

Revolutionary Women in Russia 1870-1917: A Study in Collective Biography

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Author:

Anna Hillyar

Jane McDermid

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Beryl Williams

This is the third book on Russian women of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century collectively authored by Jane McDermid and Anna Hillyar of Southampton University. The two earlier volumes are respectively, *Women and Work in Russia 1880-1930; A Study in Continuity through Change* (London, 1998) and *Midwives of the Revolution: Female Bolsheviks and Women Workers in 1917* (London, 1999). It is perhaps significant that for the first time Anna Hillyar's name appears first and this may indicate that this is largely based on her recently completed doctoral thesis. *Midwives of the Revolution* argued persuasively that women were indeed of predominant importance in 1917, not just in the sense of participating in a bread riot on International Women's Day but as workers in the textile and metal working factories of the capital. It was the women who went on strike, persuaded their male colleagues to follow them, took a proactive role in shaping the revolution and successfully pushed the reluctant revolutionary party activists into supporting them. Even later in the year, when they were overshadowed by the male movement in factory committees, there were strikes of women in some industries and women did continue to play a role, as did Bolshevik women in organising them. In many ways this book shows why. Women workers and revolutionaries (often the same thing) had a long history of action behind them.

The introduction argues the case for the book and sets out its intentions and sources. The authors admit that there are several existing works on women revolutionaries over the period, by Stites, Clements, Fieseler and others, but argue that there is a need for a study which concentrates on working class women activists as well as the highly educated intelligentsia, and which looks at the pre-1917 period including all political

parties as well as the Bolsheviks. The aim is thus to put Bolshevik women in the wider context of revolutionary women in Russia from the 1860s onward, and to show that the movement was not dominated only by the intelligentsia or by émigrés, but included a large number of working class female footsoldiers. This is what separates the volume from Barbara Clements' excellent *Bolshevik Women* (Cambridge, 1997) although there is inevitably overlap in content and sources used, and the two books are bound to be compared. Almost half the contents of Clements' book deal with events before October 1917, although she concentrates more on the higher ranks of the party activists. In many ways this volume complements Clements rather than competing for the same territory.

The primary documentation for the work is impressive. Archives include the International Institute of Social History and the Hoover library, but the majority of material is from Russian archival sources, much of it only recently available since the fall of the Soviet Union. The collective biography is based on 1500 named women, of whom some details of lives and activities have been collected for 1200. The authors have used memoirs, biographical dictionaries, for example the one edited by Nevskii in the late 1920s, encyclopaedias, and the lists of old Bolshevik membership applications for joining the VOSB (the Society of Old Bolsheviks), including those rejected by the society. Also used are the membership of the Society of Political Convicts and Deportees, compiled in 1927, of whom 13% were women. Many of these sources, although by no means all of them, have been used by Clements, but her period is shorter and her interest confined to the Bolshevikki. The material has been collated, with tables showing where possible social origins, education, marital status, occupation and party affiliation. The authors rightly stress the problems they faced in interpreting the material used, which is at best fragmentary and incomplete and at worst misleading. They have made a good job of the necessary detective work.

The book is divided chronologically into three periods; 1870- 1889, 1890-1904 and 1905-1917. The authors reject the alternative divisions of political affiliation or party allegiance as too difficult to organise. Unlike Clements, who divided her women Bolsheviks into those who joined the party before October 1917 and those who joined over the civil war, they argue persuasively for 1905 as a crucial date in changing the nature of the revolutionary movement and the women's role in it. This is because the revolution brought increasing numbers of people, including women, into the revolutionary movement, and because it clarified the divisions between the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks. Each section combines a brief overview of the general revolutionary movement of the period with individual case- study biographies of some of the women involved and statistical information on women in the parties and groups considered. At the end of the book there are short biographical details of the careers of selected Bolshevik women before October 1917, and a list of most of the revolutionary women named in the book across parties, with professions where known. Two overall conclusions emerge. The first is an increase over time in *revoliutsionerki* from peasant and worker backgrounds rather than from the nobility and those from the higher education courses, leading, in the case of the Bolshevik party, to 45% of women from the working class as opposed to 25% from the intelligentsia by 1917, as opposed to 28% workers and 60% intelligentsia before 1905. The other is of increasing Bolshevik support over other parties, although it is worth noting that Clements estimates that in 1907 the SRs had approximately 8000 women members, the Mensheviks the same and the Bolsheviks 2000 (p.30), so the increase is in the decade before the revolution. Secondly the authors stress an increasing self-organisation among working women over time and thus less reliance on party guidance, hence their role in February 1917.

The first period of populist women was dominated by the nobility and the intelligentsia and especially women of the Fritsche group who returned prematurely from studying medicine in Zurich when the Russian government recalled them. Already committed to what they saw as 'the cause' they participated in the going to the people movement. Most women got involved as students in their late teens or early twenties, a pattern which was to be remarkably consistent up to 1917. After 1878 the Bestuzhev courses enabled Russian women to obtain a higher education without going abroad and these courses proved a fertile recruiting ground for future revolutionaries as both the government and many parents recognised. Alexandra Kollontai's parents were not unique in banning their daughter from attending them. As early as the 1870s 12% of active revolutionaries were women and they featured in the two major trials of the period, the trial of

the 50, of which 16 were women, and the trial of the 193 of whom 38 were women. Women ran safe houses, they went to the factories as propagandists, they became village school teachers or ran clinics, as the Figner sisters did, and they got involved in the movement as terrorists under the umbrella of Narodnaya Volya. In the first trial six women were sentenced to hard labour but their sentences were commuted, and Breshko-Breshkovskaya in the second trial was the first to actually serve katorga. The government made no distinction between men and women in its punishments, and of the 10 women on the executive committee of Narodnaya Volya one was executed, one served 23 years in solitary confinement and one died in prison.

The Chaikovsky circle had its women's section, which set up literary circles and entered the factories, and some of those involved lived with working women. As more women came into the cities to the service industries and into textiles, women revolutionaries tried to organise them, often with difficulty. By the 1890s, with industrialisation well under way, women circles were established under Brusnev and others, with their members, often workers themselves, living in communes and concentrating their activities among female labourers, leaving their male colleagues to concentrate on the primarily male metal-working factories. The chief area of concentration was, inevitably, textiles. Foundling hospitals frequently placed their girls in the textile industry and many of these became involved in the movement. The book, in one of its sections on biographical details, takes three textile workers, all Brusnev members, and traces their very different revolutionary patterns to show how women from similar experiences could take different political routes. One, Natalia Grigoreva, became an SR, while Vera Karelina joined the Gapon movement in 1905, which had over 1000 women involved in it. The third, Anna Boldyreva became a Bolshevik, to be eventually denied membership of the VSOB, after being denounced in 1934 for complaining about the price of bread. If the early women revolutionaries had been students, by the turn of the century more women were being drawn into the movement through their factory or through family or siblings. There are a surprising number of sisters who became *revoliutsionerki*.

By the time of the major textile strikes of 1896 workers were acting independently of the intelligentsia, creating illegal trade unions and organising themselves. Guidance and education might come from the upper-class professional revolutionary women through Sunday schools and circles, such as the one Nadezhda Krupskaya worked for, but the days of predominantly intelligentsia involvement were over. The data base collected shows that two thirds of women involved in the revolutionary movement were without a higher education by the 1890s. Nevertheless it is clear that a thirst for education at whatever level was important in the motivations which took many women into the lifestyle of a revolutionary. Upper class women were more likely to be involved as technical secretaries, an important role in the underground, and one taken by both Krupskaya and Elena Stasova, the latter from a very upper class family.

The events of 1905 are portrayed as crucial to the development of the revolutionary movement and to worker and women worker's involvement in it. 1905 also saw the *revoliutsionnerki* challenged by 'feminist' groups of middle class women like the All-Russian Union for Women's Equality. The authors do not give much attention to those that Kollontai scathingly called 'bourgeois feminists', and they are not strictly 'revolutionary women', but these groups could be very radical in 1905 and aimed at getting working class support. Petitions to zemstva or city councils called for votes for women at a local level as well as calls for female suffrage for the newly created Duma. As soviets were formed in the major cities women played a part, especially in the textile towns, like Ivanovo-Vosnesensk where about 60% of workers were women. Trade union work was common among female activists in 1905 although few women workers got involved in trade unions, partly because of male hostility. Indeed male workers could be as much of a hindrance as the authorities, objecting to women participating in trade unions and fearing for their jobs. In fact after 1905 male gains during the year were undercut by employers taking on cheaper female labour when it became easier for women to move to the towns in the aftermath of the Stolypin land reforms. The book does not examine peasants, except in so far as some worker women came from peasant backgrounds, but in 1905 there were women involved in the rural movement, demands for equal rights for women came from the villages and from the Peasant Union. The Ukrainian sugar beet industry employed female labour and saw active protests by them during the revolutionary year.

Thus the authors show that by 1917 there was a real history of working women's revolutionary involvement

behind the events of February. By the latter years of the First World War soldiers' wives rioted on not receiving promised benefits and committees of soldiers wives were common. By 1917 45% of Bolshevik women were workers, but they were young, often of humble and uneducated backgrounds and not easily controlled by the party committees as the events of February showed all too clearly. Women, like men, took from the intelligentsia and party activists what they wanted and discarded what they did not. This book sets out to argue that women's passivity, as seen by male party members at the time and historians since, is a myth. Perhaps this is now not as controversial as the book sometimes implies. It also sets out to argue that women were more important in the revolutionary movement than the repetition of a few high profile names indicates, and that is undoubtedly true. Nevertheless the average number of women involved over the period was only 8.5%, peaking at 16% in 1885 (p.180)

As the authors admit the hardest task is to trace the private lives of these women. Many, probably most, were married and, as the Frischte were willing to abandon a comfortable lifestyle for prison, bombs and martyrdom, so later women were willing to abandon even loving and happy marriages, and often also sacrificed their children's futures and comfort, for the good of the cause. Most were content to remain 'foot-soldiers'. One of the problems with this book stopping in 1917 is that apart from small details, like the fate of Boldyreva quoted earlier, their future careers are not known, but few achieved political leadership. According to Clements, Stasova, one of the most qualified of the Bolshevik women, seems, like many women, not to have desired political influence. If women were often more educated and from a higher social background than their male comrades, they seem to have entered the movement for more moral motives, with less desire for power and an equal if not greater willingness to suffer. This book certainly achieves its object of showing the scale of women's involvement in all branches of the revolutionary movement before 1917. But they remained a relatively small minority, even if a significant one, and one which did not increasingly achieve influence with their growing numbers. An Alexandra Kollontai or a Sofia Perovskaia remained exceptions to the rule.

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