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Our history

The Women of 1917

- Features -

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Description:

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Women demand increased rations in a demonstration along the Nevskii Prospekt after International Women's Day, February 23, 1917. Central State Archive of Kino-Photo-Phono Documents, St. Petersburg

On International Women's Day in 1917, women textile workers in the Vyborg district of Petrograd went on strike, left the mills, and moved in their hundreds from factory to factory, calling out other workers on strike and engaging in violent clashes with police and troops.

Unskilled, low paid, working twelve- or thirteen-hour days in dirty, unhealthy conditions, the women demanded solidarity and insisted on action from men, especially those working in skilled engineering and metal factories who were regarded as the most politically conscious and socially powerful of the city's workforce. Women threw sticks, stones, and snowballs at factory windows and forced their way into the workplaces, calling for an end to war and the return of their men from the front.

According to many contemporaries and historians, these women rioting for bread using time-honoured and "primitive" methods of protest in pursuit of purely economic demands, acting from emotion rather than theoretical preparation inadvertently set in motion the storm that swept tsarism aside, before they disappeared behind the big battalions of male workers and male-dominated political parties.

Yet from the beginning of the February strikes, political slogans against the war were woven into the protests. Women's audacity, determination, and methods made clear that they understood the root of their problems, the need for workers' unity, and for winning soldiers away from protecting the tsarist state to support the revolt. Trotsky later recorded:

A great role is played by women workers in relationship between workers and soldiers. They go up to the cordons more boldly than men, take hold of the rifles, beseech, almost command: "Put down your bayonets - join us." The soldiers are excited, ashamed, exchange anxious glances, waver; someone makes up his mind first, and the bayonets rise guiltily above the shoulders of the advancing crowd.

By the end of February 23, soldiers who had been guarding tram depots had been convinced by women tram workers to join them inside, and trams were overturned to be used as barricades against police. Winning over soldiers was not simply a result of the growing burden of the war on troops or of the infectious "spontaneity" of the protests. Women textile workers had related to the large numbers of mainly peasant soldiers in Petrograd since 1914. Men in barracks and women in factories who had come to the city from the same areas talked and formed relationships, blurring the lines between worker and soldier and giving women workers a clear grasp of the necessity of armed support.

Women workers were firmly in the forefront of the February Revolution that culminated in the destruction of tsarism. They were not merely its "spark," but the motor that drove it forward despite the initial misgivings of many male workers and revolutionaries.

The February Revolution is commonly described as "spontaneous," and in a sense this is true: it was not planned and executed by revolutionaries. But spontaneity did not equate to a lack of political consciousness. The experiences

of the women who stormed Petrograd's factories as both workers and the head of households forced to queue for hours to feed their families collapsed the distinction between the "economic" demand for bread and the political demand to end the war. Material circumstances led to the blame for hunger and poverty being directed where it belonged on the war and the politicians conducting it. Such demands could not be met without seismic political change.

In addition, Bolshevik *women* were central to the strike, having worked hard to organize unskilled women workers for years, despite attitudes among men in their own party that organizing women was at the least a distraction from the fight against tsarism and at worst playing into the hands of upper-class feminists who would lead women away from class struggle.

Many men in the revolutionary movement felt that the International Women's Day protests were premature and that women workers should be restrained until skilled workers were ready to take decisive action. It was women members, a minority in the party, who argued for a meeting in the Vyborg district for women workers to discuss the war and inflation and women activists who called for an antiwar demonstration for International Women's Day. One of these was Anastasia Deviatkina, a Bolshevik and factory worker who set up a union for soldiers' wives after the February Revolution.

After February, in most accounts women largely disappear as part of the revolution's development over the course of 1917 apart from a few outstanding women revolutionaries like Alexandra Kollontai, Nadezhda Krupskaya, and Inessa Armand, who are often discussed as much for their private lives as wives and lovers as for their practical activity and theoretical contributions.

Women were mainly absent from administrative bodies that emerged from the ashes of tsarism. Few were represented on village councils, as delegates for the Constituent Assembly, or as soviet deputies. Elections to factory committees were dominated by men, who were even deputized in industries where women workers were in the majority. The reasons for this were twofold and related: women still had the task of feeding their families in straitened circumstances and lacked the confidence and education, as well as the time, to put themselves forward or to sustain high levels of political activity. The ways in which working women had lived in Russia for centuries, the material reality of their oppression, conditioned their ability to match the unquestionable rise in political consciousness with political engagement.

Russia before 1917 was a predominantly peasant society; the tsar's total authority was enshrined and reinforced by the church and was reflected in the institution of the family. Marriage and divorce were under religious control; women were legally subordinate, considered as property and less than human. Common Russian proverbs included sentiments like: "I thought I saw two people but it was just a man and his wife."

Male power in the household was total and women were expected to be passive in brutal conditions, passed from father to husband and frequently the recipients of sanctioned violence. Peasant and working women faced punishing, arduous work in the fields and factories with the considerable added burden of child care and domestic responsibilities at a time when childbirth was difficult and dangerous, contraception nonexistent, and infant mortality high.

Yet women's political involvement in 1917 did not come out of nowhere. Russia was a contradiction: alongside the profound poverty, oppression, and tyranny endured by most of its people, the Russian economy boomed in the decades before 1905. Enormous modern factories produced weapons and cloth, railways connected fast-growing towns, and investment and techniques from Europe led to huge increases in iron and oil output.

These dramatic economic changes generated immense social transformation in the years before World War I: increasing numbers of peasant women were drawn into urban factories, impelled by poverty and encouraged by employers whose use of mechanization generated more unskilled jobs and whose preference for "compliant" workers led to a huge growth in women working in linen, silk, cotton, wool, ceramics, and paper production.

Women had been involved in the textile factory strikes in 1896, in protests against conscription before the Russo-Japanese war and crucially in the 1905 revolution, during which unskilled women workers in textile, tobacco, and sweet factories, along with domestic workers and laundry workers, struck and tried to form their own unions as part of the massive revolt.

The impact of World War I was decisive in increasing women's economic and political weight. The war shattered families and upended women's lives. Millions of men were absent at the front, wounded or killed, forcing women to work the land by themselves, head households, and enter the urban workforce. Women were 26.6 percent of the workforce in 1914, but nearly half (43.4 percent) by 1917. Even in skilled areas, women's participation increased dramatically. In 1914 women had made up only 3 percent of metal workers; by 1917 the number had risen to 18 percent.

In the dual power situation following the February Revolution, women's protests did not disappear but became part of the process that saw workers' support flow from the government to the Soviet and, within the Soviet, from the moderate socialist Menshevik-Social Revolutionary leadership to the Bolsheviks by September.

The expectations of working women and men that their lives would improve with the fall of the tsar were dashed by the government and Soviet leadership's continued prosecution of the war. By May, antiwar protests had forced the dissolution of the first Provisional Government and Menshevik-SR Soviet leaders had formed a coalition government with liberals still dedicated to the war. Workers' disillusionment led to further strikes, again led by women. Some forty thousand women laundry workers, members of a union led by the Bolshevik Sofia Goncharskaia, struck for more pay, an eight-hour day, and improved working conditions: better hygiene at work, maternity benefits (it was common for women workers to hide pregnancies until they gave birth on the factory floor), and an end to sexual harassment. As historians Jane McDermid and Anna Hillyer describe:

With other female activists from the union, Goncharskaia had gone from one laundry to another persuading the women to join the strike. They would fill buckets with cold water to douse the ovens. In one laundry, the owner attacked Goncharskaia with a crowbar; she was saved by the laundresses grabbing him from behind.

In August, faced with General Kornilov's attempts to crush the revolution, women rallied to the defense of Petrograd, building barricades and organizing medical aid; in October, women in the Bolshevik party were involved in the provision of medical aid and crucial communications between localities, some had responsibility for coordinating the rising in different areas of Petrograd, and there were women members of the Red Guard. McDermid and Hillyer describe another Bolshevik woman's involvement in October:

The tram conductor, A.E. Rodionova, had hidden 42 rifles and other weapons in her depot when the Provisional government had tried to disarm the workers after the July days. In October, she was responsible for making sure that two trams with machine guns left the depot for the storming of the Winter Palace. She had to ensure that the tram service operated during the night of 25 to 26 October, to assist the seizure of power, and to check the Red Guard posts throughout the city.

The trajectory of the revolution widened the gap between working women for whom the war was the cause of their hardship, whose calls for peace grew louder as the year went on, and the feminists who continued to support the

bloodshed. For most liberal upper-class feminists who advocated equality in law and education and for social reform, those gains would be won through proving themselves loyal to the new government and to the war effort. Proving patriotism was part of winning a seat at the table.

The February Revolution had led to renewed campaigning by feminists for universal suffrage, a significant step forward when it was granted in July. But for most women, voting rights made little difference to their lives, which were still dominated by shortages, long working hours, and battling to keep their families together. As Kollontai had written in 1908:

However apparently radical the demands of the feminists, one must not lose sight of the fact that the feminists cannot, on account of their class position, fight for that fundamental transformation of the contemporary economic and social structure of society without which the liberation of women cannot be complete.

For most working-class and peasant women, questions of oppression and equality were not posed in the abstract, but emerged concretely from the process of fighting to improve their lives and those of their men and children. Those who became overtly political and more confident, often as members of the Bolshevik Party, did so as a result of their own collective action against the war and politicians' action that centered on opposition to hunger, war, and for land ownership. Robert Service argues:

The Bolshevik political programme proved steadily more appealing to the mass of workers, soldiers and peasants as social turmoil and economic ruin reached a climax in late autumn. But for that there could have been no October revolution.

This was experienced as fully for women workers, peasants, and soldiers' wives as for their male counterparts. Without the support of the mass of unskilled working people in Petrograd, most of them women, the October insurrection would not have succeeded.

Support for the Bolsheviks was not blind but the result of, in Trotsky's words, "a cautious and painful development of consciousness" by millions of workers, men and women. By October, everything else had been tried: the Provisional Government and the Mensheviks had betrayed them, demonstrations had brought repression or limited gains which no longer satisfied their hopes for a better life, and, crucially, the Kornilov coup attempt had made the stakes clear go forward or be smashed. One worker put it like this: "The Bolsheviks have always said, 'It is not we who will persuade you, but life itself.' And now the Bolsheviks have triumphed because life has proved their tactics right."

It was to the Bolsheviks' credit that they took the woman question as seriously as they did. Although from today's standpoint women were sorely underrepresented, serious effort went into organizing and developing women workers. The fact that the Bolsheviks did more than other socialist parties to relate to women workers was not necessarily because of a greater commitment to women's rights.

Mensheviks and Bolsheviks both understood the need to engage with women as part of the working class, but the Bolsheviks could integrate the fight for equality between men and women into a strategy based on class activity against the government and the war, while the parties that were implicated in the continuation of war and deals with the privileged and employers could do little more than report on women's strikes and talk about political rights, with no concrete solution for the material pressures of women's lives.

The Bolsheviks increasingly took on the organization and politicization of women in part learning from February's explosive beginnings and in part because of the tenacity of their own women members.

Leading Bolshevik women such as Kollontai, Krupskaya, Armand, Konkordiia Samoilova, and Vera Slutskaia, among others, had long argued that the party should make special efforts to organize women workers and develop their political education. They fought to convince their male comrades that unskilled women workers were centrally important and not a passive, conservative, "backward" obstacle to revolution. The Bolshevik paper *Rabotnitsa* (The Woman Worker), first issued in 1914 and relaunched in May 1917, carried articles on the importance of crèches, nurseries, and protective workplace legislation for women, and repeatedly underlined the need for equality and for "women's issues" to be taken up by all workers.

The role of women workers in February and their continued importance as part of the Petrograd working class helped to change the view among many Bolshevik men that concentrating on women's issues gave ground to feminism and that revolution would be led by the most skilled and politically conscious (male) workers. Nonetheless, it was an uphill battle; when Kollontai proposed a women's department for the party in April she was largely isolated, although she had support from Lenin, whose April Theses weren't received with much more enthusiasm by the Bolshevik leadership. Similarly, Kollontai was Lenin's only supporter on the central committee.

In following months, however, it became clear that both Lenin's argument about carrying the revolution through to Soviet power and Kollontai's grasp of the importance of women workers flowed from the dynamic of the revolution and could propel it forwards. Bolshevik papers beyond *Rabotnitsa* now argued that entrenched sexist attitudes endangered class unity, and the party worked to get women represented on factory committees, challenging attitudes among men who regarded women workers as a threat and arguing with male workers to vote for women especially in industries where the latter were a majority and to show them respect as fellow workers, representatives, and comrades.

Six weeks after the October Revolution, marriage was replaced with civil registration and divorce became available at the request of either partner. These measures were elaborated a year later in the Family Code, which made women equal before the law. Religious control was abolished, removing centuries of institutionalized oppression at a stroke; divorce could be obtained by either partner with no reason given; women had the right to their own money and neither partner had rights over the other's property. The concept of illegitimacy was eradicated. If a woman did not know who the father was, all her previous sexual partners were given collective responsibility for the child. In 1920, Russia became the first country to legalize abortion on request.

The 1917 revolution was initiated and shaped by women and over the course of the year, many ancient conceptions of women as inferior, as property, as passive, backward, conservative, unconfident, and weak were challenged, if not obliterated, by women's actions and political commitment.

But the Russian Revolution did not abolish male domination or liberate women. The catastrophic privations of the civil war and the subsequent distortions of the Soviet government made that an impossibility. Inequalities remained. Few women occupied positions of authority, few were elected to administrative bodies, and sexist ideas could not simply disappear in the extreme adversity that followed October.

During the revolution, women did not participate equally with men or contribute as significantly to the higher levels of the political process, but within the constraints of their lives they defied expectations and shaped the course of the revolution. As McDermid and Hillyer say:

True, the division of labour between women and men remained, but rather than conclude that women had failed to challenge male domination, we might consider how they manoeuvred within their traditional sphere and what that meant for the revolutionary process.

The Women of 1917

Women were integral to the 1917 revolution, making history alongside men not as passive spectators or apolitical ciphers but as courageous participants whose engagement was more meaningful for the rejection of entrenched oppression it represented. Seeing the revolution through the eyes of women gives us a richer reading of what remains the most transformative historical moment for women's lives.

[Jacobin](#)

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