

# CRASHING THE PARTY

## The radical legacy of a Soviet-era feminist

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SOVIETECA

In recent years, American and Western European policymakers and business leaders have been forced to confront stark gender imbalances within prestigious and well-paid fields, including medicine, science, and engineering. Although some wish to lay the blame on intrinsic neurobiological differences between the sexes, a glance toward the East deflates this argument. In 2015, an OECD report on health found that six of the top 10 countries with the highest percentage of female doctors are in Eastern Europe.

An astounding three-fourths of all doctors in Estonia are women, compared to only one-third of the doctors in the United States. A 2015 UNESCO report determined that Eastern European countries have far more women working in the fields of research and development than in Western Europe. Of the top 10 European nations with the highest percentage of women working in the “high-tech sector,” eight of them are in the East.

The reason behind this is simple: The legacy of decades of state socialist rule means that women face far fewer barriers to professional success in Eastern Europe than they do almost anywhere else. At the most fundamental level, the region’s post-1989 constitutions continue to assert that women have equal rights as men. Many nations also offer explicit constitutional commitments to mothers. For example, Bulgaria’s constitution guarantees “prenatal and postnatal leave, free obstetric care, alleviated working conditions, and other social assistance.”

Of course, enlightened constitutions do not eradicate everyday sexism, and Eastern European societies are still infused with male chauvinism. But the culture of state socialism did profoundly shift attitudes and make it more socially acceptable for mothers to work full time. Almost three decades after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the gender pay gap is smaller in Hungary than it is in neighboring Austria. More significantly, 73 percent of children between the ages of 3 and 6 attend formal kindergartens in Hungary, compared to only 26 percent attendance in Austria among children

the same age. This state of affairs can be traced back to the work of Alexandra Kollontai, a Russian aristocrat with a zeal for social justice and women's rights.

History is littered with tales of the oversized ambitions of men. But to Kollontai, the early years of the Russian Revolution offered an opportunity for men and women alike to pursue "magnificent illusions, plans, ardent initiatives to improve life, [and] to organize the world anew." The revolution dreamed of sweeping away autocracy and feudalism to liberate the Russian workers and peasants from centuries of exploitation. Kollontai seized upon the ideal of a more egalitarian world to promote the interests of the most downtrodden: women. Observing Kollontai in Petrograd in the years after the revolution, the American journalist Louise Bryant noted, "She works untiringly and, through persistence born of flaming intensity, she accomplishes a tremendous amount."

Born in St. Petersburg in 1872, Alexandra Mikhailovna Domontovich was raised in relative luxury. Her father was a general in the tsar's army, and her mother, the daughter of a wealthy Finnish businessman, had fled an arranged marriage to be with Alexandra's father, though she later promised Alexandra's sister to a well-to-do man 40 years the girl's senior. The young Alexandra abhorred the idea of being auctioned off to the highest bidder. Over her parents' wishes, when she was 21 she married a poor cousin, Vladimir Kollontai, and bore him a son.

Russia at that time was in the midst of great social flux. The Emancipation Reform of 1861 had freed the serfs from their feudal masters and coincided with the rise of industrial capitalism. Liberated peasants flocked to urban

areas, and cities like St. Petersburg teemed with former serfs with nothing but their labor to sell. The social upheavals of the late 19th century and the growing influence of Marxism across Europe inspired many opponents of the tsar, whose secret police dispatched countless would-be reformers and revolutionaries to the frozen lands of Siberia.

Against this backdrop, Kollontai began agitating with female textile workers in St. Petersburg, distributing literature and raising money to support women-led strikes. She taught evening classes to workers and joined underground networks that aided political prisoners. The historian Rochelle Ruthchild has written extensively about tsarist Russia's powerful feminist movement, but Kollontai believed that these "bourgeois feminists" would not lift working-class women out of their misery. In her view, all poor people needed to work together to overthrow the tsar and take control of the means of production. Eventually, Kollontai left her husband and young son to study economics at the University of Zürich.

Kollontai believed that women needed to participate in the labor force to become economically independent of men. In her view, sexual relations between men and women were poisoned by capitalism: With no means to support themselves, women had no choice but to sell themselves to men, either as wives or prostitutes. In her 1909 pamphlet, "The Social Basis of the Woman Question," Kollontai asserted that this gender oppression had its roots in the family. "In the family of today, the structure of which is confirmed by custom and law, woman is oppressed not only as a person but as a wife and mother," she observed, adding that in most countries, "the husband [has]

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not only the right to dispose of her property but also the right of moral and physical dominance over her." In an ideal communist society, Kollontai argued, men and women would only engage in sexual relations out of true passion and mutual affection.

After a period of exile in the U.S. and Europe, Kollontai returned to Russia in 1917 and gave her full support to the October Revolution. (Before becoming a Bolshevik, she had been a reformist Menshevik.) For five months she served as Commissar of Social Welfare before resigning in protest against the appalling terms of the Brest-Litovsk Treaty, which brought an end to Russia's involvement in World War I. During her brief tenure, however, Kollontai laid the groundwork for her signature accomplishment.

With the help of a cadre of progressive Soviet jurists, Kollontai orchestrated the passage of two decrees: one replacing religious marriage with civil marriage, and another liberalizing divorce. In October 1918, the highest legislative body of the Soviet Union incorporated these decrees into a new family law, which swept away centuries of patriarchal and ecclesiastical authority over women's lives. It eliminated church control over marriage and divorce, and overturned all legislation that rendered women the property and dependents of their fathers or husbands. Married couples were no longer able to make claims on each other's property, and married women retained complete control over their own wages. The new law also abolished the category of the "illegitimate" child, and included alimony provisions for those unable to work. Soon after the passage of these decrees, divorce rates skyrocketed.

Although Lenin cared little for Kollontai's sexual politics, he understood that if the revolution was to survive, women needed to formally be part of the labor force. He also agreed with her that the biggest obstacle to this was housework. "In most cases housework is the

most unproductive, the most barbarous, and the most arduous work a woman can do," Lenin proclaimed in a speech on Sept. 23, 1919. "It is exceptionally petty and does not include anything that would in any way promote the development of the woman." Russia lost many men in World War I, and with civil war threatening to take more, Bolshevik leaders needed to mobilize Russia's women. According to Kollontai, the best way to do this was through the complete socialization of household labor. In addition to winning support for the party, the socialization of cooking, cleaning, mending, and child rearing would free up women to work beside men in building the Soviet Union's industrial capacity. Equally important, Kollontai believed, as women developed skills and talents, they would be able to earn their own incomes and choose romantic partners on the basis of love rather than economic concerns.

During this period, Kollontai made significant strides in advancing her agenda on the economic and social fronts. By 1919, the Eighth Congress of the Communist Party had committed to increasing the number of socialized laundries, cafeterias, and children's homes, and Kollontai had helped found the *Zhenotdel*, a special women's section within the Central Committee of the Communist Party. The following year, the Soviet Union became the first country in Europe to legalize abortion during the first 12 weeks of pregnancy.

These legislative changes were unprecedented not only in Russia, but also in Europe and North America. In the West, it would take more than five decades for women to achieve the same rights. However, despite these initial successes, Kollontai soon encountered serious obstacles. First, she never won the full support of male comrades who worried that her insistence on women's issues would fracture working-class solidarity. Second, many Bolshevik leaders, especially Lenin, were prudish and conservative when it came to sexual matters,

and disapproved of Kollontai's more radical theories. Third, after years of war and the onset of a terrible famine, public laundries, canteens, and child-care facilities proved too costly for the crippled Soviet economy. Finally, and most importantly, the laws meant to liberate Russian women actually made their lives harder.

Women's wages were not high enough to allow them to support their families without a husband. Liberalized divorce laws meant that men abandoned women at the first sign of pregnancy, and alimony statutes proved almost impossible to enforce. A liberal sexual culture produced armies of unwanted babies, which the state lacked the means to support. Orphaned and abandoned children swarmed the streets of major cities. Legalized abortion allowed women to control their fertility, but also precipitated a massive plunge in the birth rate. By 1926, many women, especially in rural areas, clamored for a return to old ways. The provisions of the 1918 family law were slowly reversed, and in 1936, Stalin did away with most of them altogether.

In the early years of the revolution, Alexandra Kollontai was a household name, subject to both glorious praise and intense ridicule. Her ideas about sexual morality were wildly insensitive to the conservative Russian peasantry, who hated her and everything she stood for. But Kollontai's vision was embraced by some Soviet youth in the 1920s. According to a survey of students at the Sverdlov Communist University in Moscow, only five years after church marriage was abolished and divorce was liberalized, researchers discovered that just 21 percent of young men and 14 percent of young women believed that marriage was a desirable way to formalize their romances. Instead, half of men and two-thirds of women preferred a long-term relationship based on love and affection.

After Kollontai joined the Worker's Opposition and challenged the growing bureaucracy of the Bolshevik state, she fell out of favor with

Lenin. She was sent off into exile as a diplomatic emissary to Norway, but never gave up her cause. In her 1926 memoir, *The Autobiography of a Sexually Emancipated Communist Woman*, Kollontai assured readers:

“No matter what further tasks I shall be carrying out, it is perfectly clear to me that the complete liberation of the working woman and the creation of the foundation of a new sexual morality will always remain the highest aim of my activity, and of my life.”

Stalin did maintain the legal equality of men and women, and the ideal of women's emancipation never fully dissipated even though women continued to bear the immense burden of both formal employment and domestic

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## IN 1963—THE YEAR *THE FEMININE MYSTIQUE* CAME OUT—THE SOVIET UNION PUT THE FIRST WOMAN IN SPACE

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work. As the culture around gender changed, women also took on new roles. Throughout the 1930s, Soviet women were slowly integrated into the armed forces, and served in frontline combat roles throughout World War II, most famously in the 588th Night Bomber Regiment of the Soviet Air Forces. These “night witches” terrorized the Germans, flying over 30,000 stealth mode missions between 1941 and 1945. (The Dutch didn't allow women to serve in combat roles until 1979, and the Germans waited until 2001.) Between 1917 and the late 1960s, when elite American universities remained segregated by sex, the Soviet government encouraged girls to pursue higher

degrees at co-educational institutions in all fields, including the normally male-dominated fields of science, technology, and math. For example, by 1970, 43 percent of students at engineering institutes in Romania were women, and in the USSR and Bulgaria, they constituted 39 and 27 percent. By contrast, in 1976 only 3.4 percent of bachelor's degrees in engineering in the U.S. were earned by women.

After World War II, state socialist nations in Central and Eastern Europe followed the lead of the Soviet Union and implemented family laws inspired by the original 1918 Soviet Code. Because many leftist women fought alongside men as partisans during World War II, the new Eastern European communist leaders were committed to their emancipation. Furthermore, facing severe labor shortages, women were needed to work outside the home. They immediately gained legal equality with men, and socialist states poured resources into women's education and professional development. For instance, in 1945, the vast majority of women in Albania could neither read nor write, but within a decade of the communists seizing power, the entire population under the age of 40 achieved full literacy. In the years before communism's demise, half of all Albanian university students were women. Thus, despite the authoritarian nature of the regimes, the Soviet Union and the countries of Eastern Europe had the highest female labor participation rates in the world, and women slowly worked their way into a wide variety of professions. In 2018, when the *Financial Times* published an article about the prevalence of Bulgarian women in technology, it openly credited this "Soviet legacy."

Alexandra Kollontai spent most of her remaining life serving in ambassadorial posts in Norway, Mexico, and Sweden, before finally returning to the USSR after World War II. She enjoyed a long and celebrated diplomatic career and was twice nominated for the Nobel

Peace Prize. She died at the age of 79 in 1952, just a week before her 80th birthday and more than a decade before the explosion of women's movements around the world.

In the sunset years of her life, Kollontai must have despaired over her failure to create the world she once envisioned. The Soviet Union was devastated after World War II, suffering more than 25 million casualties. Most of her Old Bolshevik colleagues and at least two of her lovers had been killed in Stalin's purges. But her legacy was not forgotten. In 1955, after Stalin's death, the Soviet government repealed the general prohibition on abortions. In 1963—the same year that Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique*—the Soviet Union put the first woman in space. Despite the continued double burden of formal employment and housework, the lack of reliable birth control, and the persistence of sexism, Soviet women continued to make inroads into every sphere of professional life.

Perhaps Kollontai's biggest mistake was miscalculating the backlash her initiatives would face not only from men, but also from women who feared radical social change. Like many of her Bolshevik colleagues, she failed to understand that lasting social progress requires equal parts bottom-up cultural change and top-down legal reform. In a society where matrimony was an unbreakable, church-sanctioned religious contract, husbands had no impetus to improve their behavior toward their wives. But when the state legalized divorce, and gave women the opportunities to pursue their education and control their fertility, men were incentivized to behave better. Kollontai's schemes failed in the short term, but they ultimately increased the opportunities and improved the lives of millions of women. She also intuited, correctly, that great societal transformations cannot be left exclusively to grassroots efforts. They need to be jump-started with a little legal shock therapy from above. ●