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**“Woe to those who look backward into the ever vanishing past!”  
Bolshevik Women in Russia and the Soviet Union, 1900-1924**

By Katy Evans

In late 1904, Rozaliia Zemliachka, a Jewish revolutionary from Ukraine, wrote a letter to Vladimir Lenin from the St. Petersburg branch of the Social Democrats, proclaiming that morale and the day-to-day affairs of the branch had drastically improved since and “because ‘Absolute’ had been released from prison.”<sup>1</sup> Absolute, the *nom de guerre* bestowed upon Elena Stasova, was but one of many *Bolshevichki* (female Bolsheviks) putting her talents to use for the good of the socialist cause in early twentieth-century Russia. Earning her pseudonym from her steadfast devotion to the cause, Stasova, like many of her comrades, championed both human and women’s liberation.

It is women such as Stasova that drew scholars’ attention amid second-wave feminism. Their passion for liberation and dedication to the betterment of human life inspired an expansive historiography that centers upon a previously ignored demographic. Scholars began to examine the women who helped bring such a monumental social shift to fruition, studying legal documents, memoirs, and letters composed by and about women during the prerevolutionary, revolutionary, and Soviet periods of Russian history. The women’s collective identity has been broken down into its more basic components so that scholars might analyze the women’s social origins, motivations for and methods of mobilizing, and roles played within the larger scheme of revolution. Relatively untouched within the historiography is an examination of these women’s actions in relation to the larger trends of human behavior across time.<sup>2</sup> Despite the fact that this paper only covers a twenty-four-year period, the trends demonstrated by the research are at work within much longer time spans as framed by Big History.

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Evans Clements, *Bolshevik Women* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 71.

<sup>2</sup> Nancy Shields Kollman discusses the interaction of kinship ties, one component of Deep History, in the Russian imperial period in her monograph *Kinship and Politics: The Making of the Muscovite Political System, 1345-1547* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987).

The field of Big History makes a simple argument: that, on large timescales, “some underlying principles of change may be universal;” it studies “the fragile ordered patterns that appear at all scales, and the ways in which they change.”<sup>3</sup> These consistent underlying patterns govern the ways in which humans interact with one another and allow historians to make comparisons between centers of human civilizations across geographic regions and time. In considering “processes [that] shaped long-term patterns of collective learning and innovation,” judgments can be made as to how and why certain phenomena occurred and the ways in which they both came about and effected humankind.<sup>4</sup>

One of the most important factors within the study of the large-scale interactions between humans is the concept of collective learning, especially within established communities and civilizations, such as the one upon which this paper concentrates. Networks of exchange provide the medium through which collective learning takes place but are not necessarily restricted to transfers of information. As they are extensive within agricultural communities, such as Russia at the turn of the twentieth century, networks of exchange “shape processes of collective learning on the largest scales and determine the pace and the geography of innovation over long periods.”<sup>5</sup> Other factors must be considered when looking into such expansive regions as an entire state, or in this case, empire. Human diversity must play a role in the evaluation of the Russian Empire. As can be seen within the intelligentsia—those members of the upper classes dedicated to improving society through ideological change—at work within the empire, “diversity itself was a powerful motor of collective learning, for it increased the ecological, technological, and organizational possibilities available to different communities, as well as the potential synergies of combining these technologies in new ways.”<sup>6</sup> Diversity, especially of economic standing, gave the idealists of early twentieth century Russia the

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<sup>3</sup> David Christian, *Maps of Time: An Introduction to Big History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 7.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 283.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 290.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 284.

spark they needed to affect change within their society. They noticed “a clear gap in status, wealth, lifeways, and habits of thought between the mass of primary producers [the former serfs] and the tribute takers [the upper echelons of Russian society] who stood above them.”<sup>7</sup> The inequality demanded by this type of exchange became the driving impetus of social revolution, as the students of radical ideology believed they could enact change.

Within socialist ideology, however, the female activists found little—if any—sympathy for their own plight. Many male socialists placed little stock in the betterment of women’s everyday lives, even if that meant the improvement of society on the whole. The idea of a separate women’s movement, focused upon the issues of a segment of the population, seemed contradictory to the ideology the socialists perpetuated. Theoretically, if the socialists were to overthrow the oppressive patriarchy, each segment of the population would find its problems resolved without having to place one group’s needs above another’s. The grievance many women found with this approach lies with the fact that the implementation of socialism was not ridding them of oppression but rather altering the identity of the oppressor. Utilizing Big Historical theory on networks, this paper aims to show how *Bolshevichki* simultaneously adapted and developed the framework of revolutionary change into their own high functioning network advocating women’s liberation within the socialist society they were working to implement; despite its revolutionary context, the movement itself was not necessarily the crucial turning point it is traditionally viewed as, since women carried on the same methods of networking and kinship before and after the uprising.

## **The Historical Context of the Russian Women’s Movement**

### **The Russian Revolution**

Pivotal point in Russian women’s history or not, the Russian Revolution remains an important point in the country’s history and provides context for the

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<sup>7</sup> Christian, *Maps of Time*, 287.

research at hand. Dissatisfied with the way Tsar Nicholas II ran the country, leftist factions began to take action against the government. Abysmal living conditions drove the lower classes to join the rebellion, which culminated in strikes and riots in February 1917. The tsar's power weakened considerably as the army refused to carry out orders to suppress rioters and strikers; the loss of power gave rise to the Provisional Government, which ruled until the October Revolution. Following the seizure of the Winter Palace, the Bolsheviks controlled the government and propagated socialist policies based upon Vladimir Lenin's interpretations of the writings of Karl Marx. A civil war ensued for five years with the "red" Bolshevik forces struggling against the "white" monarchist opposition, which rejected the Leninist-Marxist ideals of the Bolsheviks. It was this atmosphere of upheaval that allowed women to take greater roles within public life.

### **Women's Participation in Social Movements**

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, following the end of the Crimean War and the emancipation of the serfs by Tsar Alexander II, a women's movement developed among members of the intelligentsia. This movement initially concentrated upon the availability of education coupled with philanthropy. Many advocating for better systems of education and access to the existing institutions of higher education argued that improving women's education would allow them to be more adept mothers or philanthropists, who could help out their less fortunate counterparts in the inner cities or countryside. One of the branches of this argument developed into making women more skilled and productive members of society, a factor that was crucial to the Social Democrats' Marxist ideology.

Key to the intelligentsia's movement from their close-knit circles into the surrounding world was the "sense of responsibility to the dark people, the peasant masses, and [they were] frustrated by their real cultural alienation from

these masses.”<sup>8</sup> Many felt that the old culture, wherein the members of the upper classes had owned other humans through the practice of serfdom, had corrupted society. As members of the more privileged echelons of Russian society, the young and idealistic intelligentsia felt the need to commit themselves to a “moral regeneration, the self-formation of ‘new men’ and ‘new women’ who could take on the task of overthrowing the old evils.”<sup>9</sup> Those idealists that took this calling to heart concentrated their efforts on educating themselves as best they could to go into rural villages and attempt to better the lives of those living there. Their philanthropic deeds served a civic as well as penitent role, as many took lower positions than would traditionally be dictated by their social standing to “expiate the guilt of privileged birth and grant entry into the homes and hearts of the common people,” a difficult task at times. The peasants often distrusted members of the intelligentsia and some of those members, such as the twenty-four-year-old Vera Figner, had never interacted with peasants before their sojourn into the countryside; others, like Alexandra Kollontai, had experienced the hardships in passing and at a distance.<sup>10</sup>

Idealistic women of the intelligentsia quickly found that their opportunities for education were limited in the nineteenth century, making their path to philanthropy in the countryside all the more difficult.<sup>11</sup> The *gimnaziia* (gymnasium) and *pro-gimnaziia* (pro-gymnasium), equivalents to secondary education, were not available until 1858, and women were not legally permitted to audit higher education courses until 1859. As they were only allowed to audit

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<sup>8</sup> Robert H. McNeal, “Women in the Russian Radical Movement,” *Journal of Social History* 5, no. 2 (1971-2): 146.

<sup>9</sup> McNeal, “Women in the Russian Radical Movement,” 147-8.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 153. Vera Figner, *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*, trans. Camilla Chapin and G.A. Davidson, ed. George R. Noyes and Alexander Kaun (New York: International Publishers Co., 1927), 53; Alexandra Kollontai, *The Autobiography of a Sexually Emancipated Woman*, trans. Salvator Attanasio, ed. Iring Fetscher (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971), 11. Laurie Manchester notes that wives and daughters of clergymen were prime agents for bridging the gap between rural and urban women as they had integrated themselves among women of the peasant class, becoming a part of their fictive kin groups; Laurie Manchester, “Gender and Social Estate as National Identity: The Wives and Daughters of Orthodox Clergymen as Civilizing Agents in Imperial Russia,” *The Journal of Modern History* 83, no. 1 (2011): 48-77.

<sup>11</sup> For more on women’s education before the revolution, see Sophie Satina, *Education of Women in Pre-Revolutionary Russia*, trans. Alexandra F. Poustchine (New York, 1966).

the classes rather than receive credit or degrees, women often took to advocating for their full admission to institutions of higher education alongside their male comrades. These demonstrations led to their expulsion from the universities and their emigration to Zurich, where women were welcomed into universities and allowed to study what they pleased.<sup>12</sup> It was in these Swiss schools that the students, both male and female, began to accept and deliberate upon radical ideals and their applications in the political sphere.<sup>13</sup>

Arguably one of the most well-known women to journey to the University of Zurich, Vera Figner joined her future comrades in Switzerland, armed with a similar passion for knowledge. Figner intended to study medicine, believing that taking up the role of a doctor would be the best way to do her part in peasant villages. Devoted to her studies, she spent little time engaged with the more radical student elements in Zurich. As time progressed, however, she grew dissatisfied with the aims of the study circles with which she was involved and joined the more radical student organization that her sister had become a part of. In her memoirs, Figner recalls being five or six months away from obtaining her degree when she decided to return to Russia in order to give herself “unreservedly,” like her comrades who had done as much “with all their souls.”<sup>14</sup> She left Zurich without completing her doctoral thesis, certain that she “already possessed the knowledge necessary for a physician, lacking only the official stamp of that calling.”<sup>15</sup> Her time at the university united her with scores of other youthful idealists in their attempts to realize “a goal so exalted that all sacrifices seemed insignificant before it.”<sup>16</sup> By 1876, Figner had been certified

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<sup>12</sup> Linda Harriet Edmondson, *Feminism in Russia, 1900-1917* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1984), 16.

<sup>13</sup> The Russian government attempted to put a stop to the radicalization of the country’s youths and opened the Vladimir Courses in 1869 at the university in St Petersburg and the Bestuzhev Courses in Moscow in 1872. The Vladimir Courses were open to the public, while the Bestuzhev Courses were specifically designed for women. This expansion of education allowed the Russian government to force its students home as it delivered an ultimatum which stated that any female students studying abroad would forfeit education and employment in Russia. For more explanation, see Edmondson, *Feminism in Russia, 1900-1917*, 17-9.

<sup>14</sup> Vera Figner, *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*, 45.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* 45-6.

as both an assistant physician and midwife in Russia and devoted her time to helping peasants in rural villages.

It was from this contingent of highly educated and idealistic youths that many revolutionaries and radicals, such as Vera Figner, sprang. As Barbara Evans Clements notes in her monograph *Bolshevik Women*, a large portion of the later Bolshevichki included within her sampling cited a fellow student as the instigator of their revolutionary sentiments. Women engaged in the early Social Democratic party, struggling for both their own emancipation and the liberation of the Russian people as a whole, often took their time to study Marxism and fully comprehend the ideology of the party they were seeking to join before actually becoming members. This period of *khrushki samoobrazovaniia* (self-education) often meant that the women would continue with their prerevolutionary jobs until they felt informed enough to become revolutionaries.<sup>17</sup> Future revolutionary women formed student circles to discuss Marx and Engels along with other socialist writers. A few *Bolshevichki* of the younger generation, that is those who joined during the civil war rather than prior to the 1917 revolution, were guided into the party without much previous study, like Klavdiia Kirsanova, a middle-class girl from Perm, who noted that her reasoning for joining the Social Democrats was due to two factors: that one of her friends had been a member of the party for some time and because it was “for the workers, [and] it wants to free them slowly, without killing.”<sup>18</sup> Their social connections facilitated their entry into the coalition, allowing them to become a part of the collective identity established by those already members. The Old Bolsheviks and Old *Bolshevichki* without immediate connections to existing members of the party relied solely upon their education and

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<sup>17</sup> Clements, *Bolshevik Women*, 48-9. Some women, like Alexandra Artiuknina and Klavdiia Nikolaeva, remained in their working-class jobs until they felt ready to join the party; Konkordiia Samoilova, like many of her fellow revolutionaries, remained in school; Inessa Armand and Evgeniia Bosh continued charity work with prostitutes and working men, respectively; Elena Stasova, Alexandra Kollontai, Vera and Liudmila Menzhinskaia, Praskovia Kudelli, and Nadezhda Krupskaia all worked to educate the poor, many of them in St Petersburg.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

convictions, carefully molding themselves into staunch believers in the rhetoric of their chosen party.

As the educational system of Russia was based upon the design of Count Dmitrii Andreevich Tolstoy, the Minister of National Enlightenment, it left something to be desired, especially for young girls.<sup>19</sup> The lack of a more balanced education available to girls drove them to form study circles with their comrades in order to further their education beyond what had been offered to them in public schools or even in home tutoring. They created for themselves the very institutions that would further their ambitions to better their own lives and that of those around them. The students concentrated on the teachings of simplicity and moral betterment as they joined together in intellectual pursuits.<sup>20</sup> Following the example of so many other young idealists, the endeavors of *khruzhki samoobrazovaniia* (circles of self-education) included readings designed to fully educate themselves to dedicate their lives to helping the peasants in the countryside and assuaging any guilt from being born into privilege.<sup>21</sup>

*Khruzhki samoobrazovaniia* produced scores of young individuals that were zealous about their vocation to aid those less fortunate. Young women within the Social Democratic party pushed themselves across new boundaries to display their dedication to their cause and collective group. Cecilia Bobrovskaia, a Jewish girl who emigrated to Warsaw for an education and chance at enlightenment, recollected in her 1902 memoirs that she was constantly on the verge of starvation upon returning home, where she joined the

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<sup>19</sup> Barbara T. Norton, "The Making of a Female Marxist: E.D. Kuskova's Conversion to Russian Social Democracy," *International Review of Social History* 34 (1989): 230. The majority of the education available for young girls in Russia was centered around the preparation of young girls for their future roles as wives and mothers. Clements, *A History of Women in Russia*, 117. Large portions of the Russian population viewed *institutka* (girls who attended government-run "high school" institutions) as a joke in Russian society, a "veritable synonym for the light-headed and ultra-naïve female." Richard Stites, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Russia: Feminism, Nihilism, and Bolshevism, 1860-1930* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1978), 5.

<sup>20</sup> Nadezhda Krupskaiia, "Autobiography" in *In the Shadow of Revolution: Life Stories of Russian Women from 1917 to the Second World War*, ed. Sheila Fitzpatrick and Yuri Slezkine (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 111.

<sup>21</sup> Norton, "The Making of a Female Marxist," 234.



local party in Kharkov (in Ukraine). She notes that on some days, because she did not have regular employment, she would consume nothing more than a drink of water but remarked that she “would rather die than give up Party work and daily intercourse with comrades” in order to find a job.<sup>22</sup> Many idealists such as Bobrovskaia were forced to choose between remaining a steadfast member of the party and finding a paid job with which they could support themselves. While some took jobs as educators or physicians, several revolutionaries identified their occupation in prerevolutionary years as ‘revolutionary,’ fully committing themselves to the cause.<sup>23</sup>

Many who became devoted revolutionaries such as Bobrovskaia were forced out of their natal coalitions—in regards to both families and social classes—due to differences in ideology; they made new, quasi-family ties with their fellow revolutionaries, a group which could be broadened beyond those that shared identical political views to include Mensheviks, social revolutionaries, or any other sympathetic soul in the case of Bolsheviks. Their differences aided their process of forming new bonds rather than limiting them, as each new person within the group brought a unique desire to further the socialist cause. In his *Structures of Elementary Kinship*, Claude Lévi-Strauss argues that bringing in members from outside the community is the surest way to achieve the greatest degree of cohesion among members.<sup>24</sup> Those who had been expelled from their families for continuing along the revolutionary path desperately sought a new coalition to which they could belong, one that would serve as a foster family. Revolutionaries who found themselves in a similar situation, being forced from their parents’ or spouse’s house, were able to easily identify with one another, giving them a firm foundation for collective identity and solidarity. As Clements notes, staying “within the circle of comrades can then become as important as the cause for which the group is fighting.”<sup>25</sup> The network which the

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<sup>22</sup> Tsetsiliia (Cecilia) Samoilovna Zelikson-Bobrovskaia, *Twenty Years in Underground Russia: Memoirs of a Rank-and-File Bolshevik* (New York: International Publishers, 1934), 34.

<sup>23</sup> See Clements, *Bolshevik Women*, 44, table 6 for more information.

<sup>24</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Les Structures Élémentaires de la Parenté* (Paris: Mouton and Co., 1967), 550.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

revolutionaries built for themselves became vital; it provided them with social connections through which they could find shelter, provisions, intellectual companions, and validation for their radical political views. As women, the members of these revolutionary circles could create the language through which the sense of belonging was conveyed, thus giving them a more solid stake in maintaining solidarity and furthering the aims of the group as a whole.<sup>26</sup>

One such dedicated individual to the cause, Alexandra Kollontai, left behind her husband and young son in order to study politics and economics in Zurich alongside the other members of the Russian intelligentsia. Because of this, she paid special attention to issues of maternity and child welfare, becoming the leading proponent of socialized childrearing; Kollontai lamented the lack of attention paid to women's issues by the Bolsheviks following the massacre of Bloody Sunday<sup>27</sup> in her 1920 memoirs, commenting that in the midst of her time as a Social Democrat, she "realized that in Russia little had yet been done to draw women workers into the liberation struggle."<sup>28</sup> Echoing the beliefs of the radicals a generation before her, she defended the visibility of the woman question, arguing that it was a problem that must be solved in conjunction with the overall human question. Kollontai declared in 1909 that the Social

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<sup>26</sup> Lévi-Strauss, *Les Structures Élémentaires de la Parenté*, 569.

<sup>27</sup> The Bloody Sunday massacre took place on January 9, 1905 outside the royal palace in St. Petersburg. A large crowd of workers and their families gathered in the square outside the Winter Palace, driven to demonstration by poor working conditions; they insisted upon presenting a petition to Tsar Nicholas II, which contained their demands for improved facilities, wages, and hours. Guards outside the palace notified the crowd of the absence of the tsar and his family and refused to pass along the petition. Despite the peaceful nature of the gathering—where many held religious icons or sang hymns—and the non-revolutionary intentions of the workers, the soldiers outside the palace took the workers' refusal to disperse as a sign of belligerent rebellion, and officers began ordering the soldiers to fire into the crowd at will. The massacre triggered waves of strikes and became a revolutionary tool, as the slaughtered workers evolved into martyrs to the socialist cause.

<sup>28</sup> Alexandra Kollontai, *The Autobiography of a Sexually Emancipated Communist Woman*, 13 n. 41. The editor has chosen to include the parts of the autobiography that were crossed out by the author herself, presenting both the finalized and original text; in this instance, Kollontai originally placed the onus of attending to women's issues on the Bolsheviks, lamenting "how little our Party concerned itself with the fate of the working class and how meager was its interest in women's liberation." The author's self-editing reflects the overall tendency within the autobiography to take the focus off one specific group and place it upon the whole of Russia, though, curiously enough, this is one of the few instances where Kollontai does not replace her personal pronouns with collective pronouns to indicate that the Bolsheviks did something as a cohesive whole.

Democratic party “is not only the defender of women in terms of its theoretical positions but always and everywhere adheres to the principle of women’s equality.”<sup>29</sup> The party would best aid women and promote their equality, in Kollontai’s opinion, by “creating communalized social services—cafeterias, childcare centers, public laundries—that would liberate them from domestic labor and allow them to enter productive work on an equal basis with men.”<sup>30</sup> Another of her aims for women, the discarding of traditional marriage, earned Kollontai scorn from her revolutionary peers. She proclaimed—and herself practiced—the concept of free love among the members of the new Russian socialist society, arguing that should the bonds of formal marriage be done away with, society could truly claim to be one united and equal whole. In socializing the aspects of everyday life that separated women from men, tethering them to their households and children, the Social Democrats might have succeeded in truly equalizing society.

Activists within the Social Democratic party, arguing that women should be active and equal participants within the government, faced a serious challenge. Russia’s population was incredibly diverse, both in terms of ethnicity and economic status. Many within the party began with the group that first attracted so many of the first generation of idealists: the working class. This class stood to gain the most from overthrowing the old regime that had oppressed them and trapped them within the confines of capitalism, barely making a living. The issue, they found, was getting the working-class people—and the peasants—to accept the advice and help of the more affluent members of their society.

**“The woman worker will not come to us...”<sup>31</sup>**

In 1904, Dora Lazurkina, a teacher from St. Petersburg and member of the Social Democrats working amongst the working class, commented, “The

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<sup>29</sup> Alexandra Kollontai, “The Social Basis of the Woman Question” in *Selected Writings of Alexandra Kollontai*, ed. Alix Holt (Toronto: George J. McLeod Limited, 1977), 58-9.

<sup>30</sup> Thomas G. Schrand, “Socialism in One Gender: Masculine Values in the Stalin Revolution” in *Russian Masculinities in History and Culture*, ed. Barbara Evans Clements, Rebecca Friedman, and Dan Healey (Houndmills, UK: Palgrave, 2002), 195.

<sup>31</sup> Clements, *Bolshevik Women*, 105

workers' wives greet us coldly; at times they declare openly that they don't like our visits. And this is understandable, for we draw their husbands into party work and the results are almost always prison or exile."<sup>32</sup> Unlike Lazarukina, most Bolshevichki grew frustrated with the working-class women and their distrust towards revolutionaries, writing them off as "backwards" and dismissing the idea of bringing the women into the party; some turned their attentions to the working-class men and focused their efforts on educating them, specifically in party rhetoric.<sup>33</sup> Kollontai made a call to action to the working-class women, though much later during her time as People's Commissariat of Social Welfare, in "From the Commissariat of Social Welfare" in 1918. Within the address, she declares, "The new Soviet Russia calls all you working women, you working mothers with your sensitive hearts, you bold builders of a new social life, you teachers of the new attitudes, you children's doctors and midwives to devote your minds and emotions to building the great edifice that will provide social protection for future generations."<sup>34</sup> Identifying the working women with the collective identity the Social Democrats, and later Bolsheviks, had been working to build allowed Kollontai to both ingratiate herself with the working class and draw them in to the collective that promised them drastic changes in their everyday lives.

Peasant women, too, constituted a challenge for Bolshevichki attempting to unify women across Russia as many of them were firmly outside the industrializing centers and rooted in their traditional customs. The lack of continuous exposure to revolutionary ideas made it much more difficult to establish and maintain any traces of a new collective identity. Many remained devoutly religious and left politics to their menfolk, conscious of the facts that the political sphere was typically male and that women were largely illiterate. Those who were literate preferred to read from *The Lives of the Saints* or the

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<sup>32</sup> Clements, *Bolshevik Women*, 101.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> Alexandra Kollontai, "From the Commissariat of Social Welfare," in *Selected Writings of Alexandra Kollontai*, ed. Alix Holt ((Toronto: George J. McLeod Limited, 1977), 140.

Bible itself.<sup>35</sup> These peasant women resisted the Bolsheviks’ atheism and feared that the revolutionaries would not only get their husbands sent to jail or into exile, but that “their husbands who [now] ate meat on fast days and ceased going to church were damned.”<sup>36</sup> The threat against their *byt’* (daily life) occasionally drove peasant women to rebel through acts of solidarity amongst themselves. They rose up against high prices of food and goods, army recruiters, and the collectivization of farms under the supervision of the communists.<sup>37</sup> Numbering at an estimated 64 million as of 1928, peasant women provided a large, yet-unreached demographic to whom the activists of the intelligentsia could devote their time and energies.<sup>38</sup>

**“...so we will go to her.”<sup>39</sup>**

### *Organizations*

As the formal branch of women’s work within the Party, the Zhenotdel, the *zhenskii otdel* or women’s department, was responsible for recruiting and training *zhenskii aktiv* (active women) to become a part of the larger party structure and to alter the *byt’* for both men and women.<sup>40</sup> Initially, the

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<sup>35</sup> Beatrice Farnsworth, “Village Women Experience the Revolution,” in *Bolshevik Culture: Experiment and Order in the Russian Revolution*, ed. Abbott Gleason, Peter Kenez, and Richard Stites (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1985), 239.

<sup>36</sup> Farnsworth, “Village Women Experience the Revolution,” 240.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 241. In regards to the uprisings of peasant women, the Communists encountered a series of rebellions in the countryside led by peasant women in 1929. The *bab’i bunty* (woman’s riots) were “a spontaneous, forceful expression of peasant opposition,” a mass of “screaming, angry women, supported by men.” Wendy Z. Goldman, “Industrial Politics, Peasant Rebellion and the Death of the Proletarian Women’s Movement in the USSR” *Slavic Review* 55, no. 1 (1996): 60. Seeing the force mustered by the peasant women, Sophia Smidovich, one time leader of the Zhenotdel, the women’s branch of the Communist Party, argued that the Central Committee should put more resources into the women’s branch so that they could move into the countryside and organize these women who made up such a driven band of rioters. Smidovich’s request was paid heed and the Central Committee re-designated the Zhenotdel to bring the “backward layer” of peasant women in the countryside into the Party and make them advocates of communism. “Ob ocherednykh zadachakh partii po rabote sredi rabotnits i krest’ianok,” *Kommunistka*, 14 (1929): 43-8, as quoted in Goldman, “The Proletarian Women’s Movement,” 61. For more information on the peasant *baba* and her struggle against the communists, see Elizabeth A. Wood, *The Baba and the Comrade: Gender and Politics in Revolutionary Russia* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997).

<sup>38</sup> Clements, *Daughters of Revolution*, 59.

<sup>39</sup> Clements, *Bolshevik Women*, 105.

<sup>40</sup> Goldman, “The Proletarian Women’s Movement,” 52.

organization was not a welcome assignment for party women; many felt it was a less-than-equal posting and, upon promotion out of the Zhenotdel, found their origins in the women's department embarrassing.<sup>41</sup> Other women, like Alexandra Kollontai, continued to insist upon the need to unify and organize women of the working and peasant classes. Indeed, over half of early membership in the Zhenotdel consisted of peasant women.<sup>42</sup> For those Great Russian women of the working and peasant classes, the Zhenotdel became a place where they found allies in Bolsheviks. The Bolshevikki within the Zhenotdel largely came as a relief, as the majority of Bolsheviks believed these lower-class women were the dark masses incapable of understanding their socialist aims and ultimately unbothered by calls to action, one reason being that over seventy-five percent of villages had no organized activity from the Zhenotdel or even the party itself.<sup>43</sup> The lack of acceptance of and participation in the socialist collective identity aroused suspicion in many Bolshevikki. Because the peasant women displayed no solidarity with the group, they were viewed as a potential threat to the socialists and their aims. For many outside the ethnically Great Russian population, especially the Muslim population in Central Asia, the efforts of the Zhenotdel spelled disaster for women.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Goldman, "The Proletarian Women's Movement," 49.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 48-9. Within the local branches of the Zhenotdel, 59% of women identified as peasants, 14% as working class, 8% as white collar workers, and 10.5% as housewives; the occupations of women are listed as "workers in female-dominated textile factories and sewing workshops, exploited wives of soldiers, cheated widows of the villages and landless laborers in the countryside." Additionally, Goldman notes that nearly one third of the women involved with the organization were illiterate.

<sup>43</sup> Farnsworth, "Village Women Experience the Revolution," 244. Great Russian, a term mostly used in the past, denotes the section of the population that is ethnically Russian; it derives from the use of the term Great Russia for Russia itself, while Little Russia consisted of the surrounding countries incorporated into the empire, such as Ukraine and Belarus; even if villages received any activity from organized Party members, it could have been "merely a poorly paid district organizer, knapsack on her back, going by foot 20 to 30 versts [one verst is approximately 0.66 miles], from district to district," showing the overwhelming degree of underfunding and understaffing faced by the Zhenotdel.

<sup>44</sup> Clements, *Daughters of Revolution*, 60-1. Between 1926 and 1927, the Soviet government attempted to extend its control to the Muslim populations living in the mountainous regions of Central Asia still under the aegis of Russian government. Many within the Soviet government believed that the Muslims represented the same backwardness they feared in Great Russian peasants. Delegations were sent to the towns in Central Asia with the intention of liberating Muslim women and were met with violent retaliation from Muslim men. Over the course of

The *zhenotdelki* (women in the Zhenotdel, also referred to as *bytoviki* on occasion due to their association with bettering everyday life), besides being instructed in the ideology of the Bolsheviks, were encouraged and expected to become *tverdaia* (hard, reserved, steadfast). Leaders of the women’s movement were given *noms de guerre* that related them to the concept of *tverdaia*, unifying them as a strong force that propagated “a program for women’s liberation based on women’s full and equal participation in public life through the socialization of the domestic sphere.”<sup>45</sup> These epithets signified membership in an elite coalition, as they were only given to those who had truly proven their mettle. Letters concerning *zhenotdelki* gifted with these names take on reverential attitudes towards the women, speaking to how they kept the various party centers running efficiently and boosting morale through their relentless efforts for equality, like the one written about Elena Samoilova.

Women’s struggle to identify with typically masculine traits helped to fight suspicions that they were diverting their attentions away from socialist ambitions to a strictly woman-centered movement. In becoming efficient, relentlessly determined, and, most importantly, industrious, these *zhenotdelki* associated themselves with their male counterparts and strove to integrate themselves and their ambitions into the larger Marxist structure they were trying to implement in Russia. Women striving for *tverdaia* hoped that if they could align themselves emotionally and linguistically with the men with whom they collaborated, they would be able to escape the suspicions of aligning themselves with Western feminists. The atypically female behavior allowed them to become the pictures of Marxist dedication, placing them—to a degree—beyond reproach. The desire to separate themselves, however consciously, from their fellow women served only as a strain upon the bonds which they had created

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two years, over 800 had been killed, including women of the Zhenotdel, Muslim women who attended their meetings, and other Communist officials.

<sup>45</sup> Goldman, “The Proletarian Women’s Movement,” 52; Clements, *Bolshevik Women*, 60. Clements notes that many of the most prominent *Bolshevichki* received epithets synonymous with being *tverdaia*; Elena Stasova was known as Absolute, Inessa Armand as Reserved, Rozaliia Zemliachka as Hard-as-a-Rock (*tverdokamennaia*), Konkordiia Samoilova as Stern (*strogaia*), and Evgeniia Bosh as Serious.

amongst themselves. Those wholly devoted to solving the woman question were thus given the idea that they were not as united as they had come to believe.

The Zhenotdel was not the only organization created to lessen the suffering of women across Russia. The “Drop of Milk” movement was established in 1904 under the umbrella organization of the Union to Combat Child Mortality in Russia to help distribute cow’s milk to infants whose mothers could not provide milk themselves. In addition to providing peasant mothers with free milk for their infants, activists, both male and female, within this movement began distributing funds amongst the peasant mothers to help them provide for their children beyond the free milk they received. In the cities, the physicians set up distribution centers where they could dispense milk to working mothers and established a variety of nurseries and walk-in clinics to assist in their endeavors. The campaign volunteers operated as physicians and midwives, encouraging mothers to employ methods of basic hygiene in order to reduce the staggering rates of infant mortality.<sup>46</sup> By connecting with the peasant and working mothers through the sometimes common bond of motherhood, female activists utilized similarities between themselves and the often distrustful women outside the collective; the similarities, coupled with the promise of a lightened burden with the implementation of socialized child rearing, drew working and peasant women into local action groups where they could be educated in socialist literature, or even educated in general.

### *Education*

In a nation where just over thirteen percent of the female population was literate by the turn of the twentieth century, education became a vital method of establishing connections between members of the intelligentsia and those of the working and peasant classes.<sup>47</sup> Various educated members of the

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<sup>46</sup> Adele Lindenmeyr, “Maternalism and Child Welfare in Late Imperial Russia” *Journal of Women’s History* 5, no. 2 (Fall, 1993): 121.

<sup>47</sup> Lindenmeyr, “Maternalism and Child Welfare in Late Imperial Russia,” 115. Lindenmeyr notes that the literacy rate, according to 1897 census data was 13.1% among females.



intelligentsia, many of them female, took to going into the countryside and continuing the education of many young Russians. These idealistic young women, deemed *kursistka* (a student in the women’s higher courses), arrived to educate both adults and children, often filling gaps left by education at a local school. Ekaterina Kuskova, a future leader in Social Democratic circles, recalled in her memoirs that her father had hired one such *kursistka* to come to their house in Saratov along the Volga River. The *kursistka* appeared at their home with the intention of teaching Kuskova and her sister music and brought with her, as Kuskova’s mother deemed them, nihilistic progressive ideas.<sup>48</sup>

Observing that the peasant women were vastly illiterate, party officials encouraged them to attend schools and enroll in training programs to enter new sectors of the workforce. The women took note of the career opportunities described in *Rabotnitsa*, such as becoming metal workers or taking up other positions typically held by men, and began attending courses set up by the government. In 1930, the government triumphantly reported that eighty percent of peasant women in the European half of the country were now literate and able to take up skilled labor positions, while as many if not more in the Eastern half were now comparably skilled.<sup>49</sup> In increasing women’s literacy, the Bolsheviks were widening their base of support, as the women now had access to more of the Party’s literature.

### *Publications*

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<sup>48</sup> Barbara T. Norton, “The Making of a Female Marxist: E.D. Kuskova’s Conversion to Russian Social Democracy,” *International Review of Social History* 34 (1989): 230. *Kursistki* distinguished themselves from the rest of the Russian population not only by their ideology but also by their appearance, marking themselves as members of a specific group. Many cut their hair in a bobbed fashion as is iconic for the 1920s, like the *kursistka* that came to teach Kuskova and her sister, and sparked a reaction among more traditional members of society that complained of young women making themselves too masculine. Some of these masculinized women preferred leather jackets or shirts with ties. In adopting garb traditionally exclusive to men, *kursistki* attempted to insert themselves into the masculine culture that their male counterparts had established in the Russian underground; at the very least, they hoped to visually identify with the males, even if they were not necessarily equally involved or positioned within the party. Anne E. Gorsuch, “The Dance Class or the Working Class? The Soviet Modern Girl” in *The Modern Girl Around the World: Consumption, Modernity, and Globalization*, ed. Alys Eve Weinbaum, et al. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 183.

<sup>49</sup> Clements, *Daughters of Revolution*, 70.

The most wide-spread and successful method of communicating with women across the vast expanses of the Russian Empire was publication. Publications came in numerous forms and addressed the issue of women's liberation in a variety of ways. The use of language as a function and marker of society within the journals allowed bonds to form between the urban and rural writers and readers, drawing them together under the aegis of common struggle and inviting them to partake in the common identity of Marxist women seeking their equality. Women came together in back rooms of apartments or held secret meetings in order to compile articles, letters, and pamphlets that would be of use to the average woman when confronting the oppressive forces of patriarchal capitalist society; the publications could be adjusted to suit its desired audience, as was *Krestianka* (Peasant Worker), incorporating language and customs of local peasants in order to garner some degree of trust. Publications such as *Krestianka* could also utilize locally held beliefs and use them as a bridge to introduce peasant women to socialist ideology.

Following the success of her column "The Labor and Life of Women workers" in *Pravda* (Truth), Konkordiia Samoilova gained permission to begin an entire journal devoted to the working woman entitled *Rabotnitsa*. Inessa Armand and Liudmila Stal, a journalist from Ukraine, supported the idea while Nadezhda Krupskaja wavered due to the worry that the journal would encourage the spread of feminist ideas. Vera Slutskaia, a 1902 initiate of the Social Democratic party from the Caucasus, asked for a series of publications to be funded that appealed directly to the poor, working-class women she was trying to recruit, including a revitalization of *Rabotnitsa*. Once she had gained permission from the new Bolshevik government, Slutskaia put together an editorial staff and prepared the board to be handed over to Samoilova, Nikolaeva, and Krupskaja upon their return to Petrograd.<sup>50</sup> In the second

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<sup>50</sup> Clements, *Daughters of Revolution*, 131. Samoilova, Nikolaeva, and Krupskaja had all been in exile due to their well-known revolutionary sentiments. Many revolutionaries of this time had gone into Western exile out of necessity or because they had escaped Siberian exile and wished to join their comrades out West until the time was right for a revolution.

configuration of *Rabotnitsa*, the authors argued that women’s issues would only be considered politically if the women joined the struggle for socialism; most importantly, the contributing authors did not place the blame for their oppression on the men of their society but on the old regime.<sup>51</sup>

Women wrote in the journal about the need for *samodeiatel’nost’* (the concept of developing the independence and initiative of revolutionary women) in their quest to improve concerns of *byt*. Anna Artiukhina expanded upon this concept in an article entitled “For the Socialist Transformation of Life” in 1930: “Our task consists not of making the individualized *byt* easier. Our task is to build a socialized *byt*. It is better now to suffer with old dish mops, flat irons, frying pans, so that we have the means and strength to put into the construction of new social institutions— cafeterias, nurseries, kindergartens, laundries.”<sup>52</sup> Other revolutionary women contributed, promoting *samodeiatel’nost’* as the key component in getting legislation passed for women’s emancipation, with one proclaiming, “No one is going to do our own business for us.”<sup>53</sup> *Samodeiatel’nost’* operated in a similar manner to *tverdaia*. It became a component of the collective identity, a stepping stone on the way to becoming an equal member of the collective; through building their own independence and revolutionary integrity, the women could prove themselves loyal to the larger collective while also cultivating connections with fellow idealists, strengthening the family-like bonds.

### **Conclusion: The End of Collective Identity?**

The bonds of fictive kinship fostered by the revolutionary women of the early twentieth century provided a means through which they could disperse information on the need for women’s equality under the banner of a new

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<sup>51</sup> Clements, *Daughters of Revolution*, 132.

<sup>52</sup> “Za sotsialisticheskuiu peredelku byta,” *Rabotnitsa*, no. 4 (1930): 3, as cited and translated in Barbara Evans Clements, “The Utopianism of the Zhenotdel,” *Slavic Review* 51, no. 3 (1992): 494.

<sup>53</sup> “Chto dolzhny delat’ delegatki v konferentsii na mestakh,” *Rabotnitsa*, no. 13 (January 1918): 8-9, as cited in Clements, “The Utopianism of the Zhenotdel,” 494.

socialist government. Facing the struggles of an impossibly diverse population, expansive grounds to cover, and deeply ingrained patriarchal structures, women working to improve the lives of their comrades utilized bonds of language and constructed familial bonds to build a base of support for oppressed women across the country. By creating new bonds to enhance or replace the old and oppressive ones, women gave each other the basis of solidarity in their ability to identify as people struggling with the same burdens. Their networks of print media and organizations allowed these bonds to stretch across the expanses of Russia, bringing more women closer than ever before.

The dedication with which revolutionary women of the early twentieth century formed bonds is a testament to their zeal for solving the woman question. The pseudo-familial connections they formed with women across class lines and across the country operated as a support network and source of strength for women struggling to improve the *byt'* of their comrades. Through their use of language, they were able to make connections with and gain the trust of women with whom they might never have interacted under different circumstances; the use of print culture and education allowed for the shaping of networks and building of bonds across such an expansive region. Uniting in such a manner allowed for closer ties between group members, providing a way in which they could both create and maintain the networks of communication as described in Big History.