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PARADOXES OF GENDER IN SOVIET COMMUNIST PARTY WOMEN'S SECTIONS (THE *ZHENOTDEL*), 1918–1930

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The women's section of the Russian Communist Party (*Zhenotdel*) was founded in 1918 immediately after the Bolshevik Revolution. It took as its principal aim to "draw the female masses into socialist construction" (*Metody i formy raboty* 1921, 1933, 247). At the same time, its founding director Aleksandra Kollontai and her colleagues wrote extensively about women's emancipation as a project by and for women. In practice these two goals—drawing women into the party and encouraging their emancipation through their own efforts—proved difficult to combine in one organization, as the one goal (drawing women into the party) was inherently oriented toward the official party center, while the other (self-realization, emancipation) was inherently centrifugal, encouraging women to move outward from patriarchal sources of power to find their own liberation. This tension also reflected a second set of contradictions as women organizers sought to have the new party-state treat women the same as men (through extensive legislation), yet also as inherently different from men because of their presumed "backwardness" and the corresponding need, therefore, to organize them separately and in different ways.

Scholars of Soviet and East European feminisms have recently been engaged in a lengthy debate over the degree of women's autonomy and proactive feminist agency in state-sponsored, socialist "women's movements" in the early and mid-20th century (see Hinterhuber and Fuchs, Chapter 3 in this *Handbook*). The relationship between ideology and practice has been especially troubling. To what extent, some have asked (Funk 2014), should communism be viewed as "state patriarchy," that is, as an inherently repressive social and political order that may have espoused women's emancipation but ultimately failed to allow autonomy and activism by and for women? Conversely, others have wondered (Daskalova 2007; de Haan 2007; Ghodsee 2015), should it rather be seen as a positive example of "state feminism," that is, a set of policies and practices put in place from above in order to emancipate women and foster gender equality in private and public life? The latter question thus involves both goals and means. Regarding women, early Soviet authorities spoke much more consistently about "emancipation" than they

did about gender "equality." To them emancipation meant liberation from the strictures of prerevolutionary patriarchy, especially that of the Russian Orthodox Church which, as Marxists, they roundly condemned for its obfuscation and oppression of the masses. The practices of the *Zhenotdel* revealed paradoxes and challenges in actual practice that made the attainment of what feminists today call equality quite difficult.

Tensions from the beginning

From the first post-revolutionary Conference of Working Women in Petrograd in November 1917, activists sparred over taking a Marxist, worker-oriented approach versus a more feminist, all-woman one. Activist Konkordia Nikolaeva argued that there should be "no separate women's organizations," while Kollontai insisted, to the contrary, that women workers should have their own representatives at the upcoming Constituent Assembly to safeguard their interests in the family, motherhood, childcare, and the workplace (Hayden 1976, 153). A year later in 1918, Bolshevik women activists held a follow-up conference where they presented an extensive package of new institutions, from childcare centers to public dining, that would advance women's emancipation from the patriarchal structures of the family (Krylova 2017, 430). Inessa Armand and Kollontai also received a green light from the Central Committee to create what became women's sections or *zhenotdely*.

In March 1919, the newly renamed Communist Party established the Secretariat, Politburo, and Orgburo, with the new women's sections under the Secretariat. This meant that the women's sections were pursuing neither high-level policy (the domain of the Politburo), nor purely organizational matters (usually handled by the Orgburo). Rather, *zhenotdely* were linked with Communist Party agitation and propaganda. They were also organized in a hierarchy in which the district-level women's section was subordinated not to the women's section at the regional level, but to the district-level branch of the Communist Party, which in its turn was subordinated to the regional branch of the Communist Party. Nor did the women's sections have their own funding; rather, funding was supplied by the branches of the party and by the agitation sections. A major victory came, however, in a circular from the Central Committee in December 1919 ordering all party committees at all levels to organize *zhenotdely*.

Organizational struggles force the women's sections to become more compliant

During the Civil War (1918–1921), the women's sections concentrated on recruiting staff and on supporting the war effort through campaigns and workdays to aid sick and wounded Red Army soldiers. This effort included publishing new journals for women (e.g., *Kommunistka* [The Woman Communist] from 1920) and creating institutions for maternal and child health, childcare, canteens, and laundries. They also contributed to campaigns against illiteracy. With the advent of economic liberalization through the New Economic Policy (NEP), women's section leaders like Kollontai vociferously attacked the high rates of female unemployment that accompanied the government's refusal to maintain and subsidize unproductive factories and other enterprises. Male party leaders like Valerian Kuibyshev used *Kommunistka* to express their disagreement with the economic liberalization of NEP and the attendant high rates of female unemployment, suggesting

that, as a second-string journal, *Kommunistka* was a place for some genuine party debate (Wood 1997, 173–176).

Kollontai had made ambivalent statements about feminism throughout her career (Iukina 2003; Uspenskaia 2003). Although she had advocated using methods similar to those of feminists since the 1860s (such as special circles for women workers, women's clubs, childcare programs), she insisted that she was not a feminist, in her view the revolution would create a new social order that would solve the so-called “woman question,” as it was called. For reasons not entirely clear, she disbanded all feminist organizations, as well as women's educational institutions and the independent women's press as soon as she was brought into the Soviet government as Commissar of Social Welfare in the fall of 1917 (Patterson 2011, 41–42).

In 1923, Kollontai and her deputy Vera Golubeva provoked a raging party controversy over feminism as a word and the concept. Golubeva, head of the TransCaucasus regional *Zhenotdel*, published an article in *Pravda* in which she argued that the women's sections should broaden their work to include not only women workers and peasants (their official mandate), but also housewives and unemployed women, especially since NEP was having pernicious effects on women's employment. She argued that they should create “special societies” to work on women's emancipation outside the party. When she was attacked in the press by several women party members for overstepping the party mandate to draw women into the party and raise their political consciousness, Kollontai came to her defense, suggesting feminism was not such a terrible word and should be rehabilitated now that the work was taking place in a workers' state rather than a bourgeois one (Dubinina 1981; Patterson 2011, 43–48).

This conflict over the meaning of feminism and women's interests reached its apex in 1923 when the 12th Party Congress accused the women's section of “creating the grounds for feminist deviations” which ran the risk of “separating the female part of the workers from the general class struggle” (cited in Wood 1997, 192). Joseph Stalin weighed in at the Party Congress, characterizing the women's sections as “an essential transmission mechanism joining our party with the female portion of the working class.” From encouraging women's emancipatory voices, party leaders moved to further suppress women's independent initiative (Emelianova 2003). Kollontai, who had relentlessly spurred the party into giving women representation at all levels, was now sidelined and sent abroad to Norway in October 1922 as a member of the Soviet diplomatic mission.

By 1926, the International Women's Secretariat of the Comintern (founded in 1920 and headed by Clara Zetkin) was closed by order of the Soviet Politburo. The women's section became immersed in internal debates over questions of marriage, divorce, alimony, and illegitimacy of children born out of wedlock, ceding ground to more conservative women who wanted more restrictive divorce practices in particular (Goldman 1984). In 1927, the 15th Party Congress criticized the women's section for not sufficiently following party guidance (Hayden 1979, 351). Thereafter, the women's sections became increasingly compliant with official directives. Anna Artiukhina (head of *Zhenotdel*, 1925–1930) played down the *Zhenotdel's* independence, arguing that the sections should follow the party line. The women's journal *Kommunistka*, followed party directives to accentuate the threat of war and the need to “militarize” women workers. In 1928–1929, the women's sections concentrated on pushing for the official policy of collectivization even though it had no benefits and significant harm for women's agricultural practices (Kingston-Mann 2018, 70–72; Patterson 2011).

In January 1930, the *Zhenotdel* was formally closed on the grounds that the “woman question” had been “solved.” Artiukhina, still head of the section, tried in vain to appeal the decision. Henceforth, work among women would be carried out by so-called “women's sectors” inside the agitation department, but they would have no funding and no independent personnel (Goldman 1996; Scheide 2001).

Assessing the work of the women's sections

To assess whether the women's sections fulfilled their official mission to emancipate women, it is necessary to go beyond the debate over state patriarchy versus state feminism. On the one hand, the women's sections functioned as a “transmission belt” through which the party-state spread its control over the larger society. Yet, on the other, they also established an agenda and a process for giving women some voice and agency in striving to improve their position in society. One way to square the circle, as it were, is to view them as an integral part of a larger program of transformation in the Soviet Union, which had both positive and negative consequences. As Scott (1998) documented in his work on Soviet collectivization, utopian projects often fail to consider the people involved and the local ways of doing things. Yet they also create new structures that have a long-term impact. In the long run, while the *Zhenotdel* agenda may not have entirely succeeded, it laid groundwork for greater equality, with both beneficial and sometimes not so beneficial outcomes.

Over the course of their existence from 1919–1930, the work of the women's sections can be assessed in five key areas, each of which merits individual attention. The most time-consuming of all these tasks, so-called “organizational” work, meant holding women's meetings at all levels of the party. These were strictly controlled affairs designed to bring women into the party and educate them in the spirit of the party, as one party directive said, “so as not to end up with incorrect women's sections at the local level” (cited in Iukina 2007, 449). The women's delegate meetings were expected to draw in the most inexperienced women and to keep them for a year, during which time they were asked to observe and learn, rather than to advocate for change on behalf of women (Goldman 1996; Scheide 2001; Wood 1997). There is little evidence that these women, many of them illiterate or inexperienced, were able to effect change or improvement in women's lives more broadly.

In publishing, by contrast, the *Zhenotdel* activists made some of their strongest contributions to women's equality. By 1930, they were putting out 18 different publications with a total circulation of 670,000 copies, not counting the special “women's pages” in the main party newspapers (Stites 1978, 336). Readership included women workers, peasants, and the delegates serving in local government. *Kommunistka*, in particular, became a place for trying out new ideas and debating women's roles in society, women's leadership, and organizing work among women (Goldman 1996; Krylova 2017). Activists, male and female used the journal to write probing criticism of NEP in particular (Wood 1997). They fought against the disbanding of local women labor organizers in the second half of the 1920s (Goldman 1996). They debated the best forms of creating services for women and children that would create new ways of living (*byt*) and new gender relations.

Women's sections also worked successfully with various institutions to improve maternity and childcare, especially the Section for the Protection of Mothers and Children (*Okhmatmlad*). With roots in the prerevolutionary period, they were significantly more

developed in the Soviet period and lasted until the post-Soviet period. Soviet architects built high-rise apartment buildings complete with childcare facilities, food shopping, and laundries right up until the fall of the USSR. In the post-Soviet period, childcare and social services have been drastically cut back, but some women activists have been able to continue the work of social service centers for women and children in crisis situations (Johnson and Saarinen 2013).

Less successful was *Zhenotdel* work with the Commission for the Improvement and Study of Female Labor in Industry created in 1922, but not fully functional until 1925 or 1926 (Patterson 2011). Improving women's position in the workforce proved difficult because of resistance among male workers and trade unions, as well as persistent efforts to eliminate separate organizing of women workers (Goldman 1996). *Zhenotdel* activists frequently expressed concern that women workers forced out of jobs would resort to prostitution. Working first with the Commissariat of Social Welfare (headed by Kollontai) and later with the Commissariat of Health, the *Zhenotdel* sought to eradicate prostitution (Wood 1997, 111–116). Kollontai viewed the problem as a breakdown of solidarity between men and women workers when women were equated with instruments of pleasure (Kollontai 1920). Soviet practice in this period was not uniform, however, and ranged from supporting women by providing alternative work to stigmatizing and even prosecuting them (Hearne 2020).

Key leaders of the women's section—Kollontai above all, but also Armand, Nadezhda Krupskaya (Vladimir Lenin's wife), and others—worked with legislators to create new law codes on a range of topics including equal rights in marriage and the family, equal property ownership, the legalization of abortion, and labor protection (Goldman 1993). Compared to government policies at the time and even today, this was some of the most progressive legislation the world had ever seen (see Htun and Weldon 2010 for a discussion of how to measure gender equality; also Johnson 2018, 9, on the problem of gender legislation that is not actually implemented). Even though the 1930s saw a clawback of rights given to women and increased regulation of sexuality—especially the criminalization of abortion, prostitution, and male homosexuality, as well as the banning of divorce and the stigmatization of illegitimate children who were not allowed to carry a patronymic (their father's name) in their passport—the general legislation made outright discrimination against women illegal in a range of areas (the family, education, and work) in ways that were sustained for the next 70 years and technically still hold today. The Soviet Union was also one of the first states to ban sexual harassment in the workplace or in situations where the perpetrator used his position of authority to extract sexual favors (Granik 1997).

The gender politics of backwardness

Often the efforts in these areas had unintended consequences, however. Two stand out as the most important: the tendency to equate women with “backward” areas of society and the demand that women both work and care for children and the household, often with insufficient support.

From the beginning, the new authorities mobilized the women's sections to deal with the most challenging social holdovers in everyday life from the Tsarist period—illiteracy, high rates of maternal and infant mortality, syphilis, and prostitution. The concentration on women's illiteracy and inexperience meant that they were, by definition, in need

of the party's tutelage. This use of gender as a wedge to bring in the party's domination can be seen particularly in Central Asia (Gradsikova 2019; Massell 1974; Northrop 2004), but also in the whole of the USSR (Zdravomyslova and Temkina 2005). In posters, the artists employed by the new leadership tended to display men as warriors looking forward (a metaphor that had been used by populists and socialists from the 1870s up to the Revolutions of 1917) and women as backwards, looking back over their shoulders and barefoot with kerchiefs on their heads (Wood, forthcoming).

At the same time, the party (both leaders and rank-and-file) continued to view women's contributions to society primarily through the lens of maternity and child welfare. This meant that over the long haul “women's matters” (*zhenskoe delo*) would come to be associated with the domestic sphere and relegated to second-class status after the more urgent problems of production and heavy industry. Since the domestic was associated almost exclusively with women, there was little call for men to change the degree of their responsibility for home and childcare. International Women's Day (March 8), to take just one example, evolved from a holiday to emancipate women from the drudgery of the kitchen into a frilly holiday for women with flowers and cakes (Chatterjee 2002).

Since Bolshevik policy was implemented somewhat sporadically and not always with an eye to the diversity of women's own experiences, women themselves (especially peasant women) expressed deep ambivalence about issues of divorce and abortion, even how best to work among women (Goldman 1993). By the end of the Soviet period, many women had rejected “the woman question” altogether. If one of the main tasks of the *Zhenotdel* was to provide public solutions to the issue of the family, women themselves did not always agree (Fuqua 1996).

Conclusions

Perhaps in the end it is unfair to raise the question of *Zhenotdel* effectiveness as either emancipatory or instrumentalist exploitation for the purpose of building party loyalty and control. Nonetheless, it will probably long remain a subject of controversy whether such a public, state takeover of domestic issues represented a step forward in emancipating women or a step backward in subordinating them to a different authority—the patriarchal state instead of the patriarchal male head of household.

Despite excellent studies of the *Zhenotdel* that have been emerging in Russia (Alferova 2011; Emelianova 2005; Iukina 2003, 2007), much more needs to be done in a number of areas. One is to determine the degree to which activists in the women's section (particularly but not only Kollontai) worked with early jurists to create the new emancipatory laws on women and the family, and the degree to which that legislation was actually implemented. A second concerns the connections between the Commissariats of Social Welfare, Health, and Labor and the women's sections. Although the leading Soviet-era author on the women's section, Chirkov (1978, 79), claims that the *zhenotdel* did not have any impact on the commissariats when they tried to send their representatives to work in them, it is not clear how much progress was actually made in creating the institutions for women that socialist theory advocated.

From 1918 to 1930, the women's sections struggled with their identities as the Push-Me-Pull-You's of the Communist Party. On the one hand, they tried valiantly to push the party, setting out demands and resolutions for improving women workers' and peasants' lives. On the other hand, they were frequently pulled in many directions, both through their own lack of confidence and through the party's insistence that their first priority was

to draw women into the party, which was itself frequently changing direction through those years.

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