
DAILY LIFE AND GENDER TRANSFORMATION

In 1923, to the surprise of many women activists, the issue of everyday life (*byt*) for the first time took on a broad salience beyond the almost clichéd rhetoric of the initial years of the revolution. Activists in the women's sections had, of course, written for years about the need for communal institutions as a solution to women's isolation and oppression in the household. They had beaten the drum of government intervention, but to little avail. Now for a variety of reasons the issue of *byt* spilled over into the general party press and became a subject of controversy and debate.¹

Five years after the October Revolution which brought the Bolsheviks to power, the leaders of the party and the state found themselves able at last to take advantage of what they commonly referred to as "a breathing spell." The civil war had been brought to a conclusion; the New Economic Policy was now under way. Writers and publicists could turn to the social and cultural dimensions of the revolution as well as the political. Lenin signaled this change in his last articles in 1923. While earlier the focus of Bolshevik party work had been on seizing power, he wrote, "now the main emphasis is . . . shifting to peaceful, organizational, 'cultural' work." The entire population, he stressed, "must go through a period of cultural development."²

Revolutionaries, as we have seen, had long considered women's oppression in daily life central to the question of their emancipation. Yet ironically the national discussion of this issue in 1923 turned not so much on questions of women's emancipation as on the harm women would bring to the revolution as non-Communist, untutored, backward, and potentially subversive wives, mothers, and mothers-in-law.

Trotsky opened the discussion of this new topic in an extended series of

articles devoted to the theme "Problems of Everyday Life."³ In one of the first articles Trotsky attempted to come to terms with what might be called the "normalization" of the revolution. "Small deeds," he said, were now the order of the day:

The revolution is, so to speak, "broken up" into partial tasks: it is necessary to repair bridges, learn to read and write, reduce the cost of production of shoes in Soviet factories, combat filth, catch swindlers, extend power cables into the countryside, and so on.⁴

Tomorrow the revolution might demand "readiness to die fearlessly under the banner of communism," but today it demanded "sewing on Soviet buttons."⁵

Trotsky repeated this theme of turning from high revolutionary tasks to "small deeds" in September in a collection of articles entitled *Literature and Revolution*:

We are still soldiers on the march. We have a day of rest. We must wash our shirts, cut and brush our hair, and, above all, clean and grease our rifles. All our present economic and cultural work is nothing but an attempt to bring ourselves into some sort of order between two battles and two marches. The main battles are ahead, and perhaps not so far away. Our time is not yet the time of a new culture, but only the threshold to it.⁶

Trotsky's use of a military metaphor arose no doubt from his training as a soldier and his years of experience as commissar of war. Yet it also suggests that while the revolution might demand soldiering, the postrevolutionary period required attention to the domestic, traditionally distaff, side of life.⁷

In 1923 zhenotdel activists expressed consternation that their persistent attention to the issue of daily life had brought little fruit, yet Trotsky's articles now opened up an avalanche of public discussion.⁸ Why should the party have turned its attention to daily life at this time? Part of the answer, as I have suggested, lay in the onset of a breathing spell, the fact that finally party members had time and energy to move beyond immediate crisis management. Part of the answer also surely can be found in Trotsky's enormous personal charisma and the influence he exercised. Historians have suggested that he turned his attention to these issues as part of a personal retreat after turning down Lenin's offer to become deputy leader in the government (Sovnarkom) in 1922. At this time he was also being steadily pushed out of his role as commissar of war. In reaction to these events and as a cultured individual, this view suggests, he now turned his attention to such issues as literature, habits, morals, the cinema, and language as a kind of retreat from politics.⁹

Yet the reason for this turn to byt must also surely lie in broader phenomena, particularly in the unrest sweeping the country in these months and years. Throughout the country party officials were noting

signs of discouragement and demoralization in all ranks of the party as well as in the ranks of the working class. Workers' strikes broke out in the spring and summer of 1923 in Moscow, Petrograd, and Ivanovo-Voznesensk.¹⁰ The Justice Commissariat brought suits against party officials accused of abusing their positions of authority.¹¹ Freed from the pressures of war, local party officials began to refuse to be transferred all over the country.¹² They also began to ask hard questions about how to make ends meet, how to combine work and family lives. It was one thing to postpone gratification in the midst of the civil war. Now, however, with the war behind them, many in the party began to consider how best they could combine revolutionary ideals and personal lives.

At this time the Central Committee also passed new statutes on disciplining party members through the Central Control Commission. Although the Ninth Party Conference had initially authorized the creation of the commission in September 1920, it had not really gotten under way until the Eleventh Party Congress in March 1922, when the party became concerned about the "growing threat of the degeneration of the least reliable and disciplined members of the party." By October 1924 the Central Control Commission had established 116 local control commissions.¹³ In addition the party carried out a purge of one quarter of its members in late 1921 and early 1922.¹⁴ In these purges the behavior of Communists was often given as a reason for their exclusion from the party.

The creation of the institution of worker and peasant correspondents (*rabsel'kory*) may also have encouraged the coverage of daily life in the periodical press, as editors sought to find topics which uneducated or poorly educated people-in-the-street could write about.¹⁵ In 1923 *Pravda* began publishing a series of articles entitled "Pictures of Daily Life" (*Kartinki byta*) designed to showcase their contributions. Trotsky addressed them in August 1923 in an article entitled "How to Begin." The local worker correspondent, he argued, was trying to become an expert on daily life (a *bytovik*, to use the nineteenth-century literary term), but had no experience in this kind of observation and writing. Nor had the party as yet addressed this question even though it had solved many other kinds of issues (from wages to forms of government). The workers' government, Trotsky argued, could intervene (tactfully and carefully) in workers' family lives on two grounds: hygienic (the production of population) and pedagogical (the upbringing of a new generation).¹⁶ Yet Trotsky also warned worker correspondents to take care not to abuse their position, not to let their writings be used to settle old scores, for extortion, etc.¹⁷

In the summer of 1923 Polina Vinogradskaja from the women's section quarreled publicly with Trotsky over the location of blame for problems of byt. Vinogradskaja disagreed with Trotsky's argument that "in order to transform daily life, it is necessary to come to know it."¹⁸ Everyone knew

perfectly well how "disgusting" (*bezobraznyi*) current *byt* was, Vinogradskaia argued, how little it had changed, how workers preferred beer halls to clubs and how they resorted to prostitution. The problem in her view was that bureaucrats were not taking action, that the country had "entered into a period of some kind of stagnation [*zastoi*] and even rotting [*zagnivanie*]." The "sluggishness" (*kosnost'*) of the soviet organs and their heads who were not personally interested in reforming daily life was preventing new steps from being taken. During war communism the party had overextended itself, Vinogradskaia claimed, and then had not been able to support the institutions it had set up. As a result many programs had languished. Now because of the recent changes the country was behind where it had been just three years before.¹⁹

Trotsky replied with an attack on "enlightened bureaucracy," charging that Vinogradskaia's argument was itself bureaucratic in assuming that the solution should lie in the government rather than in workers' own activism.²⁰ In this debate Trotsky and Vinogradskaia returned (indirectly) to Kollontai and Golubeva's contention that the source of change should be workers' own initiative and organizations. When Trotsky made this argument, it was printed in *Pravda* without a rebuke. Yet, as we saw in the preceding chapter, when Golubeva and the women's sections made similar arguments, they were publicly reprimanded for "feminist deviations."

Above all, the turn to *byt* owed its salience to writers' concerns that the new conditions of NEP would lead to deterioration in the party and in society as a whole. Party writers expressed generalized fears at this time of resurgent "bourgeois" influences in society. Two male students at a military academy had engaged in a duel over a woman. Other students, even professors, had committed suicide. "Free love societies" and "leagues" seemed to be cropping up in provincial cities.²¹ If party leaders were not extremely vigilant, the elemental forces of the new conditions could "overwhelm us, penetrating our inner lives, our way of being [*nash uklad*], our psyches; and the NEP way of life, i.e., one that is petty bourgeois and bureaucratic, will facilitate the inner degeneration of the ruling class and its party."²²

The problem of daily life thus went beyond "culture" in the abstract to core issues of behavior and habits, especially for the new ruling class. The central issue on the table was that of hegemony in a Gramscian sense.²³ How was the Bolshevik leadership to rule the country in the absence of the civil war, which had been used as a justification for coercion and domination? What should be the roles and activities of rank-and-file party members? The party now numbered half a million. What distinguished a party member from someone outside the party? What qualified the party to exercise its dictatorship of the proletariat?²⁴ If party members still had icons on their walls, why should nonparty members give up their religious

symbols?²⁵ To use Trotsky's phrase, the Bolshevik leaders were coming to realize that they could not rule "by politics alone."²⁶ Nor could they rule by force and rifles alone. If this revolution were to succeed, it would have to involve nothing less than the cultural transformation of the whole country, including (as some, but not all, saw it) gender relations.

A. A. Solts, director of the Central Control Commission, spoke directly to the issue of the hegemony of a new ruling class in his address at Sverdlov University in 1922:

There is one very interesting question which has to be answered, first of all, for the sake of ordinary party members. It is the question of the formation of public opinion on behavior not only of party members, but also of those who follow behind them. . . . We are the ruling class here, in our country, and life will be constructed according to us. It is according to how we live, dress, value this or that relationship, according to how we behave that customs will be established in our country.²⁷

The issue of behavior, i.e., how one should comport oneself, an issue which had so preoccupied nineteenth-century revolutionaries (as shown in chapter 1), thus returned to preoccupy the Bolsheviks as they made the transition from a party of opposition to the leading party of the government. At the same time, for more ordinary men and women the period of the New Economic Policy presented an opportunity to reflect on what all this talk of social transformation might mean in daily life.

Daily Life and Gender Transformation

In the postrevolutionary period issues of daily life had two primary gender components. One involved the question of how in practice the Bolshevik party should emancipate women workers and peasants. The other involved the question of male party members' relationships to their wives and other female citizens. In 1923 party leaders and public commentators increasingly turned their attention away from the issue of women's own emancipation and toward the harm that non-Communist wives could bring their Communist husbands!

Trotsky addressed the first issue, women's emancipation, in his essay "From the Old Family to the New." Society, he suggested, needed to progress through three distinct stages in the emancipation process: (1) the establishment of political equality (through decrees, legal rights, etc.); (2) the creation of "industrial equality" in the workplace; and (3) the creation of "actual equality" within the family. The easiest problem was to assume power, he noted. The hardest part was to change the roots of culture.²⁸

Trotsky's writings on women and the family reflect an anxiety about possible changes in social relations, especially a concern common to many

Bolsheviks that the old family would fall apart without the creation of positive, new social relations:

We must admit . . . that the family, including that of the proletariat, has been shattered. . . . A recent conversation among Moscow agitators viewed this fact as firmly established, undisputed. . . . It was clear to all that some great chaotic process was going on, assuming sometimes painful, sometimes revolting, ridiculous, or tragic forms, a process which has not yet had time to reveal the possibilities hidden within it for inaugurating a new and higher order of family life.²⁹

Trotsky hypothesized that in order to transform the family the working class would have to show great effort and would require "the powerful molecular work of internal cultural upsurge [*pod'em*]." It was not difficult to have a political revolution, Trotsky noted. Now, however, after the revolution it was important to "fight to raise culture and human personality."³⁰ In Trotsky's view workers agitating from below and the government working from above should cooperate to effect women's emancipation "from the confining and suffocating cages" of the family. Working women might be "backward" and "benighted," but nonetheless their pressure on society could help to transform social relations.³¹

With the ending of the civil war leading *zhenotdel* activists insisted that until something was done to transform daily life, the female laboring forces could not be "fully used."³² Kollontai had long insisted that although the tasks of male and female workers were "one and indivisible," "the conditions in which these two categories of producers find themselves are another matter." Because of the difficulties in their daily lives women could not give the same "labor energy" as men. If the trade unions wanted to transform and improve workers' lives by building new communes and the like, they should call on women workers. The *proletarka*, after all, could "create a domestic household out of nothing." With her "sharp housewifely eyes" (*zorkim khoziaiskim glazom*) and "economic skillfulness" (*smetka*) the woman worker could do a much better job in this arena than could the male. Trade unions, Kollontai argued, should include women workers in all their commissions on byt and should allow them to use some of their work time to improve factory conditions. The women's sections in turn should help think through the needs of each factory. Under no circumstances, however, should the unions ask women workers to participate in making improvements after their regular hours, as that would prove an extra burden. Only by involving women in the core activities of the unions could they overcome women's lack of confidence in themselves and men's lack of respect for women.³³

In writing on this topic Kollontai explicitly stressed the role of the women's sections as a *tolkach* (lobbyist) on behalf of women. Yet at the same time Kollontai and others in the women's sections also perpetuated stereo-

types of women as more concerned than men with daily life, more oriented toward children and home, more economically skillful as housewives.

Anxieties about Women and the Family

Commentators had been worried about the decay of the family since the civil war. S. Ravich, commissar of internal affairs in the Northern Oblast of Petrograd, wrote in 1920 of the current time as one of "inexpressible bacchanalia":

The old rotten structures of the family and marriage have caved in and are moving toward complete destruction with every day. There are no guiding principles for creating new, beautiful, healthy relations. . . . Free love is understood by the best people [*sic*] as free debauchery. The most responsible political people, leaders of the revolution, themselves appear helpless in this area. . . . We must sound the alarm.³⁴

Others referred to the "miasma of rotting capitalism" which continued to contaminate society.³⁵ Lunacharsky wrote about the costs of the fall of the "disgusting tsarist-bureaucratic apparatus," which nonetheless had held the country together, and the rise of the "full chaos" of anarchy in the country and the "half-chaos of so-called local authority."³⁶ An Old Bolshevik named Lepeshinskii lamented that the old morality had died and there was nothing to counteract the new theories of free love. The old forms of the family had been destroyed, yet new ones had not yet been created.³⁷

While much of this anxiety embodied a generalized concern with the moral decay of the time, specific concerns emerged about women's roles in the new, postrevolutionary society. Even an ardent supporter of the zhenotdel such as Moirova expressed a veiled anxiety that women, "having tasted the apple of emancipation," would no longer bear so patiently their difficult situations. Moirova wrote that women's low wages, combined with their continued need to support their children, would force them to "pester everyone on the subject of the disorder of their lives." Her fears about the tasting of the apple of emancipation suggest the image of a fallen Eve who is no longer innocent and who may cause trouble in the Garden of Eden.³⁸ Other publicists turned their attention to the dangers posed by recalcitrant wives and mothers-in-law who would drag down the morale and political consciousness of their husbands.³⁹

Trotsky himself referred to certain male and female "types." He wrote of the man who was a sound Communist but who nonetheless viewed women as "just females [*baby*] (the word is so foul) not to be taken seriously."⁴⁰ He detailed various arrangements of male-female relations in which the male might be a good Communist but the female was backward, religious, superstitious, etc. Or the wife might be a good Communist and

both spouses might attend political meetings, but their home life suffered. Or the wife might begin to awaken under the influence of the women's section and neglect her family. In all of these scenarios Trotsky blamed the wife for the unhealthy situation in the family.⁴¹

The extent of this anxiety about the breakdown of personal relations can be seen in a series of articles in *Pravda* in the early NEP years. In a fictional story called "Electrification" Nikolai Orlov, chairman of the factory committee in his factory, comes home from work tired and hungry. He has been held up at a meeting where he has grown hoarse defending the merits of electrification. "But where is that Mariia?" he asks when he comes in. She is not home. She has left a note saying she has been called away to a meeting and asking him to make the soup. Orlov blows up when she comes in: "What am I, your cook [*kukharka*]? . . . What did I marry you for? To cook dinner myself and to read your directions how to make soup? What is this?" Mariia, however, is no longer the silent and reserved wife of yesterday. Now she too cries out: "And what did I marry you for, to be your cook? Think about what you're saying, you, a conscious member of the proletariat. I married you so as to have someone close to me, dear to me, so we could help each other in everything."

"I can't live this way," Nikolai continues. "We'll get a divorce. It's easy to do so now." Mariia agrees reluctantly. Nikolai goes out and wanders in the snow until he meets an acquaintance who has brought him two tickets for the opera for that evening. He realizes he doesn't want to go alone. If only they had electrification, he muses, then everything would be okay, life would be easier. One could boil the samovar with electricity, make soup with electricity. When he returns home, he finds that Mariia has made the soup after all. He tells her that he came back because of electrification. If they had electricity, he says, he would even be willing to make the soup. "But, Kolia, that's where I was, at a meeting on electrification," Mariia explains; "what a miracle, it will mean a full transformation in our lives." "Why didn't you say so right away?" Kolia answers her; "if you had told me you were at such a meeting, I wouldn't have gotten mad."⁴²

In this story the anxiety of new and conflicting family relations is smoothed over by the dream of what today might be called a "technological fix." Introduce electrification and all will be well. Even the husband might be willing to cook the soup. Communists themselves in a meeting with Trotsky in 1923 admitted that they relied on a notion of the "radiant future" in their agitation so they would not have to solve issues of the family in any kind of immediate way. They also criticized mass agitators who cited Engels chapter and verse but had no idea how to answer questions about current conditions and family lives.⁴³

In Voronezh the provincial women's section put on a play entitled "The Trial of the New Woman." In a series of attacks on the "new woman" by representatives of the old tsarist order (a prerevolutionary factory owner,

a "soviet lady," a rich peasant, a priest, a mother), the play reveals popular anxieties and unresolved questions about gender. The factory owner criticizes the new woman for her interference in public life and in government, including participating in strikes. The "soviet lady" (*sovetskaia baryshnia*) (probably a secretary in an office) condemns the new woman for trying to make all women equal, i.e., for forcing women to produce the same quantity as men at work and for making women equal to men in free love, which could only lead to debauchery. The rich peasant argues that the place of the woman is in the home, where she should be a good housewife and mother. The priest affirms male superiority over females and the importance of the sacrament of marriage blessed by the church. The mother accuses the new woman of destroying all "femininity" in herself, of failing to be an "object of pleasure" for her husband and of giving her children to public day care.⁴⁴

In the play the court initially sentences the woman to twenty years hard labor. Workers come to her rescue, however, and restore her rights, recognizing her as highly moral and equal to the male citizen. The play touts the new order with its public child care and its civic marriages based on mutual physical and spiritual attraction. In the end this "trial" served as a morality play. All women were to follow example of the new woman.

The issues which the play raises (and which Soviet society was never able to resolve satisfactorily) revolve around the problems of a single versus double standard for work and love, questions of women's roles in the private sphere versus the public, issues of "femininity" and "comradeship." As in so much of Soviet rhetoric in this period the choices are presented as opposites: either women should serve merely as a decoration in the lives of men or they should run the new government; either men and women should observe the sacrament of marriage or they should have equality; either women should be feminine or they should be comrades.

The women's section in Moscow organized a performance of a variation on this "Trial of the New Woman" half a year later at the closing of a two-week women's provincial conference. This time a long-suffering husband brings suit against his wife for her "liking for public work and the harm brought to her family duties." The audience can see the husband's deep grief, we are told, in the droop of his simple, bowl-shaven head. "It's impossible to figure out what's going on these days," he complains. "Did I get married so my wife could go to meetings?" The district attorney plays on the crowd's "age-old maternal feelings" to make them feel sorry for this poor, abandoned husband whose children are now virtually orphaned. Yet in a strange twist the article on this trial notes that the prosecuting attorney is in fact also accusing the two thousand women in the audience, since they themselves have come as delegates to a public meeting.⁴⁵

When the woman defense attorney gets up to defend the wife, she focuses on women's difficult lot in life—how they are exploited, insulted,

how this dearly beloved husband mocks his wife, coming home drunk and dragging her around by the hair. How hard is the peasant woman's lot—fieldwork by day, weaving and spinning by night, meek slavery at home in the family, at work, and in public society. Who could defend this "terrible female lot"? Who could condemn the wife for trying to break the tenacious chains of age-old inequality?

Here the tension in the play revolves around two popularly recognized traditional principles: the patriarchal order in which the husband has a right to certain duties from his wife and an equally longstanding recognition of women's sufferings incorporated into peasant proverbs and sayings. A definitive solution is not offered, however. Of course, the play assumes, women in the new order will continue to go to meetings. Yet the play does not resolve the questions of soup-making and childrearing.⁴⁶

The question of financial equality between the sexes presented yet another source of anxiety and insecurity for *Pravda's* worker correspondents. In one short story a woman asks her husband for help with her literacy homework, since she cannot remember what they read that day. "Oh you, cabbage head," he answers her, "you sieve brain, we read about you females [*baby*], and you've already forgotten." He reminds her that they had been reading the classic phrase used in literacy classes, "The *baba* is not a slave" (*baba ne raba*, approximately the equivalent of "see Spot run" in American readers). In response the wife comments that, after all, it is true: "What kind of a slave am I to you?" she asks. Now she earns more than he does. "So it turns out that it is not you who are feeding me but I you. Your price has fallen. I can live any way I want."⁴⁷

Other articles focused on men's suffering under the new order because of the changes instituted for women. One worker correspondent visits a bar in his off-hours from work. There he overhears a bookbinder complaining to his drinking companion about his wife, who has left him. "Oh those scoundrels," he curses; "why did they have to go and give women their freedom?" His wife used to be tolerant and patient. But then "she found some kind of rights." She went and got an education. Soon she jumped into other activities as well. "I'll show you," he threatened, but this only landed him in court. "You can't touch your own wife," he complained mournfully. As a result of this altercation he ended up in jail for a month and a half, and she left him. The narrator of the story (the worker correspondent) editorializes about the benefits of women gaining emancipation. Yet the reader is left to feel sympathy as well for the man who has lost his wife.⁴⁸

Debates over Wives

In his speech about party members as the new ruling class, Solts also raised the issue of marriage and the danger that women would exercise a

negative influence on their husbands. Private life should not be separated from public life, he argued. Communists should be particularly sensitive to the danger of misalliances, i.e., marriages between individuals of different classes. What about the party members (presumed to be male) who "take wives from an alien class?" Solts asked. Such alliances, he argued, were just as deserving of censure as the marriages in former times between a count and a chambermaid.⁴⁹

Such marriages were probably not uncommon. Uneducated male workers who had been promoted to white-collar work faced strong temptations to take more educated women from the bourgeoisie and former intelligentsia as their wives. Contemporary reports told of men who married their secretaries, women whose help proved invaluable as the men struggled to compose reports and speeches for party and government meetings. For women from these classes of "former people" (*byvshie*, i.e., those disenfranchised by the revolution) such a marriage also proved advantageous as an escape from labor conscription during war communism and the potential confiscation of their personal property.⁵⁰

While technical, legal articles in 1923 took up the question of possible revisions in the 1918 Family Code, other "pictures of daily life" addressed such misalliances in practice.⁵¹ The overwhelming preponderance of the articles which addressed this aspect of daily life assumed that the party member in the marriage was male, while the nonparty member was female.⁵² Statistically, this of course was not surprising since women represented fewer than 10 percent of party members at the time.⁵³ If this was the case, some reasoned, then only 10 percent of male party members could have wives in the party; the other 90 percent of the wives were probably either "politically unconscious" or "philistine women [*obyvatel'nitsy*] hostile to communism."⁵⁴

Yet journalists and party leaders clearly found discussion of the new family arrangements confusing and a source of anxiety. They expressed concern that the working-class family might have little or no influence over its own children.⁵⁵ One correspondent noted that a large meeting in the central party club in Kharkov worked through most of its agenda with comparative ease and harmony until the issue arose as to whether to permit nonparty wives to visit the club. The next two hours, he said, were taken up with bellowing and harangues, gesticulating and name-calling until finally a vote was taken and the meeting decided not to permit such wives to visit the club.⁵⁶

Many expressed concern that Communists were no better and sometimes were worse than ordinary workers or peasants. A Communist's wife (the unconscious measure, after all, of a man's standing) was likely to be just as enserfed by the everyday cares of pots and diapers as other men's wives. The husband himself was just as consumed by the question of

bringing home the bacon. If the couple were a little better off, then they might hire a servant, but then they were no different from the bourgeois specialist living off the labor of others. In either case, whether the wife herself toiled over the stove or she hired a servant, the Communist family found itself in no better a position than the non-Communist family in terms of solving the problems of daily life.⁵⁷

Often, writers claimed, the wife was particularly pulled into an "utterly unenlightened [*bessprosvetnyi*] petty bourgeois life." "The majority of these wives of responsible comrades," wrote one correspondent, "are infected with bourgeois, middle-class psychology. They often despise the party and the party lives of their husbands; yet that does not hinder them from taking advantage of their husbands' service position to receive privileges and benefits."⁵⁸

In one article E. Shvetsova, a staff member in the central women's section, took an informal poll of men married to nonparty wives and published some of her findings in *Pravda*. She described a number of rationales men had for taking (or keeping) nonparty wives. "I just need a female [*baba*], a housewife [*khoziaika*]," one said. Another justified his choice of a nonparty wife as a way of increasing the ranks of the party; after all, by virtue of their marriage, his wife would automatically come under his influence. A third defended the practice of having different opinions in his home. A fourth said he had never thought about the matter, but he really didn't see a *kommunistka* as a woman; she was more a comrade at work. A fifth explained that he had never had a chance to get an education, so his wife helped him figure out party matters. Of course, it was more expensive to keep up proper appearances with such a wife, and he had to learn to hold his fork and knife *comme il faut* [*sic*].⁵⁹

Again and again articles in *Pravda* blamed the wives for the problems in the family, up to and including the suicides of male party members who felt they could not afford the luxury items demanded by their wives. It was the wife who took the children to church. It was the wife who kept icons in the apartment so that all the neighbors gossiped and pointed fingers at them. It was the wife (especially the one from a higher class) who had no idea how to run the house and felt they should hire a nanny, a cook, a maid. Only through creating communes and public facilities could one "beat into women's heads a materialist understanding of history so they would not cripple their children and secretly baptize them."⁶⁰

"The worst thing, the most terrifying," wrote one correspondent in *Pravda*, "are the wives of Communists."⁶¹ Another told the sad tale of "the fall of a communist." Comrade Zav'ialov had fallen in love with a *meshchanka*, a petty-bourgeois woman. Of course it was springtime and they decided to marry. Initially he persuaded her to have a civil ceremony, but then her family rebelled and wouldn't even let them come to visit. The wife broke

into tears every day. He had ruined her life. Finally he broke down and agreed to a church wedding, though it cost him a pretty penny. Now the party was judging him. The sentence was unanimous and merciless: he was guilty and should be excluded from the party:

What kind of Communist are you? [his comrades asked], when you could not even win over [*sagitirovat'*] your wife? You are worthless ballast in the party.... You gave in to the tears of this gentle creature. But what if tomorrow the party sends you to the front, to the underground, and there are more tears? Will you give in then too?⁶²

2 | As in the legend of Stenka Razin, women were a dangerous temptation to the fighting warrior. A true comrade would throw over his wife before betraying his comrades. Otherwise he himself would become a baba, weak and vulnerable to the emotional claims of others.⁶³

On this question of problematic wives, other writers, admittedly a minority, disagreed, saying that the problem of moral failing lay in male Communists themselves. Often they were torn from the factory or the fields, promoted into an unfamiliar area of work (as financial agent, policeman, or local people's judge), yet paid less than the minimum wage. The New Economic Policy would "catch" them. They would begin to drink, rub elbows with NEPmen, take bribes, and then would end up in a "government apartment" behind bars.⁶⁴ Provincial life would drag them down into the swamp of self-interest where they would lose all class consciousness.⁶⁵ How could it be "all the wife's fault" when she had had to suffer the same deprivations, the same separations when he was transferred to the front, the same trials when he was transferred to other work and she followed him without a complaint? After all, "the devil is never as bad as they make him out to be." "To communize" (*okommunistichit'*) the wife should not be all that difficult, some concluded.⁶⁶

The question arose whether the party should try to institute an ethics code. After all, certain behaviors already served as grounds for exclusion from the party—drinking, religiosity, bribe-taking, overt anti-Semitism. Should the party go further and try to regulate all relations within the family? How much should a party man be allowed to earn if he was trying to support his family? Should the wife of such a man be allowed to have cows and pigs if those cows and pigs were being used to support the family? Where was the line between "freedom" and "decadence" in sexual matters? What should be the responsibilities of spouses to each other and to their children? Should celebrations be allowed around family holidays (weddings, births, christenings)? Could one bake Easter cakes if one shaped them in the form of the red star (symbol of the Red Army)? Could one dance in a public place? Could young Komsomol men wear ties and women wear rouge and lipstick?⁶⁷

These issues continued to occupy party members throughout the 1920s. For young women they had particular salience because of their terrible vulnerability in the public sphere. If a young Komsomol woman did not agree to sleep with her male peers, she could be accused of "puritanism" or antisocial behavior. If, on the other hand, she did sleep with them and had the misfortune to get pregnant, she could be shunned as a loose woman.⁶⁸

Women newspaper correspondents in this period (comparatively few in numbers) focused on the hardships of women's daily lives, their double burdens in running from factory to bread store to home. Single mothers had the hardest lot of all. Women working in the *zhenotdel* were seeing more and more complaints of women abandoned by their husbands (even Communist ones).⁶⁹ The only solutions seemed to be better professional training for women workers (so they would be equal in the workplace) and more public facilities—nurseries, cafeterias, laundries, although there were many women who acknowledged in plain Russian the deficiencies of these institutions which left the children with colds, the family hungry, and the laundry with holes. Only revolutionary Russia had acknowledged women as full citizens, wrote those who were patriotically minded. Yet by all accounts the double and even triple burden of working, caring for the household, and raising children still weighed heaviest on women.⁷⁰

Ultimately the revolution failed to solve many of the most basic issues of gender difference. What good would it do to construct public facilities if women and men did not want to use them? How could women go to meetings and still cope with housework and child care? Who would make the soup in the new order? Although occasional articles discussed the possibility of a new division of domestic labor within the household, they were rare.⁷¹ Maternity and maternal instincts continued to be viewed as the province and spiritual predestination of women alone.⁷²

Thus the party and state encouraged women to become involved in the public sphere, to break down their commitment to old kin relations, to put formerly "private" matters such as laundry and child care into "public" hands. Yet the basic gender divisions remained unquestioned. Conservative, recalcitrant, sometimes hysterical wives presented a major problem for "good [male] communists" whose responsibilities as pater familias were now stretched to include agitating their own wives and children, their mothers-in-laws, and their neighbors. As the new service nobility, communists were expected to provide a role model for the rest of society. Yet they themselves remained confused about basic definitions of gender and gender relations.⁷³

For many in the women's sections the end of 1923 marked the end of an era. As Golubeva wrote in *Kommunistka* on the fifth anniversary of the first national *zhenotdel* congress:

Reading now the reports and resolutions of this [earlier] congress, one is simply astonished to see with what ease they projected the future formation of the old world, the state raising of children, changes in marriage relations, destruction of the domestic economy, etc. Now five years after the passing of these resolutions, when we have met such difficulty in the path of our advancement toward communism, now we know that everything in these resolutions . . . has not been realized.⁷⁴

In November 1923 Stalin addressed women workers for almost the first time. Without focusing on women themselves, he reiterated his fears (as in April 1923) that women might bring harm as mothers of the next generation:

Women workers and peasants . . . can cripple the soul of the child or else give him the healthy spirit of youth . . . depending on whether the woman-mother [sic] sympathizes with the Soviet order or she drags behind the priest, the kulak and the bourgeoisie.⁷⁵

In reading the zhenotdel reports from these years one is struck again and again by the powerlessness of the women's sections and their inability to effect real policy changes. The end of an era of policy formation and influence on the new government had come for the women's sections. Henceforth they would be more dutiful daughters, less and less able to influence the directions of the socialist republic.

Dutiful Daughters and the Dissolution of the Women's Sections

The situation in 1924 revealed the weaknesses of the women's sections with more clarity than ever. The Lenin Levy, introduced after Lenin's death in January and designed to increase the number of proletarians in the party, failed to increase women's numerical presence. Women still constituted only 9–10 percent of party members, and less than 3 percent of the staffs of provincial party committees and soviets. As in previous years women's low participation in the party was blamed on traditional failings of women themselves: their low cultural levels; their religious "stagnation"; and their enslavement in the family, which a lack of new institutions of daily life was failing to ameliorate.⁷⁶

By now there was little pretense that work among women was being done primarily for women's sake. The women's sections stated openly that the primary goal of the delegate meetings was to draw women delegates into the ranks of the party.⁷⁷ At the same time the sections remained as vulnerable as ever to charges that they were not operating "correctly." In May 1924, for example, the Thirteenth Party Congress reprimanded the women's sections for "one-sidedness" (*odnostoronnost'*) in their work; they

had been concentrating too much on agitation, propaganda, and cultural work to the neglect of work on byt, the issues of daily life now considered so important.⁷⁸

The Lenin Levy revealed both women workers' poor performance and their poor attendance when they entered political literacy schools supposed to prepare them for entrance into the party. The central party authorities called on the women's sections to redouble their efforts to "work over" (*obrabatyvat'*) individual women workers considered likely candidates for admission into the party.⁷⁹ In some places local women's sections opened special political literacy schools for women only. In others they invited the wives of male workers to join the levy. Overall female blue-collar workers constituted less than 1 percent of the entire membership of the party.⁸⁰

↳ In the labor force women's participation continued to decline steadily from 29 percent to 26 percent between October 1922 and April 1924, while female unemployment as a percentage of total unemployment now held steady at 45 percent.⁸¹ According to data from the Central Council of Trade Unions, women workers' wages tended to average approximately 68 percent of males' wages, despite Soviet legislation requiring equal pay for equal work.⁸² In a desperate move the women's sections now fought against the protectionist labor clauses which they themselves had championed barring women from night work since that prohibition was being used as an excuse to discriminate against women workers.⁸³ Still the women's sections were having no luck in getting women elected onto trade union organs; nor were women being promoted in significant numbers to management positions. In one study of workers and peasants promoted in thirty provinces, only 7 percent of those promoted were women.⁸⁴

The battles between the trade unions and the women's sections continued unabated. The Sixth Trade Union Congress (November 1924) insisted that trade union staffs should have primary responsibility for work among women and should combine that work with general union efforts wherever possible. Above all, the congress resolution emphasized, as women workers' activism increased, general trade union meetings should take over discussions of women's issues where previously they had been handled in special women's meetings. The latter should then be organized only in exceptional cases.⁸⁵ A zhenotdel meeting of staff working in industrial provinces initially supported the trade union position, conceding that at the lowest level of union organizing, i.e., the factory committees, there was no need to maintain a special apparatus for women. The elected factory committee members, they resolved, could carry out this work while fulfilling their other responsibilities.⁸⁶

The party Central Committee insisted, however, that party cell organizers working among women had to be directly introduced onto the staffs of

the factory committees. This was motivated on the grounds of providing "the best and most all-encompassing service to women workers," but "above all, in order to strengthen party influence among women workers." The principle of appointing representatives even at the lowest level of factory committees now triumphed conclusively over elections.⁸⁷ In their attempts to combat trade union inertia and resistance the women's sections had thus contributed significantly to the erosion of autonomy, not only for the unions but also for themselves. By 1926 they agreed not to carry out direct trade union work among women in the factories but rather to leave that work entirely to the party cells of the factory committees.⁸⁸

At the time of the Fourteenth Party Congress (December 1925) Aleksandra Artiukhina, the new director of the women's section, insisted on involving the women's sections in the political fights of the day.⁸⁹ The sections, she argued, should propagandize against the Leningrad Opposition (Zinoviev, Kamenev, Sokolnikov, and Krupskaja). Women workers, she worried aloud, were likely to succumb to the influence of false slogans in favor of "equality" and "participation in profits," since their material positions were usually worse than those of men: "The generally low-skilled, technically and culturally backward woman worker naturally will translate the slogan of equality into the question of making her wages equal to those of the highly skilled sections of the proletariat." The Zinovievists might insist that the Soviet economy had grown overly capitalist, but the women's sections should show the female masses the correctness of wage differentiation. After all, the country needed to produce cars and heavy industrial machines, not worry about wage equalizing and profit sharing (which the Opposition urged).⁹⁰ More actively than ever the leaders in the women's sections now acquiesced in subordinating the sections to the political agenda of the central authorities, insisting that the women's sections "have no tasks separate from the tasks of the party."⁹¹

Unfortunately, a number of leading zhenotdel figures were embroiled in the Leningrad Opposition (especially Krupskaja, Nikolaeva, and Lilina). As a result of this opposition Nikolaeva, who had been director of the women's section in 1924-25, was demoted from full member of the Central Committee to candidate member and was dropped from the Orgbiuro of the Central Committee altogether. In the meantime Artiukhina, who in addition to her attacks on the Leningrad Opposition had close ties with both Stalin and Bukharin, now received a promotion from candidate to full member of the Central Committee (where she was, as Nikolaeva had been before her, the only woman), as well as being added to the Orgbiuro. In other words, Nikolaeva, who had sided with the losing Leningrad Opposition, and Artiukhina, who had sided with the winning Stalinist faction, now traded places. Without data from the archives (which appears conspicuously absent), one can only wonder at the rending of internal zhenotdel relations which must have occurred at this time.

In 1926 the most economically important issue on the table was the introduction of rationalization in industry, usually known as the "regime of economy."⁹² Now Artiukhina revived the theme of women's sharp eyes to call on female workers to become involved in "the fight against wreckers of the national economy—against embezzlers, thieves, drunkards, against all those who do not know how to save Soviet kopecks. We must not be afraid that our delegatki will go after [lit., take in hand] one of the 'visible' or 'responsible' people. . . ."⁹³

Others wrote as well of women's particular role in "production discipline in the enterprises and institutions, carrying out the struggle against slovenliness, absenteeism, drunkenness, etc."⁹⁴ Local party officials called on women workers and workers' wives to join the party and above all to participate actively in the work of the cooperatives. After all, "the woman more than anyone else must come in contact with the cooperative. With her housewifely eye [*khoziiskii glaz*] she will sooner notice its faults, which must be definitively removed."⁹⁵

In the new clubs created at the end of the 1920s women were called on once again to fight philistinism and disorderliness, to instill cleanliness and neatness. They should do everything in their power to create comfort so that the clubs could serve as a real place of rest and "rational recreation" (*razumnoe razvlechenie*).⁹⁶

Yet privately at their own meetings zhenotdel leaders acknowledged that women workers were resisting rationalization, were failing to comprehend the differences between socialist and capitalist rationalization. In late October 1926 Artiukhina spoke of some of the mistakes associated with the implementation of the regime of economy, especially taking away special work clothes given out to women workers and cutting back on nurseries and kindergartens. She was particularly upset by decisions not to include nurseries in collective agreements between workers and factories, an omission which meant the factories cut nurseries out of their budgets.⁹⁷

In a moment of self-criticism Artiukhina acknowledged that the sections had not done enough work in education (*vospitanie*). Older women workers particularly resisted the transition to an uninterrupted work week. "Why," asked Artiukhina, "should the woman worker who has worked in the factory for twenty-five or twenty-six years, make the transition to a three- or four-day work week? Why should she, who is used to celebrating Sunday as a holiday, have to celebrate every four days?" Artiukhina's solution was to try to make women understand Soviet policy more clearly so they would respond appropriately to the new initiatives.⁹⁸

Throughout the latter half of the 1920s the central women's section toed the official line in more obvious ways than ever before. Now the central women's section activists were particularly anxious to prove their merit as "dutiful daughters" in the workers' state. In 1927 when the country was

gripped by a new war scare the women's section played up the importance of the "militarization" (*voennizatsiia*) of women workers.⁹⁹ In 1928 Artiukhina insisted that the women's sections must draw the broad female masses into practical work in carrying out the First Five-Year Plan, in collectivizing agriculture, and in political campaigns.¹⁰⁰ On March 8 that year only one slogan out of the sixteen officially promulgated for International Women's Day advocated efforts to emancipate women in their daily lives; the rest focused on rationalizing production, developing collective agriculture, recruiting more women into the party.¹⁰¹

By 1928 the women's sections again had to face the problem of liquidationism. Artiukhina initially tried to combat this new liquidationism by writing of the need to "calm the liquidationist itch."¹⁰² Unfortunately, not all of the liquidationism came from outside the women's sections. Internal critics now also charged the women's sections with narrowness, attention to form over content, false optimism and propaganda which hid the negative sides of Soviet life, alienation from the women workers and peasants they were supposed to represent.¹⁰³

Recapitulation and Intensification

The ultimate liquidation of the women's sections in 1930 recapitulated many of the problems which had been facing the socialist women's movement in Russia from even before 1917: the dependence of the women's sections on party largess; the primary attention to women's negative qualities (their backwardness, stagnation, ignorance); the co-optation of women to serve as a force for discipline in the regime; and the women's sections' own impulses to act as "dutiful daughters."

In January 1930 the party Central Committee announced that the women's sections were being liquidated as part of a general reorganization of the party. Contradictions abounded in this decree, however. On the one hand, work among women workers and peasants was said to "take on the highest possible significance." On the other hand, this was taken to mean that work among women should be done by all the sections of the Central Committee rather than by a special women's section. On these grounds the Central Committee now moved to eliminate the women's sections and to replace them with *zhensektory*, or women's sectors, within the newly created sections of agitation and mass campaigns.¹⁰⁴ All of the party's sections received new staffs. *Kommunistka* was eliminated and its readers told that *Sputnik agitatora* (The Agitator's Companion) would try to pay special attention to issues of work among women in its place.¹⁰⁵

Lazar Kaganovich, Stalin's righthand man, justified the "reorganization" of the women's sections on grounds that reveal their impossibly weak

position. Only the party could determine the correct policy, he argued: "Our party is strong not only in its correct, restrained class policy, but also in its ability to determine the correct policy with the correct system of organization." The women's section, he claimed, had now "completed the circle of its development." In a classic example of the new Stalinist doublespeak, Kaganovich insisted that the achievements of the women's sections obviated any need for their further existence. Even though there was still "conservatism" and resistance to women's involvement in the public sphere, a woman should now be promoted "not as a woman but rather as a party worker, fully equal, grown up, developed."¹⁰⁶ In other words, the party's policy of "upbringing" (*vospitanie*) had succeeded. Thanks to the party's efforts, women were no longer children in need of rearing (except in the East, where special women's sectors were kept even after the general women's sectors were eliminated in 1934). In this way the party declared that the historic "woman question" which had served as a reason for special attention to women's issues and a special women's sections in the party had now been "solved"

Kaganovich continued, however, to invoke the notion that women were potentially dangerous. In their resistance to collectivization, he argued, they revealed the insufficient political education given them by the women's sections.¹⁰⁷ Throughout 1929 and 1930 leading articles in *Pravda* and party circulars stressed that the success of collectivization would depend in large measure on women's attitudes. Although the broad masses of women workers and peasants were increasingly active, that activism was invariably portrayed as "far from sufficient." The woman peasant, officials argued, was still too attached to her cow and her house to understand the full benefits of collectivization. This meant that "under conditions of heightened class struggle antisoviet elements could use the most backward layers of laboring women in their fight against the party and the soviets."¹⁰⁸

In the face of this fear that women would resist collectivization and undermine the party's efforts, Kaganovich turned on the women's sections and blamed them for placing too much emphasis on trying to improve women's daily lives.¹⁰⁹ The attention to byt had undermined the distinctions within the village between poor and rich women peasants, which meant that kulaks (rich male peasants) could easily mobilize women as a group against the new collective farms. Yet, as we know, only a few years before, the Thirteenth Party Congress had charged the sections with neglecting byt. In 1930, in the last issue of *Kommunistka*, Artiukhina had also criticized zhenotdel work on daily life as weak, a "sore spot" in their work.¹¹⁰

Artiukhina's own ambivalence about, even denial of, the reorganization of the women's section can be seen in her last appeal to government staffs: "One must insist [*nuzhno trebovat'*] that the national commissariats, trade

unions, and cooperatives make a decisive turn to face the daily life of women." She called on them to make real budgetary commitments (*real'nye assignovaniia*) to the immediate reconstruction of daily life along new socialist lines.¹¹¹ Yet who was going to do this insisting? Who was going to take up the role of *tolkach* once the women's sections were gone? Whom did Artiukhina mean when she wrote "one must insist"?

According to the *zhenotdel* leadership itself, reactions to the abolition of the women's sections were mixed. Some in the party expressed relief that they would no longer have to deal with the insistent demands of the *zhenotdely*. Others, especially Communist women, were glad to be transferred to general party work and out of work among women. Artiukhina was adamant, however, that Communist women not give up any of their work among women. In fact, more than ever they should act as *tolkachi* (lobbyists on behalf of women's issues) and *provodniki*, transmission belts putting into practice efforts associated with the real emancipation of the broad masses of female laborers.¹¹² That there was some conflict between the notions of serving as "lobbyists" advocating on behalf of women's needs and interests and as "transmission belts" who would transmit the will of the party seems to have escaped Artiukhina's notice. At the very least she did not mention it.

The impossible position of the women's sections can be clearly seen in these years. They could be criticized for too little attention to daily life ("one-sidedness," according to the Thirteenth Party Congress) or too much (according to Kaganovich). In 1926 Kalygina, Artiukhina's assistant for rural affairs, criticized the women's sections for striving too hard to aid the poor peasantry and thus ending up with a "social welfare bias."¹¹³ At other times Artiukhina and other leading *zhenotdel* activists criticized the women's sections for taking too bureaucratic an approach, for not paying sufficient attention to women's own needs. Overall the women's sections faced a daunting task of navigating between the Scylla of too much activism on behalf of women (which led to charges of "feminism" or "parallelism") and the Charybdis of too little activism (in which case they were chastised for "passivity," "inactivity," "lack of consciousness," and the like). Other organizations, particularly the trade unions and Komsomol, also faced such tensions, but nowhere were these tensions and contradictions so built into the mandate of one organization as in the case of the women's sections.