

Alexandra Kollontai and the Fate of Bolshevik Feminism

Christine Sypnowich

Volume 32, 1993

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/lt32re03>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (print)

1911-4842 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Sypnowich, C. (1993). Alexandra Kollontai and the Fate of Bolshevik Feminism. *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 32, 287–296.

Alexandra Kollontai and the Fate of Bolshevik Feminism

Christine Sypnowich

Alexandra Kollontai, *Love of Worker Bees*, trans. and introd. Cathy Porter (London: Virago 1988).

Alexandra Kollontai, *A Great Love*, trans. and introd. Cathy Porter (London: Virago 1991).

ALEXANDRA KOLLONTAI is one of the most fascinating and least understood figures of the Bolshevik revolution. A feminist and a socialist, Kollontai defended a vision of emancipation premised on equality, comradeship, and personal autonomy, where society would take responsibility for domestic labour while enabling individuals freely to express their sexuality. In the wake of the collapse of Soviet communism, Kollontai and her creed may seem a subject best consigned to Marx's "dustbin of history." But Kollontai's story must be told if we are to understand the failure of the Soviet project. For it is unclear whether she should be viewed as an innovative and visionary radical or just another compromised participant in the official order. Our assessment of Kollontai will help us to determine the extent to which an anti-authoritarian vision of socialism was ever a possibility in the former USSR. As we ponder today whether the October Revolution itself was a brilliant dream gone wrong, or bankrupt in its very origins, so too must we address these questions to Kollontai's contribution.

In this spirit of reflection on the Russia that might have been, two attractive recent editions of Kollontai's fiction, translated and introduced by Cathy Porter, provide a welcome opportunity to learn of the utopian aspirations and ominous difficulties that characterized the early struggles of the October Revolution.¹

¹See also her biography *Alexandra Kollontai: The Lonely Struggle of the Woman Who Defied Lenin* (New York 1980).

The Paradox of 'the Woman Question'

THE POSITION OF WOMEN IN THE USSR, like many features of that country, abounded in paradoxes. On the one hand, Marxist-Leninist doctrine has insisted on the importance of sexual equality. In the *Communist Manifesto* Marx and Engels called for the abolition of the status of women as "mere instruments of production" and of "prostitution, both public and private." Lenin argued that only a socialist economy could emancipate women from her lot as a "domestic slave," where "*petty housework ... chains her to the kitchen and the nursery ... [where she] wastes her time on barbarously unproductive, petty, nerve-racking, stultifying and crushing drudgery.*"² In Soviet public life, women have played highly significant roles in some domains, as activists in the revolution and soldiers in the civil and world wars, and in occupations, from labourer to physicist, traditionally dominated by men in the West. And Soviet policy on issues such as abortion, divorce and maternity leave, even the longstanding recognition of International Women's Day as a public holiday, have won the respect of Western feminists.

On the other hand, Marxist theory has long been criticized by feminists for subsuming the unique question of women's emancipation under issues of class or property. Similarly, independent grassroots feminist movements have been actively discouraged by the Soviet state; a central tenet of Soviet ideology seems to have been that there is no tension between the interests of the regime and the interests of women, and hence there is no need for women to press their own cause. Soviet women have occupied few positions at the peaks of their professions, or in prominent political posts. Further, backward social conditions have taken their toll on women in particular, who must endure the trials of finding food in undersupplied shops and the consequences of faulty contraception devices. That women have borne these burdens alone is a manifestation of the deep-rooted sexism in the domestic sphere, where women continue to have arduous responsibilities in the home without even the pretence of assistance from their sons and husbands.³ Thus on issues of sexual equality, like so many others in the former USSR, the evidence is sufficiently ambiguous that Western Marxists can sing their praises, while Soviet dissidents can find grounds to mock them as a mere facade.⁴

²Lenin, *On the Emancipation of Women* (Moscow 1965), 63-4.

³Richard Stites, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Russia* (Princeton 1990), ch. 12; Martin Walker, *The Waking Giant: the Soviet Union under Gorbachev* (London 1986), ch 11; and, Barbara Evans Clements, "Later Developments: Trends in Soviet Women's History, 1930 to the Present," in B.E. Clements, B.A. Engel, C.D. Worobec (eds.), *Russia's Women: Accommodation, Resistance, Transformation* (Berkeley 1991). An excellent rendering of these issues in fictional form is Julia Voznesenskaya, *The Women's Decameron*, transl. W.N. Linton (London 1987).

⁴Compare William Mandel, *Soviet Women* (New York 1975) with Tatyana Mamonova, *Russian Women's Studies: Essays on Sexism in Soviet Culture* (Oxford 1989).

The paradox of the "woman question" in the USSR can be traced to the early days of the Revolution. Sexual equality was a cardinal belief of most revolutionaries, and women were organized and active in defending the Bolshevik cause. But feminism was never permitted to be an autonomous force. The Zhenotdel, the women's bureau of the Central Committee formed in 1919, was an impressive, dynamic organization. It published a women's paper, won important reforms in areas of childcare, contraception and marriage, and achieved a significant record of success in raising the consciousness of women in the provinces. However, as an organ of the party, the Zhenotdel was dependent on official sanction. When the regime moved to the right, women's issues were deemed an extravagance and support for the bureau dwindled until it was eventually closed in 1930. Socialization of housework and childcare, while a credo of many prominent Bolsheviks, was never realized, and indeed, by the Stalin era, just preserving reforms which ameliorated the conditions of the traditional family was the best that could be hoped for.⁵

Kollontai and the October Revolution

ALEXANDRA KOLLONTAI was at the centre of Bolshevik debate about the position of women, and her life provides an absorbing chronicle of, as she put it, "a sexually emancipated communist woman."⁶ Kollontai turned her back on her liberal aristocratic background, first by marrying against her parents' wishes, and then, revolting against "love's tyranny" (Introduction, *LWB*, 8), defying her husband and his conventional views about marriage to embark on a life of political action. Her efforts at mobilizing women to mass action attracted the attention of the Tsar's police, and by 1917 she had spent a significant number of her adult years in exile. After her return to participate in the revolution, she was made head of Zhenotdel and was honoured with the post of Commissar of Social Welfare, making her the only woman in Lenin's government.

These successes were shortlived, however, as Kollontai's views and activities increasingly set her apart from other Bolsheviks, ultimately at the cost of her career. Kollontai's ideas on free love and her liaison with the sailor Dybenko, a man both younger than her and lower in social status, were the source of considerable suspicion in the Party, where conservative views about sexuality and the family continued to prevail. But it has been argued that it was Kollontai's participation in the Workers' Opposition and her criticism of the increasing authoritarianism of the Bolshevik state, not her radical ideas about sex and love, which were the primary

⁵See Barbara Evans Clements, "The Birth of the New Soviet Woman," in A. Gleason, P. Kenez and R. Stites (eds.), *Bolshevik Culture* (Bloomington 1985).

⁶This was the title of her autobiography: *The Autobiography of a Sexually Emancipated Communist Woman*, (ed. and afterward I. Fetscher), transl. S. Attanasio (New York 1971).

cause of the resumption of her life as an exile.⁷ In 1922 she was posted to Scandinavia as a diplomat, eventually becoming Soviet ambassador to Sweden. Ironically, the sexism of the Soviet state against which she battled may have saved her life, since it has been suggested that Stalin's chivalry prevented him from executing her along with her male counterparts in opposition circles. (Introduction, *AGL*, 8)

Kollontai's philosophy of personal emancipation, set out in well-known essays such as "Make Way for Winged Eros," constitutes her most innovative contribution to both socialist and feminist thought.⁸ For Kollontai, communism would mark a revolution in relations of the heart, as well as the economy and society. Instead of possessive, exclusive pairing — and its corollary, infidelities based on brute physical instinct — there would emerge free relations among the sexes in manifold marital and non-marital combinations of love and sex. Mutual respect, individual autonomy, and a commitment to the welfare of the community would be guiding principles. As a Marxist, Kollontai insisted that this sexual revolution was not a mere change in attitude, but would only be possible on condition of fundamental social and economic reforms, where childcare and housework were socialized, and women found themselves on the same footing as men at work and in politics.

The utopianism of this vision is hard to deny. But Kollontai's fiction shows that she was not unaware of the obstacles which beset it. Indeed, we may well learn most about Kollontai's ideas, not from her essays, but her short stories, which were written in the first years of her diplomatic career, and which abound in examples of the kinds of social relations to which she aspired. Moreover, the stories demonstrate the distance between Kollontai's philosophy and the salacious depiction given by both Soviet and Western commentators who saw in them a call for promiscuity and decadence.⁹

The two collections explore how women find it difficult to refuse the disproportionate share they have traditionally taken in fostering their romantic relations, and how private property relations under the New Economic Policy bring with them traditional expectations of home and hearth for women. In both "Vasilisa Malygina" and "Sisters," in *Love of Worker Bees*, women find solidarity with other women as they confront the disappointments of relations with men, a theme which anticipates the ideas of sisterhood in the "Second Wave" of feminism in the 1970s in the West. In "Sisters" the women involved are a principled Bolshevik, bristling under her "bourgeois" marriage to a "NEPman," and the young woman her husband

⁷See Barbara Evans Clements, *Bolshevik Feminist: the Life of Aleksandra Kollontai* (London 1979), 216; and, Stites, *Women's Liberation Movement*, 333. But see Porter, *Alexandra Kollontai*, 412-4.

⁸See Kollontai, *Selected Writings*, introduction and commentaries Alix Holt (New York 1977).

⁹See Stites, *Women's Liberation Movement*, for a catalogue of the slurs made against Kollontai by a number of writers, including E.H. Carr.

engages as a prostitute. The women find that their suffering has a common cause; just as the prostitute was forced to turn to the sex trade after she had been laid off in the harsh economic climate unleashed by the New Economic Policy (NEP), her Bolshevik sister attributes her conventional marriage to the imperatives of the new market economy. The stories offer a trenchant critique of the emerging inegalitarian and hierarchical structures in postrevolutionary Soviet society and in the Party itself, and their effect on relations between men and women, suggesting that our criteria for assessing the success of political transformation should include people's well-being in private matters. The 1970s slogan, "the personal is political," is anticipated in Kollontai's examination of domestic injustice.

The best-known story in the *Worker Bees* collection is "Three Generations," where it is especially clear that winged eros was more difficult to realize in practice than its theory indicated. The tale's focus is the successively less monogamous views of love of three generations of women. The middle generation is represented by the heroine, Olga, who on the one hand shocks her mother with her affair with a married man, while herself being shocked by the sexual conduct of her daughter, who sleeps with her mother's lover along with other men. The story was unfairly interpreted as a call for libertinism; it is best seen, however, as a frank admission of the difficulties of achieving consensus and tolerance over controversial issues in turbulent times. Olga ponders of her daughter's philosophy, "Was this nothing more than wanton promiscuity, unchecked by any sort of moral standards? Or was it some quite new phenomenon created by new lifestyles? Was this in fact the new morality?" (LWB, 205) The openness of Kollontai's discussion here is startling, particularly in contrast to the emphasis on doctrinal correctness which later came to characterize Soviet culture.

The ironically titled *A Great Love* is not as well known as *Worker Bees*. Yet its title story, or more accurately novella or *povest'*, may well be Kollontai's finest literary achievement. It concerns the doomed love affair between Senya, a respected and senior revolutionary in a traditional marriage, and the younger Natasha, a revolutionary and an independent woman. In her introduction Porter takes up a theme of her biography of Kollontai and mounts a case for seeing the story as confirmation of a rumoured liaison between Lenin and Inessa Armand, Kollontai's predecessor as head of Zhenotdel. But while Senya is unmistakably Lenin-like, and Natasha very much a passionate and emancipated woman of Kollontai or Armand's ilk, the evidence that this is a *roman-à-clef* is rather contentious.¹⁰ Moreover, this preoccupation takes away from the main interest of the story: its critique of the shortsightedness of the Bolshevik leadership when it came to democratic and libertarian values in social and personal relations. For all his stature as a leader of revolutions, Senya emerges as a limited man, unable to accept his lover as an equal in the domains of work, sex or politics. One cannot help but question the prospect that the October Revolution might transform the

¹⁰See Clements, *Bolshevik Feminist*, 229.

realm of the personal if this is the best relationship that can be achieved by two of its most gifted revolutionaries.

In literary terms, these books have their limitations. There is more than a hint of the melodrama about them, as the often very short stories handle large issues through a quick succession of startling events. Further, Kollontai's prose, while unpretentious and direct, is also often sentimental and clumsy. Consider some of the dialogue from "Vasilisa Malygina": "'Work before everything,' he'd said, 'but there's our love too, and that's almost as important, isn't it, Vasya?' And she'd agreed. She felt the same way, happy and confident that they weren't just man and wife but real comrades too." (*LWB*, 29) (Porter's translation is at least partly to blame here, since the Russian language more naturally lends itself to sentimentality than does English.) Though "A Great Love" is the most successful work of fiction, exploring a complex relationship with greater subtlety, in all the stories there is a touching frankness about the realm of the intimate, a recognition of the irresolvable tensions in human lives, which sets Kollontai's fiction apart from writers before and since, in Russia and elsewhere. The political and historical interest of these stories is undeniable, whatever their artistic merit.

Conformism and Innovation

HOW SHOULD WE assess Kollontai today? There is considerable evidence that Kollontai's views and actions were in accord with the dictates of the prevailing order, and thus that depictions of her as an uncompromising radical risk romanticization. Under pressure to maintain party unity, Kollontai recanted many of her views, not only about the Workers' Opposition, but also sex and the family. She also heavily revised her autobiography to conform to the party line. For Kollontai, like many of the Left in and outside the former Soviet Union, the Soviet project commanded ultimate loyalty, however flawed it might be and whatever cynical means it might employ. Moreover, even before her differences with the party leadership led her to backtrack on her position, Kollontai could be said to have shown a conformist streak, both in her assumption that the Bolshevik cause was inevitably feminist, and in her "productivist" conception of women's liberation, where the prospect of enlarging women's contribution to the revolution often appears to be the *raison d'être* of putting them on the same footing as men.¹¹ It is striking that Olga's daughter in "Three Generations," for all her rebellion in the realm of sexual relations, declares her fidelity to the things that really count: "... there are people whom I love very much, other people besides mother. There's Lenin, for instance — don't smile, I mean it! I love him far more than all the men I like and have slept with. I'm always beside myself for several days whenever I know I'm going to see him and hear him talk — I'd give my life for him too!" (*LWB*, 210-1) This endorsement of the Lenin cult should give us pause when touting

¹¹This critique is made by Jacqueline Heinen in her "Kollontai and the History of Women's Oppression," *New Left Review*, 110 (1978).

Kollontai as a subverter of authority.¹² Ultimately, then, Kollontai's contribution may be best seen in terms of cementing the authoritarian order that came to prevail.

On the other hand, it is difficult to avoid portraying Kollontai as a visionary of some kind when considering her ideal of a socialist society where domestic labour, as well as production, was socialized and personal relations fundamentally transformed, and her courage in urging this ideal on her reluctant comrades. It seems unfair, perhaps, to charge her with conformism when her views were deemed by the state to be grounds for permanent exile. The regime's continued embarrassment about Kollontai's place in its history was manifest in a Progress edition of Kollontai's writings published in 1984. The volume excludes her articles on sex, and sanitizes her views. Writes I. Dazhina in the introduction, "like all communists, Kollontai was convinced that corruption and perversion would be removed from the relations between the sexes as communist morality became the norm of human behaviour. She herself gave a very modest assessment of her literary contribution to the issues of the family and private life and later admitted that much of what she had written was soon outdated."¹³ Surely Kollontai stands as an oppositional figure of some kind if the former Soviet regime's unease about her was such that even her rehabilitation involved a belittling of her ideas.

In trying to resolve the enigma of Kollontai, it is tempting to point to the time-honoured rationale of tactics versus principles. And indeed, perhaps Kollontai thought it made tactical sense to defer her feminist principles until the Bolshevik revolution was secure, to qualify her views so long as they threatened the new regime. But tactical explanations such as this assume that the only alternative to Bolshevism was the continued reign of the tsars, or that the immediate securing of Bolshevik power was the only way forward. Both views are open to question. Moreover, the calculation that the success of October was a necessary, if not sufficient, condition of feminist achievements of any kind does not square with the instrumental aspects of Kollontai's feminist principles themselves, where the liberation of women is embraced as a means of furthering the socialist project, not vice-versa.

Ultimately Kollontai's place in Bolshevik history, the rightness or wrongness of her ideas and actions, are impossible to assess in the manichean terms of principled heroine or compromised collaborator. But this in itself may provide an important lesson for Western Marxists in light of recent events. It should now be apparent that no participant in the Bolshevik project, however noble or courageous, can be thought of in terms of innocence in any strict sense; compromise came to everyone — be it Trotsky, Bukharin or Kollontai — from the outset. Even Mayakovsky, who committed suicide in despair of the future of Bolshevism, could

¹²For a fascinating account of the Lenin cult of this period, see Nina Tumarkin, *Lenin Lives! Cult in Soviet Russia* (Cambridge, MA 1983).

¹³Kollontai, *Selected Writings and Speeches*, comp. I.M. Dazhina, M.M. Mukhamedzhanov and R.Y. Tsivlina (Moscow 1984), 13-4.

rightly be described as one of the founders of the cult of Lenin. It is thus unfortunate that in their effort to celebrate Kollontai in the face of her fall from grace that Porter, in her introductions to the two volumes, and Sheila Rowbotham, who writes a brief afterward in *Worker Bees*, are not more honest about the complexity of Kollontai's position. Kollontai, like the Bolshevik project as a whole, was at once heroic and compromised, innovative and conformist, romantic and pragmatic.

This complex reading of Kollontai's moral position should not lead us to overlook her intellectual contribution, in particular her idea of the import of the private realm. Both as a member of the Workers' Opposition and as a feminist, Kollontai was convinced that social and economic questions had a personal dimension of great significance for the success of socialism. For Kollontai, socialism involved citizens living autonomously in community, and this required both the elimination of injustice in the private sphere and the protection of a realm of personal privacy. But Kollontai's analysis of the importance of personal relations not only did not take root; its precepts were reversed. The former Soviet Union disregarded the welfare of its citizens in private life, resulting in low standards in housing, consumer goods, health care and educational practices on issues of gender, while taking a more than meddlesome interest in how personal affairs were conducted. That the private sphere is not simply the domain of bourgeois egoism, which should meet the same fate as private property, is an idea that socialists have only recently begun to consider, but which finds a thoughtful treatment in the writings of Kollontai.¹⁴

Whither Kollontai's Feminism?

IT IS UNCLEAR WHAT STATUS KOLLONTAI might have in the Russia which is now emerging. The perestroika era gave some hope that a more democratic socialism might be in the offing, whereby some of the radical voices of the Old Bolsheviks, such as that of Kollontai, would contribute to a rejuvenation of the former USSR. Gorbachev targeted feminist issues as an area in need of reform in his speech to the 27th Congress, in which he called for improved arrangements for childcare and maternity leave, along with the revival of women's councils in workplaces and residential areas. But as in so many other areas of reform, Gorbachev's inability to deliver on his promise of improved social conditions meant that only the proposals for democratization took hold, with the result that the women's councils served only as a new vehicle for expressing discontent, undermining rather than strengthening the regime of perestroika.

The fall of Gorbachev and the collapse of communism would seem to have ended any hope for a renewed socialism, and thereby a feminist socialism along the lines of that proposed by Kollontai. Such hopes may have been naive in any case, insofar as the main purpose of the turn to perestroika was the revival of the

¹⁴I discuss this in my *Concept of Socialist Law* (Oxford 1990), and "Justice, Community and the Antinomies of Feminist Theory," *Political Theory*, 21:3 (1993).

economy, a purpose which as before might have meant the indefinite postponement of other emancipatory agendas. Moreover, the move to democracy and openness initiated by Gorbachev gave vent to a wide range of dissident voices, many of them not obviously feminist. On the one hand there is a neoSlavophile emphasis on traditional roles for women as a constituent in the rebirth of Mother Russia. On the other hand, the view that "west is best" is reflected in unqualified support for a commodity culture which has produced the objectification of women in pornography and the "return of a repressed femininity" in standards of female beauty.¹⁵

In this rather bleak context, it is significant that one area where the new spirit of openness has fostered a feminist voice is the arts. Barbara Heldt argues that a "gynoglasnost" has taken place in film and literature, giving rise to a perspective which takes issue with both the old regime's subsumption of feminist concerns under the requirements of the socialist state, and the current revival of the traditional emphasis on sexual difference.¹⁶ It seems that contemporary Russian feminists are taking Kollontai's example, using artistic forms to express powerfully their vision of sexual equality. Of course, it is too early to tell whether this vision will have any lasting effect on society as a whole. It is even more difficult to say whether it will ever incorporate any of Kollontai's socialist ideals. But in any case, Kollontai's corpus should be read as an important contribution to socialist feminist writing in general. Western socialists may nonetheless hope that our appreciation for Kollontai may have a wider effect in these times when things Western are so admired by Russians, so that Kollontai will at last be able to make an enduring contribution to the society for which she wrote.

I am grateful to David Bakhurst for very helpful comments on an earlier draft.

¹⁵See Maxine Molyneux, "The 'Woman Question' in the Age of Perestroika," *New Left Review*, 183 (1990), and Barbara Heldt, "Gynoglasnost: Writing the Feminine," in Mary Buckley (ed.), *Perestroika and Soviet Women* (Cambridge 1992).

¹⁶See Heldt, "Gynoglasnost."