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FEMINISM DURING THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION: A FAILURE ON MULTIPLE
FRONTS

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The Russian Revolution began in February 1917 and quickly led to the abdication of Emperor Nicholas II, the collapse of the Romanov dynasty and the fall of the Russian Empire. The ensuing turmoil prominently featured a number of influential women. Catherine Breshkovsky, the “Little Grandmother of the Russian Revolution;” Alexandra Kollontai; Inessa Armand; and Nadezhda Krupskaya played a significant role in the success of the Revolution. Although many have been forgotten and their accomplishments overlooked, women were not only a significant force in the Revolution but were the impetus behind it. Unfortunately, feminist policies and progressive dogmas that these women campaigned for affected working class women little. By the end of the Revolution, the isolation of peasant women, sexism within the Communist Party, and the policies of Stalin led to the loss of whatever newly gained rights women had achieved. Feminist ideals were neglected by the new government and whatever changes occurred were reduced to mere illusion.

For most women revolutionaries, female liberation was a central goal. However, they were unable to accomplish it in a lasting and universal way. Nevertheless, the influence of both aristocratic and working class women who joined the Bolsheviks cannot be ignored. Women such as Nadezhda Krupskaya, Inessa Armand and Catherine Breshkovsky contributed by organizing party groups, writing and distributing journals, leading strikes and giving the revolution a strength, vigor and appearance of morality. These women were a major force behind the revolution and the subsequent establishment of the Soviet Union.

The liberal democratic February Revolution began a series of uprisings, general strikes in the cities and mutinies in the Russian Army that led to the Bolshevik October Revolution, the victory of the Leninists and the formation of a Communist Soviet Union in 1917. The February Revolution began as a women’s protest on International Women’s Day was focused around the

capital of Petrograd (now called St. Petersburg, the name the city had from its founding in 1703 until 1914, when it was renamed upon the start of World War I because St. Petersburg sounded “too German”) and consisted mostly of society women, peasant women and school girls¹. Thus the revolution began with women and would continue to be dominated by their influence. The Imperial Parliament of Russia, or Duma, which was created in May 1906 following an earlier uprising in 1905, seized control by forming a Provisional Government, forcing Nicholas to step down. The Provisional Government, headed by Prince Georgy Lvov, consisted mainly of wealthy aristocrats and successful capitalists. The Soviets (“soviet” means “workers council”), a party of revolutionary urban working class citizens and soldiers, allowed the Provisional Government to rule with the agreement that the Soviets would be able to influence decisions and maintain militias.

From February until October 1917, the Soviets and the Provisional Government shared power. The Provisional Government held power in the state but the Soviets had the support of the majority of the population. Many other socialist political parties were also gaining influence and vied for power within the Duma and the Soviet Party. Mostly though, Bolsheviks, known for their red guard militias, were the main party and gained popularity by their policy against continued fighting in World War I.

Finally, in the October Revolution, the Bolsheviks overthrew the Provisional government, transferring all power to the Soviets, who then moved the capital to Moscow. Next the Bolsheviks, joined by the Soviets, established a socialist federal government. Soon after, the new Russian government withdrew from the war, and a civil war broke out between the Bolsheviks, counter-revolutionaries, the independence movement and the non-Bolshevik

¹ Orlando Figes. “The women’s protest that sparked the Russian Revolution.” *The Guardian*. March 08, 2017.

socialists. The Bolsheviks defeated all other parties and renamed themselves the Communist Party. The revolution finally ended in the creation of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in 1922. The transfer of power was not smooth, however, and even after the USSR was established, many smaller revolutions occurred in smaller cities and among peasants who took over and redistributed land. Many urban women travelled to the country to aid revolutionary peasants.

Inessa Fyodorovna Armand, a French-Russian communist politician, directly involved herself in this struggle by peasants. She was a prominent communist Bolshevik politician, born in Paris to a comedian and a French opera-singer, and was most influential during the pre-revolutionary era. At one point Armand was the most influential woman in Russia, according to biographer Michael Pearson.² Armand began working with Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov, better known by the alias Lenin, due to her fluency in four languages and talent for organization. (Ulyanov may have adopted the name Lenin as a derivation of the River Lena in the Central Siberian Plateau, where he was exiled for three years in the late 1890s for subversive activities). By the time that Lenin met her, Armand had been imprisoned four times and escaped from exile in Mezen, a town in northern Russia on the White Sea, close to the Arctic Circle.³ After agreeing to help Lenin and join the Bolshevik Party, she set up a revolutionary school in Longjumeau, a commune in the southern suburbs of Paris, and helped him rig a Social Democratic Party conference in Paris to gain a Bolshevik majority.⁴ Armand also worked on Lenin's behalf to reorganize the St. Petersburg party network, which had been broken up by police raids. Although she disguised herself as a Polish peasant, she was recognized and jailed for six months.

² Michael Pearson, *Inessa: Lenin's mistress*. (London: Duckworth, 2001), 217.

³ Ibid, 217.

⁴ Ibid, 217.

Armand was not willing to subordinate herself to men and formed equal and open relationships with her lovers. In 1902, she left her husband to marry his younger brother Vladimir. In 1911, she openly became Lenin's lover while her second husband continued to support her. Armand's relationship with Lenin was one of equality, even though she worked under his direction. In 1916 she travelled to Paris to raise support for Lenin. When Lenin told her he was not satisfied with her progress they had their first big fight, with Armand unwilling place herself in a position of inferiority.⁵ Armand was also close friends with Lenin's wife, Nadezhda or "Nadya," although Nadya was aware of the affair between Lenin and Armand. Nadya was devoted to Armand's children and after her death in 1920 informally adopted the younger ones.⁶ Both were steadfast feminists and accepted non-traditional families and relationships such as their own.

Nadezhda "Nadya" Konstantinova Krupskaya was not just Lenin's wife and a friend of Inessa Armand. She was also a prominent revolutionary in her own right. Nadya was a passionate feminist and she firmly believed in socialism's power to aid her cause. In socialism, she believed, "a man sees in a woman, and vice versa, above all not a creature of the opposite sex, but a person."⁷ Although Nadya was primarily known for her role as Lenin's wife, "she undoubtedly deserved a great deal of her popularity on personal merits."⁸ Nadya was a well-educated woman and knew several foreign languages. She helped Lenin by translating a number of foreign texts with Lenin including works by Marx, Webb, Kautsky and Engels.⁹

⁵ Cathy Porter, "Inessa Armand: Revolutionary and Feminist," in *New Statesman & Society*, (London, UK: New Statesman, 1992), 38.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁷ Richard Stites. *The Women's Liberation Movement in Russia: Feminism, Nihilism, and Bolshevism, 1860-1930* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1978), 261 Accessed.

⁸ Louis Segal. "Nadezhda Konstantinovna Krupskaya," in *The Slavonic and East European Review* 18, no. 52 (London, UK: University College London, 1939), 202.

⁹ John V. Richardson "The Origin of Soviet Education for Librarianship: The Role of Nadezhda Konstantinovna Krupskaya Lyubov Borisovna" in *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science*

Nadya was a champion of the rights of working women. She believed that a woman's role was not only as a wife or mother, but also as a member of her society. Alexander Kerensky, a Russian lawyer and politician who was a key member and later a leader of the Provisional Government, was a personal friend of Nadya and wrote that "she never played the part of the leader's wife and even preferred to retain her maiden name."¹⁰ Nadya was strong and ambitious and through her actions she demonstrated to others what equality looked like.

After the establishment of the Iskra ("Spark") newspaper in 1900 as an underground publication and the official organ of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party, Nadya became the secretary of the editorial board and was in charge of contact with revolutionary organizations across Russia.¹¹ In 1905, she became secretary of the Central Committee of the Bolshevik Party. Nadya wrote a number of works during her life such as a pamphlet called "How Lenin Studied Marx," a preface to Lenin's "Emancipation of Women" and an article entitled "Young Pioneers: How Women Can Help."¹² Some of her favorite topics included education, her husband and women's role in the revolution. Her first pamphlet, *The Woman Worker*, aimed at working class women and promoting revolutionary behavior, was published in 1901.¹³ Throughout her life, Nadya worked to increase the rights of women and bring women into the work of the State administration.¹⁴

Inessa Armand joined with women across Russia in a way similar to Nadya, helping to further the cause of women greatly. Armand started the production of *Rabotnitsa*, one of the first

41, no. 2 (Seattle, WA: Association for Library and Information Science Education, 2000), 106

¹⁰Kerensky, *Catherine Breshkovsky (1844-1934)*, 472.

¹¹ Vashna Jagarnath. "Nadya Krupskaya: the Russian revolutionary." *The Conversation*. December 3, 2017.

¹² Marxist Internet Archive. "Nadezhda K. Krupskaya." *The Lenin Internet Archive*.

¹³ Kerensky, *Catherine Breshkovsky (1844-1934)*, 472.

¹⁴ Kerensky, *Catherine Breshkovsky (1844-1934)*, 472.

socialist women's journals, in 1914.¹⁵ In 1917, she published the journal *Working Woman's Life* and, after becoming Chair of the Moscow Branch of the Economic Council and with the aid of Alexandra Kollontai and Konkordia Samoilov, she began organizing the First All-Russia Congress of Working and Peasant Women.

In 1919, she founded and became the director of Zhenotdel, a government department dedicated to helping women and improving their position in society ("Zhenotdel" is a syllabic abbreviation for the Russian words for "women's department"). The department aimed to educate women, increase female literacy and promote awareness of laws in the Soviet Republic about marriage, abortion, education and the workplace.¹⁶ She established nurseries, communal laundries, canteens and clinics to help peasant women. The Zhenotdel encouraged women to stand up for their "political rights, the right to divorce a cruel husband, equal pay for equal work, labor protection, and in the future, help with childcare and housework."¹⁷ Her biographer, Michael Pearson, sums up her influence by writing that "she was to help him [Lenin] recover his position and hone his Bolsheviks into a force that would acquire more power than the tsar, and would herself by 1919 become the most powerful woman in Moscow."¹⁸ Thus, Armand was able to use her influence within the Zhenotdel and among women revolutionaries to become one of the most significant women in Russia.

Catherine Breshkovsky, another important revolutionary, also achieved fame throughout Russia through her devotion to the revolutionary cause. As mentioned, she was nicknamed "the

¹⁵ David Pinner, "Troika and terror." in *New Statesman* (London, UK: New Statesmen, 2000), 43.

¹⁶ Pavla Vesela, "The hardening of Cement: Russian women and modernization." in *NWSA Journal* 15, no. 3 (Baltimore, Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 104.

¹⁷ Barbara Evans Clements, "The Utopianism of the Zhenotdel" in *Slavic Review* 51(3) (Urbana, Illinois: The University of Illinois, 1992), 486.

¹⁸ Michael Pearson, "Lenin's lieutenant." in *The Guardian*. September 28, 2001.

Little Grandmother of the Revolution,” or “Babushka,” by her followers in Russia and the U.S.¹⁹ Her work and status as a prisoner and revolutionary gained her fame not only in Russia and the U.S. but worldwide. In her obituary in the *Slavic Review*, a friend of hers wrote that many admirers will write about Breshkovsky “and they will have much to say” because her “whole life was one burning torrent of unreckoning love which swept away on its path every barrier set up by calculations of reason.”²⁰ In her devotion to her revolutionary cause, she gave up her child, her husband and her former life. She was highly successful in winning the respect of many in the United States and support among the Russian peasants. She believed in what she thought was represented in the revolutionary ideals: an understanding of the goodness and abilities of women. In her memoir, “Hidden Springs of the Russian Revolution,” after remarking that “women are the best part of the population,” she asserted that “my opinion is that everywhere on the earth the women are more exquisite creatures and much less corrupted than men.”²¹ Thus, women like Breshkovsky who led the revolution also strongly favored the feminist movement and recognized the importance of the work women did to support the revolution.

Catherine Breshovsky’s devotion represented the sacrifice many women made to join the revolution. She left her husband and parents in 1873 and when she gave birth, she entrusted the care of her child to her sister-in-law. Similar to Nadya Lenin and Armand, Breshkovsky believed that women were not bound to a traditional family life and should have the ability to gain prominence in society. In July 1874, she left for the Ukrainian Villages, where she hoped to

¹⁹ Catherine Breshkovsky, *The Little Grandmother of the Russian Revolution*. Norwood, Massachusetts: Norwood Press, 1917.

²⁰ Kerensky, *Catherine Breshkovsky (1844-1934)*, 472.

²¹ Katerina Breshovskaia, *Hidden springs of the Russian revolution: Personal memoirs of Katerina Breshkovskaia*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1931), 257.

reconnect with “the people” and convince them to take action to stop their oppression²². From 1896 to 1903, she secretly traveled throughout Russia, creating the party of the Socialist Revolutionaries. In 1905, she traveled to the United States to spread the Russian movement by speaking in front of large audiences, something no other revolutionary had done.²³ Her work spanned almost three-quarters of a century and many of her political ideas became the tenets of the Socialist Revolutionary Party.²⁴

In a similar way to Catherine Breshovsky, women were often known by nicknames representing their role in the revolution. Maria Spiridonova, nicknamed the “The Blessed Virgin of the SR (Socialist Revolutionary Party)” was anything but what her name suggests.²⁵ Spiridonova was a member of the SR terrorist squad and in 1906, at the age of twenty, assassinated G. N. Luzhenovsky, a landowner, provincial councilor and district security chief in Russia near eastern Ukraine, because of his brutal suppression of rebellious peasants. She was arrested and initially sentenced to death. However, domestic and international pressure led her punishment to be reduced to life imprisonment. Press reports suggesting that she had been tortured and sexually abused by police gained her sympathy and she was soon named a “martyr-heroine” who had sacrificed herself for suffering peasants.²⁶ By the time she was released from

²² “Breshkovsky, Catherine (1844-1934).” In *Encyclopedia of World Biography*. Detroit: Gale, 1998. General OneFile (accessed December 3, 2017).

²³ Alexander Kerensky, “Catherine Breshkovsky (1844-1934)” in *The Slavonic and East European Review* 13, no. 38 (London, UK: University College London, 1935), 470.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 470.

²⁵ Alexander Rabinowitch and Maria Spiridonova. “Maria Spiridonova’s “Last Testament”.” in *The Russian Review* 54, no. 3 (1995): 424-46.

²⁶ Jane McDermid. “Mariya Spiridonova: Russian Martyr and British Heroine? The Portrayal of a Russian Female Terrorist in the British Press.” In *Reinterpreting Revolutionary Russia*, 36-37.

prison, after the overthrow of Nicholas II, she was regarded as a revolutionary saint.²⁷ In prison and exile, Spiridonova's fame as a revolutionary icon saved her.²⁸

Spiridonova's career also included many leadership positions. After the October 1917 Revolution she became leader of the radical agrarian Left SR Party. She was nominated by both the Bolsheviks and the Left SR Party for President of the Constituent Assembly. A year later, in July 1918, she masterminded the assassination of Count Wilhelm Mirbach, the German ambassador to Soviet Russia. Soon after the Bolsheviks sent her to Soviet prison and labor camps, where she spent the rest of her life. After her imprisonment she received little attention or recognition for the many contributions she had made; she is now considered one of Russia's important but little known figures.²⁹

Many other women made significant contributions, although they did not become national figureheads for the revolution like Inessa Armand, Catherine Breshovsky and Nadya Krupskaya. Klavdia Nikolayeva, a working woman who became a writer for the first magazine for working women, the *Kommunistka*, spoke of how peasant women, women workers and soldiers' wives must participate. She fought for the soviets and communism, but also for the emancipation of women.³⁰ Other prominent feminist revolutionaries include Konkordia Samoilova who, with Nikolayeva, took the first steps in the working women's movement, particularly in Leningrad (as the former capital, Petrograd, was renamed in 1924 after Lenin's death)³¹; Varvara Nikolayevna Yakovleva, a member of the Moscow secret police who in 1922 became Soviet Minister for Education for the Russian Federation and in 1929 was appointed the

²⁷ Rochelle Goldberg Ruthchild. "Heroes of our time." in *The Women's Review of Books*, March 2000, 7. General OneFile (accessed December 9, 2017).

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Alexander Rabinowitch and Maria Spiridonova. "Maria Spiridonova's "Last Testament"." in *The Russian Review* 54, no. 3 (1995): 424-46.

³⁰ Alexandra Kollontai, "Selected Articles and Speeches" in *Zhensky Zhurnal*, trans. Sally Ryan (1984).

³¹ Ibid.

USSR Minister of Finance; and Alexandra Kollontai, ‘The Valkyrie of the Revolution’ whose belief in the respect women deserved for their role in the home was obvious from the public talks she gave with Lenin.³² While many other women contributed anonymously, party members such as these are remembered for their contributions to revolution and the newly formed Soviet government.

Anonymous members of the Zhenotdel, the Communist Women’s Combat Detachment and the Communist Women’s Special Purpose Detachment also exemplify the way in which women played a pivotal role. Women were recruited into the demoralized and reeling Russian Army by the new Provisional Government formed after the February Revolution, adding many devoted soldiers. Women such as Larisa Reisner, who specialized in intelligence gathering for the Red Guard as well as fighting as a soldier, were integral parts of the Communist Party’s operation by providing their technical skills. Many women sacrificed their lives in the name of the revolution, exemplifying their commitment to the cause; Vera Slutskaya was shot by Cossacks near Petrograd during the October Revolution while her Red Guards detachment was delivering medicines, and Yevgenia Bosch, another revolutionary, committed suicide in 1924 upon hearing that Leon Trotsky had been forced to resign as leader of the Red Army.³³ Many women fought at the barricades, and many still remain nameless. Most significantly, though, the five people condemned for assassinating Tsar Alexander II in the Winter Palace in 1881 included two women, Sofia Perovskaia and Gesia Gelfman.³⁴ Strikes in cities by working women and the general participation by middle class women were essential to the fight and revolutionary leaders considered female support essential to the cause. Rochelle Ruthchild, a research associate at the

³² Encyclopedia of Marxism: Glossary of the People. “Glossary of People: Ya”. Encyclopedia of Marxism. Retrieved March 27, 2007.

³³ Ruthchild, *Heroes of our time*.

³⁴ McNeal, Robert H. “Women in the Russian Radical Movement.” *Journal of Social History* 5, no. 2 (1971): 143-63. <http://www.jstor.org.proxy.lib.pdx.edu/stable/3786408>. pg 144.

Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies at Harvard University, writes that “it is a clear and indisputable fact that, without the participation of women the [...] revolution could not have brought the Red Flag to victory.”³⁵ Women were essential to the revolution, taking a role in almost all aspects, including fighting and gathering intelligence.

Anna Barkova, a poet, memoirist and Bolshevik journalist, became increasingly disillusioned with Soviet life. After her previous support for the revolution, she was denounced and imprisoned in 1934 for five years in the Gulag, due to her outspoken writings that reflected her disappointment. The Gulag was a system of Soviet forced-labor camps that housed a wide range of convicts, from petty criminals to political dissidents – Gulag is a Russian acronym for Main Camps’ Administration, the agency in charge of the camp system, but the word quickly became synonymous with the camps themselves. Soon after her release she was arrested again and sentenced to ten years imprisonment and further years of restricted rights. She claims in her poem “The Heroes of Our Time,” that she and the other women who stood up to authority are the true heroes of the twentieth century.³⁶ They “have seen everything, and survived it,” she writes. Women leaders, women prisoners and women peasants are the true heroes and force behind the revolution; without them party leaders would have been incapable of connecting with the public and forming such a strong resistance. During the Russian Civil War, 20,000 women trained as Red Nurses and another 30,000 served as administrative workers, and another 60,000 fought as soldiers in the Red Army. All party leaders understood that the revolution’s success “depended on the women’s acceptance.”³⁷

Women, in theory, were given new rights by the Party they had so strongly supported. Soon after the Bolsheviks seized power, they instituted no-fault divorce and civil marriage, and

³⁵ Ruthchild, *Heroes of our time*.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

declared the full legal equality of women to men. In October 1918, the Soviet Union liberalized laws on divorce and abortion and began permitting cohabitation and homosexuality. In 1917, the Code on Marriage, Family, and Guardianship and a Department for the Protection of Mother and Child were established. This code promised educational and work opportunities for women as well as publicly funded day cares.³⁸ In November 1918, the first authorized Women's Congress was held.

In the end, though, women benefitted little from the new government and the “new society” it had promised. In reality, socialism achieved few of the goals of the liberal feminist movement and women were treated with disrespect, their contribution largely forgotten. The Zhenotdel was shut down in 1930 after what devoted Leninists refer to as “the Stalinist counter-revolution” – the concentration of power in the hands of Lenin's successor, Joseph Djughashvili, who sometime before World War I began calling himself Stalin, Russian for “steel,” as his *nomme de revolution*. Stalin's ascension to power also led to Russia's abortion laws and other social liberation laws being repealed³⁹ (factors in this decision included concern over a declining birth rate and social instability brought about by the decline of the family unit). Many women were largely forgotten due to party censorship. This disappointment was portrayed by women like Anna Barkova who understood that women received few of the benefits they had been promised and many rights they had fleetingly held were gone by the time the Soviet Union was firmly established.

Peasant women were affected little by Party policy even when it was in their favor. Most actually rejected female equality. Peasants refused to attend meetings held by the Zhenotdel in

³⁸ John Quigley. "The 1926 Soviet Family Code: Retreat from Free Love." In *The Soviet and Post-Soviet Review*, 166-74.

³⁹ Wendy Z. Goldman. *Women, the state, and revolution: Soviet family policy and social life, 1917-1936*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

1919, 1920 and 1921.⁴⁰ According to Barbara Evans Clements, a professor at University of Akron and author of numerous books on women in Russia, in 1921 only 14,709 peasant women attended the meeting in fifteen of the central provinces where the population was a number of millions.⁴¹ There were also only a small number of organizers working with peasant women, leaving women in the country almost entirely unaffected. The Bolsheviks preached a message that showed little consideration for the peasant lifestyle, causing many villagers to reject and become suspicious of Party policy. Many villages relied heavily on female labor and many peasants, including women, worried that women's emancipation would "abolish the family" and lead to the "destruction of the village."⁴² The most obvious problem was the significant distrust between the Bolsheviks and the peasants:"the Bolsheviks considered the peasants to be backward and conservative, and the peasants saw the Bolsheviks as city folk, outsiders."⁴³ In the end the Zhenotdel concentrated its attention on city women, and the "patriarchal family survived the buffeting of change."⁴⁴

Barbara Clements also believes that the Marxist emphasis on equality actually worked against its goal of female liberation. The philosophy "cast woman in the role of 'comrade,' indistinguishable from her male counterpart, and branded any special attention to her needs as diversionary and definitely disruptive if the greater goal of the socialist revolution."⁴⁵ Although Marxism does not advocate sexism per se, many Marxists were sexist and treated women as if they were inferior. Of all the socialist parties in Russia at the time, the Bolsheviks were most successful in gaining popular support, yet they were also the least likely to recognize differences

⁴⁰ Barbara Evans Clements. "Working-Class and Peasant Women in the Russian Revolution, 1917-1923." *Signs* 8, no. 2 (1982): 215-35. pg 219.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 219.

⁴² Edwards, George Clifton. "Maxim Gorky." *The Sewanee Review* 10, no. 2 (1902): 234-37.

⁴³ Barbara Clements. *Working-Class and Peasant Women in the Russian Revolution*, 218

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 218.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 219.

between men and women. They were most committed to their slogan of unity and less willing to recognize the need for female emancipation, although they preached female equality. While the Bolsheviks projected this outward appearance of feminism, the Bolshevik Party in reality actively oppressed women. After the Bolsheviks came to power, brothels became regulated by the state and all single women between eighteen and thirty-two were considered to be property of the state. As such, they were required to register with the Bureau of Free Love.⁴⁶ Men between the ages of nineteen and fifty could choose any woman they wanted without her consent and because divorce was so convenient and relationships were often temporary, women were often left in poverty. At one point, Lenin sent a telegram to the city of Nizhny Novgorod with the suggestion that over a hundred prostitutes be shot for supposedly getting soldiers drunk.⁴⁷ It was the Bolshevik philosophy and inner hypocrisy that blocked the efforts of Aleksandra Kollontai, Catherine Breshovsky, Inessa Armand and others whose goal was to liberate Russian women.

While many programs were implemented with good intentions, differences between proposed goals and reality served to injure the movement. Russian women revolutionaries, although they preached the acceptance of all women, felt that they had nothing in common with “bourgeois feminism” and thus the movement isolated itself from both peasants and aristocrats.⁴⁸ The depictions of women during the revolution, although complimentary, were misleading. Inner Party speech reflected a much more misogynistic views. The stereotypical Stakhanovites of the 1930s (diligent and enthusiastic workers in the model of famously hard working and productive coal miner Alexy Stakhanov) and the heroic mothers of the 1940s World War II Soviet Union were part of a propaganda program that hid a more unfavorable truth. Secret Party reports

⁴⁶ Cristina Clarke. “Russian prostitution ‘a lie’.” *Herizons*, Summer 2004, 4. *General OneFile* (accessed December 13, 2017).

⁴⁷ V.I. Lenin. “Letter to G. F. FYODOROV” in *Lenin Collected Works*, trans. Andrew Rothstein (Moscow).

⁴⁸ Lynn Lubamersky. *Slavic Review* 54, no. 4 (1995): 1118-119. doi:10.2307/2501479.

between the years 1950 and 1960 show that leaders saw women only as “future wives and mothers of workers” as well as “an obstacle to the social and political transformation of society.”⁴⁹ Leaders such as Stalin believed that women’s place in the home should be praised, but this in itself became a tool of oppression because “if the state proclaims ‘more choice for women at home,’ it means they will have less choice at work.”⁵⁰ Stalin, through his narrow vision of women, perpetuated sexist stereotypes; however, he also oppressed women through other means such as his unwillingness to favor legislation that supported women and his blatant disregard for their well-being.

In the political prisons that Stalin maintained, most of them established after Stalin came to power, women were treated horrendously, with even their most basic needs disregarded. Children were often born in the crowded prisons. However, there were no doctors to attend during childbirth and the guards offered no assistance. Historian Rochelle Ruthchild writes about a time when a woman gave birth and without any sharp object, as prisoners were not allowed edged implements that might be used as weapons -- a cellmate had to chew off the umbilical cord.⁵¹ The women were routinely marched naked before male guards, strip searched and required to undergo vaginal exams in front of peepholes.⁵² Women who refused the sexual advances of the prison guards risked being punished by being thrown into isolation cells or being forced to carry out dangerous manual labor.⁵³ These atrocious conditions again served to show how little respect women were afforded.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Anastasia Posadskaya. “Women’s Studies in Russia: Prospects for a Feminist Agenda.” *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 22, no. 3/4 (1994): 157-70.

⁵¹ Rochelle Goldberg Ruthchild “Heroes of our time.” *The Women’s Review of Books*, March 2000, 7. General OneFile (accessed December 9, 2017).

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

Women were also expected to take the background roles most often, with some exceptions, and to receive little recognition for their efforts, which perpetuated sexist stereotypes. Lenin's sisters Anna and Maria were both forgotten in historic analysis, although both were politically active. One possible explanation is that "the sisters' interests were very much focused on helping real people, often individuals, rather than in broad, abstract scheming," affording them little recognition for their work.⁵⁴ Yelena Dmitriyevna Stassova, named secretary of the Bolshevik Party Central Committee in 1912, was "always at her post, yet never pushing forward to the front row, to prominence [...] Her concern was not for herself, but for the cause."⁵⁵ As Yelena demonstrates, women were required to devote their lives to the revolution without expecting repayment. Women were expected to be devoted and inferior in most cases, although some women were able to defy this stereotype. As Barbara Engel, a professor at The University of Colorado, writes: "for women, perhaps to a greater degree than men, commitment to revolution often required substantial self-sacrifice."⁵⁶ Because women involved themselves selflessly, often taking the supporting role, their influence could more easily be forgotten or overlooked after the revolution.

Women played a critical role in the Russian revolution and helped to ensure its success. As demonstrated by the female revolutionaries, dynamic policies and changing societal roles discussed in this paper, women of the revolutionary era deserve further study. Today, "the study of the female masses [during the revolution] is just beginning."⁵⁷ The Soviet archives in Moscow hold significant uncovered information about the female experience between 1917 and 1921.

⁵⁴ Christopher Read. *The Slavonic and East European Review* 88, no. 3 (2010): 563-64.

⁵⁵ Alexandra Kollontai, "Selected Articles and Speeches" in *Zhensky Zhurnal*, trans. Sally Ryan (1984).

⁵⁶ Barbara Alpern Engel. "The Emergence of Women Revolutionaries in Russia." *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 2, no. 1 (1977): 92-105. doi:10.2307/3346112.

⁵⁷ Barbara Evans Clements. "Working-Class and Peasant Women in the Russian Revolution, 1917-1923." *Signs* 8, no. 2 (1982): 215-35.

Women of the revolution were highly influential and it is essential to acknowledge this in scholarly work.

It is important not to overlook the political importance of women, because as Christopher Read remarks, “whether one looks at the mere number of women in the movement or their overall contribution to the strength of Russian Socialism, one is struck by the unusual importance of the second sex.”⁵⁸ Unfortunately the revolution, which had given assurances of freedom from patriarchal society and promised social, sexual and legal equality, actually delivered none of these. Socialism had promised a new society but by 1924, the year Stalin came to power, any significant progress had been reversed. While one must acknowledge this failure, women of the revolution still contributed important perspectives to modern day Russia. The “martyr-heroines” of the Russian revolution, the stereotypical Stakhanovite workers of the 1930s and the heroic mothers of the 1940s World War II Soviet Union represent a rich female narrative essential to the history of Russia.

⁵⁸ Robert H. McNeal “Women in the Russian Radical Movement.” *Journal of Social History* 5, no. 2 (1971): 143-63.

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