

### **Equality begets Equality: Women's Suffrage in 1917**

Russia became the first major European nation to achieve women's suffrage on March 19, 1917, when protesters forced the Petrograd Soviet and the Provisional Government to accede to their demands.<sup>1</sup> Until this point, despite general support for suffrage among their members, both governing bodies had refused to acknowledge women's suffrage. Why, then, did a 40,000-woman march convince them to change their minds on the spot? What advantages did the women have that they were able to succeed in one march, while American women worked for 70 years before achieving their goal? Clearly, compared to other western nations, the political and economic environment surrounding women's suffrage was very different and provided Russian women with a uniquely exploitable situation.

Until the introduction of the Duma in 1905, Russian men and women were equal in their lack of a political voice. The Tsar was an absolute autocrat and had a secret police that would suppress any dissent.<sup>2</sup> In 1905, after the Tsar brutally suppressed petitioners outside the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg, rioting, striking and protesting were rampant. Eventually, the Tsar gave in and formed Russia's first representative government, the Duma. This was the first time that Russian men were ostensibly given the opportunity to vote for their leaders (although in effect, they still did not have full power because the Tsar ignored the Duma). By the time that women were demanding their right to vote in 1917, only twelve years had passed, hardly enough time for men to develop a defensiveness regarding their voting right.

The events of March 19, 1917 are recounted by Olga Zakuta, an activist in the Russian League for Women's Equal Rights, in a brochure to Petrograd residents she wrote about the successful march. She tells of a 40,000 woman march that resulted in a positive agreement with both the Petrograd

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1 Olga Zakuta "How in the Revolutionary Time the All-Russian League for Women's Equal Rights Won Suffrage for Russian Women" (March 19, 1917), ed. and transl. Rochelle Ruthchild, *Aspasia*, volume 6, 2012, pg 117

2 Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Russian Revolution* (Oxford, 2008), pg 15

Soviet and the Provisional Government on the subject of women's suffrage.

According to Zakuta, the primary concern of the Petrograd Soviet about giving women the right to vote was the belief that Russian peasant women would vote conservatively.<sup>3</sup> Why and how did the Soviet overcome this fear of conservatism on March 19<sup>th</sup>? What changed because 40,000 women were outside their door? It is possible that the revolutionary attitude of the march convinced Nikolay Chkeidze, the leader of the Petrograd Soviet, that women wouldn't vote so conservatively. Banners declared "Free women in a Free Russia" and appealed to the revolutionary fervor of the time.<sup>4</sup> In addition, Poliksena Shishkina-Iavein, the leader of the march, pointed out that women took part in the risks and difficulties of the revolution.<sup>5</sup> They even began the protests that spiraled into the February Revolution.<sup>6</sup> The presence of radical political figures like Vera Figner may also have assuaged some of the Soviet leader's fears. Such slogans and the presence of revolutionary figures may have reminded the Soviets that women were an instrumental part of the Revolution.

Based on the initially negative reaction to the idea of suffrage, the march itself must have had a significant impact on the Provisional Government and the Soviet. The two bodies wanted to ignore the issue and move forward with other problems. The weather on the day of the march was bad. Olga Zakuta writes, "The nasty weather, the late hour, the rain puddles and the dirt did not cause them [the marchers] to leave."<sup>7</sup> Perhaps the leaders of the Provisional Government and the Soviet simply thought that, given the weather, they could wait out the protesters. This is supported by their pathetic excuses, "Chkeidze could not appear outside, because he had lost his voice". But there were also significant factors that kept the women there. They knew that, so soon after the February revolution, the government could not violently remove them. They were also guarded by women police.<sup>8</sup> This

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3 Zakuta, pg 119

4 Ibid pg 123

5 Ibid pg 121

6 Ibid pg 121

7 Ibid pg 121

8 Ibid pg 120

would have been significantly less intimidating than male police. There is a noticeable lack of fear in the writings of Olga Zakuta. Though the piece is primarily narrative, nowhere does it show that she (or the rest of the marchers) were afraid of being attacked, or even that they would fail at their objective. Once it was clear that the government could not wait out the marchers, the march brought the issue of women's suffrage to head and forced the government to decide between ignoring the marchers demands indefinitely and acceding. It seems that the desire to have the support of women overrode the fears of conservatism and the Provisional Government's initial stubbornness

Upon admitting defeat, Soviet leader Chkiedze's speech to the crowds reveals the Soviet's reasons for supporting women's suffrage. He invokes the term “proletariat”, appealing to a Marxist ideal that there is no fundamental distinction between women and men.<sup>9</sup> He also suggests that women without rights would be “slaves”.<sup>10</sup> This indicates that Chkiedze and the Soviet were supportive of women's suffrage on moral and Marxist grounds, but only oppositional on practical (Conservatism) grounds. Such a position is much harder to defend in the face of a 40,000 woman march. The Marxist perspective of Chkiedze points to greater ideological reasons why women's suffrage was easily achieved in March 1917 for the Russian women. The revolution was partially led by socialists and, in one form or another, a significant portion of the nation was supportive of socialist policies and/or Marxist ideals. The Soviet had already stated that women's suffrage would be considered, but many women considered this an empty promise. Clearly, women's suffrage was at least on the table, something that was not true in the United States where Woodrow Wilson violently suppressed protesting women in 1917<sup>11</sup>. This sense of progress would have smoothed the way for Russian women's suffrage.

It is interesting that only Chkeidze and the Duma Chairman, Mikhail Rodzianko, were required for the decision to grant women suffrage. Did they not need to discuss the issue with the other

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9 Ibid pg 122

10 Ibid pg 122

11 Ibid pg 117

members of their respective bodies? This may indicate that both bodies were already in a position to grant women suffrage, but the issue just had not been brought up. Or, it may indicate that these two leaders were both instrumental in the effort to block women's suffrage and that other members would follow their lead. Or, it may simply demonstrate how autocratic even a representative Russian government could be.

It is also interesting that no mention is made of the Provisional Government until the Soviet has already decided to give women suffrage. The document states that Shishkina-Iavein and Figner went into the State Duma to ask “what was the Soviet of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies’ position on women’s suffrage, adding that the thousands of marchers had come there to get an answer to this question.”<sup>12</sup> The first mention of the Provisional Government comes when its leader, Rodzianko, comes out to address the people. This suggests that on an issue like women's suffrage that concerned the working class and peasants, the Provisional Government would defer to the decision of the Soviet. Deference would have smoothed the way for suffrage because the working-class Soviet would have been more likely to support suffrage than the bourgeois and elite Provisional Government.

Women's suffrage was natural in Russia. The role and value of women's work was held in high regard. This is evidenced by Olga Zakuta's recounting of a short speech given by the leader of the Provisional Government. After acceding to the demands concerning women's suffrage. Rodzianko says, “I am an old zemstvo activist and I am accustomed to deeply respect and value the selfless work of Russian women in all spheres of community life.”<sup>13</sup> The perceived value of Russian women may have presented an interesting opportunity in Russia. Because the nation was in the midst of a democratic revolution while remaining in the infancy of its industrial revolution (and was also caught in a war which necessitated that women participate heavily in industry) Russian women were still considered to be highly valuable laborers and less likely to ignored and belittled.

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12 Ibid pg 120

13 “Suffrage” Olga Zakuta (March 19, 1917) in Ruthchild, Aspasia, pg 123

It is hard to deny the female half of Russia its voting rights when your political and economic ideology and your sense of respect for women tell you it is wrong *and* you have 40,000 women outside your door that you can not send away because of the contemporary political climate. Women in the United States, Britain, France and many other western nations had been fervently working towards their suffrage for 60 years, demonstrating that, on short time scales, hard work was not sufficient; the social and political climate needed to change. In Russia the times had already changed and fell right into the hands of the women. Zakuta acknowledged this when she wrote that “particularly now, in the current conditions, the League had to press for Russian women’s rights with redoubled energy.”<sup>14</sup> Clearly, the winds were behind Russian women's backs and they sailed to suffrage – no oars were necessary.

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14 Ibid pg 119