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Working Women Discovered Their Value
as Russia Sank into the Time of Uncertainty

ЖЕНЩИНА

Московской работнице

Женщина - с нами, когда мы рождаемся,
Женщина - с нами в последний наш час.
Женщина - знамя, когда мы сражаемся,
Женщина - радость раскрывшихся глаз.

Первая наша влюбленность и счастье,
В лучшем стремлении - первый привет.
В битве за право - огонь соучастия,
Женщина - музыка. Женщина - свет.

Константин Бальмонт, 12 марта 1917 г.

Women's involvement in the February Revolution in Russia in 1917 is often underplayed in the light of the initiative of the working class and the soldiers as well as class tension among different female groups active at the time. On February 23, 1917, however, women workers joined demonstrations in Petrograd and later built connections to workers and soldiers that finally led to the mutiny of the soldiers and the overthrow of the Tsarist regime. To better understand the motivation of the working class women during the February events as well as during their continuing political struggle until March, one needs to realize the conflict in this subset of population torn between its gender and its class affiliation. On the one hand there were educated women of the upper classes who encouraged them to fight for suffrage, but seemed, at least to the workers, very distant from the reality of a working woman's life. On the other – male workers who together with the working women suffered from low salaries and long work hours at the factories, but not infrequently beat these same women, with whom they shared their hard lives. On the 23rd of February 1917 the female workers sided with men of their class and

poured into the streets of Petrograd to demand bread, end of war and of autocracy. Later, after the Tsar's abdication, groups of educated women exploited the female workers' political momentum and inspired more demonstrations until universal suffrage was achieved.

Russian women's involvement in social life can be traced back long before 1917, and it was the very difference in the treatment of men and women in the society that allowed women to circumvent the existing order. Police reports dating back to 1885 and 1889 mention peasant women's uprisings against redistribution of land. There women acted as defenders while men "stood off to the side... convinced that they [the authorities] would not touch their wives."¹ Some women of noble origin were looking for a way to alleviate peasants' and workers' sufferings. Many of these wealthier women were involved in educating the poor. Countess Panina founded Ligovsky People's House in a poor district of St. Petersburg in 1903. Another example was Anna Kalmanovich, who helped poor Jews in Saratov. She also became involved in the feminist movement and spoke at the All-Women's Congress in 1908. In the speech she delivered, she admitted that women are not recognized as a powerful and worthy subset of the population. She expressed her bitter feelings towards political organizations that claimed to be non-discriminatory of gender, yet in their actions, such as choice of audience, revealed their strong preference for "doctors, lawyers, judges, civil servants, merchants, and even the workers and

¹ "Report of the Voronezh Vice-Governor V.G. Karnovich to the Minister of the Interior, I.N. Durnovo, about the attack of peasants of the hamlet of Zubovskoe, Korotoiaskii District [Voronezh Province] and their seizure of landowners' lands" in R. Bisha et al, *Russian Women, Experience and Expression, 1698-1917*, 341

peasants” over women of any social class.¹ She argued that women ought to have their own organization, formed based on gender. This early feminist call addressed mostly women of the higher social classes, those who were literate and aware of the international history of suffrage, and left out women in the working class and peasantry.

The relationship between educated Russian women advocating for women’s rights and women coming from working class did not go well at first. For one, there was resentment towards the wealthier women among the lower classes. These women were wives of capitalists for whom the workers slaved or of landowners who collected taxes so high that peasants lived in hunger most of the time. These rich people were “able to buy goods from the salesmen at once, even if the goods cost one hundred rubles, thus contributing to the disappearance of goods.”² Then, when feminist groups did start addressing women coming from working class, their attempts were blamed for splitting the working class and disrupting the collective effort of the Proletariat.³ The Proletariat, however, was split along the gender line.

The way working men were treating their wives and daughters made it difficult for the women to engage into revolutionary activity with them. Women, particularly those of lower social classes, were frequently victims of domestic violence, who could have been beaten up for any reason or for no reason at all but

¹ A.A. Kalmanovich, *The Women Movement and Its Tasks. Brief Historical overview*, in R. Bisha, *Russian Women*, 322-323

² Engel, “Not by Bread Alone: Subsistence Riots in Russia during World War I,” 715, in R. Ruthchild, *Equality and Revolution: Women’s Rights in the Russian Empire, 1905-1917*, 386

³ Serditova, 123 in in R. Ruthchild, *Equality and Revolution*, 387

that their husbands were drunk. A teenager in a workers' family, Anna Litveiko, described her father who would get drunk and "chase [her] mother around with a knife."¹ Frustrated, these ever-overworked men took their anger out on the women who could not protect themselves physically or legally. In Slavic cultures suffering being a pre-requisite for good life after death and obedience being one of the most valued virtues, women were generally patient with these men. However, as industrialization brought women work equal to that of men and the war gave women the right to decide for entire families, women's patience grew thin.

During World War I, women's involvement in the life of the country and their responsibilities expanded, making women of the lower class a more powerful political group. In the countryside, women were now often heads of households with all the cares left on their shoulders while their husbands were at the front. By 1917, three years into World War I, industry expanded due to the needs of the war, and the number of female factory workers increased dramatically because the conscription drew many men to the front. The fraction of women in the industry now constituted almost 40%.² Many women now were working same hours as men, performing as hard a work as men, and facing as much danger as men. This broadened range of tasks made women realize their capabilities, their value and the need for change of the social order.

¹ A. Litveiko, *In 1917*, in S. Fitzpatrick and Y. Slezkine, *In the Shadow of Revolution*, 51

² Gaponenko, *Rabochiy Klass Rossii*, 86 in M. McCauley, ed., *The Russian Revolution and the Soviet State, 1917-1921: Documents*, 4

These energetic women responded well to political propaganda such as the leaflet from Mezhraionka that called for working women's participation in the strike of proletariat in Petrograd. The leaflet emphasized that "for a long time women *naravne* (next to, equally) to men had been standing next to the factory machines," enslaved by factory owners and put in jail, which emphasized similarity between the genders. Mezhraionka also put great value into women's participation in the revolutionary struggle by saying that women in the rear had to continue "the great... work of liberation of the entire humankind from oppression and enslavement" because the men who had been doing this work were fighting at the front now. The leaflet further elaborated on the miseries that united men and women of the working class: the long and draining war, inflation, shortages, and neglect and exploitation by the government and factory owners. This document thus specifically addressed women of the working class, empowered them and advocated joint action by the Proletariat.¹

On February 23rd 1917, when striking workers went into the streets of Petrograd to demand bread, end of war and of autocracy, the working women readily joined them and drew even more male participants out into the streets. As reports about that day in Petrograd stated, in the streets there were "many ladies, and even more poor women."² At the New Lessner factory, female workers yelled

¹ Mezhraionka leaflet dedicated to the International Women's Day, Feb 23, 1917 in D. Longley, "The Mezhraionka, The Bolsheviks and International Women's Day: In Response to Michael Melancon," *Soviet Studies*, vol. 41, No.4, 625-645

² A. Balk, "*Gibel' tsarskogo Petrograda: Fevral'skaia revoliutsiia glazami gradonachalnika A.P. Balk: Vospominaniia A.P. Balka iz arkhiva guverskogo institute voyny, revoliutsii i mira (Stenford, SShA), 1929 g.,*" *Russkoe proshloe* 1 (1991), 7-72, 26 in R. Pipes, *The Russian Revolution*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf,

“Come on out! Quit working! Join us!” and threw “snowballs and pieces of metal at the factory windows.”¹ This encouraged 7500 male workers to leave the factory. In the face of the possibility to throw off the old regime and fight for the new, better life, the inspired working women could not wait or “miss something like that.” They were “rushing around town,” “screaming to the soldiers... “Long live revolution! Soldiers, come out!”,” standing in the parterre of the Bolshoi Theater listening to speakers, “slicing bread from morning till night” to feed the soldiers, and making the revolution happen in many other ways.² Women’s active participation in the young revolution spoke strongly to the need of a new, more equal place for them in the society.

Both new governments, the Provisional Government and the Soviet of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies, made vague promises to the women, but neither one rushed to fulfill them. The Provisional Government promised “immediate preparation for the convening, on the principles of universal, equal, secret and direct suffrage, of a Constituent Assembly,” but never specified what “universal” meant. This looked all the more suspicious because all members of this government were men.³ The Soviet claimed to be different from the Provisional Government, but promised even less well-defined “implementation of civil rights” and was also

1990, 274 in R. Ruthchild, *Equality and Revolution: Women’s Rights in the Russian Empire, 1905-1917*, 377

¹ Chatterjee, 47 and Hasegawa, 219 in R. Ruthchild, *Equality and Revolution: Women’s Rights in the Russian Empire, 1905-1917*, 392

² A. Litveiko, *In 1917* and E. Olitskaia, *My Reminiscences* in S. Fitzpatrick and Y. Slezkine, *In the Shadow of Revolution*, 50-51, 36

³ “The composition and aims of the First Provisional Government,” *Izvestiya Petrogradskogo Soveta rabochikh i soldatskikh deputatov*, 03/03/1917 in E. Acton and T. Stableford, eds., *The Soviet Union: A Documentary History*, 9

entirely male.¹ Kerensky openly claimed that he was a “partisan of complete equality of rights for women,” but even with most of the Provisional Government being at least not anti-feminist, it took women many more days in the streets to prove their competence and secure their political and civil rights.²

Many were reserved about women’s votes because women of lower social classes were less literate than men. According to the statistical data available for 1918, the number of literate women constituted from 50% of that of literate men in cotton textiles to 69% in chemical industry, the only exception being printing factories where almost all men and women were literate.³ One can reasonably suspect that for women in 1917 the situation was at least as bad. With most of political groups actively rallying, it was hard for workers to determine their political affiliation. As Anna Litveiko, a worker of Elektrolampa factory in Moscow, wrote in her autobiography *In 1917*, she knew that there were Social Democrats and SR’s. Having heard slogan “Land and Freedom” from the SRs, she thought that as a worker and town dweller she had no need for land, so Anna decided she was a Social Democrat. Her thinking process when making this decision reveals a lack of understanding the actual programs of either of the two groups. Anna Litveiko then described her frustration over the fact that the Social Democrats came in different kinds and she had to keep choosing. The two different groups she referred to,

¹ “From the Executive Committee of the Soviet of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies,” *Izvestiya Petrogradskogo Soveta rabochikh i soldatskikh deputatov*, 03/03/1917 in E. Acton and T. Stableford, eds., *The Soviet Union*, 11

² “Kerenskiy’s visit to Moscow,” *Vestnik*, No.4, 03/09/1917, 3 in R. Browder and A. Kerensky, *The Russian Provisional Government, 1917: Documents*, vol. 1, 173

³ O. Crisp, *Private Correspondence*, in M. McCauley, *The Russian Revolution and the Soviet State*, 7

Bolsheviks and Mensheviks, made contradictory statements about Provisional Government and Revolution, and she could not figure out which ones were true. She “was dying to sign up with somebody,” and chose Bolsheviks over Mensheviks because, as a Bolshevik activist described to her, Mensheviks were “neither one thing nor another,” which did not appeal to the young Litveiko’s decisive resolution “to fight to the end.”¹

To politically educate women of the working class, feminist groups published articles in popular newspapers such as *Pravda*. Those who could read, read encouragements: “Weren’t we women first out on the streets? Why now...does the freedom won by the heroic proletariat of both sexes, by the soldiers and soldiers’ wives, ignore half the population of liberated Russia?”² as well as clearly stated demands: a woman “needs the right to participate equally with men in elections, the right to be elected to the Constituent Assembly, to city councils and to district and rural organizations. She needs the right to study and hold all government positions for which she is qualified, and to receive equal pay....”³ Demonstrations, newspapers and speeches grew a new sense of freedom and independence in the working women, so that when they were finally given promise by the Provisional Government, these women could embrace their new rights. Tyrkova-Williams in her

¹ A. Litveiko, *In 1917* in S. Fitzpatrick and Y. Slezkine, *In the Shadow of Revolution*, 52-53

² Kollontai, “*Rabotnitsy i uchreditel’noe sobranie*,” 1, *Pravda* (March 21, 1917) in R. Ruthchild, *Equality and Revolution*, 399

³ Olga Bobyleva, “*Privet russkoi rabotnitse*,” *Pravda* (10 March 1917): 3-4, 3, in R. Ruthchild, *Equality and Revolution*, 399

Liberation of Women describes a conversation that occurred between a soldier and a group of feminist women waiting in line:

Then a soldier standing next to them smiled and asked: "What, can I not beat my *baba* any more?" After this the line became livelier. "Oh no, dear," – they responded. – Nothing like that. You just try. It will not work. To let someone beat ourselves? Never in our lives. Nobody's got a right now."¹

In July 1917 the Provisional Government finally passed an electoral law that legalized women's votes in the election of a Constituent Assembly.² When after the election the October Revolution took place, Lenin's government granted women equality. On the other hand, the food that women demanded so passionately in February 1917 did not come in until the early 1920s. World War I, Civil War, and outdated agricultural tools delayed its arrival.

Women of Russia's working class went through an internal struggle to define their identities early in 1917. Motivated by carefully written political leaflets, the women joined the working men against the hunger, the Tsar and the war. Success of the February Revolution gave women confidence and energy. Feminist groups took the lead and helped the women understand that their contribution to the Revolution and the country's survival was as big as that of men. Because many fathers and husbands were at the front, in these troubled times working women had to take care of themselves and obtained the opportunity to make choices for themselves. This

¹ A. Tyrkova-Williams, *The Liberation of a Woman*, 1917, 15 in R. Stites, *Feminist Movement and Bolsheviks: February and October Revolution 1917*

http://www.owl.ru/win/books/genderpolicy/stites.htm#_ftn1

² "Statute on Elections to the Constituent Assembly," 07/20/1917 in R. Browder and A. Kerensky, *The Russian Provisional Government*, 455

combination of responsibilities and freedom developed a stronger sense of an independent self in the women of the working class.

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