

*The Woman Question in Russia: Contradictions and Ambivalence*

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The Woman Question in nineteenth and early twentieth century Russia focused principally on the position of women in the family and society. It was one of the so-called “burning” social issues that occupied the Russian intelligentsia in the second half of the nineteenth century, questions such as the emancipation of the peasants and the Jews, the rise of national consciousness.

Yet it was perhaps the least straight-forward of the burning questions, the one most burdened by contradictions and ambivalence. It was, for one thing, very much a question about the place of men and masculinity under autocracy. Although it ostensibly addressed notions of how to improve women’s lot, it also contained within it and even perpetuated deeply misogynist notions of women’s backwardness. The early “woman question” was also often a code phrase for authors seeking to evade the strict censorship under Tsar Nicholas I (1825-1855); they wrote about women as a way of talking about revolution and radical social change. Contemporaries perceived the Woman Question as a native development that had organic Russian roots. Yet in actuality it came to Russia as an import, borrowing many Western ideas, yet melding them with Russian intellectual and moral traditions in a new synthesis.

Historians and literature scholars debate the timing and nature of the earliest appearances of the Woman Question. Most general discussions date it from the time of discussions of the Emancipation of the peasantry, i.e., the late 1850s and early 1860s. Yet it is easy to see the roots in changes under Peter the Great and Catherine the Great, as well as in the 1830s-40s [1-4].

Historians have posited a number of factors contributing to the discussion of women’s position in society and the possible ways to change that position through education and work: Enlightenment prioritization of education as a vehicle for social change; Catherine the Great’s commitment to creating rational citizens; the alternative gender models contained in the memoirs of Princess Dashkova and the so-

called Cavalry Maid, Nadezhda Durova; the rise of a new ideal of companionate marriage; the eroding of women's subject position after the Russian defeat in the Crimean War, and the need for many so-called "superfluous women" of the nobility (i.e., those who had not married) to find gainful employment once the serfs were freed and the nobility lost much of their income.

Scholarship about the Woman Question in Russian History has expanded greatly in the last ten years. Most recently scholars in the field of Russian literature have generated a raft of monographs and articles exploring women's own writings and the ways in which they contributed to gender understandings in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries [5-7]. The older scholarship (my own included) tended to emphasize the ways in which the Woman Question, as expressed in the thick journals of the 1850s-70s, tended to be written principally by and for men [1, 2, 8-10]. As Nikolai Shelgunov so vividly wrote in 1870, "Who among our women writers -- and we have many of them -- has studied the woman question and written about it? Not one" [11:11]. While it is true that discussion of the Woman Question in the thick journals was dominated by men, women writers were addressing similar issues, albeit in fictionalized form, in their belles lettres. Here they focused on loveless arranged marriages, on the restrictions of the family, on women's choices between motherhood and independence [12-15].

The earliest history of the Woman Question in Russia is intimately linked with new ideas of "upbringing" [*vospitanie*] dating from the 1770s and ideas of "personality" [*lichnost'*] from the 1830s. In medieval Russia and up to the early 18<sup>th</sup> century elite women had been cloistered, leading lives segregated from their male family members, with minimal education and contact with the outside world. It was only under Peter the Great that new decrees allowed Russian subjects, male and female, to make their own choices in marriage (rather than having those dictated by parents or other relatives). Peter also actively required women to attend his grand social assemblies.

Catherine the Great brought in Enlightenment ideas from France and Germany particularly

concerning education and citizenship. Catherine's unofficial minister of education, Ivan Betskoi, sought to transform what the historian Vasily Kliuchevsky once called "the raw material" of childhood, through upbringing so as to make proper male and female adult citizens [16:431-2]. While Catherine's overall goal was to create "a new race of people," she viewed women's status as particularly crucial in their roles as mothers of the next generation. Upbringing, especially in the sense of the moral training of both female and male children, she saw as "the root of all evil and good" [17:312n.2; 18].

Women's education was still limited, however, to their roles as wives and mothers. Graduates of the Smol'nyi Institute were to be "good Russian wives, caring mothers, and zealous homemakers" [1:306]. From the time of Catherine's son Paul I onward, one goal of formalized education for young Russian girls was in fact to make sure that they did not receive too much education.

The quintessential "good wives," historically speaking, were, of course, the so-called Decembrist wives, i.e., those wives (and two French mistresses) who followed their husbands into exile after their failed uprising in December 1825. Historians have debated whether they contributed to the later emergence of the Woman Question. Some have claimed they were nothing more than sentimental creatures who upheld patriarchal notions by following their husbands, while others have held that their choice to endure the hardships of Siberia with their husbands made a political statement, which later inspired women activists and changed notions of women's possible roles [1:8].

The Decembrist wives represented an important link in the chain of ideas leading up to the celebrated Woman Question of the 1860s precisely because they demonstrated the importance of nineteenth century men's *ideals* for women. The core notion associated with the Decembrist wives was one of self-sacrifice, an ideal aspired to by both men and women in the generation of repentant noblemen (the 1830s and '40s). Egotism in the Woman Question, i.e., trying to emancipate women for their own sake, was considered unacceptable, but women taking actions that would benefit the larger collective were lauded, especially when

they were perceived as martyrs.

The ideas that played a key part in fomenting the Decembrist revolution - equality, liberty, fraternity, citizenship, Masonic revivals of early Christian values - all these had not been sufficiently strong to persuade the men of the Decembrist movement to include women in their revolutionary societies. Women in their view could only have an auxiliary role organizing philanthropic and private societies.

These Enlightenment and Masonic ideas did, however, combine with German idealism to create notions of the Beautiful Woman, the ideal relationship that would help to restore the wholeness of the alienated, superfluous man emerging at the time [19]. Nikolai Nekrasov and others wrote sentimental poems and stories of women peasants being violated by their male owners. Noblemen began to feel guilty not only toward their peasants but also toward Russian women, both noble and serf. They began as well to bemoan the lot of so-called fallen women.

A whole genre of writing, produced by both male and female authors, beginning in the 1830s, was devoted to the hardships of women's lot [1:101-9, 20]. The initial way out, discussed by early members of the intelligentsia, including men like Vissarion Belinsky, focused on making women "human." This corresponded to the Hegelian notion of needing to foster true individuality [21:313-34, 22: 131-6].

Nonetheless, even the most ardent male proponents of the Woman Question tended to describe women's emancipation primarily as it related to men. Women were to be viewed in terms of their "elevated spiritual harmony", wrote Belinsky in 1835: "Woman is the guardian angel of man in all the steps of his life." She was to be "the radiant guiding star of his life, his support, his source of strength, which does not let his soul chill, grow hard, and weaken" [23:29-30].

The setting for producing many of the ideas that went into these writings were the salons of the 1830s-1850s [24, 25]. Here women played an important role as hostesses, encouraging lively discussion among individuals of all social estates. Avdotia Panaeva and other salonnières also provided the financial

backing for some of the thick journals for which this period is famous, including the journal The Contemporary [*Sovremennik*] where many of the articles about women's education and employment were published [26, 27]. Because Russian upper-class women could maintain property independently from men, they were particularly valued as a source of funds for both legal and later illegal revolutionary movements.

In the 1830s and 40s George Sand's novels caused a firestorm among the Russian intelligentsia. In her novel Jacques (1834), Sand told the story of a young male hero who committed suicide in order to free the woman he loved so she could marry the man of her dreams. A number of Russian novels now took up this theme, among them Aleksandr Druzhinin, Polinka Saks (1847); Alexander Herzen, Who is to blame? (1845-47); and most famously Nikolai Chernyshevskii, What is to be Done? (1863). In all these novels male authors tend to focus on the actions of the male protagonists, particularly their dramatic rescue of the young women. The male characters are known by their last names and/or by their full name and patronymic, whereas the females are known by their first names in diminutive form (e.g., Polinka, Verinka in Druzhinin's novellas) [28, 29].

Freedom in marriage became the rallying cry of much of the intelligentsia. In salons and thick journals they now began to discuss the injustices of arranged marriages and marriages undertaken for convenience, the social costs of the illegality of divorce, the despotism of the patriarchal noble family, and women's legal inferiority in inheritance and property. One effect of this idealism of the people of the forties was an intertwining of the public and the private, the attachment of intense political and moral significance to social arrangements.

When Russia lost the Crimean War in 1856, both government and society became even more obsessed with the country's apparent backwardness. Many of the markers of that backwardness were linked to the female sex: high illiteracy (which theoretically could be fixed if mothers had higher reading skills so they could help their children); high infant mortality (which was blamed on women's poor mothering skills,

their alienation from society); high rates of venereal disease (which could be blamed on prostitution and on the low numbers of trained medical personnel in the country) [22].

Nikolai Pirogov, one of the leading reformers of the late 1850s and early 1860s, now argued in his “Questions of Life” that women should be allowed to serve in professional capacities as nurses. With higher education and professional attainments they would cease to be mere “dolls” in society and prove useful to the nation. Other negative female stereotypes predominated in the discussion as well, especially stereotypes of society ladies who thought only about the marriages their parents were arranging for them; of more middle-class ladies trapped in the conservative sway of their merchant families who could only be saved by marriages with radical students from the university [1, 8, 30]. Even Alexander II’s Minister of Education, Avraam Norov, wrote to the tsar in 1856, begging for more education for girls and young women, claiming that it would help foster improvements in “family morals” and in “citizenship,” since those were areas “on which the woman has such a powerful influence” [31:297].

Education for women became a particular focus of agitation for a number of reasons. One was the perception that young people (both male and female) needed to educate themselves first before they could be “useful” to the silent masses of Russia. Another was the direct influence of John Stuart Mill, who claimed that if women were held back in their intellectual and spiritual development, then men could not advance either. As the Emancipation began to be noisily discussed and then implemented, gentry women became increasingly aware that they could no longer afford to be the “lishniaia” (extra one), living in their brothers’ homes if they never married.

Professionally, women also now had more choices, as Tsar Alexander II’s reforms created whole new professions (e.g., pharmaceutical work) and encouraged others in which women’s work was considered acceptable, especially journalism, medicine and law [32-35]. Maria Vernadskaia (1831-1860), Russia’s first woman economist, declaimed insistently that women must stand on their own two feet and learn to work if

they were to have independence [6:263-323; 8:35-37; 36]. Other radicals, such as Petr Zaichnevsky and Mikhail Bakunin, advocated full equality between women and men, the abolition of church and civil marriage, and the public education of children [8:117, 124].

The Woman Question, as it developed in the 1860s, also had a performative aspect. Male radicals played the parts of knights rescuing women, while women often dressed and acted as nihilists, who violated the norms of high society. They cut their hair short, wore black dresses, smoked cigarettes, used coarse language, addressed everyone as equals (using “ty,” the familiar form), lived in communal apartments. Scholars have often interpreted this latter behavior as part of the rise of the people of mixed rank [*raznochintsy*] in Russia in this period [6:215-22, 29:17-20]. While this is an important part of the story, it also has very much to do with a wholesale rejection of “civility,” “high society,” and “femininity” [*zhenstvennost*’], which was perceived as being linked to the alienation of the superfluous man. Women wanted to have their own autonomy, their own “personality” [37, 38].

Conservatives and radicals now waged battles royal over what they referred to as “female types” [*zhenskie tipy*] and women’s “destiny” [*naznachenie*]. They wrote articles on women’s “upbringing and significance in the family and society,” and on their “foreordained position” [*prednaznachenie*] in society [10]. For both conservatives and radicals what mattered most was what women could do for the nation (and/or for the revolution), whether by shoring up positive traditional values or undermining harmful old ones and allowing new ones to take root.

Arranged marriages were one of the most frequent targets of both male and female writers in the 1860s. Following in the footsteps of Sand’s *Jacques*, many famous male writers became involved in so-called “love triangles” where the protagonists had to sort out all their feelings, while striving to suppress all feelings of jealousy. Jealousy would demean the males experiencing it and imprison the females who were its object [8, 28].

The challenge of the woman question was that it was often patronizing toward real flesh-and-blood women. The anarchist (and former prince) Peter Kropotkin unconsciously demonstrated this attitude in his memoirs:

With some severity the [male] nihilist would repulse the “lady” who chattered trivia and boasted of her “femininity” in her manners and the refinement of her toilette. He would say directly to her: “How can you not be ashamed to chatter such inanities and wear a chignon of false hair?” The nihilist wanted, above all, to see in a woman a comrade, a person, not a doll or a “bread-and-butter miss.”

A nihilist would never give up his seat for a woman entering the room if he saw she wasn’t tired and there were other seats in the room. He treated her like a comrade. But if a girl, even one he didn’t know at all, showed an interest in learning something, he would give her lessons and was ready to go halfway across the city to help her [39:269].

This passage provides an excellent example of what Arja Rosenholm has perceptively called the “hierarchical asymmetry” in the “topography” of gender relations in the Woman Question [6:11-17]. It is the man who decides whether a given woman is worthy of his attention, censoring those whom he finds wanting. And it is the man who strives to help the young lady (whom he now refers to as a “girl”), through private lessons so she will join him as a “comrade” and a “person.” The woman in this account is portrayed as passive, while he is active, seeking her out, walking across town, teaching her.

A common metaphor in the early Woman Question that underlined the gender asymmetry was that of women’s awakening and then educating the next generation. The lead editorial in the journal Rassvet (the Dawn) (1859-1862) sounded the clarion call:

Finally, at the dawn of a new day for Russia, the spirit flies down to the sleeping Russian woman and it awakens her, pointing out the path she must travel in order to make herself a



citizen and prepare herself for her high duty - to be the educator of the new generation now being born [40:78].

The most famous exposition of the idea of so-called “new people” was Nikolai Chernyshevsky’s novel, What is to be Done? Here too one can see an extended example of the intelligentsia’s ambivalence toward women. On the one hand, What is to be Done? is usually understood as a Bildungsroman of the heroine Vera Pavlovna: she is rescued from her family; she founds a sewing cooperative; she is allowed to have freedom in her romantic relations.

Yet within the novel there are three competing “tales about new people,” all important for analyzing the Woman Question. One is the tale of two men, Lopukhov and Kirsanov, who bond with each other, almost to the exclusion of the heroine; one is the tale of Vera Pavlovna who is the object of male solicitousness; and one is the tale of a third, unrelated man (Rakhmetov) who spurns all women.

In the first subplot Lopukhov and Kirsanov spend hours deciding who and what is best for Vera Pavlovna. They come to the conclusion (without asking her) that even though she doesn’t realize it yet, she has fallen in love with Kirsanov despite her marriage to Lopukhov. Following the example of George Sand’s Jacques, Lopukhov, unbeknownst to Vera, fakes a suicide and escapes to America. The discussion *between the men* takes center stage.

The bond between man and woman, especially that of Lopukhov and Vera, follows what Irina Paperno has called “the teacher scheme.” On the literal level Lopukhov enters Vera’s natal family’s household to work as a tutor for her brother. But he also has fantasies of teaching Vera, helping to liberate her from the darkness of her family of origin. Chernyshevsky himself had had fantasies of teaching his bride: “I will become her teacher. I will explain my notions to her and open the encyclopedia of civilization to her” [29:98]. In real life Chernyshevskii’s bride, Olga Sokratovna, apparently laughed at him when he made such a proposal. But Vera Pavlovna does not. Although she later becomes quite active in establishing her

cooperatives, she is principally portrayed as following the advice of the men.

The third story - the one most often cited, and the one that Vladimir Lenin most identified with in his own essay called "What is to be Done?" - is that of the professional revolutionary Rakhmetov who appears out of nowhere. He has no first name at all. Described as "belonging to a different breed" and as "the rigorist," he has taught himself to base his life entirely on certain principles, including the principle not to have anything to do with women.

Nominally the novel focuses directly on Vera's emancipation. She becomes independent under Lopukhov's and later Kirsanov's tutelage. Nonetheless, the long dialogues between Lopukhov and Kirsanov tend to emphasize their superior ability to recognize what Vera is experiencing. Rakhmetov also stresses that he, as an "extraordinary man," can overcome his feelings whereas women (and ordinary men) cannot. And Chernyshevsky's narrator makes frequent references to the differences between the "perspicacious" reader, on the one hand, who will understand everything, and "female" and "common" readers, on the other, who will need assistance or who won't understand the novel at all.

In the 1860s and 1870s thousands of young people began a movement "to the people" in which they hoped to bring the peasantry education and exposure to modern ideas. Some hoped that the long, slow process of learning and exposure to new ideas would prepare the peasantry for a new society. Others hoped that exposure to such ideas would light a spark that would ignite a revolution in the countryside. In many of these populist movements women were considered to hold a special place as "the strong," "the pure," "a test of the males' moral regeneration" [41:150]. Petr Lavrov, one of the leaders of the new populist movement, later described the women of the famous Chaikovsky circle in the 1860s and 70s as "the purest embodiment of the ideal, limitlessly devoted and self-sacrificing women who have so often inspired our poets and novelists" [38:125; 42-45].

Reading the memoirs of some of these populist women, one cannot help noticing how they strove

constantly to prove their dedication, loyalty, and self-sacrifice. They pleaded to be transferred to the most dangerous assignments. On the one hand, these activities had traditionally been coded as “male.” Yet at the same time they showed a dedication to the “family” of revolutionaries that perpetuated female stereotypes.

This was not, I would argue, because women were inherently more “moral” [38]. Rather, whether consciously or unconsciously, they were trying not to appear stereotypically female while at the same time not threatening the dominant group (men). They had to show they were active, not passive (the female stereotype), while at the same time showing that they were dedicated, not self-serving and excessively independent. They had to be careful as well of the tsarist police, lest they be labeled “loose women” and arrested for prostitution [8:121-2; 44-45].

At this time there were many women and men who were deeply ambivalent about the Woman Question, even opposed to it. Among male writers, from the beginning there predominated an assumption that women’s *difference* from men was the main cause of their subordination to and inequality with men. Many subscribed to the view expressed by M. L. Mikhailov, one of the first authors on the Woman Question: “There should be nothing feminine in women except their sex. All other traits should be neither masculine nor feminine, but purely human” [8:46].

Women in the populist and revolutionary movements of the 1870s also expressed ambivalence about the Woman Question. Many of them joined women-only discussion groups, but only for brief periods of time. They hoped that in so doing they would learn to reason for themselves, becoming in the process less shy, less prone to let the men dominate discussions [38, 42, 45].

In the 1860s reformist women also began concretely working to solve the twin challenges of the Woman Question: education (since women were excluded from the universities) and work (since women had little training). Using their high society connections with ministers (including Dmitri Miliutin, whose wife sympathized with their cause), they lobbied extensively during balls and other social events to persuade the

government to permit higher education courses for women and also courses for “learned midwives.” Women students also pressured the government by going abroad to study, so exasperating government officials that they finally issued a decree in 1873 requiring all women students abroad to come home on pain of losing the right to teach in the villages and practice medicine (which was their goal in going abroad to study in the first place). Even once higher education courses were established, however, women graduates still could not work in government service or obtain ranks which would lead to their ennoblement separate from their fathers’ and husbands’ positions [32, 46-47].

In the area of employment feminist reformers (especially the famous trio of Anna Filosofova, Nadezhda Stasova, and Mariia Trubnikova) organized sewing cooperatives, publishing cooperatives, and living cooperatives, such as the Society to Provide Cheap Lodgings. Later, in the 1880s and 1890s Filosofova and Stasova worked with others to found the Russian Women’s Mutual Philanthropic Society which was modeled on U.S. women’s clubs that combined self-help and social advocacy [8, 48].

In the 1880s and 1890s as Marxism began to penetrate into Russia, the new theorists tended to take primarily an instrumental view of the “woman question” and women’s position in society. If the overthrow of autocracy was to be accomplished, everyone - women as well as men – needed to join the revolutionary movement. That meant women would need to be emancipated from their “patriarchal isolation” and the “stultifying world of housework” [49:548; 50:202]. Yet at the same time Social Democratic writings consistently express enormous anxieties about women. If they were not mobilized and carefully coached, they would doubtless prove to be “passive,” “indifferent,” “a bulwark for counterrevolutionary and anti-Soviet agitation” [51:9]. They were “the most backward and immobile element,” one that had served as “a brake in all previous revolutions” [52:169; 53:521].

In 1909 Alexandra Kollontai published The Social Bases of the Woman Question, a 400-page treatise designed to show that the question of women’s emancipation could not be separated from the larger social

struggles of the day. Only when the entire economic order was restructured would women become truly free and equal. She insisted that women could never view men as their enemies; rather they must always see them as their comrades. Nonetheless, she did take up some of the classic issues of the woman question: the double morality in which women had to choose between what Kollontai saw as the “bondage of marriage” and the slavery of prostitution, as well as the problems of education, work, maternity, and child care. Kollontai and other Social Democrats consistently assumed that the revolution would solve these problems. Moreover, after the revolution, the state would take over many of the tasks currently fulfilled by women within the family (childcare, cooking, and laundry, to name a few). By implication, gender relations between the sexes would not have to be changed as the state would simply step in to liberate women from all the extra labor of care for cooking, the house, and children [54:58-73].

Kollontai and her Social Democratic comrades had good reason to be threatened by the feminists. In the years between 1900 and 1917 they were organizing en masse and promising to reach out to women of all estates. In 1904 Maria Pokrovskaia founded a new journal, The Women’s Messenger [*Zhenskii Vestnik*], specifically devoted to a renewed focus on the woman question and to advocating for women’s equal rights. The Union of Equal Rights for Women, founded in spring 1905, had 8,000 members by 1906. Soon thereafter, the Women’s Progressive Party was founded, one of the first women’s political parties in the world. By 1907 a second feminist journal had begun publishing, The Union of Women [*Soiuz Zhenshchin*] [55-58].

As Rochelle Ruthchild and Linda Edmondson have pointed out, the demand for female suffrage (a key part of Western notions of feminism) did not develop in Russia as early as in Western Europe, principally because of men’s and women’s “equal rightlessness,” as contemporaries put it. Even feminists in this period were hampered by their ambivalence about women’s equality. As Mariia Chekhova, a prominent liberal feminist wrote, “We are far from that naive and nearsighted feminism which dreams about resolving

the women question outside of ties with general political and social questions, equalizing women's rights with men independent of general rights and social equality" [57:180].

Feminists now openly called themselves "equal-righters" [*ravnopravki*]. In 1905 men of the Russian Empire obtained the vote, while women still had not, and many groups including the male leadership of the liberal Constitutional Democrats were deeply ambivalent about whether the vote should be extended to them. The Woman Question had now evolved from a general concern about "women's destiny" and issues of education and employment, to legal grievances about rights that women did not have and unfair restrictions that they faced. Some of the key issues being hotly debated in Russia, both within the feminist community and within the larger liberal and socialist intelligentsia, included women's property and inheritance rights, their right to their own passports, the restrictions facing schoolteachers who married, and the registration and surveillance of prostitutes [36, 59].

While feminists mostly agreed about the need for suffrage, they disagreed vehemently over the issue of separatism, i.e., whether women's organizations should be separate from those of men or should, on the contrary, be fighting within the context of the overall political struggle. Further splits emerged between so-called "liberal" and "socialist" feminists, i.e., those supporting a moderate constitutional outcome and those hoping for a full-fledged revolution. The League for Women's Equal Rights (1907-17), for example, tried to combine philanthropy, education, and mutual aid, on the one hand, with political demands, on the other, while remaining on the whole fairly moderate and legally registered with the authorities. The Union of Women's Equal Rights (1905-1908), by contrast, never attained legal status and focused primarily on lobbying for female suffrage and equal rights. Militant and implacable, its members marched in demonstrations and even staffed the barricades during the 1905 uprisings. However, they let men join as members and one (N. V. Chekhov) even served on their Central Board. The Women's Progressive Party (1905-1917), by contrast, was militantly separatist, not allowing any men to join, but otherwise not quite as

politically militant as the Union [60].

The women's movements were harassed constantly by the tsarist authorities and periodically by the liberal and socialist parties. The Social Democrats branded them as "bourgeois feminists" claimed, untruthfully, that they had no interest in working women [61]. The right-wing Octobrists criticized them for their empty chatter. By 1908 the authorities had made it virtually impossible for the suffragists to get their word out through meetings and petitions [8:213-15].

The feminists held one last general conference, the First All-Russian Women's Congress, in December 1908, with over 1,000 women in attendance. Unfortunately, the groups in attendance were so disparate they could not find a common language. Women workers and peasants claimed they were not being heard. Upper-class women claimed that working women were interrupting them and that socialist groups were not supporting women's suffrage [8, 55]. In 1910 feminists met with doctors, bureaucrats, and members of the intelligentsia to hold the All-Russian Congress for the Struggle against the Trade in Women and Its Causes. Here too class conflicts and differing ideas of how to solve women's issues disrupted the proceedings [62:219-30].

In February 1917 on International Women's Day feminists combined forces with factory women to demand both bread and suffrage. The story usually told is that the beginning of the February Revolution was marked by women workers taking to the streets protesting the lack of food in the stores. Yet Rochelle Ruthchild has been able to show that the banners women carried into the streets were indeed suffrage banners. Some 40,000 women rallied, calling to the men to join them. Two days later, Prince L'vov, head of the Provisional Government, promised to include women in the suffrage; on July 20 the Provisional Government extended the vote to women.

When the Bolshevik government came to power in October 1917, they created a special women's section of the party [*zhenotdel*], as a place to discuss and resolve the women question once and for all. As

Nadezhda Krupskaya had explained in 1913,

The “woman question” for male and female workers is a question how to draw the backward masses of women workers into organization, how best to explain to them their interests, how best to make them into comrades in the general struggle [63:37].

Krupskaya was adamant that the way to solve the woman question had to be solidarity among female and male workers, especially their joint commitment to a common cause, common goals, and a common path. But where a separate organization was needed, she and her comrades in the women’s section agreed, it was to serve a remedial purpose that would bring women “up to” the standards of men, that would make them “human” instead of female, comrades instead of backwards women who only knew the path from the threshold to the stove (as the Russian proverb said).

It was easy for the top Party leadership to declare by fiat in 1930 that the woman question had been “solved.” Henceforth, only small women’s sectors [*zhensektory*] were permitted to continue functioning, and then only in Central Asia [64-66].

Central Asia had, in fact, long been the site of a specific version of the Woman Question: the quest for what Gregory Massell once called a “surrogate proletariat.” Since there was no discernible local proletariat through whom revolution could be fomented, the central authorities in Moscow, after trying several other solutions, settled on women’s liberation as an excuse for becoming involved in “liberating” the whole region. By 1927 this campaign had been named a *hujum*, or assault against the “moldy old ways” of female seclusion and inequality. Once again, male authorities demonstrated that they knew best how women should be emancipated [67-68].

Limited discussion of the woman question reemerged under Nikita Khrushchev and Leonid Brezhnev in public airing of women’s difficulties in carrying the “double burden” of work and childcare (or, as some noted, the triple burden of those two plus housework). During the Khrushchev years official women’s



organizations were revived, now called *zhensovety*, and once again designed to mobilize women into the workplace and the party. During the Brezhnev years new topics in economics and demography were added to the traditional woman question as social scientists became concerned about the declining state of the Soviet economy. These were still principally instrumental concerns (how would women serve the state?); yet they did show a renewed interest in investigating women's actual position in society [66].

In the Gorbachev and Yeltsin years the woman question emerged with new vigor as scholars and activists began examining *patriarkhal'nost'*, the patriarchal nature of society [69-73]. "*Feminizm*" (i.e., feminism in the Western sense) was still a taboo topic in the general media despite the general love of foreign words in politics, as Linda Edmondson has noted in the context of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century [74:197].

In addition to the urgent problems of health and demographics (continued from the Brezhnev years), gender researchers now began asking questions about women's legal and social rights, their involvement in the business world, female unemployment, labor discrimination against women, domestic violence, poverty among single mothers, contraception, and pornography. New research centers were created such as the Moscow Center for Gender Studies (established in April 1990), and similar ones in St. Petersburg, Ivanovo, Kharkov and Minsk. In 1998 there were some 150 such centers in Central and Eastern Europe, the former Soviet Union, and Mongolia, and some 600 non-governmental organizations had registered with the Russian Ministry of Justice [75-77].

Today scholars of gender relations in the former Soviet Union have criticized the Soviet-era Woman Question for its role in obscuring rather than clarifying women's issues. Olga Voronina has called it "one of the most refined social mystifications" of that era [78:37]. Anastasiya Posadskaya, one of today's leading feminists, has argued that Russia today is in the grip of a "patriarchal renaissance" [79:4]. Despite reservations about the old woman question, new questions of women's and gender studies continue to nurture fruitful discussions and advances in scholarship.

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