancipation: West European Enlightenment notions of equality, liberty, fraternity, and citizenship; Freemasonic revivals of early Christian values; and German philosophical notions of the ideal of personality (*lichnost'*), a notion which in Russia came to mean that women as well as men should be allowed their full intellectual development.²³

In the 1830s and 1840s West European ideas of "the citizen mother," the "emancipated woman," and "the fallen woman" made their way into the Russian intellectual and social climate at the very moment that the "intelligentsia" was being born in opposition to the tsarist state. Through the influence of Fourier, Enfantin, and other French utopian thinkers, the ideas of socialism and women's emancipation emerged on Russian soil at the same time and became intertwined.²⁴

The process of integrating women in society got under way in a serious way in the 1840s with the development of salons where the intellectual elite met and talked about current ideas. In these settings women played an important role as hostesses, setting the tone and encouraging writers to submit their works for criticisms and suggestions. In some salons leading figures such as Avdotia Panaeva encouraged egalitarian behavior, discouraging social snubbing of less elite members of the group, especially the *raznochintsy*, writers and thinkers of nonnoble ancestry.²⁵

Women's participation was valued not only for their lofty inspiration but also for the financial support they gave struggling publishers of such intelligentsia journals as *Sovremennik* (The Contemporary), a journal which, not coincidentally, served as the leading outlet for discussion of the woman question in the 1860s.²⁶ Because Russian upper-class women could maintain property independent from men, they were valued from the beginning as a source of funds for legal and illegal revolutionary movements. Women contributed significant funds to the Bolsheviks as well during their years in emigration and in the underground in Russia.

The early intelligentsia also began to discuss male-female relations in light of George Sand's notions of the "emancipated woman" who could make her own decisions in love and marriage.²⁷ In the ensuing years gentry men now assumed that it was their duty toward women to "liberate" the women in their own immediate circles and give them their freedom if they fell in love outside the bonds of marriage. These were men alienated from the main structures of their society who sought to understand the sources of injustice under tsarism. In the salons they began to discuss the injustices of marriages undertaken for convenience, the social costs of the illegality

of divorce, the despotism of the patriarchal noble family, and women's legal inferiorities in inheritance and property.²⁸ Since they could neither imagine nor implement solutions to the huge social ills of the day such as serfdom, they began to focus on trying to change their own behaviors and on "emancipating" the women nearest them.

One effect of the idealism of the men of the forties in general was a nonseparation of "public" and "private." This was to become a defining characteristic of the nineteenth-century intelligentsia which encouraged men to define their ideals of women as comrades. Private behavior was considered as significant and as telling as public actions. Within this context women came to play a role as the inspirers of men, the links between men, and the objects of male tutelage.

Backwardness and Male Tutelage of Women

The Russian loss of the Crimean War in 1856 brought a concern with the nation's backwardness (*otstalost'*) to the fore. In response many public thinkers began to link that backwardness with women's specific roles in giving a better upbringing (*vospitanie*) to the next generation so as to help propel Russia to modernization. Leading reformers such as Nikolai Pirogov argued that not only should women be allowed to serve in professional capacities as nurses, but they should also receive at least some higher education so they could cease to be mere "dolls" in society and prove useful to the nation.²⁹ As mothers and educators, women would also save Russia from the egocentric, acquisitive values of contemporary Western Europe.³⁰

Discussions of women's issues in the 1860s and 1870s occurred simultaneously in a number of forums, under different auspices and to different ends. Most important, there were different types of solutions proposed: state-oriented solutions which called on the government to intervene and foster new educational institutions; revolutionary solutions which advocated the abolition of the family as a starting point for social change; and activist solutions in which the intelligentsia and particularly its more radical wings sought to act out their ideals of correct gender behavior in everyday life. Embedded in each of these types of solution one can identify varying and sometimes conflicting notions of ideal womanhood: the citizen-mother who herself required education and upbringing if she was to raise children more suited for service to the fatherland; the woman companion who would support her male comrade in his "struggles" (often a code word for reform or revolution); and the woman revolutionary who would mix the nitric acid and glycerin to make explosives. These ideals were in turn counterpoised to negative stereotypes—the doll, the society lady who

had no ideas of her own, the passive woman held tightly in the vise of the patriarchal, backward life of the Russian gentry and popular classes.

Women's moral role began to be of concern to public figures at this time. In 1856 Avraam Norov, minister of education, wrote to the tsar about education for girls: "On it depends both the masses' understandings as to their personal obligations and every sort of possible improvement in family morals and in general in all citizenship, on which the woman has such a powerful influence."³¹ As with Catherine the Great before him, Alexander II's main interest in women's education lay in their future roles as "good wives and useful mothers."³²

Within society, reformers pushed for women's higher education for a number of reasons: a perception that young people, both female and male, had to educate themselves before they could bring culture to the masses and thus transform the nation; a new focus on the liberal ideas of Western thinkers such as John Stuart Mill who claimed that if women were held back in their intellectual and spiritual development, men could not advance either; a growing awareness among women of the upper classes seeking independent professions that they needed education and training if they wanted to take part in the new professions (journalism, medicine, and law all received an important stimulus in Alexander II's reforms); and a changing demographic situation as the gentry became less able to support unmarried female relatives (as a consequence of the emancipation of their main work force, the peasantry) and as those women began to seek alternative means of survival.³³

Radical women adamantly rejected any "feminism," however, as historians have often noted. Vera Figner, one of the most prominent revolutionary women, commented in a later memoir about her life in Zurich in the early 1870s:

The students abroad, as a whole, were not proponents of the woman question and reacted with a smile to any sort of mention of it. We had arrived, not worrying about being pioneers or about realizing the actual solution to this question: to us the woman question didn't seem to need a solution. It was passé: equality of men and women in principle already existed in the sixties and left to the next generation a precious heritage of democratic ideas.³⁴

This reaction to the woman question "with a smile" recurred often in the Soviet period as well. This ubiquitous smile seems to have arisen from the negative valence of what was considered "female." Was it not philistine to worry about specifically female problems? Was there not something petty about focusing on inequalities and injustices between males and females when revolution was on the agenda? Many revolutionary groups made statements that marriage was immoral and the family should be abolished, but they did not focus further on daily life or on women's own positions

except to the extent that they, as responsible males, could "rescue" women from the prisons of their families.³⁵

Revolutionary women offered an ambiguous legacy to generations of later women activists in their insistence that the whole sphere of private life was incompatible with revolutionary dedication. As Olga Liubatovich, active in the 1870s and sometimes known as the Amazonka, wrote in 1906, "Yes, it's a sin for revolutionaries to start a family. Men and women both must stand alone, like soldiers under a hail of bullets."³⁶ Mothering and full revolutionary commitment to many seemed incompatible. As Ekaterina Breshkovskaia, known as the "grandmother of the revolution" in many accounts, told in her memoirs: "The conflict between my love for the child and my love for the revolution and for the freedom of Russia robbed me of many a night's sleep. I knew that I could not be a mother and still be revolutionist."³⁷ As a result Breshkovskaia gave her child to her sister to raise and chose instead to devote herself to the revolution, thus pouring her motherhood into the future state and society. Men, of course, also had to choose between personal family life and dedication to the cause of social change as full-time professional revolutionaries. Yet, interestingly, as we shall see, they did not strive to become fathers of the revolution in the same way that women were asked to devote their maternal instincts to the cause of revolution.

Conservatives and radicals waged a battle royal over women's "types" and women's "destiny" (*naznachenie*), "the significance of women in the family and society," and their "purpose in society."³⁸ Yet both attached enormous importance to this question in an instrumental fashion: what women were to do for society and the state rather than what women themselves might gain. Exceptional individuals such as economic journalist Mariia Vernadskaja called on women to work and stand on their own two feet so they would no longer be dependent on men.³⁹ Yet the bulk of the discourse created by male members of the intelligentsia spoke about women in terms of their service to society rather than considering what society might do for them.⁴⁰

Male members of the intelligentsia spent a great deal of thought and energy trying to find ways to "rescue" women from the bonds of their natal families so they could pursue education and independent lives. As early as the 1830s, for example, Mikhail Bakunin, the future leader of anarchism, devoted himself to "fixing" the relations among the men and women in his circle and above all to "liberating" his sister Varvara from a marriage which Bakunin considered insufficiently replete with spiritual harmony.⁴¹ Nikolai Chernyshevskii wrote that a man's highest goal was to subordinate himself to the desires of his wife.

Yet just how patronizing and self-aggrandizing this behavior was can be seen in a passage from Peter Kropotkin's memoirs:

With some severity the nihilist would repulse the "lady" who chattered trivia and boasted her "femininity" in her manners and the refinement of her toilette. He would say directly to her: "How can you not be ashamed to chatter such inanities and wear a chignon of false hair?" The nihilist wanted, above all, to see in a woman a comrade, a person, not a doll or a "bread-and-butter miss." . . . A nihilist would never give up his seat for a woman entering the room if he saw she wasn't tired and there were other seats in the room. He treated her like a comrade. But if a girl, even one he didn't know at all, showed an interest in learning something, he would give her lessons and was ready to go halfway across the city to help her.⁴²

This passage is noteworthy for several reasons. It outlines the dominant role of the male figure who decides whether a given woman is worthy of his attention and then judges those found wanting (the frivolous "ladies"). It suggests that he can help to form the young lady (now transformed linguistically from "woman" to "girl") through private lessons so she will join him as a "comrade" and a "person." In so doing, he does not hesitate to sacrifice his own ease to walk halfway across the city. Yet there is no mention of the woman's role in seeking out and incorporating new ideas, in following her own ideals and dreams. She plays no active role in this process.

Chernyshevskii's novel *What Is To Be Done?* provides another paradigmatic example of this ambivalence toward women in a writer supposedly committed to women's emancipation. On the one hand, *What Is To Be Done?* is usually understood as a *Bildungsroman* of Vera Pavlovna's coming of age: she is rescued from her family; she founds a sewing cooperative; she is allowed to choose the man she really loves while her first husband conveniently fakes a suicide. Western and Russian observers alike have therefore taken the novel as the locus classicus of women's emancipation. It provided essential female character development over time and pointed to one of the means for women to find themselves (by creating useful work for themselves and other women in anticipation of the revolution).

Yet in the background of the novel are two competing notions of "tales about new people" (this was the novel's subtitle) and how they should bring about the future society. One competing tale concerns the relationship between the two main male characters, Lopukhin and Kirsanov, who spend long conversations deciding what is best for Vera Pavlovna as they can see (even before she has!) that she has fallen in love with Kirsanov rather than with her husband, Lopukhov. The second competing tale is the characterization of Rakhmetov, who is identified as "belonging to a different breed." Described as "the rigorist," he has taught himself to base his life entirely on certain principles, including the principle not to become entangled in personal relations: "I must suppress any love in myself: to love would mean to bind my hands. . . . I must not love." His one requirement is eating great quantities of beef, and his one pleasure is smoking cigars. All

other pleasures (drinking wine and, above all, having relationships with women) he has rejected.⁴³

The novel centers on both sexuality and asceticism. Its male characters are obsessed with their relationships to their ideas of women: either they as men should devote themselves to anticipating women's every emotion and responding to the point of absenting themselves or they should reject all intimate contact with women as inherently distracting from the larger cause.⁴⁴

While the novel is nominally constructed around the importance of making women equal to men by placing them on the same footing as men, there are nonetheless a number of revealing gender contrasts. One of these is the use of names. Vera Pavlovna is always called by only her first name and patronymic, without a last name, whereas Kirsanov and Lopukhov are almost invariably referred to by their last names; Rakhmetov meanwhile appears not to have a first name at all. Nor is it accidental that Chernyshevskii refers frequently to the differences between his "perspicacious" reader, on the one hand, and his "female" and "common" readers, on the other hand. A third major gender difference can be seen in Rakhmetov's view that women are unable to overcome their strong emotions whereas he, "the extraordinary man," can overcome them through diligent effort.

Equally interesting is the fact that Lenin and other later revolutionaries chose to focus on the character of Rakhmetov to the virtual exclusion of Vera Pavlovna. When Lenin named his most famous revolutionary call-to-arms "What Is To Be Done?" he focused entirely on the development of "professional revolutionaries" and the ways in which they should devote themselves completely to the revolution, shedding all vestiges of amateurism and attachment to private life. No women appear in this work, and self-help cooperatives are denigrated as providing only "trade union [not revolutionary] consciousness." The ideal that Lenin and others took from Chernyshevskii's novel, then, was clearly that one should sleep on a bed of nails and banish all thought of personal relations. If one did sympathize with women's fate, this and other works suggest, then one should show one's manly courage and rescue them without in the process succumbing to sexual distractions.

Comradeship and Purity

As Isaiah Berlin pointed out, the earliest circles of the intelligentsia in the 1840s had been "a dedicated order, almost a secular priesthood."⁴⁵ The earliest groups that began the "movement to the people" in the 1860s also committed themselves to a search for a "revolutionary ethic."⁴⁶ Other major populist groups from this period also sought to create "a religion of equality."⁴⁷

The presence of women in the populist movement became an important part of the search for a revolutionary purity. This was not because of some kind of "natural purity" on the part of women revolutionaries. Rather it was the result of a male desire to see women in symbolic terms which would help them advance their own revolutionary projects. It was a Pygmalion phenomenon. At work was a notion garnered from Russian Orthodoxy that the one who suffered most was therefore the purest. The radical critic Nikolai Dobroliubov, for example, argued that in the family the woman suffers most "under the burden of tyranny" and therefore she would rise up with the strongest protest because "the strongest protest is that which finally rises in the breast of the weakest and most patient."⁴⁸ The elevation of women as "the strong," "the pure," etc., arose in the 1850s and 1860s and continued as long as men were afraid of being weak, soft Oblomovs, in short, of being "feminine." They sought in women the antidote to their own condition.⁴⁹

In the highly moral and self-renouncing atmosphere of the Russian revolutionary movement, women were welcomed "as a test of the males' moral regeneration."⁵⁰ At the same time, though, this elevation of women placed a heavy burden on them. Like holy women described in the books of the medieval saints' lives, these women had to stand higher than other mortals; they had to serve as an image or example (*obrazets*) for others to follow. As Vera Karelina, a woman worker involved in a study group in the 1890s, commented,

What comradeship and purity there was between us! The men treated us girls [*sic*] with consideration and courtesy, and we, in turn, tried to be worthy of their treatment. Among us there were no stupid jokes or coquetry. There was only purity of relations; nor could it have been otherwise. After all, we women had a heavy responsibility. Our behavior had to be an example for newcomers to our ranks as well as for all the other women of our circles.⁵¹

As historian Christine Faure has noted, the woman revolutionary was required to serve as both "the spectator and the saint." The overwhelming desire of male revolutionaries to believe in the saintliness of female revolutionaries often resulted in "freezing the feminine universe in a rather bloodless virtue."⁵² Again and again women activists in Soviet Russia in the 1920s exhorted each other to serve as "examples" to their menfolk and to the masses more generally.⁵³

Class and Gender

In the 1880s and '90s as Marxism began to penetrate into Russia (Marx's *Capital* was first translated into Russian in 1872 before its translation into

any other language), the intelligentsia turned its attention to the proletariat, hoping that it would prove capable of overthrowing tsarism. In shifting their attention to agitation among workers, however, the new Marxists paid even less attention to women's issues than had the populists before them. In 1884, for example, Russia's first Marxist group, "Liberation of Labor," decreed equal voting rights for all citizens without regard to religion or nationality, but made no mention of gender.⁵⁴ Workers' groups, such as the Zubatov and Gapon organizations and the Shidlovskii commission for workers in St. Petersburg, all explicitly excluded women from positions of leadership.⁵⁵

Yet women were now a significant part of the working class. According to the factory inspection report of 1885, women were 22 percent of the factory force in Russia, a portion that grew steadily to 32 percent in 1914, when there were about 660,000 women workers in the whole empire. Female literacy was also rising rapidly. Whereas in 1897 approximately 56 percent of male workers were literate and 21 percent of female workers, those percentages grew to 79 percent and 33 percent respectively in 1913.⁵⁶ Yet despite women's growing literacy rates and their increasing involvement in the work force, male workers and leaders of the labor movements in this period continued to view women as backward, lesser beings who would just as easily cross the picket lines as support a labor action. A few members of the new worker intelligentsia did, however, see a woman worker's backwardness as an opportunity to "enlighten" her, to draw her into the unions, to "make her a comrade."⁵⁷

By 1910 the leading European Marxist works dealing with women's position in society (particularly August Bebel, *Women under Socialism*, and Friedrich Engels, *Origins of the Family*) had begun to appear in Russian translations. From these works and a handful of others (such as those by German Social Democrats Lily Braun and Clara Zetkin), the Russian Marxist movement absorbed certain "orthodoxies" concerning women's position in society: only through revolution and dictatorship of the proletariat could women be freed from exploitation and injustice; progress in that revolutionary effort could best be measured by women's condition; wage labor would serve as the best guarantor of their emancipation by integrating women into the industrial work force; women needed to be freed from the chains of domestic slavery; and they could be the best agents of their own emancipation.⁵⁸

While these tenets gave a foundation for including the woman question within the Russian Marxist paradigm, they nonetheless contained a number of contradictions which affected Bolshevik thinking and ultimately policy-making on these issues. Perhaps the greatest problem, as one scholar has noted, was "the relative neglect of 'the woman question' built into Marxist theory" because of its emphasis on class relations and eco-

conomic determinism.⁵⁹ But there were other problems as well. First among these was the tendency to refer to women only in negative terms—as more backward, ignorant, superstitious, resistant to change, susceptible to incorrect influences than men.⁶⁰ While it may be argued that women in the Russian Empire did on average have lower levels of literacy and less work experience in the industrial labor market than men, nonetheless they lived in a common milieu, had high rates of employment in both urban and rural sectors (particularly as a result of World War I), and showed high levels of political involvement in food riots, workers' strikes, and the like.

A second problem, widespread in Russian Social Democracy, was the tendency to assume that consciousness could come only from outside the individual or group. In particular, there was a marked tendency to treat women workers as empty vessels to be invested with correct class consciousness, without questioning what women themselves might want or need from a political movement claiming to act on their behalf.

Finally, the Social Democrats tended to treat women's issues in a reactive way, i.e., they began to pay attention to questions relating to women primarily when other forces impinged on their consciousness and made women's support necessary to their own success. When German Social Democrats called an international socialist conference devoted to women's issues in 1907, only then did the Russian Social Democrats develop an interest in sending a women's delegation. When women workers gained a vote in 1912 for newly created insurance committees, the Bolsheviks began to agitate among women to insure that they voted for sympathetic party candidates. When the advent of World War I boosted the size of the female work force and that female work force became increasingly dissatisfied with the war, the party reacted by convoking special meetings and demonstrations to capture those discontents.

Male-Female Relations in Early Bolshevik Writings

Vladimir Lenin and Nadezhda Krupskaja, future leaders of the Soviet Communist Party, first tried their hand at writing on women's position in society in 1899 during their first year of marriage in Siberian exile. At the time they were reading and translating a book on trade unionism by one of the most famous husband-wife teams in the history of British socialism, Beatrice and Sidney Webb.⁶¹ Living in a tiny village of 1,300 people in the wilds of Siberia, Lenin and Krupskaja began to hone their skills as political writers and no doubt to address their own relationship as husband and wife.⁶²

In Lenin's writing of this year, his magnum opus *The Development of Capitalism in Russia*, one can see his opposition to "patriarchalism" and

"personal dependence." The only solution to women's inequality must be to draw women out of the family with its "patriarchal immobility" and into industry, which would give them a position independent from their families and husbands.⁶³ Later, in 1919 and 1920, in the thick of the civil war, when Lenin spoke to women workers about housework as "stultifying" and "degrading," it was clear that he decried the influence of the family itself, which he associated with all that was backward, resistant to change.⁶⁴

The one Social Democratic work to directly examine women workers' plight before 1905 was Krupskaja's *The Woman Worker* (*Zhenshchina-Rabotnitsa*, 1899). In three main sections Krupskaja's book addressed the multifaceted nature of women's roles as members of the working class, as wives, and as mothers of the next generation. Krupskaja described the woman worker first and foremost as a potential burden on her husband's involvement in political work. Because she did not understand what her husband was trying to do and saw only danger in his organizing efforts, the wife tried in every way to hinder him, raising quarrels, preventing him from studying, not welcoming his comrades into her home. But men could not do the work alone, Krupskaja argued. If women were not involved in the movement, they could sabotage it in endless ways. Besides, to leave them out of the movement would be the equivalent of leaving half the workers' army unorganized.⁶⁵

As mothers too, women workers should have an interest in the revolution, Krupskaja argued, because in return for their productive labor, they, like all members of society, would benefit. Yet even as Krupskaja praised what the revolution would do for women workers, she berated women on the grounds that they did not know how to take care of their own children. They barely had time to feed them, let alone give them any kind of real upbringing. Often the woman would leave her child in the hands of one of its older siblings, who was then very likely to drop it or drown it or burn it. But even if the woman took care of her child herself, she had no education, no knowledge of the child's organism or of child development. She was guided by habit and superstition. The woman worker, Krupskaja argued, "is completely unprepared for the role of raising children. . . . She doesn't know how and what to teach them."⁶⁶

In her discussions of women as workers and as mothers, Krupskaja (unlike many male commentators, including Lenin) moved beyond an abstract portrayal of women's position to at least mention a few concrete issues affecting women workers, including the problems of wife-beating, harassment by foremen, unequal wages, and undernourishment because of lower wages than men. Still the solution lay always in the future in the bright new world that the revolution would bring about. "A fully independent position is something that she [the woman worker] can attain only at the same time as the victory of the proletariat."⁶⁷ Krupskaja placed her faith

in the socialized child care which the revolution would bring: "The woman female worker cannot fail to value all the benefits of socialized upbringing. Maternal instinct compels her to desire socialized upbringing."⁶⁸

Many Bolsheviks regarded women workers and peasants as "the least conscious, the most downtrodden and conservative part of the proletariat, . . . not the daughter but the stepdaughter in our laboring family."⁶⁹ This virtually exclusive focus on women's negative qualities made even the most committed revolutionaries reluctant to engage in agitation and propaganda work among women in the factories.

Fighting Feminists and Mensheviks

In the years 1905–17 the Bolshevik Party concerned itself very little with women's issues, despite a theoretical commitment to women's emancipation.⁷⁰ In her memoirs Kollontai recounted that she often had to fight as much against her own party as against those she characterized as "bourgeois equal-righters," i.e., liberal feminists. Many political activists on the left, including some of the most famous women revolutionaries of the day such as Vera Zasulich, saw special work among the female proletariat as "superfluous," a "harmful deviation towards feminism."⁷¹

What was wrong with feminism? Why the harsh rebuke for Kollontai's organizing efforts? There were two main reasons within the Marxist canon of thought: first, the conviction that feminists' main interests lay in "bourgeois" issues and hence they would betray the working class once they had made gains in the interests of the women of their own class; and second, a fear that women workers would be drawn into this "bourgeois feminist" movement and away from the class struggle of the proletariat. Any "particularistic" interests (except those of the working class, which were considered "universal") would undermine the solidarity of the revolution, the discipline and unity required to overthrow the autocracy.⁷²

Historians have disagreed about the causes which finally persuaded the Bolshevik Party, despite years of silence, to take up women's issues more seriously. Did the Bolsheviks become interested in organizing women in 1913 because women workers themselves were more politically active?⁷³ Or did they begin organizing women workers even though women remained as "backward" and "inactive" as ever because they needed to broaden their revolutionary base?⁷⁴ Or did biographical factors, especially pressure by strong individuals such as Aleksandra Kollontai and Inessa Armand, play a determining role in convincing the party to become involved in organizing women workers?⁷⁵

The most likely explanation for the Bolsheviks' increased, though still uneven, attention to women workers between 1905 and 1917 can be found

in their fears that other groups would organize women workers first. The threats could be seen on all sides: in tsarist state-sponsored police socialism, which allowed the formation of special women's groups; in feminists' appeals to working women on philanthropic and self-help grounds; in Menshevik proposals for maternity insurance; in right-wing Black Hundreds' appeals to women's lowest instincts as well as those in men. All of these represented threats because they could potentially turn women workers away from socialism.

As the situation in urban Russia became increasingly unstable, the Bolsheviks found themselves beleaguered. They were forced to battle for one of the newest constituencies in the modern political arena—women workers whose votes they courted for insurance committees, for city soviets, and ultimately for the Constituent Assembly. At the same time, as we shall see, the intervention of World War I played into their hands: peace, bread, and land, the Bolsheviks' major slogans, provided a particularly strong appeal to the female urban masses, who were forced to shoulder the burden of the war effort and bear the brunt of suffering on the home front.⁷⁶

The number of organizations competing for women workers' allegiances was growing. In 1904 the Assembly of Russian Factory Workers, which was organized by Father Gapon and which made its ill-fated pilgrimage to the Winter Palace in January 1905, opened its doors to women and grew to have approximately 1,000 women members out of 9,000.⁷⁷ In 1905 the feminist Union of Equal Rights and the Society for Mutual Aid to Working Women began organizing women workers and domestic servants.⁷⁸

The Second International socialist movement and particularly the German Social Democratic Party influenced the young Russian Social Democratic Party in important ways in these years. In 1907 the Second International meeting in Stuttgart passed a resolution requiring all socialist parties to fight for women's political rights. At the same time it authorized the founding of a new International Women's Secretariat, of which Clara Zetkin was named the first director, while *Die Gleichheit*, the German women's journal she had edited since 1891, was made its leading publication. This activity sparked the interest of Lenin and Kollontai. Both were impressed with Zetkin, who showed the same kind of hard-line resolve in the face of hated "opportunists" which they themselves cultivated.⁷⁹ From this time Lenin made a point of sending handpicked delegates with prearranged agendas to attend international women's conferences, though he more often called for smashing his rivals Plekhanov and Kautsky than for attending to women's needs.⁸⁰

After the 1907 Stuttgart meeting Kollontai returned to Russia with what she considered "a fully mature plan for work among women workers." The problem, of course, was getting the Russian Social Democratic Party,

which disdained all contact with anything remotely resembling upper-class feminism, to acknowledge that work among women might be advantageous. Organizations of women separate from men clearly made them nervous. When Kollontai tried to have a meeting "for women only," someone responded with a sign announcing "a meeting for men only."⁸¹

Kollontai focused her main defense of special organizing for women on the inroads that feminists, with the help of some socialist revolutionaries, were making among women workers through the distribution of journals, brochures, and appeals; the convening of special meetings; and the submission of petitions to the State Duma. When the feminists decided to call a national women's congress in 1908, Kollontai found that the Social Democrats were willing to take advantage of the congress as a platform to propagate socialist ideas.⁸² In typical fashion the Bolsheviks were willing to take over any available forum to spread their ideals. Kollontai herself in later years criticized them for not encouraging workers' own independent development and initiative (*samodeiatel'nost'*) but rather "using" them.⁸³

The ambivalence of the Bolshevik wing of the Social Democratic Party toward the feminist conference of 1908 can be seen especially in the Bolsheviks' decision at the last moment to choose a representative, Vera Slutskaia, who had openly opposed sending anyone to the congress and to appoint a man (identified only as Sergei) as the leader of their delegation.⁸⁴ On the eve of the congress itself the Bolsheviks balked. While the Menshevik-organized Central Bureau of Trade Unions was writing and printing appeals to women workers to attend the congress, Kollontai and her comrades learned that the Bolshevik Petersburg committee was printing an appeal to women workers to boycott the very same congress. It took all of Kollontai's oratorical talents to persuade the Petersburg committee that here was a "backward layer" (women workers) which could be reached and converted.⁸⁵

To the feminists themselves Kollontai addressed her *Social Bases of the Woman Question*, which appeared just after their congress. In classic Marxist fashion she denied the existence of "any special women's question separate from the social question of our day." Given that women's subordinate position had been brought about by economic factors, only a general transformation of the world along economic and social lines could bring about women's true freedom and equal rights. If feminists wanted to awaken the consciousness of their "sisters," that was fine. It was not fine, however, for them to try to steal women proletarians into their ranks. What the bourgeois feminist could not do was "to warm the suffering proletarian soul, to promise women that bright future on which are turned the eyes of all exploited humanity." All the equal rights in the world could not save working women from their sufferings if capitalism was not also abolished. Hence there could be no general "woman question." The *feministki* should

give up their illusions and follow their own class interests, relinquishing any claims to winning over their sister *proletarki*.⁸⁶

Formulating the Woman Question in Print

The Bolsheviks reached out more seriously to women workers in 1913–14 as a wave of unrest mounted in the industrial regions of the country. In response to that unrest the tsarist government decreed a national social insurance project for workplace disabilities in 1912 which gave women the right to vote alongside men and be elected to the factory insurance committees.⁸⁷ Articles in *Pravda* immediately called on women to join the unions and become involved in the committees.⁸⁸

In the fall and winter of 1913 a group of leading Bolshevik women began to lay plans for a journal for women which would be edited simultaneously in Paris and St. Petersburg.⁸⁹ Lenin himself closely followed the progress of the new journal, *Rabotnitsa* (The woman worker), even writing to Armand that she should take up work on the journal "super-energetically."⁹⁰

The degree to which the journal was committed to women's issues and not just to recruiting women into the proletarian movement as a whole was not clear, however. As Krupskaja wrote to one of the leading editors in late 1913, "It's not good to make the first issue exclusively 'female' even if it is to come out just before Women's Day."⁹¹ Armand also noted emphatically, "Women workers do not have special demands separate from general proletarian demands."⁹² Another editor wrote to Krupskaja asking her to request contributions from Lenin for the journal: "For we are not feminists, after all, and very much want the participation of the male estate."⁹³

For all their disclaimers about separatism and feminism, the journal editors felt called upon to explain why they were creating a journal specially for women workers. "Does the woman worker understand why her life is so hard?" Inessa Armand asked rhetorically in announcing the forthcoming journal. If women were not drawn into the general proletarian movement, she told male workers, they would be "a huge hindrance in your path."⁹⁴

Krupskaja wrote a draft editorial summarizing her definition of the woman question:

The "woman question" for male and female workers is a question how to draw the backward masses of women workers into organization, how best to explain to them their interests, how best to make them into comrades in the general struggle. Solidarity among the male and female workers, a general cause, general goals, a general path to that goal—that is the solution to the "woman" question in the working-class environment. . . . The journal *Rabotnitsa* will strive to explain to unconscious women workers their inter-

ests, to show them the commonality of their interests with the interests of the whole working class. Our journal will try to help women workers become conscious [*soznatel'nye*] and to become organized [*sorganizovat'sia*].⁹⁵

The party and trade unions would thus play a tutelary role, enlisting and recruiting women into the larger movement. As Kollontai said, the party would become working women's "true defender."⁹⁶ *Rabotnitsa* would explain women's "true interests" to them.

The tsarist authorities found the journal as subversive as its editors intended it to be and confiscated three of the seven initial issues before closing the journal down completely in July 1914. They objected with particular vehemence to articles on health and safety in factories, infant mortality, and any hint of industrial strikes.⁹⁷ On the eve of International Women's Day (February 23, 1914) the police struck in a concerted fashion, arresting all but one of the leading editors of *Rabotnitsa* as they were assembled to go over the final copy and arresting as well many of the women workers who had been carefully groomed as speakers for meetings to be held the next day.⁹⁸

Who were these women who came to form the initial core of the Bolshevik women's movement in Russia? The journal's editors and main instigators (Nadezhda Krupskaja, Inessa Armand, Konkordia Samoilo, Praskovia Kudelli, Liudmilla Menzhinskaia, Elena Rozmirovich, Liudmilla Stal', Zlata Lilina, and Anna Elizarova) were from the middle to upper classes, with higher educations. They were linked by ties that went back many years—to philanthropic work before the 1880s for Armand and Elizarova, to the Mobile Museum of Pedagogical Aids (which spread revolutionary propaganda among workers in the 1890s), and above all, to professional revolutionary work in the years after 1905, work which they carried out in both Europe and Russia. The editors of the initial board of *Rabotnitsa* were also closely linked to important men and other women in the movement: Krupskaja, Elizarova, and Armand to Lenin as wife, sister, and close friend; Liudmilla Menzhinskaia to her brother, future head of the national secret police, and to a sister who was also active in the revolutionary movement; Lilina to her husband, Grigorii Zinoviev, head of the Leningrad party; Rozmirovich to her sister Evgeniia Bosh (a leading figure in the civil war), her first husband, Aleksandr Troianovskii, and her more famous second husband, N. V. Krylenko, commissar of justice and chief procurator under Stalin; Samoilo to her husband, Arkadii Samoilo (also a Bolshevik activist).⁹⁹ Many counted each other as their best friends. In 1914 the editorial group ranged in age from fifty-five (Kudelli) and fifty (Elizarova, Lenin's older sister) to twenty-seven (Rozmirovich). Samoilo and Menzhinskaia were in their late thirties; Armand, Stal', and Krupskaja were in their forties.

The leading women workers involved in the journal, Klavdiia Nikolaeva

and Aleksandra Artiukhina, both later to become directors of the party's women's section, were younger (ages twenty-one and twenty-five respectively). Nikolaeva had trained as a bookbinder and had met Kollontai at the club which the latter had briefly organized, the Mutual Aid Society for Women Workers, in 1907, after which she had accompanied her to the first congress of feminists in 1908.¹⁰⁰ Artiukhina, initially a weaver, had worked in the metalworkers' union and written an article for *Pravda* signed "Shura the metalworker," which got her arrested and led her onto the path of revolution and underground agitation.¹⁰¹

Women and War

The onset of World War I in July 1914 and the resultant military censorship made it impossible to publish left-wing journals or newspapers inside Russia. At the same time, however, growing popular discontent with the war played directly into the Bolsheviks' hands and increased the salience of the woman question, since many of the war issues were perceived as particularly affecting women—losses of male breadwinners and family members, high prices and shortages of food and fuel, especially for those dwelling in the cities, plus speculation in grain prices.¹⁰²

In February 1917 women workers, housewives, and soldiers' wives headed up the food riots which broke out on International Women's Day and which led to the downfall of the autocracy. Women, in Trotsky's account, "more boldly than the men," went up to the soldiers, took hold of their rifles, and beseeched them to join the workers in their protests. This shamed the soldiers into acquiescence, Trotsky reported. Unconsciously underlining the gender contrasts, he described as well how "a mass of women . . . flocked to the municipal дума demanding bread. It was like demanding milk from a he-goat."¹⁰³

Yet even after the fall of the autocracy, the Bolsheviks remained ambivalent about special women's organizations. What, if anything, should they do about mobilizing this raw force of female energy? In early March 1917, only two weeks after the February Revolution which brought down the autocracy and before Lenin and many other leading Bolsheviks had been able to return from exile, Vera Slutskaia, the reluctant Bolshevik delegate to the 1908 feminist congress, came before the Petrograd Executive Committee (of which she was a member) to propose that the party create a special Bureau of Women Workers with women representatives from each of the city's main neighborhoods.¹⁰⁴ The Russian Social Democrats borrowed this notion of a central bureau with its own journal (*Rabotnitsa* was also to be revived) virtually wholesale from the German Social Democratic Party, which had created a network of women representatives in the years

between 1878 and 1908 when the notorious Anti-Socialist Laws had prevented women from participating in German politics alongside men.¹⁰⁵

Slutskaia made her initial request to the Petrograd committee just three days before Kollontai's return to St. Petersburg and four days before the feminists were planning to hold a major demonstration to demand equal rights, thus raising the question whether she was not trying to preempt one or both of these events. Because of resistance in the Petrograd committee, however, Slutskaia had to limit her proposal: the bureau would conduct only agitational work; working women would be organized only within existing proletarian political and trade union institutions, i.e., not in independent women's organizations; and all work would be conducted "in full agreement with the decisions of the Petrograd committee."¹⁰⁶

In March, upon her return to Russia, Kollontai wrote of her fear that the new revolutionary freedoms might pass women by. She turned the usual negative view of women's backwardness on its head. Many feared, she knew, that women would prove to be a conservative force who would bring back the tsar. "The baba will ruin our whole 'freedom'; don't give them any rights," they would say. Kollontai countered this fear, however, by saying:

But wasn't it we women, with our grumbling about hunger, about the disorganization in Russian life, about our poverty and the sufferings born of the war who awakened a popular wrath in our husbands and sons, preparing that bonfire which on March 1 blazed up in the cleansing fire of revolution? And didn't we women go first out to the streets in order to struggle with our brothers for freedom, and even if necessary to die for it?¹⁰⁷

Kollontai's other major concern in this period was that the "equal-righters" had "taken over the minds of women workers and grouped the soldiers' wives around themselves."¹⁰⁸ This was no idle threat, as a major feminist demonstration on March 20, 1920, brought some 35,000-40,000 women and men onto the streets of Petrograd. Three weeks later, on April 12, a demonstration of soldiers' wives (known as *soldatki*) brought another 15,000 people to the streets. These still further convinced Kollontai of the need to have a special party apparatus for work among women.¹⁰⁹

At this time Kollontai spoke directly to Lenin and Krupskaja (who had just returned to Russia) about the question of organizing the *soldatki*. Lenin agreed that it would be a good idea to "win them over," but when Kollontai used the occasion to lobby for a "special approach" in the form of a commission or a bureau for work among women, Krupskaja rejected the idea. Lenin, however, gave Kollontai his go-ahead to convene some of the women in the party to discuss the matter. Of her comrades only Nikolaeva and one other woman worker supported her proposal. Armand was lukewarm. Lilina, Stal', and Armand edited a resolution Kollontai wrote

calling for a women's conference and removed any reference to separate work among women. Kollontai reacted with dismay and disbelief, hurt that her own colleagues would not support her plan for a special bureau.¹¹⁰

In the summer and fall of 1917 the journal *Rabotnitsa* (which had resumed publishing in May and now emerged as the main organizing center for work among women) organized special women's demonstrations at the Cinizelli Circus and at the Modern Circus on the Petrograd side, an important working-class neighborhood, to address such topics as "The Woman Worker and Inflation," "Who Needs the War?" "Female Labor," "The Protection of Maternity." The Bolshevik woman organizers tried not to allow Mensheviks, Social Revolutionaries, and Anarchists even to attend.¹¹¹

The issues to be used in organizing women workers during the months after February 1917 were clear: the war, inflation, food and fuel shortages, the hardships of women in the war industries, the sufferings of soldiers' wives whose husbands were at the front or were no longer among the living.¹¹² Female activists tried to persuade women workers that their sufferings meant that they should join forces with the Bolsheviks. Even simple factory women could be induced to give speeches vilifying the hated *burzhui* (bourgeoisie):

The capitalists are rich, yet they try to swindle us of every kopeck. They don't consider us people. We have been giving birth under inhuman conditions and living, God help us, like heathens, in cramped quarters, in dirt, without any furniture.¹¹³

At the same time, however, there was a danger that right-wing groups would persuade the working women of the big cities that far from following the Bolsheviks, they should see that they were in fact German spies. According to one account, many women in Petrograd and elsewhere who had joined the party threw in their red membership cards when they heard rumors that Lenin and his cronies were in the pay of the German authorities.¹¹⁴

In the fall of 1917 a major issue became the preparations for the elections to the Constituent Assembly, especially since the Provisional Government had granted women the vote. Kollontai chided the trade unions for not doing enough to prepare women workers (whom she characteristically referred to as "the most backward and least developed part of the working class") for the elections to the assembly. Otherwise they might "strike a great blow" against the Bolsheviks because of their inability to understand party lists. She called on the "comrade men" in the trade unions to wake women workers from their indifference.¹¹⁵ In September 1917 the Petrograd committee gave permission for an "initiative group" of women activists to hold a nonparty conference of women workers to explain why they should

vote for the Bolshevik slate of candidates rather than for the candidates put forth by the feminists and by other groups.¹¹⁶

The Ambivalence of Gender Difference

What then incited the Bolshevik Party to take a more serious attitude toward the woman question in the last years of the old regime? A crucial issue was certainly women's position in the labor force, since by 1917 women accounted for 40 percent of the work force in large-scale industry.¹¹⁷ Many of the key Bolshevik issues of the day (demands for land, peace, and bread) made women seem natural candidates for propaganda and agitation. Other political groups, including feminists and Mensheviks, were courting women's votes as well.

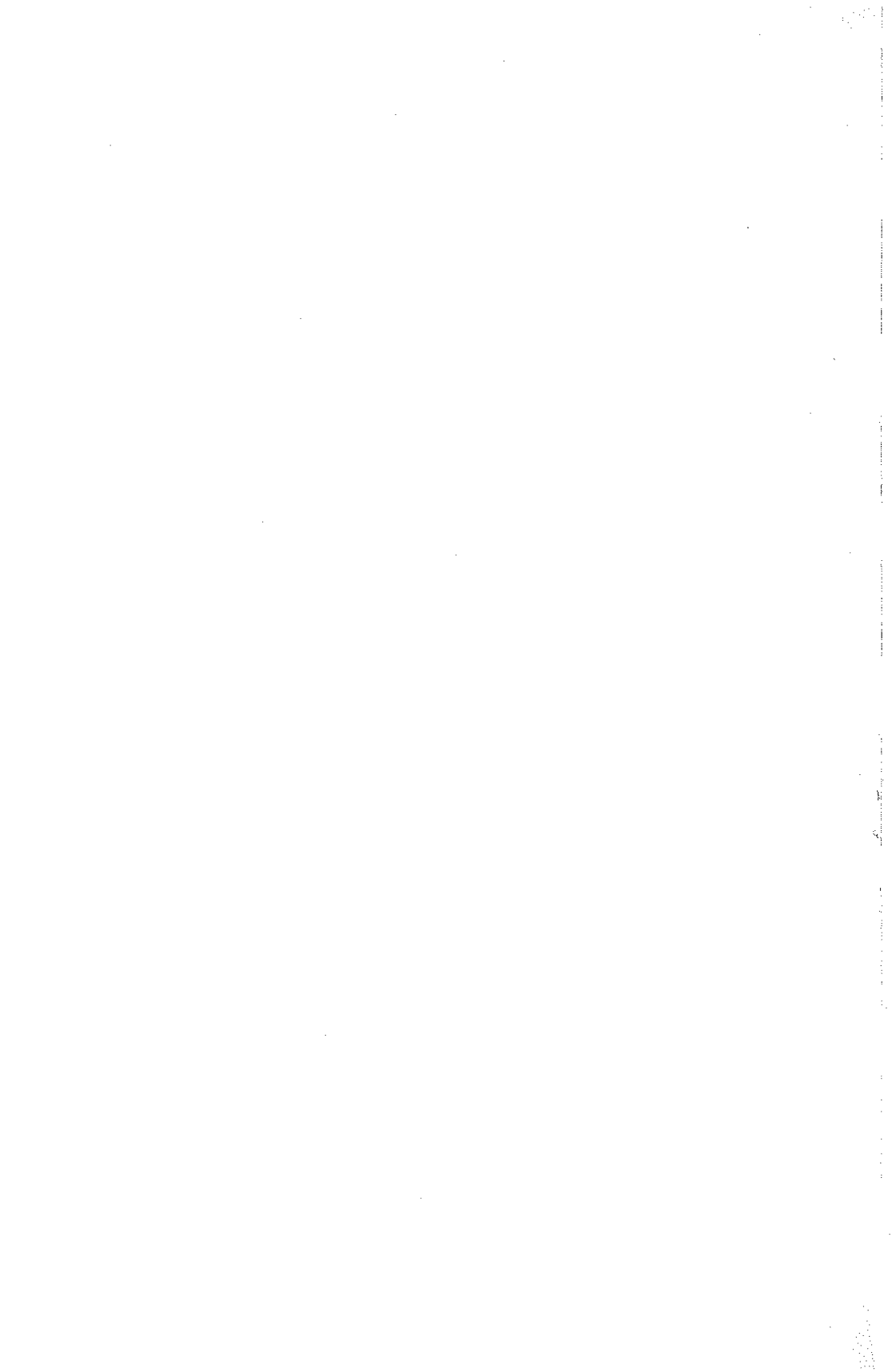
Above all, there was a contingent quality to Bolshevik writings about women. Ultimately Bolshevik attention to the woman question was not primarily focused on women themselves but rather on competition with other groups in society for the allegiances (and in these early years, the votes) of a new group in society. The image of women generated in this period tended to be dominated by qualities of absence and nonaction. Lenin referred to women as "the most backward and immobile element" among workers and as a "brake in all previous revolutions."¹¹⁸ Inessa Armand argued that the task of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party must be to overcome "female passivity."¹¹⁹ Clara Zetkin reported Lenin as saying that the woman worker's "backwardness and her lack of understanding for her husband's revolutionary ideals act as a drag on his fighting spirit, on his determination to fight. They [women] are like tiny worms, gnawing and undermining imperceptibly."¹²⁰

Real issues that Russian women dealt with every day (sexual harassment, job discrimination, overcrowded housing, lack of child care), issues which they raised in letters to the Social Democratic press, were passed over in silence.¹²¹ Women were described in the official Bolshevik press as objects of revolutionary agitation. They were to be "educated," given a new "upbringing," "brought up to" the level of male workers. As a result of this fixation on women's backwardness and passivity, Bolshevik leaders were themselves taken by surprise by women strikers in February 1917 who "blatantly ignored" the decisions of the district committee when they not only went out on strike but also infected other workers, male and female, with the labor unrest which eventually brought down three hundred years of the Romanov tsarist dynasty.¹²²

Admittedly, male workers and peasants were also castigated for their passivity and described in terms of their need for guidance. But their "maleness" was not implicated. Nor was their gender definition consid-

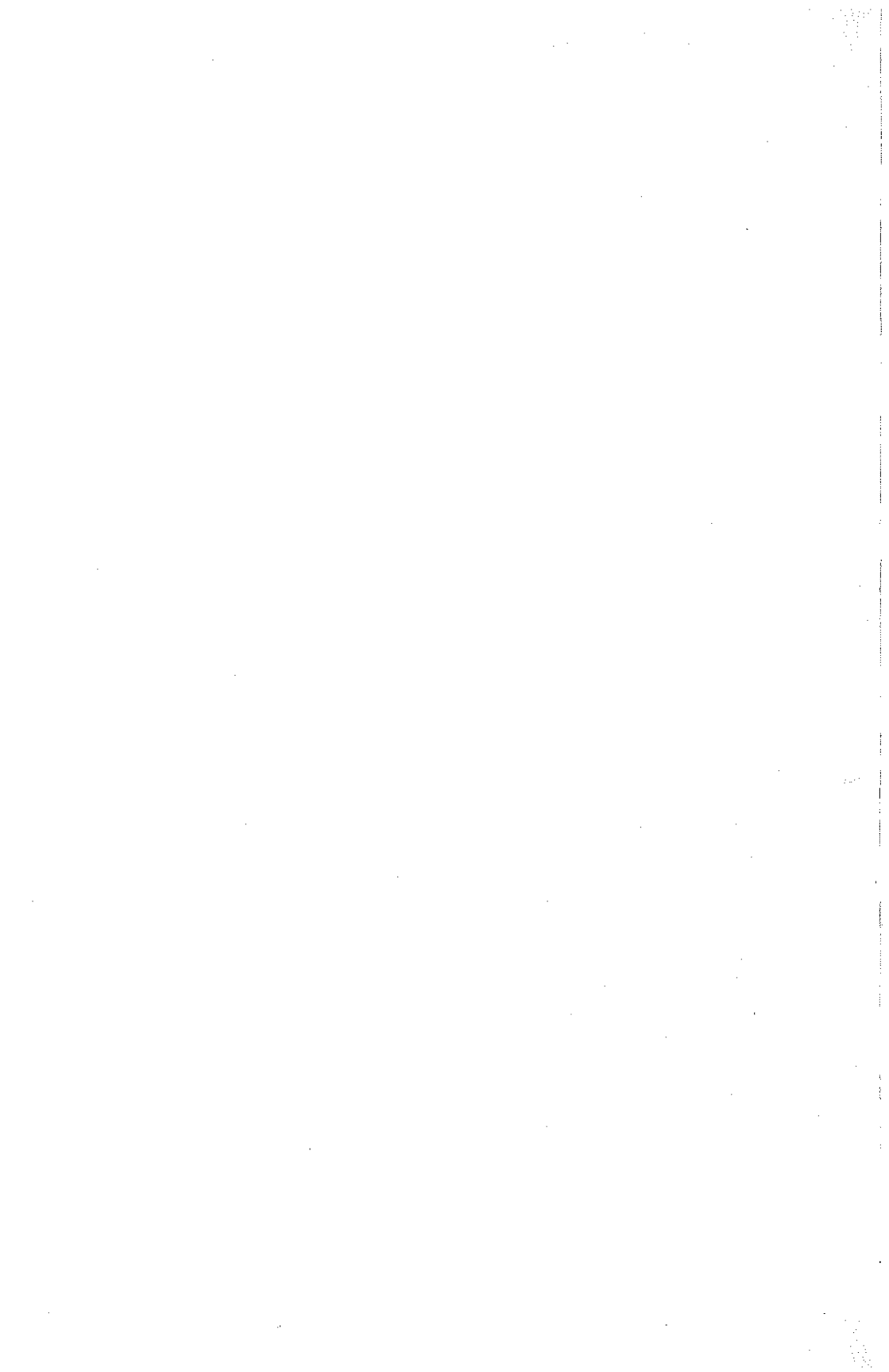
ered a hindrance to be removed so they could be brought up to the level of "humans."

The conundrum of gender difference was exacerbated by the Bolshevik Party's primary commitment to finding class solutions and igniting world revolution. Yet it was clear that they would have to address women's issues if they hoped to compete with other political movements of the day. Creating a proletarian women's movement provided a forum moreover for addressing the international socialist movement based in Germany. But above all, the very negative qualities which made the Bolsheviks ambivalent about involving women in their movement also made women particularly attractive as a vehicle for the new agitation and propaganda. In the symbolic imagery of the day women were portrayed as a kind of tabula rasa, a group "unseduced" (*neiskushennye*) by modern politics. They were to be "awakened," "stirred up" (*vskolykhnut*), "aroused." They were to be brought under the tutelage of the state and "protected" through labor protection and maternity protection. If women were convinced of the need for the defense and building of socialism, then the next generation would follow, and the fall of the old "patriarchalism," so hated by Lenin, would be assured. Sleeping women workers had to be awakened and pressed into service as comrades of the revolution.¹²³ The revolutionaries gradually became convinced that there would be a moment when it would be necessary "to include in our ranks all those women workers who have not been pulled into social-political life. It will be necessary to penetrate into every corner of the remote village, *volost'*, small city in order to wake up and raise up the peasant woman who has not yet awakened, to force her to feel that she is also a human being, a woman citizen, a comrade."¹²⁴



II.

Gender in the Context of State-Making and Civil War



With the seizure of power in October 1917, Bolshevik revolutionaries who had formerly engaged only in underground agitation against the tsarist state became heads of state themselves. In their new positions as rulers they now had to bear the brunt of responsibility for the same problems which had plagued the Provisional Government, especially the war (which soon developed from a war with Europe into a full-fledged civil war) and the attendant problems of food shortages and inflation, plus a disastrous decline in industrial production.

Activists working among women knew full well that women workers and peasants, housewives, and white-collar employees were grumbling about the continuing shortages of food and fuel, the lines for bread and other necessities, and the civil war which broke out in the spring of 1918. Who were the female masses to blame now that the capitalist ministers were out of power? How were activists to direct the animus of the female working masses? As one organizer noted in 1920,

Now there's no [Tsar] Nicholas, no Kerensky [prime minister during the Provisional Government], but we still have war, and hunger is on the rise again. It is understandable that the woman worker who had never heard the word "politics" [*politika*] before 1917 has a hard time understanding such a complicated state of affairs.¹

Women workers complained, "You have deceived us. You told us that there would be plenty, but the opposite is true. Life is growing more difficult."² Others were equally direct: "How long are the accursed Bolsheviks going to torment us? Under the Tsar . . . bread was three kopecks; now it's up to seventy. In the stores all the shelves are empty. Good luck finding even a button. Isn't Soviet power at fault for this? The children are hungry. Isn't Soviet power the reason?"³ Women workers had a particularly difficult time understanding why the Soviet authorities were continuing the war after all their antiwar propaganda.⁴ Newspaper reports commented: "The mood of the women workers is poor. . . . They don't at all understand that we are starving because of the White Guards. They put all the blame on the Soviet government."⁵

In response to the civil war the Bolshevik leadership became extremely sensitive to the moods of the country. Women's moods in the rear, they knew, affected the mood of soldiers at the front. Food issues had brought down the tsarist government. There was no reason they could not again bring down the Bolsheviks themselves.

Food and unrest were not the only reasons for particular attention to female sectors of the population in the 1920s, however. Another was the Bolsheviks' acute awareness that the "proletariat" in whose name they claimed to rule now had a predominantly female composition, since the men had been mobilized to the military front, had moved out of working-class jobs into official positions in national and local governments, or had taken refuge in the countryside. Whereas women had been 25 percent of workers in large-scale industry in 1913, they were 40 percent in 1917 and 46 percent by 1920.⁶ Organizers in the big cities such as Petrograd were particularly cognizant of the fact that if they wanted to increase women's union membership (which in 1918 was less than 10 percent) and decrease the danger of uncontrolled, wildcat strikes, they would have to organize women workers as well as men.⁷

Civil war organizers also feared that women workers were particularly vulnerable to "Black Hundreds" agitation, i.e., agitation by counterrevolutionary elements such as priests, rich peasants (kulaks), and right-wing elites who attempted to scare the population by threatening that the Bolsheviks intended to introduce a second serfdom.⁸ If women were not won over to the Bolshevik side, it was argued, they would hinder efforts to spread revolution within the country.⁹ Incidents did take place in which women played a "counterrevolutionary" role. When Kollontai attempted to appropriate the Aleksandr Nevsky monastery in Petrograd in January 1918, for example, in order to house wounded soldiers, she was met by demonstrations of women and priests holding icons aloft.¹⁰ When the Czech forces stranded in Siberia in May 1918 began revolting against the new Bolshevik authorities, women workers joined the crowds which lynched known Communists.¹¹ When the authorities tried to requisition livestock, local women staged traditional "women's protests" (*bab'ibunty*).¹² They disrupted meetings and kept Bolshevik speakers from conveying their message.¹³ Local women often joined the party when it supplied their neighborhood with food but then left as soon as the food supplies were no longer forthcoming.¹⁴ Gaining women's support was thus, at a minimum, a question of supporting the extension of the new party and state into the cities and the countryside and trying to minimize popular resistance, which often took specifically female forms.¹⁵

In 1918 another motivation for making a special effort to reach women lay in the continued (though temporary) importance of elections to the city soviets. In elections to the Petrograd Soviet in June 1918, for example,

women voted in large numbers against the Bolsheviks. By December 1918 the Bolsheviks had turned this around, so now women were voting for them. In June 1918 twenty-seven women were elected to the soviet; in December, sixty-six women.¹⁶ Even as late as 1919 the Bolsheviks were having trouble preventing the election of Mensheviks to the Kharkov city soviet and blamed women workers, claiming they were particularly susceptible to Menshevik propaganda, which attempted to "play on the sorest strings, to speculate on the empty stomach of women workers, on their ignorance [*temnota*] and lack of consciousness."¹⁷

The new Social Democratic government in Russia was also acutely conscious of international socialist opinion in these years. This consciousness became even stronger from 1920 when the government began organizing an international women's secretariat and international delegations of women trade unionists began visiting from England and elsewhere.

Another important piece in the mosaic of reasons for Bolshevik attention to working women, despite manifold resistance at all levels of society, lay in the fact that a strong female leadership began to develop which gradually became convinced of the importance of mobilizing the female population. This leadership emerged from several main sources. One source was women from the middle and upper classes who had been active in the underground from the 1890s. Many of these women had strong personal ties to each other and to male leaders. They had worked together both abroad and in Russia, as well as serving long sentences together in exile. A second source of female leadership lay in working-class women activists promoted and trained by the women of the intelligentsia, women who were weavers, printers, and tram drivers by profession, who also had seen their share of prison cells and convoys into exile.

Over time this core of dedicated activists, often despite considerable initial reluctance, came to feel that their task was to work on behalf of women despite the resistance and mixed ideological messages they received from the central authorities and local officials in the party. They traveled all over the country carrying out "work among women," as it was known, while officially abjuring all "feminism" as bourgeois and un-Marxist.

In the appeals to women workers and peasants in this period one can see the emergence of a kind of primitive social contract language. Bolshevik pamphlets and leaflets, especially during the civil war, often addressed the question "What has Soviet power given women workers and peasants?" While this style of question was a common idiom of the day, such appeals paid special attention to winning over the sympathies of working women by showing what Soviet power had done for women (particularly in the arena of daily life) and by appealing to women to give their loyalty and their assistance in return.

For Kollontai and other activists the civil war seemed to present a particular opportunity to create "a new attitude toward women," "a revolution" (*perevorot*).¹⁸ An important part of the breakdown in the infamous double standard, the bourgeois duplicity (*dvoistvennost'*) of one life for men (the breadwinners) and another for women (the keepers of the domestic hearth) would be an end to the dichotomy between military matters as the terrain of men and domestic matters as that of women. For Kollontai and her comrades in the women's section the ideal was to have women serve actively in both labor and defense.¹⁹ This would break down the last stereotypes which fed into the inequality of the sexes.

By participating in the defense of the Soviet republic and in the class war, women could be assured of securing their own emancipation and equal rights, Kollontai and others argued: "With their class sensitivity [*chut'e*] women workers intuit [*ugadyvaiut*] the unbreakable link between the full emancipation of women and each new victory of the Red front."²⁰ The "self-sacrificing" work of women in the rear and their active support as medical personnel, telephone operators, quartermasters, political workers, and rank-and-file in the militia army would show the nation that they were ready and able to enjoy full civil rights.

Such appeals were, of course, addressed to the population and written with the explicit aim of winning them over. We hear only one side of the conversation, what the Bolshevik government wanted women workers and peasants to believe. It is not clear therefore whether any true "social contract" developed in this period. Nonetheless activists on behalf of women did often invoke women's loyalty and their services to the revolution in bargaining with the central authorities to win more provisions for women workers and peasants.

Overall the Bolshevik leadership followed three main strategies in appealing to the female population: (1) the establishment of equal rights in legislation; (2) a vigorous program of appeals to women during the civil war and (3) a halting, often conflicted set of policies designed to create somewhat separate (but not overly separate) organizations for women workers (the party women's sections) which would draw women into the political sphere.

These three arenas reveal contrasting approaches to the question of gender sameness and difference. For while the early legislation primarily stressed the common interests of the two genders and the elimination of gender inequalities, the prosecution of the war tended to highlight gender differences (who was to fight and who was to maintain the home front). The establishment of a special women's section of the party in 1918-19 then exacerbated the problem of identity and gender difference.

The new Soviet legislation and the advent of the war raised a number of thorny issues directly affecting definitions of gender and citizenship,

Kollontai's appeal to
 the "new generation" of
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 to create a new
 type of woman.

issues such as military service and service on the home front. What were to be the new definitions of service in this period? Did they have a gendered dimension? To what extent did the war expand notions of traditional gender roles and to what extent did it limit them and tend to make them more rigid?²¹ If service in the Red Army gave male soldiers new access to literacy and familiarity with "soviet" ways of doing things, how were the female masses to gain the same kind of experience?²² To what extent did the war divide women from men despite the revolutionary fervor concerning equality of the sexes?

In addition we must ask to what extent the civil war was a "formative" experience for women and for men in relation to gender issues and the politics of the new regime. Did the general "militarization" of the political culture, which historians have pointed to, affect gender issues as well?²³

In official legislation the regime stressed the rights and duties accorded to the population "without regard to sex" (as we will see in chapter 2). Yet in practice as the authorities sought to create new forms of government and to administer the home front during a time when the front lines were constantly shifting, they made special appeals to women which alternated between newer, "Soviet" notions of women's equality as citizens (an equality given to them by the state) and older, preexisting notions of women's roles as mistresses (*khoziaiki*) in the home. While the authorities usually tried to rise above gender, to make women into "comrades" and "citizens," they nonetheless found it expedient at times to rely on older stereotypes which portrayed women as "managers" of the home, and by extension, of the "home economy."²⁴ Such stereotypes tended not to diminish women's difference from men but rather to emphasize their "domestic" qualities: their compassion for the men at the front (their "tender hearts"), their abilities to shame their menfolk into correct behavior, their housewifely abilities to run the home, and the "sharp eyes" they could bring to ensuring order and supervision on the home front. Women were asked in a variety of ways, despite the apparent gender neutrality of official policy, to extend these qualities to the whole "proletarian family," thus becoming the mothers of the new revolutionary order.

Organizing special women's sections within the party brought into focus what had previously been fairly theoretical questions: Should the party and the unions organize women workers separately from men or in common with them? How were the women's sections to deal with male party members' hostility and female popular indifference to the official "woman question"? Were the conditions of women's emancipation fundamentally the same as those of men's or different? In order to be effective in their work on women's behalf, particularly in efforts to win over women workers and peasants, the women's sections needed to lobby and pressure local and central authorities for the allocation of resources and personnel.

Yet at the same time they needed to prove their loyalty to the party and state in a time of war and postwar disorganization. The central party authorities insisted that the newly created women's sections function primarily as a "technical apparatus" to convey party decrees and directives to the female masses. In the parlance of the day the regime designated the women's sections as "transmission belts" between regime and people. Yet the question of directionality was often confusing: Were they only to convey decrees from the top in a kind of "feminism from above"? Or were they also to convey women's needs and requests from below? How could the two be reconciled without the women's sections themselves being accused of "feminist deviations" (as they often were in this period)?

As in the prerevolutionary period, a major item on the agenda of the new state reformers was the transformation of women workers and peasants from backward, ignorant, immobile creatures into enlightened, active fighters to help win the civil war. Political literacy courses and involvement in the public sphere thus became an important element in all routes to women's advancement. At the same time local males and party organizations often resisted women's involvement on precisely the grounds that they were inexperienced and would hinder "real work." A further tension lay in the conflict between regime interests (e.g., raising labor productivity) and women's interests (e.g., child care, health care, a shorter workday to allow for more time for domestic chores, all of which required money and resources). The area where the party and state proved most effective in mobilizing women's participation was in the traditionally "female" sectors of health, education, and welfare. While this provided an important starting point, nonetheless (as we shall see) contemporaries, including Krupskaja and others, worried that the stereotypes of women's "domestic" functions would continue to dominate.

When the civil war finally began to wind down in the summer and fall of 1920, the women's sections turned their attention away from national tasks (such as support for the Red Army) toward the resolution of more difficult "women's" issues, especially female labor protection under conditions of labor conscription and issues of abortion, motherhood, and prostitution. If the Bolshevik Party initially undertook special efforts on behalf of women in reaction to pressures from other organizations (as I argued in chapter 1), by the end of the civil war the women's sections had begun to come into their own as important lobbying organizations.