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Early twentieth-century Russia was a time of great political unrest. Following a period of revolutionary activity in the late nineteenth-century, a series of revolutions in 1905 and 1917 spurred the transition from a tsarist autocratic Russian Empire to the Soviet Union, which existed until its dissolution in 1991. Though this transformation lasted only a handful of years, these revolutionary movements took on several forms. The first, in 1905, was a sequence of organized strikes and demonstrations in opposition to Tsar Nicholas II. Though ultimately unsuccessful, it resulted in a short-lived constitutional monarchy; under this structure, the power of the tsar was moderated by the creation of the Duma, or parliament. This event served as a precursor to the more dramatic and lasting revolutions of 1917. In February of that year, the tsar was forcibly removed from power and replaced by a provisional government. A second revolution occurred in October, led by Vladimir Lenin (1870-1924) and his fellow communist Bolsheviks. With the Bolsheviks in power, a new age of socialist rule began in the Soviet Union.

The Bolshevik victory in October 1917 was the result of a concerted effort to raise class consciousness and organize and unite the working class not just across national divisions, but also across the gender divide. Since the early days of protest, Russian women had played an active role in every stage of this work. In the 1890s, women participated in isolated study circles that mainly focused on the education of workers and the study of ideas of Marxism. These dedicated sessions were particularly directed towards female industrial workers in the textile industry, though non-factory workers such as seamstresses and maids were occasionally included. Sunday schools in working class neighborhoods also played an important function in the spreading of socialist propaganda among the workers. Primarily government-initiated, classes were often led by female students from colleges for women and were used to teach the growing

working class in cities to read and write.[1] Liberal and Marxist intellectuals frequently distributed illegal literature in these schools, hoping to attract new members to their cause. While this work was not insignificant, the first real push for women's rights did not occur until the chaotic early years of the twentieth century, when the fight for gender equality depended upon not only the massive transformation of popular attitudes, values, and behaviors, but also the leadership and organizational abilities of a small, dedicated group of female socialist activists.

A Brief History of Early Twentieth Century Women's Rights

The development of the women's rights movement in the Russian Empire and Soviet Union contrasts with the history of revolution and women's suffrage in the Western World, particularly the United States. While many women took part in the American Revolution that resulted in the colonies' separation from British rule, major victories for women's civil rights, including suffrage, did not occur until more than a century after the conclusion of the Revolution. Rights for women were never overtly tied to the agenda of American rebels or to demands made of the nascent American government. In contrast, the fight for gender equality in Russia occurred in tandem with the fight for political liberation.

This dual fight forced women to consider how the struggle for equal rights would relate to the larger struggle for political change in Russia. In 1905, defeated Bolsheviks were forced to once again conduct their dissident work underground. One of the tasks often assigned to female revolutionaries was the organization of safe houses, where insurgents could covertly convene and strategize. Women also often assumed the role of secretary within the Communist Party. Though this may seem an inconsequential job, in reality, it was one of extreme importance – both Lenin's sister Maria (1878-1937) and his wife, Nadezhda Krupskaya (1869-1939), held this

[1] Rochelle Goldberg Ruthchild, *Equality and Revolution: Women's Rights in the Russian Empire, 1905–1917*, (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010), 24-5.

position.[2] Krupskaya, for example, served as Party secretary in the years Lenin was exiled and was responsible for maintaining contact between the Party's leadership abroad and those who remained active in Russia. Additionally, women formed civic organizations that focused on everything from women's liberation to political engagement, often conducted through charitable activity: groups such as the Society for Poor Relief, the Russian Women's Mutual Philanthropic Society, and the Society for Cheap Lodging sought not only to improve the lives of women in Russia, but also to address gender inequities in the national fight for social justice.[3] More radical groups emerged at this time, too. The Women's Equal Rights Union, the first women's political group that was focused on achieving equal rights for women, appeared shortly after Bloody Sunday.[4] The union was broad in its influence and composition, and included women from many political backgrounds; it deliberately framed its focus on women's rights as part of the liberation movement from the tsarist regime.[5] From here, the momentum of women organizers grew in subsequent years, but the complexities of differing priorities and loyalties also increased. While grassroots organizing and publications like *Pravda*, the Bolshevik party newspaper, flourished, institutional recognition of women's rights remained difficult to obtain.

The early twentieth-century conversations over extending equal rights, along with voting rights, to Russian women clearly made gender a defining issue for many females, eventually causing them to create a different set of political priorities than many of their male comrades. Even after the Bolshevik Revolution late in 1917, an increasing number of women began to correlate their economic situation with the need for political rights. The fight for women's

[2] Ruthchild, *Equality and Revolution*, 71-7.
[3] Ibid., 30-6.
[4] On Sunday, January 9, 1905, a peaceful procession of demonstrators was fired upon outside the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg. Known as Bloody Sunday, innocent civilians, including women and children, were slaughtered. In response, there were strikes and marches of protest across the Russian Empire.
[5] Ruthchild, *Equality and Revolution*, 47.

equality was spearheaded largely by a new, emerging group, referred to as the female intelligentsia. These leaders were not afraid to challenge traditional Russian notions of women's roles in family and society and leveraged a variety of tools, skills, and institutions along the way. Perhaps no organization proved more vital during this time period than Zhenotdel, particularly under the leadership of Alexandra Mikhailovna Kollontai (1872-1952).[6] Between 1917 and 1930, this group served as the women's department of the Central Committee of the All-Russian Communist Party, as the Bolsheviks were also known. Devoted solely to women's affairs, Zhenotdel not only provided new opportunities to women during the Russian Revolution but also led the charge for women's liberation, and, though ultimately unsuccessful in all its goals, left a lasting impact on Soviet society.

Zhenotdel did not spontaneously appear; many workers dedicated countless hours and much labor to create it. Krupskaya's pamphlet, *The Woman Worker*, written in Siberia and published in 1900, is generally accepted as the first known Russian work addressing the woman problem from a Marxist point of view. It drew little, if any, attention, and it was not until six years later that the women's issue gained any traction. Alexandra Kollontai, a Party worker in St. Petersburg, made a key difference by organizing women into Social Democratic discussion groups. Her early life experiences shaped her approach to politics and her work, ultimately allowing her to assume leadership roles within the Party, and Zhenotdel, to effect notable change.

Though many scholars have studied Zhenotdel, few have examined precisely which men or women can be attributed with its creation. Gail Lapidus opines that "the same small group of female activists, who had been prominent in prewar efforts to organize women workers –

[6] Zhenotdel is an abbreviation of the Russian phrase *zhenskii otdel*, meaning "women's section" or "women's division."

particularly Kollontai, Armand, Krupskaya and Nikolaeva – now played a decisive role in winning official assent to the creation of new organizational mechanisms [Zhenotdel] for the mobilization of women."[7] Carol Eubanks Hayden credits Kollontai for her significant contributions before ultimately acknowledging the larger group of Bolshevik women, citing Kollontai's five-month absence from Moscow prior to the decision to create the new department. Despite authoring one of the few comprehensive Kollontai biographies, Barbara Evans Clements identifies Armand for playing the pivotal role in the formation of Zhenotdel:

> [Armand was] astute enough to settle first for the commissions[8] and allow the party leadership to become used to that idea. Then, when the commissions proved unable to mobilize large numbers of women, she could argue for a woman's bureau on the German model, with headquarters in Moscow and a hierarchy of provincial and local departments which would be more directly under control of the central section than the commissions had been. Inessa had gotten the Zhenotdel established and she was well suited to the delicate task of building it.[9]

Interestingly, Ralph Carter Elwood, Armand's biographer, rejects the importance of all the Bolshevik women and instead presents a different theory, one which provides a "more plausible explanation for the establishment of Zhenotdel… [that] it was a product of organizational housekeeping by the Central Committee [of the Russian Communist Party] itself."[10] Essentially, in September 1919, Zhenotdel was no more than one of nine other sections restructured into the Central Committee Secretariat. With such little consensus across the historical community, it is critical we first develop a deeper understanding of Kollontai in order to better appreciate her role

[7] Gail Warshofsky Lapidus, "Political Mobilization, Participation, and Leadership: Women in Soviet Politics," *Comparative Politics* 8, no. 1 (1975): 96. Here, Lapidus is referring to French-Russian communist politician and feminist Inessa Armand (1874-1920) and Russian revolutionary Klavdiya Nikolaeva (1893-1944).
[8] There was thought to be a greater likelihood of getting leadership to authorize the establishment of commissions for organizing women which would be attached, and therefore fully subordinate, to local Party committees.
[9] Barbara Evans Clements, *Bolshevik Feminist: The Life of Aleksandra Kollontai* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), 226.
[10] Ralph Carter Elwood, *Inessa Armand: Revolutionary and Feminist* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 194.

and influence on Zhenotdel, before finally analyzing the organization and its impact on advancing women's rights in Russia.

Alexandra Kollontai: A Leader Made, not Born

Born April 1, 1872, in St. Petersburg, Kollontai came from a family that was neither poor nor proletarian, a characteristic shared by many prominent women of the Russian Social Democratic Party. Her father fought in the Russo-Turkish War (1877-1878) and subsequently received appointment as Provisional Governor of Tarnovo, Bulgaria. Upon the family's return to Russia in 1879, the Tsar censured her father for a study he published on the war that was considered insufficiently nationalistic, overly sympathetic to the British constitutional monarchy, and shaded with liberal overtones.[11] Kollontai's mother grew up similarly privileged, the daughter of a wealthy timber merchant. Initially forced into an arranged marriage, she eventually divorced her first husband after falling in love with Kollontai's father. Alexandra's parents' eventual path to marriage was hardly traditional, as her mother brought two children to the union. Alexandra herself was born out of wedlock. These circumstances certainly influenced Kollontai's political beliefs, as both she and her half-sister later confronted similar pressures to enter into arranged marriages.[12]

Kollontai's affluent upbringing allowed her to receive a good education. She did not attend conventional school or even university, due to her parents' anxiety at the idea of her leaving their fold. However, she displayed an aptitude for languages from a young age and studied French, Finnish, Italian, Bulgarian, German, and English, in addition to Russian, under the tutelage of her mother, father, and beloved English nanny.[13] She also studied under governess

[11] Clements, *Bolshevik Feminist*, 4.
[12] Cathy Porter, *Alexandra Kollontai: A Biography* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2014), 34.
[13] Porter, *Alexandra Kollontai*, 15-17.

Maria Strakhova, a "radical, but [also] a populist of the old school…. Imperceptibly, Strakhova was teaching [Kollontai] to understand Russian society and its contradictions."[14] As a youth, Kollontai developed a desire to secure personal freedom, seeking to "express desires of [her] own, to shape [her] own life."[15] She also acknowledged her growing curiosity in the world and questioned her life of relative privilege, writing in her diary, "[f]rom childhood I liked good living, but the knowledge that while I had my comforts others were suffering grieved me tremendously."[16] This passion for social justice and equality remained with her throughout her life and culminated in her work with Zhenotdel.

While most of her female peers enjoyed the society life, attending balls, theaters, and receptions, Kollontai, always one to break with tradition, instead preferred to study the popular socialist writers of the late nineteenth century, such as Karl Marx (1818-1883), Friedrich Engels (1820-1895), and August Bebel (1840-1913). In 1893, in yet another act of rebellion, Kollontai insisted on marrying Vladimir Kollontai, a distant cousin. Her parents disapproved of this choice and were reluctant to give their permission, fearful that Vladimir could not adequately provide for their daughter on only an engineer's modest salary. They need not have worried, however, as Vladimir established himself in his career and comfortably supported his wife. His earnings allowed Alexandra to raise their son, Mikhail, affectionately known as Misha, and maintain a wide circle of friends, while simultaneously continuing to indulge her interest in political philosophy.

[14] Ibid., 24.
[15] Beatrice Farnsworth, "Conversing with Stalin, Surviving the Terror: The Diaries of Aleksandra Kollontai and the Internal Life of Politics," *Slavic Review* 69, no. 4 (2010): 951.
[16] Alexandra Kollontai*, Selected Writings of Alexandra Kollontai*, trans. Alix Holt (London: Lawrence Hill Co., 1977), 33.

Travels with her husband solidified Kollontai's views on class and politics. In 1896, Vladimir was overhauling a ventilation system in the Krengholm factory near Narva, in what is now Estonia. Here, Alexandra witnessed first-hand the terrible conditions in which the working class lived. She recalled a particularly formative experience of visiting a workers' barracks:

> [T]he rooms were filled with wooden bunks, and rags were piled on top of them. Rarely, there was a thin mattress on any bunk. [The workers] slept side by side – married and single. The air in the barracks was heavy, saturated with *makhorka* [cheap tobacco] and human fumes. The windows were plastered over, so that not the slightest breath of fresh air could penetrate here. On the floor, among the bunks, little children played, lay and slept, or fought and cried under the supervision of a six-year-old nanny. I noticed a little boy… who was laying very still. When I bent down to examine what was wrong with him, I was convinced with horror that the child was dead. A little deceased was among living, playing children.[17]

The St. Petersburg textile strike of 1896 evoked in her feelings of solidarity, as she noted in her diary when she stated that the protest demonstrated "the development of a conscious proletariat in conditions of such complete oppression and inequality."[18] These successive events ultimately persuaded Kollontai to take up her "allegiance to the Marxists."[19] Her subsequent decision to study political economy in Zurich, Switzerland, in 1898 cemented her devotion to the revolutionary cause and, from then on, she worked to both respond to and define her positions on the problems facing the cause.

The economic classes she took at Zurich University were the catalyst that forced Kollontai to confront the most fundamental problem of all, the same issue which would eventually split the social democratic movement – the problem of its concept of revolution. Kollontai chose to study under Professor Heinrich Herkner (1863-1932), a German Marxist economist, based on the strength of his book *The Workers' Question*. Herkner eventually altered

[17] Porter, *Alexandra Kollontai*, 47-8.
[18] Kollontai, *Selected Writings*, 64.
[19] Barbara Evans Clements, "Emancipation Through Communism: The Ideology of A.M. Kollontai," *Slavic Review* 32, no. 2 (1973): 325.

his ideas, opting, like many of his contemporary German theorists, for a reformist revision of Marx, one which involved a significant modification of fundamental Marxist theories, often supporting the formation of an alliance with the bourgeois class and ultimately negating class struggle.[20] In contrast, Kollontai spent much of her time at the University defending the classical Marxist positions and contesting Professor Herkner's ideas.

With her husband's support, this time away from her family, including young Misha, allowed Kollontai to deepen her understanding of Marxism, and, as she began her new life, she documented her changing emotional needs:

> Love, marriage, family, all were secondary matters now, transient. They were there, and they would intertwine with my life again and again. But I had to break with the man of my choice, otherwise (this was an unconscious feeling from me) I would expose myself to the danger of losing my selfhood… It was life that taught me my political course, and study from books.[21]

In this moment, we see Kollontai realize that her life's true calling lay in her work with the revolution and the fight for equality for all; the traditional role of mother and wife would no longer fulfill her.[22]

Bebel's *Women and Socialism*, a piece she had read before embarking on her journey to Berlin, also profoundly impacted her attitudes about gender roles and the revolutionary working class in Russia. A woodworker by trade and a personal friend of Marx and Engels, Bebel was a founding member of Germany's Marxist Socialist Party. He eventually became one of its most respected spokesmen until his death in 1913. In 1879, he wrote *Women and Socialism* in an attempt to educate and organize German working-class women. Bebel argued that what must be

[20] Clements, "Emancipation Through Communism," 326.
[21] Porter, *Alexandra Kollontai*, 66.
[22] Kollontai's devotion to the struggle for social justice and desire to subvert traditional family routine led to a final break with her husband in 1899; however, they did not officially divorce until 1916. Though she enjoyed a close relationship with Misha in later years, he was primarily raised by his father, stepmother, and maternal grandparents.

right for the working class must also be right for women – in other words, women struggling for their equality could find their natural allies in workers. Since men had systematically oppressed and exploited them under capitalism, "[women] must not wait for them to help them out of this condition, just as workers do not expect help from the bourgeoisie."[23] Instead, women's liberation must be the labor of the women themselves. No women were immune to this treatment, either, as bourgeois women also experienced degradation at the hands of their husbands; they were expected to play the part of a perfect wife and doting mother while their spouses committed adultery for sexual pleasure. Through her studies of Bebel, Kollontai began to view the institutions of marriage and the traditional family as contributing to women's oppression. Even if women worked outside of the home, they remained responsible for the majority of unpaid work in the domestic sphere, which they performed individually for both their husbands and children. These household labors would continue to prevent women and girls from taking advantage of educational and professional opportunities if and when they became available. Kollontai believed that only collective childrearing and the socialization of cooking and cleaning would allow women to pursue their own economic goals, which would in turn provide them with the financial independence to exercise complete autonomy over their own lives.

Apart from this meditation, perhaps the most important question Bebel posed in *Women and Socialism* was how women could be freed when their welfare was so deeply dependent on that of their husbands. Indeed, how could family conditions improve, either?[24] Due to capitalism's innate oppressiveness, for Bebel, true liberation for women could only be achieved through the elimination of the capitalist family and the comprehensive transformation of social

[23] August Bebel, *Women and Socialism*, trans. Meta L. Stern (New York: Socialist Literature Co., 1910), 466.
[24] Bebel, *Women and Socialism,* 116-124.

conditions. Such was the expectation of capitalism that women had no choice but to place the needs of their husband and children above their own. In an attempt to maintain the bourgeois practice of owning property, women were married off. In class systems, men often only pursued marriage as a means of accumulating property via dowries or inheritances. Working men, Bebel believed, were more likely to marry for love than men from the bourgeoisie.[25]

Though Kollontai came from a privileged background, Bebel's arguments resonated with her since, as he postulated, all women received this type of treatment to varying degrees. Kollontai grew up familiar with her mother's tales of evading an arranged marriage and later watched her beloved half-sister marry a man decades older simply to maintain the family's class standing. Wanting to avoid the same fate, Alexandra instead found her love match in cousin Vladimir. This choice strained her relationship with her mother. The same woman who defied tradition by ending her first marriage and giving birth to her daughter, Alexandra, before wedding her second husband now expressed disappointment in Kollontai's decision to follow her heart rather than her head. Kollontai's mother and father took pleasure in identifying as members of the "liberal intelligentsia in Tsarist Russia,"[26] so, to them, this disobedience was the act of a radical. Indeed, Kollontai herself described this as "a [revolt] against a marriage of convenience."[27] Perhaps it is this difference in politics that explains why Kollontai's mother could not better relate to her daughter's familiar choice to abandon the conventions of the time and marry for love. One may even go so far as to say that Kollontai was rebelling against her family's prized liberal tradition.

[25] Ibid., 105.
[26] Porter, *Alexandra Kollontai*, 48.
[27] Kollontai, *Selected Writings*, 72.

While Bebel played an obvious role in shaping Kollontai's views, her time outside of Russia was marked by more than just her studies. Leveraging her radical political opinions, she proved a skilled coordinator of women workers, particularly in the years preceding the Russian Revolution. Forever changed by the Krengholm factory visit, in the mid-1890s Kollontai plunged into underground Party work; she discreetly disseminated literature about workers' rights and conditions to plant employees, visited those living in squalid conditions, and partnered with multiple educational organizations across Europe.[28] She continued these subtle demonstrations of activism working in libraries, where she taught illiterate workers not just reading and writing, but also basic Marxist principles. Over time and after repeated exposure to factory workers, Kollontai's work became more radicalized.

After her extensive exposure to fundamental Marxist principles, upon returning home to Russia in 1899, Kollontai joined Russia's Social Democratic Labor Party. In 1903, the Social Democratic Labor Party split between the Mensheviks, under Julius Martov (1873-1923), and the Bolsheviks, led by Lenin. Kollontai initially offered her services to both factions; by 1906, however, she grew disillusioned by the hostile position taken by the Bolsheviks towards the Russian Duma and, despite her generally left-wing ideology, officially joined the Mensheviks. The journey back to St. Petersburg took her through Finland, where she was introduced to Finnish Social Democrats and vowed to raise funds for striking textile workers. Though they differed in their Marxist ideology, Kollontai remained in contact with Herkner, her mentor. At his suggestion, Kollontai began studying Finnish economy. She displayed great sympathy for the Finns, both due to her own background and the opportunity to witness repressive tsarist policies in action. Finland had been part of the Russian Empire since 1809, but the tsars had permitted the

[28] Porter, *Alexandra Kollontai*, 52-54.

country substantial autonomy. Under Nicholas II, the government revoked that policy, requiring Finns to serve in the Russian army. Subsequent Finnish protests were violently suppressed. Kollontai became a leading Party expert on Finland, publishing a variety of pamphlets in an effort to galvanize the Finnish people.[29] Much like her compassion for Finns, Kollontai's care for all Russian women would later become one of the hallmarks of her work with Zhenotdel. In the meantime, this essential work allowed Kollontai to naturally step into the role of underground organizer, as the Social Democratic Labor Party was still considered illegal. She continued teaching classes on Marx; however, these opposition activities were not welcomed in Russia. After publishing a particularly inflammatory pamphlet which called on the Finnish people to rise up against oppression within the Russian Empire, Kollontai was forced to move to Germany in 1908 to evade arrest. She became an active member of the German Social Democratic Party while living there and toured Europe, Scandinavia, and the United States, educating supporters on what she knew best – Marxism, radical politics, and her own views of feminism.

During this period, Kollontai's activities centered on organizing working women. The struggle for abolition of the "slavery" of working women remained her highest priority, and she continued to espouse the benefits of socialism in the struggle for the liberation of women and for their equality of rights. The revolutionary events of 1905 precipitated Kollontai's struggle against Russia's liberal feminists and led to her efforts to convince the men of the Russian proletariat to include women's rights in its revolutionary struggle. Unlike many feminists, Kollontai's background taught her that true liberation extended beyond simply earning the right to vote. Instead, she drew on the themes of Krupskaya, Bebel, and leading German socialist and women's activist Clara Zetkin (1857-1933), appearing at feminist meetings for the purpose of

[29] Clements, *Bolshevik Feminist*, 146-49.

harassing and disrupting the leaders. She also formed her own labor groups, where she educated factory workers on the benefits of socialism and touted the advantages of relying on fellow proletariats in the fight for liberation. Many Social Democrats viewed the proletariat women's movement with ambivalence and antagonism; effectively exiled, without Kollontai's presence, the charge for female liberation in Russia received little attention.

Her absence was tangible. After an extended period of relative inactivity, the movement received a much-needed jolt of energy when a handful of Bolshevik female Party leaders united to form a special periodical for women workers named *Rabotnitsa*, or *The Working Woman*.[30] Editors extended from Paris to St. Petersburg and included names such as Krupskaya, Lenin's sister Anna Elizarova (1864-1935), and Armand. March 8, 1914, marked the first edition of the journal; this date was selected for its symbolic representation, as it also served as the socialist movement's International Women's Day. Unsurprisingly, police arrested local *Rabotnitsa* editors for speaking out against the tsarist government. This second stage of the proletarian movement officially came to an end a few months later both with Russia's entry into World War I and its resultant repressive measures.[31] Apart from strikes and subsistence riots, wartime Russia afforded women little time for organized activity.

Kollontai vehemently opposed Russia's entry into World War I. By June 1915, she broke with the Mensheviks and joined the Bolsheviks, as she believed they more consistently fought social patriotism. She returned to Russia after the February Revolution of 1917 and almost immediately reunited with her Bolshevik comrades. As the women's movement had fallen by the

[30] Carol Eubanks Hayden, "The Zhenotdel and the Bolshevik Party," *Russian History* 3, no. 2 (1976): 155.
[31] During World War I, Russia's infrastructures struggled to cope with the demand of war as its industry depended almost entirely on foreign imports. Germany and its allies blockaded Russia's eastern ports and, as a result, its railway, electricity, and supply systems broke down. Laborers were called to serve in the army, leaving few to collect harvests; this directly contributed to a country-wide food shortage and rationing measures.

way-side during the war, Kollontai, Krupskaya, Armand, and others set about resurrecting it. Prior to 1917, the Bolshevik Party relied on small, local committees to communicate with its branches via newspapers or political agents; similarly, feedback to the center came through correspondence or the rare conference. After 1917, the Bolsheviks used these methods of communication, in addition to leveraging railroads and telegrams, for social mobilization of the country.[32] These innovations were all based on techniques previously employed by the revolutionary underground, including Kollontai. Naturally, then, Kollontai did not hesitate to harness these activities while once again promoting women's liberation in Soviet Russia. She also lent her literary talents to a revived *Rabotnitsa* and initiated a campaign to mobilize women workers and soldiers' wives in the capitals and in the industrial towns of central Russia. Kollontai, in particular, helmed a strike of laundresses and a cadre of soldiers' wives in Petrograd[33]; included in their long list of grievances were numerous political demands. Bolshevik female medical students and workers organized Red Nurse detachments and other auxiliary services to assist the insurgents during the October Revolution. These actions and many others were coordinated by the *Rabotnitsa* editorial board, which instructed women workers not only to unify and arrange meetings but also to send liaisons to the *Rabotnitsa* office for further information. Thus all the basic components required for social mobilization, including charismatic leaders and a network of communication, were established before the beginning of the October Revolution.

[32] Richard Stites, "Zhenotdel: Bolshevism and Russian Women, 1917-1930," *Russian History* 3, no. 2 (1976): 175.
[33] St. Petersburg saw its name change to Petrograd at the beginning of World War I in 1914. Russians felt the name sounded too German and therefore gave it a more "Russian-sounding" name. The *Petro* start of the name retained the history of honoring Peter the Great, while the *–grad* portion was a common suffix used in the names of many Russian cities and localities.

Could this mobilization continue even after the conclusion of the war? If so, to what extent and how effectively? The leaders of the proletariat women's movement viewed it as inherent to the Revolution and all but assumed it would continue to forge ahead. Later in life, Kollontai reflected back upon the hostility to the regime. Doubters feared that an equal society would unsettle ingrained family dynamics, destroy the church – a prominent presence in everyday life – and promote the unconscionable separation of children from parents.[34] In 1917, however, Kollontai was already cognizant of the widespread disillusionment amongst Party members, particularly women, and recognized the need for both education and effective communication. For Kollontai, the fight was a marathon, not a sprint. In his first few years of Soviet power, Lenin rarely shared his opinion on the matter, but he was in full agreement with Kollontai, Armand, and others on the need for the active liberation of Russian women, in practice as well as in policy.[35] However, garnering support for any legislative program of emancipation could only come about by means of a social revolution that rose up from below.[36]

Initial progress towards female emancipation was slow. However, a twelve-day conference of women workers of the Petrograd Region, which commenced November 6, 1917, marked the beginning of meaningful action. Supported by Kollontai and other activists, the symposium produced a number of substantive resolutions that provided a framework for working drafts for Soviet decrees on women, such as one on maternity protection.[37] Disappointingly,

[34] Kollontai, *Selected Writings*, 212-15.
[35] Christine Sypnowich, "Alexandra Kollontai and the Fate of Bolshevik Feminism," *Labour/Le Travail* 32 (1993), 290.
[36] Linda Racioppi and Katherine O'Sullivan See, "Organizing Women before and after the Fall: Women's Politics in the Soviet Union and Post-Soviet Russia," *Signs* 20, no. 4 (1995): 837.
[37] Hayden, "Zhenotdel and the Party," 153. This conference was organized to rally support for the Bolsheviks in the Constituent Assembly elections. Demonstrating the ideological divide among leading women's rights activists, Nikolaeva encouraged delegates to reject feminist candidates. In contrast, Kollontai urged women workers to nominate their own officials in order to ensure that their specific interests, like higher wages, day care, and state support for mothers and children, were represented.

Party committees continued to overlook any potential benefits that the sanctioned creation of women's groups may have provided the movement. A National Congress, planned to coincide with Women's Day in 1918, never materialized. Local meetings bore similarly limited results. According to Kollontai, an old textile worker in Ivanovo once again suggested the idea of an "all-Russia" Congress of Women. Lenin backed the idea but once again stressed that this would not lead to a separate feminist movement outside the Party. Kollontai and her fellow women's rights activists took it upon themselves to arrange the meeting anyway, and in the summer of 1918, the First All-Russian Congress of Women was held in Moscow. Because of the Civil War and the generally unreliable transportation throughout Russia, organizers anticipated a turnout of three hundred delegates. Surprisingly, over one thousand workers, mostly women, appeared. Kollontai delivered a speech entitled "The Family and the Communist State," which eventually became one of her most widely quoted works. In her lecture, Kollontai outlined a future in which traditional family ties, outdated and archaic, would give way to new forms of gender relations, by a "comradely and cordial union of two free and independent, earning, equal members of a communist society."[38] Lenin followed Kollontai on stage, and, though his remarks were brief, his general endorsement of emancipation and earnest request that women support the movement caused a sensation – no head of state had previously endorsed "The Woman Question" in such a way. Before establishing Zhenotdel, previous attempts at setting up similar women workers' bureaus had failed in the face of the opposition within the Party. Any effort towards this purpose was thwarted by Party members who viewed these attempts as divisive of the working class and reeking of the very bourgeois feminism that Kollontai and her peers so vehemently denounced. In her writings from this time, Kollontai notes instances of Bolshevik men purposefully creating

[38] Kollontai, *Selected Writings*, 214.

obstacles to their initial efforts to organize women. Buildings for holding gatherings were routinely found locked with notices attached to the doors declaring the spaces unavailable for women's meetings. She herself described this hostility in her diary, writing, "They gave no encouragement and even went as far as trying to hinder the group."[39] Curiously, in her very next paragraph, Kollontai softens the blow of these actions on the part of her male comrades, noting, "Such an attitude was based on an easily understandable fear that the working class might leave their class movement and get entangled in the snare of feminism."[40] Though not explicitly stated, it is almost as if Kollontai was worried that any criticism would be interpreted incorrectly or reflect badly upon the Party.

Kollontai's relationship to feminism was complex. Much like Lenin, she recognized the necessity of examining "The Woman Question" but often dissociated herself from the term "feminism," since it was equated with bourgeois feminism. Unlike Kollontai and her fellow activists, bourgeois feminists believed in a united struggle for women's rights across all classes, thereby denying the possibility of a struggle of the entire working class against the propertied classes, as promoted by Marxist ideals.[41] In contrast, Party members viewed any attempts to organize women separately as a divisive attempt by feminists to hinder class struggle. Though Kollontai herself denounced feminism, and indeed the feminist label, she was frequently associated with the term since most of her work was so focused on the well-being of the female members of the Social Democratic Labor Party. She thought feminists incapable of creating a world free of gender inequality, going so far as to write in 1909:

> Proletarian women have a different attitude [than feminists]. They do not see men as the enemy and the oppressor; on the contrary, they think of men as their comrades, who share with them the drudgery of the daily round and fight with them for a better future. The

[39] Ibid., 174.
[40] Ibid., 175.
[41] Jinee Lokaneeta, "Alexandra Kollontai and Marxist Feminism," *Economic and Political Weekly* 36, no. 17 (2001), 1407.

> woman and her male comrade are enslaved by the same social conditions; the same hated chains of capitalism oppress their will and deprive them of the joys and charms of life.[42]

Patriarchy was only part of the issue; struggles with perceived sexual and gender inferiority, as well as social and economic conditions, also needed to be taken into account.

For Kollontai, a successful revolution would encompass all the distinct needs of her female compatriots, and Lenin's vocal support legitimized her work. By the end of the conference, the assembly developed an extensive list of objectives which mirrored Kollontai's own causes: to win the support of women for Soviet power; to combat domestic "slavery" and the double standard of morality within marriage by introducing law reforms which would reduce or eliminate the subservient relationship between a husband and wife; to establish centralized and collective living accommodations in order to release wives from a litany of household chores; to protect women's labor and maternity through the implementation of abortion rights and collective childcare; to end prostitution; and to "rebrand" women, thus "[giving] Communist society a new member."[43] For Kollontai and her fellow planners, the First All-Russian Congress of Women proved effective in demonstrating that their real labor was only just beginning.

Prior to this event, the last Russian women's assembly had taken place in 1908, and, at the time, served as the high-water mark of the Russian feminist movement. While noble in its quest, the assembly lacked direction, leadership, and government support. In contrast, the 1918 Congress was a vastly different experience. Lenin's backing signaled the start of the Bolshevik regime's support for the liberation of women – at least as its leaders understood it – and, before the Congress adjourned, it vowed to solidify structures necessary for enacting its goals. This first

[42] Porter, *Alexandra Kollontai*, 159-60.
[43] Edmondson, *Feminism in Russia*, 278.

took the form of "commissions for agitation and propaganda among working women."[44] In practice, however, these commissions were instead makeshift bodies attached to regular Party organs as opposed to fully functional groups with established objectives. Kollontai served on the Central Commission, which sought to create local branches at the lower Party level. She found the formation of women's commissions to be a laborious process, one that was often hampered by local resistance. Though plagued by imperfections, the Eighth Party Congress ultimately approved the measure in 1919. Later in the year, Kollontai's Commission rebranded into the Women's Section or Department of the Central Committee Secretariat. Subsequently appointed the People's Commissar of Social Welfare, Kollontai was the first woman to serve in the Russian government. Sensing the need to create autonomous channels to support women, she exercised her political power and, with the help of her comrades, officially established Zhenotdel as a separate department, which was itself comprised of a smaller network of local zhenotdels within the Bolshevik Party. Women had to bear a triple burden, shouldering the roles of worker, housewife, and mother. Zhenotdel therefore not only functioned as a tool to develop and educate future female Party leaders, but also instituted separate channels of communication to bring women into the struggle for a socialist society.

The Work of Zhenotdel

To achieve their ambitious goals, Kollontai and the other leaders of Zhenotdel sought to mobilize women in support of the Red Army[45] and the new regime during the Civil War. Kollontai and Krupskaya led propaganda teams on agit-trains and boats through Red areas,

[44] Lapidus, "Women in Soviet Politics," 92.

[45] Officially called the Workers' and Peasants' Red Army, but colloquially known as the Red Army, this organization was the main military force of the Soviet Russia. It was established in early 1918 by the Bolsheviks and fought the anti-Bolshevik's White Army during the Russian Civil War.

drumming up support in remote villages with speeches, song-and-dance groups, and poster art.[46] Recruiting saw slow returns, leading the Party to utilize Zhenotdel workers for more mundane tasks such as food distribution, child and orphan care, and education initiatives. Work days were long and eventually took a toll on Armand, the first official appointed leader of the Zhenotdel. Driven to exhaustion, she contracted cholera and died in 1920; Kollontai replaced her. This necessitated a move to Moscow, as Zhenotdel's central headquarters were located near the Kremlin, providing the organization a sense of legitimacy within the Party.

Scholars believe Kollontai was initially overlooked for this leadership position two years earlier due to the Party's, and in particular Lenin's, greater confidence in Armand's reliability and obedience.[47] Though Kollontai and Armand shared similar philosophies regarding women's liberation, Kollontai dismissed any notion of a feminist movement as separate from or outside the Party.[48] To that end, she even eradicated some of the strictly "female" features of Zhenotdel work, such as dedicated "women's pages" in Party publications like *Rabotnitsa* and *Pravda*. Kollontai firmly opposed any attempt by the Party to shutter Zhenotdel, so strongly did she believe in the organization's mission. She told fellow propagandist and women's rights organizer Emma Goldman (1869-1940) that women "were ignorant of the simplest principles of life, physical and otherwise, ignorant of their own functions as mothers and citizens."[49] It was therefore necessary to bring enlightenment to the women of Russia and to address specific, woman-related problems, such as maternity care, childcare, and domestic labor, directly.

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[46] Hayden, "Zhenotdel and the Party," 162.
[47] Karen Field, "Alexandra Kollontai: Precursor of Eurofeminism," *Dialectical Anthropology* 6, no. 3 (1982): 236. Lenin and Armand were also rumored to have engaged in a long-term affair, which may also have played a part in this decision. See, for example, Carter Elwood, "Lenin and Armand: New Evidence on an Old Affair," *Canadian Slavic Papers/Revue Canadienne Des Slavistes* 43, no. 1 (2001): 49-65.
[48] Beatrice Brodsky Farnsworth, "Bolshevism, the Woman Question, and Aleksandra Kollontai," *The American Historical Review* 81, no. 2 (1976): 301.
[49] Farnsworth, "Conversing with Stalin," 959.

Kollontai repeatedly refused to identify this, and other similar measures, as feminism; instead, it was a basic need, one that was essential to the success of the Party.

From the mid-nineteenth century to around 1920, the feminist movement in Western Europe and the United States viewed suffrage as the pinnacle of emancipation. After earning it, however, it was not until decades later that the feminist movements in the West achieved significant gains with regards to economic or sexual liberation. Perhaps more shamefully, they did even less to champion the liberation of working class or minority women. In contrast, Bolshevik feminism inverted the social agenda of Western feminism. For the latter, political emancipation was the goal. For the former, it was only the start.

Prior to her appointment, Kollontai remained engaged with Zhenotdel activities, even when her duties during the Civil War took her far afield. After her promotion, she captained the organization with the same vigor, passion, and talent that she had previously exhibited in other facets of revolutionary work. Kollontai's two-year tenure as leader was marked by political transitions. Imperative to the survival of Zhenotdel, the organization began to evolve away from its focus on wartime support measures into a tool that the Party could leverage to more effectively promote its policies. While this was Kollontai's most practical accomplishment, what was arguably her most impactful was her liberation work with "women of the East" – that is, the Muslim, Christian, Jewish, and Buddhist women of the non-western borderlands of Caucasia, the Volga, and Central Asia. These women were exposed to culturally accepted practices of sexual behavior unseen in the rest of Russia. Most extreme of these was the Muslim law of şeriat, which afforded women no status and no purpose apart from servant, pleasure-giver, housekeeper, and child bearer.[50] Kollontai set about organizing these women and invited some of them to Moscow

[50] Olga Voronina, "Soviet Patriarchy: Past and Present," *Hypatia* 8, no. 4 (1993), 103.

to participate in congresses with their fellow comrades. For extra drama, the foreign guests would dramatically remove their face coverings, startling audience members. Kollontai recognized the impact of such an action, admitting to American journalist and Bolshevik sympathizer Louise Bryant (1885-1936) that "all pioneering work is theatrical."[51]

This work was not always so melodramatic. In actuality, Zhenotdel activities among Eastern women were especially difficult, and Kollontai's conferences were just the start. These women were reluctant to discuss the type of abuses they were subject to in their homes under the traditional order. They described themselves as silent slaves, often hiding in their rooms or cowering before the husbands who lorded over them. Many were sold into marriage as children, sometimes at the age of ten or even younger. Sticks and whips were common methods of corporal punishment. Children, particularly daughters, were sold off, much like their mothers before them. Lacking homegrown Bolshevik supporters in these regions, Zhenotdel sent Russian revolutionaries and educators to attempt to earn their allegiance. However, workers encountered numerous obstacles to achieving this goal, including a lack of native Bolsheviks, a significant language barrier, the large size of the territories, widespread illiteracy, deeply engrained religious beliefs, and the open hostility of men. To make any headway, Zhenotdel volunteers were forced to adopt methods in accordance with the local situation. Any political activity was covert, taking place at women's clubs and other small group meetings. In spite of the danger they faced, hundreds of native women volunteered for Zhenotdel, eventually working their way up through the ranks into administrative positions. It was not uncommon for throngs of women to gather in the town squares or marketplaces in Eastern territories on International Women's Day to

[51] Kollontai, *Selected Writings*, 161.

celebrate their minor gains. For all her eventual successes, this, more than anything, would remain Kollontai's greatest achievement as Zhenotdel leader.

As director, Kollontai not only reported to the Party Secretariat and supervised the internal affairs of the central Zhenotdel organization, but also recognized the wide-ranging influence she held in almost every corner of women's lives, regardless of their geographical location. She forged relationships with other female-centric groups like the Maternity and Infancy Section of the Ministry of Health, the Commission for the Struggle Against Prostitution, the Komsomol, and a variety of other bureaus addressing food, insurance, education, welfare, trade unions, and literacy. As Richard Stites observed, the full extent of the Bolshevik women's movement extended well beyond the reaches of the national network of zhenotdels.[52] Much like Kollontai, lower-level leaders were also appointed based on their revolutionary experiences. V. A. Moirova, for instance, was the daughter of an Odessa laundress and witnessed first-hand the struggles her mother went through to provide for her family. A disciple of Kollontai, she worked her way through Party ranks and was eventually appointed head of the Ukrainian Zhenotdel; she later moved into the deputy position. In general, the local, grass-roots zhenotdel employees were working-class women or professional revolutionaries and veterans of the Civil War.

The Moscow Zhenotdel served as the centralized hub for the women's movement, and was responsible for creating propaganda, inciting agitation, and mobilizing support, which then radiated out to the local branches and, from there, to the female masses. Before the Revolution, propaganda served to convey a myriad of ideas to the few; in contrast, protests and demonstrations transmitted only one idea to the many. For Zhenotdel, the printed word functioned as the primary method of propaganda because it disseminated news, ideas, and

[52] Stites, "Bolshevism and Russian Women," 184.

instructions quickly and efficiently to its supporters. Though Kollontai's critics frequently expressed concern over whether or not her interpretation of "The Woman Question" extended far enough, she continued to center the experiences of the woman worker in her activism.[53] Thanks to Kollontai's practiced hand, brochures were widely used to supplement newspapers and periodicals, distilling Marxist classics on "The Woman Question" into easily digestible snippets. While these pamphlets were an efficient means of disseminating her ideas, *Rabotnitsa* continued to retain its place as the central organ of the movement.

The main drawback of these methods, however, was that only literate women could consume them. Print held no value in the large areas of Russia still populated by illiterate females. Therefore, propaganda techniques changed depending on the geography and demographics. Canvasing amongst the people, providing face-to-face interaction, proved a popular method. If an area sported a robust railroad system, agit-trains were employed; in the Kama and Volga regions, agit-boats made more sense. During a 1920 Petrograd speech, Grigory Zinoviev (1883-1936), the region's Party chief, insinuated that since most women workers could not read and did not willingly attend meetings of their own accord, in order to distribute propaganda, it would be necessary for the Party to visit bathhouses, as they served as a centralized location in which women could gather to gossip.[54] The strategy varied slightly in more urban areas; for instance, members of the Leninist Young Communist League would meet at local Zhenotdel command centers to receive instruction and then proceed to factories and communities to organize the laborers.

As effective as these methods were in stirring up support for the cause, it was not enough. For Kollontai, the secret to winning the heart and mind of the Russian woman was to lure her

[53] Anne Bobroff, "The Bolsheviks and Working Women, 1905-20," *Soviet Studies* 26, no. 4 (1974): 542.
[54] Racioppi and See, "Organizing Women," 834.

directly into the work of liberation, allowing her to become an active, rather than passive, participant. Women's sections were therefore created and comprised of volunteers interested in active Party work. This proved a failed experiment since it had a limited scope and only attracted those females already invested in public activity. Yet another technique Kollontai tried was the creation of delegate meetings, which were designed to deliver a continuous education in liberation and politics. Coordinators would hold elections among the women, and workers would select a representative to serve as a delegate to Zhenotdel for a set period of time. For many women, these elections allowed them to exercise their voice for the first time ever. Wrote Kollontai of the experience, "When the gray, backward, nonparty woman elects her representative, she feels she has accomplished an act of politics."[55] The agent would function as both observer and apprentice, floating between various branches of public activity: factories, soviets, trade unions, schools, and hospitals.[56] She would report back to her constituency at the end of her term and the process would start again. Essentially, each delegate served as an elected politician, administrator, and propagandist. This system played a vital role in elevating the consciousness of many rural, peasant women by introducing them to the intricacies of bureaucratic political life, to which they might not otherwise have been exposed. In essence, such women became "a menace to… drunkards, kulaks, sub-kulaks, and all who opposed Soviet law."[57]

[55] Kollontai, *Selected Writings*, 178.
[56] Soviet is from the Russian *sovet*, or "governing council." After the Russian Revolution, the term was used for local governments elected by workers, as well as the higher councils that those local soviets elected in turn.
[57] Linda Edmondson, "Equality and difference in women's history: where does Russia fit in?," in *Women in Russia and Ukraine*, ed. Rosalind Marsh (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 102. Traditionally, *kulak* described a peasant in Russia wealthy enough to own a farm and hire labor. In the early Soviet Union, particularly in Russia, the term became a veiled reference to property ownership among peasants who were reluctant allies of the Bolshevik Revolution. Millions of kulaks who resisted the forced collectivization in the 1930s were arrested, exiled, or killed.

The opportunity for delegates to congregate, share their experiences, and meet new people was invaluable for not only their Party education, but also their social mobilization. Writing again to Louise Bryant, Kollontai observed that "a woman who has gone to Moscow from some remote village is more or less something of a personage when she returns and you can be sure that the journey is an event for the whole village."[58] The number and frequency of the delegate meetings were staggering. During the Civil War, Bolshevik women leveraged similar non-Party symposiums to tempt unaffiliated women from rival political parties like the Menshevik or the Socialist Revolutionary Party. Rather than operate as a stage for free debate as in the Western world, they instead acted as demonstrations of solidarity and celebrations of Communist ideologies. The final delegate meeting, the Congress of Women Deputies to the Soviets, occurred in 1927, and functioned to commemorate the vast amount of change that had occurred over the previous ten years. Attendees later remembered the prevailing "sense of power and achievement" and "[the] note of almost touching faith in the new Soviet gospel."[59]

Unfortunately for Kollontai, her effectiveness as a leader proved to be her downfall, and in 1921 her outspoken participation in the Workers' Opposition Movement led to the end of her political duties in Russia; she was eventually posted abroad.[60] Her absence once again struck a devastating blow to the Russian women's movement, and an already tenuous Zhenotdel was left

[58] Kollontai, *Selected Writings*, 33.
[59] Mary Buckley, "Complex 'Realities' of 'New' Women of the 1930s: Assertive, Superior, Belittled, and Beaten," in *Gender in Russian History and Culture*, ed. Linda Edmondson (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 184.
[60] Kollontai was an ardent supporter of the Workers' Opposition Movement, which advocated for unionized workers' control over factories and in the management of Russia's national economy. Movement members believed that a Communist society could only be implemented by an industrial proletariat – that is, people with economic experience. Kollontai believed in placing a greater emphasis on reducing bureaucratization and was a harsh critic of the Central Committee of the Communist Party. After writing and publishing her pamphlet *The Workers' Opposition*, Stalin, Zinoviev, and leader of the Soviet secret police Felix Dzerzhinsky (1877-1926) recommended she be purged from the Party, though a resolution was later passed which allowed her to retain her membership unless further disciplinary violations were committed. Lenin, her old supporter, opposed this act, but as a result, Kollontai was posted in diplomatic assignments abroad to remove her from everyday Party politics.

even more vulnerable. Party authorities sought to replace Kollontai with someone of comparable reputation, but were unsuccessful. Fellow Communist and social democratic activist Angelica Balabanoff (1878-1965), for instance, was tapped to assume the post but refused, claiming she lacked the same interest and talent that Kollontai demonstrated. Elena Stasova (1873-1966), a Soviet revolutionary and Old Bolshevik, expressed similar sentiments when pursued. Krupskaya, one of the few remaining major female leaders, also declined. This leadership vacuum was an early sign of the impending decline of Zhenotdel as a political force. The eventual successors of Kollontai, while dependable revolutionaries, were significantly less renowned. Eventually, Sofia Smidovich (1872-1934) accepted the formidable task of following Kollontai. Like her predecessor, she had limited formal education, but the Social Democratic causes she supported were much narrower in scope. Smidovich was more concerned with the care of single mothers and abandoned children than she was with the theoretical sexual rights publicized by the new regime. After her short stint as Zhenotdel leader, Smidovich became a fervent opponent of the freer sexual tendencies of the time. Klavdiya Nikolaeva and Alexandra Vasilevna Artyukhina (1889-1969) helmed the organization from 1924 to 1927, and from 1927 until the abrupt dissolution of the Zhenotdel in 1930, respectively. Both capable leaders, neither left the same lasting impact as Kollontai.

For her part, Kollontai remained hopeful that her post abroad was only temporary and that she would soon return to her political work with Zhenotdel. In reality, her diplomatic assignments turned into a form of exile. Overseas for more than twenty years, Kollontai was first sent as an attaché to Norway, becoming one of the first women serving in diplomacy in modern times. Positions followed in Mexico, again in Norway, and finally Sweden, where, in 1943, she was promoted to Ambassador. She also served as a member of the Soviet delegation to the

League of Nations before finally retiring from public service in 1945. Notably, she was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in both 1946 and 1947 for her diplomatic efforts to end the Winter War between the Soviet Union and Finland.[61] Kollontai died in Moscow on March 9, 1952, a month short of her 80th birthday. Perhaps protected by her exile abroad, apart from Stalin and Ukrainian Bolshevik revolutionary Matvei Murano (1873-1959), she was the only member of the Bolsheviks' Central Committee that had led the October Revolution who lived into the 1950s.

Conclusion

The impact of Zhenotdel might be measured by evaluating support for the women's movement in 1930 by comparison with that in 1918. At the time Zhenotdel ceased operation, most urban Russian women backed the Communist regime.[62] It is important to note, however, that rural peasant women were essentially obligated to accept Communism with the introduction of collectivization in the early 1930s, which granted them not only legal and civic equality, but separate earnings, as well. Zhenotdel also sought to end domestic "slavery" and deeply engrained spousal double-standards, particularly in the East. Because of its efforts, marital rape was deemed illegal in 1922. The group and its sprawling network succeeded in bringing women into the Russian economy and helped them attain higher levels of education through workshops and seminars. Through partnerships with organizations such as the Maternity and Infancy Section of the Ministry of Health, Zhenotdel volunteers introduced labor protection for women and expectant mothers, while simultaneously spreading knowledge about government maternity care.

[61] The Winter War was a conflict between the Soviet Union and Finland that began with a Soviet invasion of Finland on November 30, 1939, three months after the outbreak of World War II. It concluded four months later, on March 13, 1940, with the Moscow Peace Treaty. Despite its superior military strength, the Soviet Union suffered great losses. The League of Nations viewed the Soviet Union's attack as illegal and, as a result, expelled the nation.

[62] Stites, "Bolshevism and Russian Women," 188.

As a result, abortion was legalized in 1920, making the Soviet Union the first country to do so. Zhenotdel did not experience unlimited success. In spite of its collaboration with the Commission for the Struggle Against Prostitution, for instance, the sex-work industry continued unchecked until the mid-1930s, when a combination of rehabilitation clinics, labor drafts, and increased policing helped curtail the practice.

Zhenotdel's influence was wide-ranging, and there was hardly a sector in which it was not involved: child and orphan care, school inspections and services, food distribution, housing, public health measures, anti-prostitution campaigns, education, government legislation, and mass propaganda supporting just about every crusade the Party decided to adopt. Some may say these causes resembled traditional feminist work; however, as an agent of the Party, Zhenotdel had virtually unlimited resources with which to engage women all across Russia, from urban centers to remote villages. With Party backing, Zhenotdel not only championed women's liberation but also created new, politically conscious Communists in the process. Lenin, in particular, remained a steadfast supporter, and indicated as much in this exchange with Clara Zetkin in 1920:

> We want no separate organizations of Communist women! She who is a Communist belongs as a member to the Party, just as he who is a Communist. They have the same rights and duties. There can be no difference of opinion on that score. However, we must not shut our eyes to the facts. The Party must have organs – working groups, commissions, committees, section[s] or whatever else they might be called – with the specific purpose of rousing the broad masses of women, bringing them into contact with the Party and keeping them under its influence. This naturally requires that we carry on systematic work among the women. We must teach the awakened women, win them over for the proletarian class struggle under the leadership of the Communist Party… It would be silly to ignore them... This is not bourgeois "feminism"; it is a practical revolutionary expediency.[63]

Despite Lenin's enthusiasm, however, by the end of the 1920s, an anti-feminist movement was gaining traction among Bolshevik leadership and, as a result, Zhenotdel lost much of its power

[63] Dmitri Volkogonov, *Lenin: A New Biography*, trans. Harold Shukman (New York: The Free Press, 1994), 280.

and influence. Local Party organs shuttered their zhenotdels, subsuming the work into other organizations. Skepticism was present within the body, too. As early as 1922, lacking Kollontai's leadership skills and general passion, Smidovich proclaimed it would be "better to liquidate [Zhenotdel]" rather than witness its diminishing returns. By the 1930s, Russia's rapid industrialization and collectivization measures proved too difficult for Zhenotdel to navigate. It championed necessary and important work during its time. Now, the Party believed that a solid cohort of liberated women and a specific, dedicated committee were no longer useful.

For many Zhenotdel workers, this signified the end of political work among Russian women and the almost certain death of much of what they most valued from the beginning. In a short period of time, Zhenotdel made an enormous impact on Soviet society. It functioned as an engine of mobilization in an environment of extreme social and political unrest; Zhenotdel's organizational and communication skills under Alexandra Kollontai were unmatched and enabled it to transition beyond small, specific tasks. It instead supported much larger, loftier Party goals, surpassing feminists in power and prestige along the way. Its success demonstrated that there was something more to female emancipation than simply obtaining suffrage. Indeed, without Zhenotdel and Alexandra Kollontai, the Soviet government might never have implemented the progressive legislative equality measures that it did.

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