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THE BIRTH OF THE NEW SOVIET WOMAN

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## The Birth of the New Soviet Woman

The subject of this paper, the new Soviet woman, is a familiar figure to most students of the Soviet Union. Indeed, an accurate representation of her has been known to Westerners ever since Greta Garbo played Ninotchka, the beautiful, austere communist who fell in love with Melvyn Douglas in the Paris of the 1930s. Ninotchka, before her fall, is remarkably true to the Soviet ideal of heroic womanhood: she is ascetic, dedicated, hard-working, intelligent, scornful of sexual game-playing, and demanding of equal treatment from men. Of course in the movie she abandons these values for love, thereby finding her true destiny as a woman. In the Soviet Union, though, Ninotchka survived with her virtue intact; she never went to Paris, never found cynical newspapermen irresistible. Born in the revolution and the civil war, the ideal Soviet heroine was a fighter--as a nurse, as a political leader in the army, even as a combat soldier. She was modest, firm, dedicated, sympathetic, courageous, bold, hard-working, and energetic. Often young, she gave no thought to her personal welfare. She could leave her children, although with regret, if she was needed at the front; she could put up with physical hardship, face combat and torture if captured, and even endure death, believing that her sacrifice had contributed to the building of a better world.

This model of female revolutionary virtue appeared first in Soviet periodicals during the civil war, primarily in Kommunistka, the journal of the Woman's Bureau, and, in less developed form, in newspaper columns for women workers and in obituaries for fallen women communists. The heroine of the revolution has been revered ever since. From the obituaries for Inessa Armand in 1920 to the

latest collections of biographical sketches of Bolshevik women of the revolutionary generation, the revolutionary woman has remained modest, firm, bold, courageous, self-sacrificing, and the rest.<sup>1</sup> Of course, succeeding generations of Soviet writers have modified the revolutionary heroine, giving the ideal woman of the twenties the same character as the revolutionary fighter, but praising her for different activities--studying or working in industry. In the thirties a more maternal woman began to appear, as the traditional attitudes toward motherhood gained widespread acceptance among the party leadership. The ideal Soviet woman of today grew out of this hybrid heroine of the thirties. The present ideal woman is dedicated, hardworking, and modest like her grandmother of the revolution, but she is also loving and maternal, the keeper of the family hearth. The revolutionary heroine is still there in the background, holding up her red banner, but she has the air of the museum about her.

Who created the revolutionary heroine, what purpose did she serve, and what does her progress reveal about the attempts of the early Bolshevik government to establish a revolutionary culture based on a new value system? The answers to these questions, as to most questions of Soviet culture, can be found in the complex interaction of Bolshevik ideology and Russian reality. One must examine what the Bolsheviks believed about women when they assumed power, how these beliefs shaped the images of women they propagated, and how the images were in turn shaped by the experience of revolution and war. My thesis is a simple one: the Bolsheviks when they began to govern held a stereotyped and ambivalent view of women. They believed that the woman of the masses was a conservative who could be an enemy of

revolution and a long-suffering victim of oppression who must be liberated by revolution. The emancipated revolutionary woman already existed among the proletariat and in the party, the Bolsheviks believed, but in very small numbers. The vast majority of women were thus both victims and adversaries, whom the revolution must make over into free and equal beings. With these conceptions, a group of Bolsheviks began agitation and propaganda among women. During the civil war years, the vision of the emancipated woman propagated by the party was tempered because of the fear of female conservatism and because of inner-party opposition to feminism. During the NEP, that ideal was further altered as part of a syncretism between radical Marxist and traditional Russian values. The Stalinist ideal which emerged was, therefore, a blend of the old and the new.

It is this process of adaptation and change which I propose to examine. The alteration of the ideal of Soviet womanhood from revolutionary heroine to Stalinist mother illuminates the changes in Soviet policies on female emancipation. It also provides insights into the larger process of value formation in Soviet culture and finally it demonstrates again that the Bolshevik party was ideologically diverse. On this last point some elaboration is necessary before proceeding to a detailed examination of the new Soviet woman. Obviously there were great differences in ideological sophistication among Bolsheviks. The elite had mastered Marxism as a tool of social analysis. The rank and file, especially during the civil war years, accepted this as a collection of articles of faith which identified the enemy and promised a more equitable future. Specifically with regard to the woman question, there were important differences between the attitudes of

the elite and the party masses, that is, the leadership accepted a more complete program for female emancipation than did the rank and file. But the party leaders, by which I mean the Central Committee, high government officials, and the intellectual establishment, also differed among themselves on the extent to which they embraced the Marxist vision of female emancipation, and these differences became especially important in shaping the ideal of Soviet womanhood in the twenties. The formulation of the conception of the new Soviet woman came then from this Bolshevik leadership, which took power with certain beliefs about women, and constructed an ideal out of pre-suppositions and experience, eventually acting themselves as advocates for traditional values they had once vigorously denounced.

The presuppositions with which the Bolsheviks began can be classified into two broad categories. There was woman as they perceived her to be in present day Russia and woman as they believed she would become. The former conception, woman as they perceived her to be, can be seen in the writings of Krupskaja, Kollontai, Inessa Armand, Samoilova, and in the short-lived newspaper Rabotnitsa.<sup>2</sup> These sources indicate that the Bolshevik elite held the view of womanhood common among the Russian radical intelligentsia, which is to say that they saw the masses of Russian women as suffering meekly under the heavy oppression of class and family. The woman of the peasantry and the proletariat was, to quote Gorky, a "soft, sad, and submissive" creature who bore every hardship that a cruel world could inflict on her with simple resignation.<sup>3</sup> Deeply maternal, she devoted herself to caring for her husband and children. This romanticization of the poor Russian woman (the noblewoman of course was dismissed as a parasitic

member of an exploiting class) had been formulated originally by the populists of the mid-nineteenth century, and had been most eloquently articulated by the poet Nikolai Nekrasov. Nekrasov saw the Russian woman as doomed to crushing labor, male tyranny, endless childbearing, and early death. Gorky, writing later, was the other great protraitist of lower-class women. His male characters, especially the peasants, were often coarse, brutal caged animals, who fought one another out of frustration. To them he contrasted the saintly and submissive women, whom he saw as more victimized even than the children of Russia. The grandmother in his autobiography was the greatest of these archtypical victims; Gorky crowned her with a childlike faith in God and a primitive love of nature. The tragedies of her life she accepted as did Nekrasov's heroines, with resignation, and she died, as Nekrasov's heroines usually did, worn out by the struggle to provide for undeserving men.

This idealization of woman as suffering servant has its roots in Christianity, in romanticism, and in populism. It is part of the radicals' ennobling of the suffering of all the oppressed, and is different from their idealization of the men of the lower classes only in the extent to which the docility of women is praised. And even Nekrasov and Gorky believed that the unquestioning fidelity and capacity to endure which they attributed to women, could lead, did lead women to accept a cruel reality. No reformer felt comfortable lauding those qualities which enabled the poor to survive by adapting to the status quo. Nekrasov and Gorky laid the blame for the poor woman's submissiveness on an oppressive society which gave her no choice but to make the best of her lot. The Bolsheviks accepted this explanation

too, and ideologically the Bolsheviks were committed to the belief that the ignorant woman would break the chains of her submissiveness when she learned that she could end her suffering by revolting against the established order.

This view of the poor woman as oppressed and virtuous was part of Bolshevik ideology. It was, in a sense, the party's official position on the condition of women in contemporary society, but it was not the Bolsheviks' total conception of woman's nature. They also harbored some very negative attitudes toward her. The notion that women were more submissive than men grew out of ancient beliefs in woman's natural passivity, but also out of the observation in the late nineteenth century that women were less inclined to political activism than men. Women did not join trade unions in large numbers. They attended church more regularly than men. They were illiterate and therefore more difficult to propagandize. They considered politics a male preserve. It took considerable faith, or romanticism, for revolutionaries to explain this passivity as an indication of female virtue. Many radicals, including the Bolsheviks, also believed that female passivity resulted from female conservatism, and that women in addition to being long-suffering and faithful, were also ignorant, religious, and apathetic. The Bolsheviks had similar fears about lower-class men, which they expressed for the most part in condemnations of the peasantry. With regard to women of both the peasantry and the proletariat, they admitted openly that they believed women to be a backward element which could threaten the success of the revolution.

Thus Bolshevik beliefs about the nature of woman were profoundly ambivalent. On the one hand they saw her as a suffering servant, on

the other as a benighted traditionalist. The two conceptions coexisted in the pre-revolutionary period, the ideological commitment to female virtue coming into conflict with the belief in female conservatism when proposals arose for work among women. Then the argument was often made that funds should not be wasted on efforts to organize unresponsive women.

There was much less ambivalence in the Bolsheviks' conception of what woman would be after the revolution had swept away her ignorance. She would become "the new woman," a creature the Bolsheviks took directly, and at first without significant modification, from nineteenth-century feminism and socialism. The Europeans who played the leading role in developing this ideal were, of course, George Sand, Charles Fourier, Harriett Taylor and John Stuart Mill, August Bebel, and Henrik Ibsen. Although differing on the proper role of women in the family, these writers agreed that the defining characteristic of the new woman was independence from prescribed roles and male domination. She was an individualist, determined to pursue self-development, to seek, in Mill's terms, "a life of rational freedom"<sup>4</sup> in defiance of custom and even of the legitimate claims of those she loved. Bebel wrote one of the most succinct and most influential descriptions of the new woman in the last section of Woman Under Socialism (1879):

The woman of future society is socially and economically independent; she is no longer subject to even a vestige of domination and exploitation; she is free, the peer of man, mistress of her lot. Her education is the same as that of a man, with such exceptions as the difference of sex and sexual functions demand. Living under natural conditions, she is able to unfold and exercise her mental powers and faculties. She chooses her occupation on [sic] such field as corresponds with her wishes, inclinations and natural abilities, and she works under conditions identical with man's. . . . She joins in studies, enjoyments or social intercourse with either her sisters or with men,--as she may please or occasion may serve. In the choice of love, she is, like man free and unhampered.<sup>5</sup>



Mill and Bebel assumed, as did most other writers on the new woman, that she would choose to express her freedom in socially responsible work, either, in Mill's case, as educated mother of a rational and humane citizenry, or, in Bebel's, as worker in the construction of a socialist society. Reformers such as Mill and Bebel were not inclined to embrace a pure, anarchic, self-absorbed individualism, but they saw no contradiction between the new woman's dedication to her own emancipation and her dedication to humanizing the world. Indeed, rational freedom, the goal of liberals and socialists alike, demanded a high degree of commitment to the welfare of others on the part of men as well as women. Thus although the defining characteristic of the new woman was independence, it was an independence in which she voluntarily chose to advance social well-being, that is, she served society while serving herself. She was, in essence, an individualist whose actions nonetheless contributed to the collective welfare.

The new autonomous, socially responsible woman, a Western-European creation, made her way into Russia with the opening of the debates on the woman question in the 1850s, and found her most influential advocate in Chernyshevskii. Vera Pavlovna, the heroine of What Is To Be Done?, became an inspiration for generations of radical women, including those Bolsheviks--Inessa Armand, Krupskaya, Samoilova, Kollontai--who were to play a still more direct role in creating the Soviet heroine. Throughout Chernyshevskii's novel, Vera Pavlovna seeks personal independence. She finally obtains everything a free woman could want: a loving, supportive husband, beautiful children, good friends,

and a worthwhile career. Elena, of Turgenev's novella "On the Eve," was another of the new women of nineteenth-century Russian literature, but she was more passionate than the rationalistic Vera Pavlovna, more decisive, and more clearly committed to revolution. Elena, with her ardent social conscience, and Vera Pavlovna, with her stress on individual freedom, together exemplified primary aspects of the new woman for several generations of Russian radicals. The new woman was firm, forthright, honest and sincere, an individualist concerned for the welfare of her society. She did not truckle to tradition, hypocrisy, or cant; she cared about others and she acted on her principles.

This vision of emancipated womanhood, expressed in fiction, found real-life embodiment in the revolutionary women of the 1870s. Partly inspired by fictional models, Sofiia Perovskaia, and her comrades created the tradition of female participation in revolutionary parties. The Bolshevik leadership took its conception of the new woman from this blend of Western-European and Russian ideals. The woman of the society they were to build would be an independent, courageous, dedicated, self-sacrificing communist. She would be created from the masses of downtrodden Russian women about whose attitudes and loyalties the Bolsheviks had grave doubts. It was with the goal of transforming babas into emancipated women that Bolshevik propaganda began during the civil war years to create the image of the new Soviet woman.

The creators of this conception were the Bolsheviks who led the first efforts to organize working-class women, that is,

Inessa Armand, Aleksandra Kollontai, Nadezhda Krupskaya, Konkordiia Samoilova, Klavdiia Nikolaeva, Liudmilla Stal, and Rakhil Kovnator, among others. The tasks of organizing women and of articulating new conceptions in order to organize them were left almost exclusively in the hands of these women of the Zhenotdel, because most Bolsheviks simply did not think the work was very important. The party had long judged women's emancipation to be a lesser issue subsumed under the great task of bringing about revolution. During the civil war, Bolsheviks set the highest priority on military tasks, and downgraded the worth of work among women as well as work in education or in other social services. For the same reasons the party spent little time discussing the woman question. Agitation and propaganda for general party or public audiences rarely mentioned women,<sup>6</sup> so that propaganda among women and the conception of the new Soviet woman were initially developed by the Zhenotdel working alone.

The first agitation addressed to women in 1918 and 1919 took the form of pamphlets written by Kollontai, Inessa, Samoilova and others and newspaper columns written by the organizers of work among women, not by the regular newspaper staffs.<sup>7</sup> The agitation sought to persuade women to aid the war effort by convincing them that the revolution was worth defending. The conceptions of women propagated by these writings included woman as suffering victim occasionally, but far more commonly used was the negative view of woman as anti-revolutionary. Woman was passively watching the revolution, the pamphlets and columns

said, while her men fought and died for her. "We, whom nature endowed with a special sensitivity of soul, a special ability to understand another's grief," wrote Gofanovich-Milovidova, a communist in the army in 1919, "we stand on the sidelines in this great cause--the emancipation of the oppressed and outraged."<sup>8</sup> The lower-class woman had been given freedom and equality by the soviet government, but she was too ignorant to understand this, so she was allowing herself to be abused by her bosses and deceived by the priests.<sup>9</sup> The writers admitted that working women were sometimes openly critical of the Bolsheviks,<sup>10</sup> and they explained both the apathy of the majority and the hostility of the minority as resulting from woman's backwardness. The word otstalost' occurs repeatedly in these sources, as do references to temnye zhenshchiny. By contrast the columns praised women who had awakened from their ignorance to an understanding of the revolution as a great triumph for their gender and their class, and who had dedicated themselves to defending it against the capitalists and the landlords.

A disturbing insensitivity seems to pervade this agitation. Only rarely did writers show any sympathy for the terrible hardships that beset women in the civil war years--the hunger, cold, and disease with which they had to cope for themselves and their children. If ever there was a time when the Russian woman truly was the suffering servant it was 1919, and yet the columns and pamphlets for the most part ignored woman's struggle to survive and accused her of passivity if she could not find the energy to volunteer for a subbotnik. Were the Bolsheviks

callously refusing to understand the plight of the working-class woman in explaining her refusal to flock to public activities as a sign of her personal deficiencies, her backwardness? Some Bolsheviks no doubt were given to such unfairness, but not the leaders of the Zhenotdel. No, they chose to condemn woman's passivity because they believed that woman's welfare and the revolution would be advanced if women became involved in nursing the sick or organizing day care centers. Thus the Zhenotdel writers could not admit that very real problems were keeping most women occupied from morning till night. Rather, they had to proclaim that women's attitudes were the obstacle preventing them from joining the revolution, and they had to ignore the privations which the government could do little to alleviate.

But what of the subject that chiefly concerns us here, the creation of the conception of the new Soviet woman? Did the emancipated woman figure in the agitation addressed to working-class women? The answer is no, not in her fully developed form. The Pravda columns and the pamphlets presented female emancipation to proletarian women as a package of reforms which would make their lives easier, not as a program for the total restructuring of their lives, and thus this agitation kept the new woman in the background. "Woman worker," a typical headline in Pravda proclaimed, "take your fate in your own hands, wake up, lift up your head. You are an equal creature."<sup>11</sup> Equality was explained as political rights, the right to divorce a cruel husband, equal pay for equal work, labor protection, and, in the future, help with child care and housework. There was no

glorification of women's domestic duties here, no hymns to the happy homemaker like those which appeared in the thirties, but neither was there the wholesale assault on family roles which Bolshevik ideology promised. Women were assured that the state was not going to take their children away from them, only care for the youngest while the mothers were at work. "Free love" was interpreted as meaning marriage based on friendship rather than male domination. Although Christianity was derided as prejudice and superstition, agitators did not deny that women had a right to practice religion. Lunacharskii, in an article in Pravda in 1919, gently explained that women could pray if they chose, but that they could not, as one woman told him she would, join the Communist Party and continue to go to church.<sup>12</sup>

The agitators urged women to support the revolution, therefore, not because the revolution was going to make them into new woman, but because the revolution had already broken the power of the landlords and the bosses, and had given them political rights. Eventually it would make their lives easier. In return, women owed aid to the soviet government. They had a duty to work hard in their jobs, to volunteer for subbotniki, to organize facilities to help themselves, to visit wounded soldiers in the hospitals, to support their men at the front, and to join the Communist Party and fight at the front themselves. They had been given much, they should take part in defending the revolution.

This elementary appeal was chosen because Inessa, Kollontai, Krupskaia, and Samoilova believed that working-class women would at best be indifferent to theorizing about the new woman, and

at worst would be hostile to the criticism of religion, family, and women's traditional roles implicit in advocacy of complete emancipation.<sup>13</sup> There is evidence provided by Zhenotdel workers that working-class women did openly condemn the Bolsheviks, although the extent to their opposition is unclear. The Bolsheviks may have overestimated the resistance of working-class women to their programs, because they began with the assumption that working-class women would resist them. In any event it is clear that Zhenotdel workers found little in the behavior of proletarian women in 1919 and 1920 which challenged their belief in widespread female conservatism.

The Zhenotdel leaders also may have avoided an ardent appeal for the new woman in mass agitation because they feared that the party would charge them with encouraging feminism. The party leaders had always demanded that agitation among women do nothing to rouse "feminist" attitudes, which meant that such agitation must always emphasize woman's responsibility to the "general revolutionary cause" as the phrase went. And the Zhenotdel leaders themselves may have feared feminism among the more politically aware working-class women. There were times when women questioned whether the party's promises to women were being kept, as at a meeting in 1919 when a factory worker asked why women were not getting equal pay for equal work. She was told by the conference organizers that women would be paid equally when they participated equally in the struggle.<sup>14</sup> Zhenotdel writings also contain fragmentary references to women in the provinces organizing women's unions, which the

leaders in Moscow condemned as feminist and ordered disbanded.<sup>15</sup> Inessa, Kollontai, Krupskaya and Samoilova wanted to bring women under Bolshevik leadership, not encourage them to question its shortcomings. In writing their agitation for working-class women, therefore, the Zhenotdel workers developed a carefully crafted message which would calm the opposition of traditionalist women, anti-feminist Bolsheviks, and activist women alike.<sup>16</sup>

The Zhenotdel had not abandoned the new woman; its leaders simply did not feel that she should be presented to the masses of working-class women, so they saved her for agitation and propaganda designed for a more educated audience. Once a woman had mastered the basics of literacy and Marxism, then she was ready to be introduced to the new woman. Thus in the brochures and handbooks recommended to Zhenotdel workers and especially in Kommunistka, the journal of the Zhenotdel, the new woman figured more prominently than in the mass agitation of Pravda and the pamphlets.<sup>17</sup> In these publications, designed to teach communist women or fellow-travellers about organizational techniques and about the condition of women in Russia, Inessa and Kollontai felt free to call for the creation of that fully autonomous creature who had completely rejected the past, economically, socially, psychologically. Theoretical articles such as Kollontai's on morality and the family, Inessa's and Krupskaya's on the marriage law, or Krupskaya's on abortion, discussed the changes in relations between the sexes that were necessary to free women from slavery to men.<sup>18</sup> By and large, however, the editors of Kommunistka, led by Krupskaya, expressed their



advocacy of the new woman not in theoretical essays, but in biographical sketches of real and fictional women, thereby creating the Soviet heroine with whom we began. Kommunistka was not the only champion of the new woman; there were short stories, poems, and plays published elsewhere during the war years in which she appeared, but Kommunistka featured her so consistently and so prominently that its editors can justly be credited with playing a major role in the creation of the Soviet heroine.<sup>19</sup>

She was, above all else, a fighter who was willing to dedicate her entire life to the cause of advancing communism. Often of lower-class origins, she had fought her way out of the slavery which was a woman's lot, usually because the revolution in 1917 had shown her the truth. She had then gone on to work for the cause, as a political officer, nurse, or soldier, and had distinguished herself by her bravery, her selflessness, and her modesty (skromnost', meaning in this context that she lacked the vanity commonly attributed to women). Zinaida Chalaia described such women as "bold, impetuous, practical, prudent, greedily drinking in all knowledge." Liudmilla Stal praised "the fire of their faith" and their "joy in labor."<sup>20</sup> If they had to die, they died with their faith undiminished, as did Ksenia Ge, a real communist who faced a White firing squad with the defiant shout, "I am dying for that blessed idea which you will someday understand."<sup>21</sup> So long as they lived, they worked tirelessly at whatever job the party gave them, putting duty ahead of all else. Inessa became the shining example of such self-sacrifice,

for she drove herself to the point of exhaustion in 1920, and then, forced by her friends to take a rest in the Caucasus, she contracted cholera and died.<sup>22</sup> Women such as Inessa never lost hope, never faltered; they were a source of inspiration and comfort to their comrades. In a poem in Pravda in 1920 entitled "Woman Communist" a female soldier newly arrived at the front tells the men who greet her with hisses:

I have come from your sisters and brothers,  
I can help you in your suffering,  
I will brighten the horrors of death's embraces  
Overcome hunger, cold, despair.<sup>23</sup>

Are these heroines the new women of the nineteenth century converted to communism and armed, or are they simply Bolshevik Molly Pitchers, the suffering servant in uniform? The answer is that they are emancipated women, for they have rejected traditional female roles to serve, not their men, but the cause, and they have done so, the articles often say explicitly, to escape bondage as women. In the mass agitation women were often called on to support the revolution as a way of helping their husbands or defending their children. In Kommunistka few such appeals to traditional loyalties were made. The writers even speak approvingly of the new women's decision to leave their children. They are praised for their autonomy, and in this they are the direct descendants of Vera Pavlovna and Elena. In fact, they are more autonomous than Vera Pavlovna, in the extent to which they have abandoned family life. And they do so not simply to dedicate themselves to communism, thus exchanging one form of service for another, but they do so to free themselves as individuals. It is only after emancipating themselves that they can dedicate

themselves to society. Like Vera Pavlovna and Elena, they are individualists who serve the collective welfare. A poem from 1922 entitled "Daughters of October" sums up their virtues:

They came  
Not in diamonds or flowers.  
They were born in October  
On the barricades, in the streets.

They wear finery: jackets, caps,  
Blood red kerchiefs;  
They shake hands until it hurts,  
And their expression is bold, profound.

With the sound of new, red songs,  
With cries of horror from the Philistines  
They blow up the seven lamp molds\*  
Madly rejoicing in the light.

Love with censers, love with altars  
They cast away, smiling--  
Love is free, as themselves,  
The boundaries are broken for them.

Not knowing the slave's boredom, they  
Rush between life and labor  
Pressing toward the springs of science,  
Quenching their thirst for knowledge.

Their violent beginning  
Opened the doors to a new age,  
And shouted loudly to the world,  
"I am a person."<sup>24</sup>

\*Used to make ikon lamps.

Most of the articles on the revolutionary heroine were more muted in their proclamations of women's sexual independence. In Kommunistka, as in agitation for less literate audiences, the Bolshevik belief in free love was acknowledged, but usually defined as a commitment to monogamous relationships based on love. Rakhil Kovnator wrote openly about a woman's right to "a free, independent attitude in her personal life" in Kommunistka in 1920, and of course Kollontai analyzed sexuality.<sup>25</sup> Other writers in Kommunistka avoided the issue, and this is evidence in these

years before sexuality became a subject of general discussion that it was controversial. The writers also soften the individualism of the new woman somewhat by stressing her service to the cause as her chief virtue. Her individual emancipation is usually pictured as a means to the end of her apotheosis as communist. Thus, predictably, even in the most feminist of Bolshevik writings, woman's liberation is subordinated to the liberation of the whole, feminist goals to communist ones. Nevertheless, the new woman's emancipation qua woman was made more explicit and praised more loudly in Kommunistka than in the agitation designed for uneducated women.<sup>26</sup>

What functions did the new woman, now transformed into revolutionary heroine, fulfill in the Kommunistka articles and in other propaganda for communist women? She honored the dead and exhorted the living. Examples such as the peasant who became a communist after a lifetime of servility or the young machine-gunner who held a bridge until reinforcements arrived reassured the Bolsheviks that the new woman was emerging from the sea of babas whose hostility they feared.<sup>27</sup> The new woman also served as the regime's approved model of female virtue, the antithesis of the lethargic, obstructionist baba. In approving her, the Bolsheviks declared the traditional conceptions of female virtue, and therefore traditional roles, obsolete.

And yet, even in the earliest days of Soviet rule, the Zhenotdel leaders felt that they had to make concessions to public opinion where women were concerned. The agitation addressed to mass audiences was cautious in its advocacy of

female emancipation. In the twenties, the new woman came under attack not from the masses, but from within the party itself. Two initially unrelated debates then began which changed the revolutionary heroine--one, the discussion of sexuality which culminated in a rejection of the nineteenth-century doctrine of free love, the other the marriage law reform, which in effect gave official blessing to the nuclear family. Both these changes were part of a syncretism in progress between Bolshevik ideology and traditional Russian values, a syncretism apparent as early as the Pravda columns of 1919, that led by the thirties to the emergence of a modified revolutionary heroine. She was an equal citizen, a loyal worker, and a chaste wife and mother, and she had lost most of her autonomy, the defining characteristic of the new woman. Rather than rejecting family roles, she fulfilled them perfectly; she was enmeshed in a web of responsibilities to husband, children, and society and beatified for her capacity to serve. In her ability to be all things--worker, wife, and mother--the Soviet heroine of the thirties resembled Nekrasov's valiant peasants, except that unlike Nekrasov, her Soviet mentors praised her domesticity and, implicitly, her submissiveness, without qualification. The mass agitation of the civil war years had been careful not to attack traditional ideas about woman's nature and role in the family too directly. The pronouncements of the thirties--mass agitation, inner-party propaganda, and belletristic works--embraced a number of those traditional ideas wholeheartedly.

A brief quotation from F. Panforov's novel The Village Bruski illustrates the change in the Soviet heroine by 1937. The peasant Stehka has come to Moscow to receive an award from Stalin, and appears on national radio to praise the leader, who is standing by her side. "Our feminine hearts are overflowing with emotions," she declares, "and of these love is paramount." Yet, a wife should also be a happy mother and create a serene home atmosphere, without, however, abandoning work for the common welfare. She should know how to combine all these things while also matching her husband's performance on the job." "Right," said Stalin.<sup>28</sup> It is as though, having vanquished the benighted baba, the party felt free to merge the two images of women which Bolsheviks had always admired--the free communist and the long-suffering servant. No longer did woman's capacity for dumb endurance threaten to preserve an unjust society; now her mythical powers of submission could be useful in strengthening a Bolshevik-ordained social order.

Yet it is too easy to accuse the Bolsheviks of manipulating stereotypic images of women to suit their own purposes. The Bolsheviks did not praise the new woman's individualism during the civil war simply to break down traditionalism, then abandon it as soon as conformity to their government became desirable. To accuse them of such Machiavellianism is to assert that they did not genuinely believe in female emancipation, which is untrue. The truth is that the Bolsheviks disagreed over the extent to which female emancipation should lead to changes in family structure and sexual morality, but that these were disagreements

only acknowledged in the twenties, when the party faced for the first time the full implications of the Marxist program for female emancipation to which they had been committed on paper for twenty years. Earlier those who would emerge as moderates on the woman question had been content to leave to the Bolshevik feminists the definition of the emancipated woman and the issues of family structure and sexual morality which are closely related to female emancipation. The Zhenotdel workers had been relatively free to laud the daughters of October and to consider the abolition of the family. In the twenties, the ending of the war crisis allowed Bolsheviks to turn their attention to peacetime problems, among them the pattern of daily life which was emerging in the new Russia, and that consideration naturally included an examination of male-female relations. Some Communists then began to charge that widespread divorce and promiscuity were threatening the consolidation of social stability.

The Zhenotdel's role in the definition of Soviet womanhood ended with this growth of party interest in matters once stigmatized as of secondary importance. The Zhenotdel relinquished that role openly in 1923, when Sofiia Smidovich, then head of the department, announced in Kommunistka that hereafter the journal would be devoted exclusively to instructing Zhenotdel workers in organizational techniques. Smidovich advised female communists interested in "theoretical questions" to turn to "the party press," which meant, presumably, publications of a less exclusively female readership.<sup>29</sup> The debates over sexuality and the marriage law occurred instead in Molodaia gvardiia, published by the

Komsomol, in Pravda and in collections of articles issued in book form, all under the guidance and with the participation of people such as Emelian Iaroslavskii, whose commitment to the new woman was weakened by a lingering affection for the virtues of chastity, motherhood, and monogamy which Nekrasov's peasants exemplified. The Zhenotdel's abdication of a role in the debate, save for occasional articles by Smidovich, resulted primarily from the fact that the original leaders of the department were gone--Inessa and Samoiloova dead, Kollontai in exile, Krupskaja withdrawn to Gorkii to nurse Lenin, Stal and Kovnator moved off into editorial work elsewhere. But it is doubtful that even they could have defended the new woman against the party's reassessment, for the assimilation of traditional values in Bolshevik ideology was a virtually inevitable part of the formation of a broadly-based Soviet culture. The resurgence of traditional values regarding woman's responsibilities to the family is also related to the growth of authoritarianism throughout Soviet society; historically, authoritarian government has depended on patriarchal values. Furthermore, a government which was coming increasingly to prize order and hierarchy was as uncomfortable with the new woman's iconoclastic individualism as it was with all individualism.

This complex mingling of values in the 1920s has already been analyzed extensively and well by H. Kent Geiger and Richard Stites.<sup>30</sup> I can add to their observations only a few small, rather obvious ones of my own. First, the story of the formation of the ideal of the new Soviet woman demonstrates



again that Bolshevik ideology was far from monolithic. There were differences on female emancipation between the party elite and the rank and file, and within the elite itself sufficiently serious to produce a compromising of feminist aspirations, even when those aspirations were sanctioned by the ideology. Secondly, Bolshevik policy was influenced by traditional loyalties often denied but nonetheless real. The Bolsheviks perceived the sexual experimentation and marital instability of the twenties as a threat to society's well-being. Having legalized divorce, the party was horrified when some women complained that their husbands were leaving them; having advocated free love, they were dismayed by fornication; and they responded by shoring up the family and urging the young to sublimate. This reaction was obviously conditioned by Russian values, reinforced by the European reformist values the leadership had adopted. In fact, Sheila Fitzpatrick has found evidence that there was considerably less sexual experimentation than the party believed, and the negative effects of divorce on women may also have been overestimated.<sup>31</sup> In turning to the nuclear family to counteract an exaggerated danger, the Bolsheviks were relying on an institution they had supposedly rejected much earlier. They then reformed it rather than abolishing it, and in the process they retained the division of labor between men and women within it, thus serving as the high priests of that syncretism between Bolshevism and tradition to which I referred earlier. They did so not simply because they realized that they must compromise with the masses, but

also because they shared, to a greater or lesser extent depending on their ideological sophistication, the values of the masses. Despite the party's ideological commitment to the abolition of the family, many Bolsheviks actually believed that the family was a bastion against anarchy, and that crucial to the survival of the family was the preservation of woman's nurturing roles within it. Many also believed in the preservation of male authority within the family, but such a notion was so completely antithetical to their ideology that it could not be openly admitted.

Finally, the Bolsheviks acted from a Marxist analysis of the causes of female subordination that was inadequate, in large part because Engels considered the family to be an institution derivative of power relations in the larger society. This led him to underestimate seriously the depth of human loyalties to family structures and the ability of men and women to adapt those structures to deal with social change. Following Engels, the Bolshevik leadership were committed to the notion that the family, like the state, could be dispensed with. Thus they never analyzed either institution, family or state, with any subtlety, paid lip service to the abolition of both, and acted instead to preserve both as a means to preserving their own power.

Soviet culture did not originate in a dialogue between the Bolsheviks and the masses, but in a much more complex drama, with the Bolsheviks both acting and acted upon. Their power to effect change was always less than it seemed, for their responsiveness to the people they governed, and the attitudes they shared with those people, were hidden by obfuscation and

self-delusion. The new woman played her part in this drama, and then was moved into the background, her place at center stage taken by a more Russian heroine.

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## Footnotes

1. See for example, N. K. [Krupskaia] "Inessa Armand," Kommunistka, no. 5 (1920), pp. 17-20; Pravda stavshaia legendoi (Moscow: Voennoe izd. Ministerstva oborony SSSR, 1964); Zhenshchiny russkoi revoliutsii (Moscow: Politizdat, 1968); A. Pomelova, Slovo o zhenshchinakh severa (n.p.: Severo-Zapadnoe knizhnoe izd., 1968); Bez nikh my ne pobedili by (Moscow: Politizdat, 1975).

2. N. Krupskaia [pseud. Sablina], Zhenshchina-rabotnitsa (n.p.: Iskra, 1901); R.S.D.R.P., Zhenskaia dolia (Geneva: Iskra, 1905); Kollontai, Sotsial'nye osnovy zhenskogo voprosa (St. Petersburg: Znanie, 1909); Inessa Armand, "Zhenskoe rabochee dvizhenie i voina," Sotsial-demokrat, no. 34 (1915), reprinted in Vsesoiuznaia kommunisticheskaia partiia (bol'shevikov), Kommunisticheskaia partiia i organizatsiia robotnits (Moscow-Petrograd: Kommunist, 1919), pp. 47-50; K. Samoilova [pseud. N. Sibiriakova], "Avgust Bebel i zhenskii vopros'," Rabotnitsa, no. 1 (1914), reprinted in Vsegda s vami; Sbornik, nosviashchennyi 50-letiiu zhurnala 'Rabotnitsa' (Moscow: Pravda, 1964), pp. 51-53.

3. M. Gor'kii, Mat' in Sobranie sochinenii (Moscow: Gos. izd. Khudozhestvennoi Literatury, 1960), 4:158.

4. Mary Wollstonecraft, The Rights of Woman and John Stuart Mill, The Subjection of Women (London: Dent, 1955), p. 311.

5. August Bebel, Woman Under Socialism, trans. from the 33d edition by Daniel de Leon (New York: New York Labor News Co., 1904), p. 343.

6. For examples of general agitation in which women were rarely mentioned see the Pravda columns "Working Life" and "Column of the Red Army Soldier" for the civil war years. See also the Agitprop journals Agit-Rosta for 1920 and Vestnik agitatsii i propagandy for 1921-1922. There were occasional proclamations and leaflets issued by party committees or by commissariats addressed to women. For examples see G. D. Kostomarov, ed., Golos velikoi revoliutsii (Moscow: Politizdat, 1967), pp. 186-88 and "Fevral'skaia revoliutsiia v dokumentakh," Proletarskaia revoliutsiia, no. 1 (13) (1922), pp. 282-84.

7. The columns, or "stranichki" appeared first in the newspapers Kommunar, Petrogradskaia pravda, and Krasnaia gazeta in November and December 1918. Pravda began to publish a weekly column in the spring of 1919. The columns were the responsibility of the organizers of work among women in a given area. At their peak in 1921 there were some 80 stranichki being published in provincial newspapers, carrying a combination of articles sent from Moscow and local news. ("Otchet o rabote ot Ts.K. R.K.P. po rabote sredi zhenshchin s m. po fev. 1921," Izvestiia Ts. K. R.K.P.(b), March 5, 1921, pp. 29-30.) Many of the columns were discontinued in 1921 and 1922 when a paper shortage and N.E.P.-induced budget restrictions necessitated cutting down on features.

8. Pravda, December 14, 1919, p. 4.

9. See, for example, Ibid., June 12, 1919, p. 4.

10. Ibid., June 19, 1919, p. 4; July 3, 1919, p. 4; July 10, 1919, p. 3; July 17, 1919, p. 4; September 11, 1919, p. 3; October 16, 1919, p. 4; June 3, 1919, p. 2; October 24, 1919,

p. 4. Evidence of this criticism also occurs frequently in the pamphlets cited below, note 16.

11. Ibid., September 4, 1919, p. 3.

12. Ibid., October 2, 1919, p. 3.

13. These fears are directly expressed in Ibid., July 31, 1919, p. 4; K. Samoilova, "O rabote sredi krest'ianok," Kommunistka, no. 9 (1920), p. 33; Kommunisticheskaia partiia Sovetskogo Soiuza, Vos'moi s'ezd, mart 1919 goda (Moscow: Politizdat, 1959), p. 300.

14. Pravda, June 3, 1919, p. 2.

15. Ibid., June 3, 1919, p. 2; October 24, 1919, p. 4.

16. This summary is based on the following pamphlets:

Ekaterina Arbore-Ralli, Mat' i det'ia v Sovet. Rossii (Moscow: Gosizdat, 1920); Kollontai, Kak boriutsia rabotnitsa (Moscow: Izd. VFsIK, 1919); Kollontai, Rabotnitsy, krest'ianki i krasnyi front (Moscow: Gosizdat, 1920); Kollontai, Sem'ia i kommunisticheskoe gosudarstvo (Moscow: Kommunist, 1918); Z. I. Lilina, Nuzhna li rabotnitsam i krest'iankam Sovetskaia vlast'? (Petrograd: Gosizdat, 1921); K. Samoilova, Krest'ianka i sovetskaia vlast' (Moscow: Gosizdat, 1921); Samoilova, Rabotnitsy v rossiiskoi revoliutsii (Petersburg: Gosizdat, 1920). It is also based on two Zhenotdel broadsides reprinted in Kostomarov, Golos velikoi revoliutsii, pp. 203-07, 210-14; and on the column "Stranichka zhenshchiny-rabotnitsy," Pravda, 1919-21. There were individual differences in the agitators--Inessa and Kollontai were more feminist than Krupskaja or Unskova (one of the main contributors to the Pravda column), but these differences did not alter the central thrust of the agitation. The published materials used here cannot be

augmented with speeches made to delegate meetings, a major form of mass agitation, because usually only the titles, not the content, of those speeches were reported in the press.

17. For the instructional materials for Zhenotdel workers see Vsesoiuznaia kommunisticheskaia partiia (bol'shevikov), Tsentral'nyi komitet, Otdel po rabote sredi zhenshchin, Sbornik instruktsii ot dela Ts.K. R.K.P. po rabote sredi zhenshchin (Moscow: Gosizdat, 1920), especially pp. 44-50; V.K.P., Kommunisticheskaia partiia i organizatsiia rabotnits, especially pp. 12-16, 31-41. See also Kollontai's articles on the new woman, Novaia moral' i rabochii klass (Moscow: Izd, VTsIK, 1918).

18. Kollontai, "Sem'ia i kommunizm," Kommunistka, no. 6 (1920), pp. 16-19; Kollontai, "Tezisy o kommunisticheskoi morali," Kommunistka, no. 3-4 (1921), pp. 28-34; Inessa Armand [pseud. Elena Blonina], "Usloviia polnogo osvobozhdeniia rabotnits i krest'ianok," Kommunistka, no. 3-4 (1920), pp. 21-24; Krupskaia, "Voina i deto rozhdenie," Kommunistka, no. 1-2 (1920), pp. 16-19.

19. Xenia Gasiorowska (Women in Soviet Fiction [Madison, Wisc.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1968]) writes that "the very first 'New Woman' in Soviet literature" appeared in 1921 in A. Neverov's story "Marya the Bolshevik." (p. 35) There is evidence in the "stranichki" in Pravda, however, and also in an article by Rakhil Kovnator ("Novaia zhenshchina v revoliutsionnoi literature" [Kommunistka, no. 5 (1920), pp. 32-35.]) that the new woman had been present in the very earliest Soviet literature, as she was in the propaganda.

20. Zinaida Chalaia, "Bortsy i stroiteli," Kommunistka, no. 10-11 (1922), p. 28; Stal, "Novye zhenshchiny," Kommunistka, no. 6 (1920), p. 19.

21. "Pamiati krasnykh sester," Kommunistka, no. 8-9 (1921), p. 40.

22. N.K., "Inessa Armand," Kommunistka, no. 5 (1920), pp. 17-20; L. Stal, "Pamiati Inessy Armand," Kommunistka, no. 12-13 (1921), pp. 9-12.

23. Pravda, January 18, 1920, p. 3.

24. Ksenia Bykova, "Docheri Oktiabria," Kommunistka, no. 10-11 (1922), p. 28.

25. Kovnator, "Novaia zhenshchina v revoliutsionnoi literature," Kommunistka, p. 33.

26. This summary is based on the materials on revolutionary women published in Kommunistka from 1920 to 1923. They total 47 columns and articles, far too many to list individually here. For a representative sample see the pieces cited above. See also "Biografiia rabotnitsy A. N. Razumovoi," Kommunistka, no. 4 (1920), p. 28; "Barmashikha," Kommunistka, no. 10-11 (1922), pp. 30-31; "Zhenskie tipy v povstanchestve," Kommunistka, no. 10-11 (1922), pp. 36-37.

27. "Odna i mnogikh (Dorogoi pamiati t. Barmashevoi)," Kommunistka, no. 3-5 (1922), p. 12; "Kommunistka-geroinia," Kommunistka, no. 5 (1920), p. 22.

28. F. Panforov, The Village Bruski (Moscow, 1937), 4:132; quoted in Gasiorowska, Women in Soviet Fiction, p. 53. Gasiorowska points out that even the physical descriptions of the peasant



women of Socialist Realism are reminiscent of Nekrasov and Turgenev. (pp. 59-60)

29. Smidovich, "Znachenie 'Kommunistki' dlia raboty sredi zhenshchin," Kommunistka, no. 7 (1923), pp. 7-9. See also the article by Putilovskaia, which asserts that in the past Kommunistka had engaged in unsufficiently "concrete" and "factual" examinations of the byt. ("Nash put'," Kommunistka, no. 7 [1923], pp. 15-17.)

30. H. Kent Geiger, The Family in Soviet Russia (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968), pp. 43-106; Richard Stites, The Women's Liberation Movement in Russia (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), pp. 346-91.

31. Sheila Fitzpatrick, "Sex and Revolution: An Examination of Literary and Statistical Data on the Mores of Soviet Students in the 1920s," The Journal of Modern History, 50 (June 1978): 252-78. Much of the information used during the marriage law debate to establish that women were suffering from abandonment was highly impressionistic and sensationalized. See Rudolph Schelsinger, The Family in the U.S.S.R. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1949), pp. 81-168.