

The Meaning of Equality

Without the Participation of Women, Suffrage Is Not Universal.

—*March 19, 1917, demonstration banner*

MARCH 19, 1917, was a pleasant late-winter day in Petrograd.¹ The writer Zinaida Gippius looked out from her apartment in the center of revolutionary Petrograd, watching thousands of women march below, “a countless number; an unprecedented procession (never before in history . . .). Three [women], very beautiful, rode by on horseback.”² The journalist Liubov Gurevich similarly described “an endless orderly column, with red banners unfurled and placards: thousands, tens of thousands of women, . . . factory workers and women doctors, medics and writers, maids and students, telegraph operators and nurses.” At the head, in an open car, rode the revolutionary heroine Vera Figner and the feminist leader Poliksena Shishkina-Iavein, flanked by “Amazons” on white horses. Two brass bands played “La Marseillaise.” An estimated forty thousand people marched. Many carried banners and placards with such slogans as “Hail Women-Fighters for Freedom,” “A Place for Women in the Constituent Assembly,” “Women Workers Demand a Voice in the Constituent Assembly,” “Raise the Allowance for

Soldiers' Wives," and "Without the Participation of Women, Suffrage Is Not Universal." To Gurevich, like Gippius, the march was unforgettable, "an unprecedented, unparalleled sight" for the people of Petrograd.³

Yet this foray by women into the revolutionary public space has been almost completely forgotten, or, if remembered, ascribed to the wrong date or considered to have had "a disappointing, if not wholly unsuccessful, outcome."⁴ In fact, the marchers won their chief demand that very evening. To cement their achievement, two days later, leading feminist activists met with the head of the revolutionary Provisional Government, Prime Minister G. E. Lvov. The prime minister reaffirmed the commitment to women's suffrage he had made to the demonstrators on March 19. On July 20, 1917, with the publication of its new election statute, Russia, the largest country in the world, became the first major power to grant women the vote.⁵ The March events in Petrograd marked the second time that a significant women's suffrage victory had taken place in lands controlled by the Russian government. Eleven years earlier, in the Grand Duchy of Finland, then a part of the Russian Empire, women had won both universal suffrage and the right to hold elective office.⁶

These major achievements have been largely ignored. Historians of global feminism generally portray the first women's suffrage victories as happening in or connected to the West. Women's suffrage history has mostly focused on the English-speaking countries, more precisely Britain and its former colonies. From this vantage point, early suffrage gains were won "in nations most similar to England." Those preferring a more global context largely argue that women's suffrage first came to states and nations on the periphery, far from the centers of Western power, but with strong connections to the West, such as New Zealand, Australia, or Finland.⁷ As part of the West or as part of the rest, Russia is rarely discussed. Yet the history of women's suffrage in the Russian Empire provides a model for a different form of struggle for women's rights. Women's suffrage in this case was not won through a long struggle within an evolving democratic structure, but through a much shorter process ignited and facilitated by popular revolution within a decidedly undemocratic multinational state.

Historians of Russia and the Soviet Union have also paid little attention to the early attainment of Russian women's suffrage. The reasons for this are varied, from failure to incorporate gender into notions of what is historically significant to the remarkable staying power of the orthodox Marxist argument that women's suffrage was meaningless to peasant and working women, since feminism was ostensibly a "bourgeois" movement with only "liberal" goals. If acknowledged at all,

the Provisional Government's 1917 law on female suffrage is mentioned in passing without reference to the global context. Russia's women's rights movement is portrayed as narrow for devoting most of its energies to suffrage, "weak" and lacking militance compared with its Western counterparts.⁸ In this book I challenge both the standard women's and Russian historical narratives of this movement. The suffrage achievements of women in the Russian Empire do not fit the existing women's history paradigms. At the turn of the twentieth century, Russia was neither stable nor democratic. Ruled by a rigid autocrat, the empire, stretching across Europe and Asia, was hardly peripheral. A part of the system of European alliances, a major battlefield in Europe's wars, and the first European country in modern history to be defeated by an Asian state, Russia was more central to global events in the early twentieth century than was the United States.⁹

The Grand Duchy of Finland, part of the Russian Empire, pioneered as the first national entity in the world to grant all adult women the right to vote and the right to run for elective office. Paradoxically, by acquiescing to the demands of Finnish nationalists, Tsar Nicholas II struck a blow for women's rights more sweeping than any accomplished at that point in any Western democracy.¹⁰ Many women's historians ascribe Finland's female suffrage victory solely to the Scandinavian liberalism that led to suffrage victories in Denmark, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden soon after. The Finns' achievement was, in fact, more directly related to the social upheaval of the 1905 revolution in Russia, brought on by the tsarist government's disastrous defeat in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904 and 1905. Finland's southeastern border was fewer than thirty miles from the imperial capital of St. Petersburg; the Russian unrest spread quickly to the Finns, who were chafing under renewed Russification policies. A massive Finnish general strike and demonstrations in 1905 won major concessions, including universal suffrage for both sexes.¹¹

Women's suffrage, which I define as the right to vote and to run for elective office, is one of the great democratic reforms of the twentieth century. It is the logical extension to women of the rights of citizenship articulated by the French and American Revolutions and over the nineteenth century extended to the majority of men in most Western countries.¹² Scholarly neglect of the Russian suffrage struggle obscures a significant marker in the global battle for women's equal rights. Russian women won full suffrage one year before the British and the Germans, three years before their sisters in the United States, eleven years before full female suffrage in Great Britain, and twenty-seven years before their French counterparts. Winning women's suffrage in Russia took only twelve years. Winning the vote in

Western societies took much longer: It was fifty-one years from 1867, when John Stuart Mill started “the first substantive parliamentary debate on woman suffrage,” to 1928, when British women won full suffrage; seventy-two years from the U.S. feminists’ Declaration of Sentiments at Seneca Falls in 1848 to the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment establishing female suffrage in 1920; and 153 years from the publication of Olympe de Gouges’s *Declaration des droits de la femme* during the French Revolution to General de Gaulle’s 1944 decree giving French women the vote.¹³

In contrast to the Western democracies, where universal male suffrage came first after long popular struggles, the issue of women’s and men’s suffrage in Russia appeared simultaneously and only in the early twentieth century. Except for a tiny segment of the propertied class, neither women nor men had the franchise until the 1905 revolution forced Tsar Nicholas II to issue his October Manifesto giving men the vote. As the feminist Zinaida Mirovich wrote, up to this point all Russian adults had been “equal in inequality.” When the possibility of suffrage became real in 1905, supporters of women’s suffrage found powerful forces arrayed against them. The tsar and even his most enlightened ministers resisted giving women the vote, fearing their radicalism; prominent male liberal politicians opposed extending the franchise to women, fearing peasant conservatism. Further to the left, socialist parties included women’s suffrage planks in their platforms, but most did not make it a high priority.¹⁴

The voices of women arguing for citizenship, equality, respect, and civil rights are the often silenced or unheard sopranos and altos of Russia; without them Russian history is largely baritone and bass. Women’s suffrage and women’s rights were very much a part of political discourse in all parts of the Russian Empire between 1905 and 1917. A study of the individuals active in the women’s rights movement provides insights into the *mentalité* of a new social group in Russia, the female intelligentsia, their support networks, their negotiation of public and private space, at the intersection of class and gender. A complex of motivations impelled these women into gender consciousness and political action for their sex and sustained them in the face of derision and repression.

Feminism and Suffrage in Russia

The hostility or indifference to women’s rights on the part of leading liberal and socialist male politicians shocked those educated Russian women who believed in the progressive intelligentsia’s ideal of egalitarianism. Spurred on by their anger

and inspired by the opportunities created by the 1905 revolution with its loosening of tsarist controls on the formation of political groups, these women and a few male allies formed the first feminist political organizations in Russia. In 1917, after the February Revolution, sparked by International Women's Day demonstrations, Russian feminists acted to achieve their primary goal.¹⁵

A study of Russian feminism in this period illuminates the different circumstances in which suffrage struggles were successfully waged and in which feminist movements operated. Governments in countries like Britain and the United States were strong and stable, with peaceful transfers of power between political parties. In Russia, however, the first two decades of the twentieth century saw three revolutions (in 1905 and February and October 1917) and four changes in form of government (from absolutist monarchy to parliamentary monarchy to dueling interim revolutionary governments to revolutionary dictatorship). Russian feminists created political organizations and saw those organizations grow, shrink, change shape, and in some cases disappear. Overcoming setbacks, a cadre of committed activists remained involved, adapted to the repressive political climate, and after the February Revolution in 1917 were able to mobilize supporters and lobby successfully for the vote. Suffrage resulted both from the open political opportunity structure and from the sense among many that a new world was possible.¹⁶

The calls for suffrage articulated by Russian women cannot be understood without reference to feminism and feminist movements. I define "feminism" as both a movement and a discourse aimed at challenging male hegemony in a variety of historical and cultural settings.¹⁷ Feminism is neither time-limited nor issue-limited. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, suffrage became a chief answer to the "woman question," or the question of woman's place in society. Like their counterparts in other countries, Russian feminists had high hopes for the effects of bringing women into the political process. Some argued that women would add greater moral clarity and spirituality to politics; others hoped that bringing women into the public political sphere would force men to relate to women as equals. In the 1905–1917 period, as a political movement, Russian feminism was most closely identified with struggles for women's suffrage and equal rights. The female leaders of this movement were diverse, not linked with one political party or political tendency.

I use the term "feminism" with the awareness that it, or its Russian analogue *feminizm*, is often a contested term, particularly so in Russia. As the historian Linda Edmondson has observed, feminism is the rare foreign word that has not been adopted enthusiastically by Russians. Many Russian feminists refrained from calling themselves or their movement feminist. They preferred to stress their links

with other Russian social movements and to phrase problems and solutions in the common language of such movements. Thus the problem was the “woman question” (*zhenskii vopros*), the solution was the liberation (*osvobozhdenie*) or, less frequently, the emancipation (*raskrepostshenie*) of women, and the movement was the women’s liberation movement (*zhenskoe osvoboditel’noe dvizhenie*).¹⁸

When political rights became possible in 1905, neither the organizations nor periodicals that arose between 1905 and 1917 used the words “feminist” or “suffragist.” There were no journals like the International Woman Suffrage Association’s *Suffrage News* (*Jus suffragii*), or French feminist Madeleine Pelletier’s periodical *La suffragiste*, and no organizations with names like the U.S. National Woman Suffrage Association. Instead, the Russian organizations emphasized equal rights (*ravnopravie*), as did the Women’s Equal Rights Union (Soiuz ravnopraviia zhenshchin) and the League for Women’s Equal Rights (Liga ravnopraviia zhenshchin). Although some activists in this period did proudly label themselves feminists, they were clearly in the minority. Others considered it a derogatory term applied to political enemies who were “unfeminine” and equated with the militant and at times violent British “suffragettes.”¹⁹

Studying feminism and suffrage in Russia encompasses more than notions of political success and failure. The consensus among historians of Russian women and of the 1917 revolutions has been that feminists erred by focusing on suffrage, that this focus alienated women workers. The two major Western scholars of Russian feminism, Richard Stites and Linda Edmondson, have viewed suffrage primarily as an institutional reform. They have argued that suffrage had little relevance for Russia’s female masses. Stites notes, for example, that the feminists winning the vote might have “enriched the democratic process in Russia . . . though the records of other countries give little enough reason to believe this.”²⁰ Edmondson initially viewed suffrage as a diversion: “But even if one gives feminism some credit for changing social attitudes (including revolutionary perceptions of women), one still has to ask whether feminists did not allow themselves to get side-tracked from major issues by their campaign for the vote, not simply in Russia, but wherever the women’s movement was strong.” She continues to argue that the vote has meant little for women in terms of real power.²¹

Despite the fact that many feminists considered themselves socialists, misperceptions about feminists’ political and class status remain the norm. More than two decades after Stites’s and Edmondson’s pioneering studies, the few Western historians of Russia who have written about prerevolutionary women have largely adhered to Soviet paradigms, in which revolutionary women win praise for helping

to topple the tsarist regime and feminists are scorned as privileged and out of touch with the needs of most women in their focus on suffrage. For example, coauthors Jane McDermid and Anna Hillyar, in their generally excellent study of the role of women workers and female Bolsheviks in 1917, are rare among scholars in even acknowledging the feminists' suffrage victory. Yet they quickly dismiss it, arguing that "such gains as sexual equality in politics . . . had little immediate impact on the majority of women who sought more tangible changes in their situation."²²

The assertion that suffrage was not important to ordinary women is echoed in survey histories. The historian Rex Wade, in his work on the February and October 1917 Revolutions, although more positive about the feminists and acknowledging victories for women in the interrevolutionary period, has concluded that such gains meant little to peasant and working women.²³ Such arguments run counter to recent scholarship emphasizing the importance of demands for political and civil rights among the masses in early-twentieth-century Russia. As the historian S. A. Smith has noted, in 1905 "the dominant political idiom in both town and countryside was that of 'citizenship' (*grazhdanstvo*) and 'liberty' (*svo-boda*)."²⁴ Russian women's entry into the public sphere and the political arena parallels the entry of other groups, such as Jews and other subject nationalities, professionals, peasants, and workers. Still, the current discourse about citizenship in Russia generally does not include women as a distinct group, despite the fact that a significant part of the discussion about civil rights in Russia from 1905 to 1917 involved the debate about women's rights.

Reexamining Russian feminism and the women's suffrage movement challenges the almost unanimous current portrayal of Russian feminism as a separate and monolithic movement of privileged women seeking rights primarily for themselves. The entry of working-class women into the political sphere is viewed as generally separate from and hostile to feminism, as a force that weakened the women's rights movement. It is certainly true that feminist organizations and independent activism disappeared soon after the October Bolshevik Revolution. Yet 1905 through 1917 mark the high point of Russian feminist activity. During this period, particularly in 1917, feminism appealed to and was strengthened by women workers; ideas about women's rights had an appeal across class, to peasants as well as workers.²⁵

Women enter the historical narrative often as anonymous members of crowds. The emotion usually ascribed to them is "angry." And they are protesting because of hunger, "rebellions of the belly," with the line of analysis "elementary—instinctive—hunger," as the historian E. P. Thompson has described it. Histories

of Russia in the early twentieth century generally fit this pattern. Aside from a few revolutionary terrorists (such as Vera Zasulich, Maria Spiridonova, and Vera Figner), and later a socialist leader like Alexandra Kollontai, the most common descriptions of women are as spontaneous participants in bread riots. The food shortages were serious and significant and did motivate women's actions as the war progressed, but to concentrate only on these manifestations ignores other parts of the picture.²⁶

Women who entered public space often did so consciously, with clear goals and strategies. In seeking to make such women more visible, I have included an examination of the lives of key women who became feminist activists. Who were they? What impelled them into political participation? What were their patterns of activism? How did their personal choices affect their political activism? What were their support networks? How did they negotiate their multiple roles and identities? Private political disagreements within a family could become public disagreements in public space. Studying feminism and the women's movement offers insights into issues of class and gender, the shifting understandings of these categories, and the intersections of both, especially during the revolutionary periods of 1905 and 1917. As an exploration of feminism, feminists, and the Russian women's movement, this book disputes such dichotomies as feminism-radicalism and feminism-socialism, both of which are based on a narrow definition of feminism. If feminism at its core is a challenge to male hegemony, then by definition it questions the most fundamental assumptions about society and its organization around the family, the basis of patriarchal authority. Feminists have adopted a variety of tactics and goals in the course of this ongoing movement, but their ultimate aims can hardly be dismissed as conservative.

The very notion of women abandoning their traditional domestic roles and entering the public sphere aroused anxiety all across the Russian political spectrum. The specter of separate women's organizing particularly haunted some socialists, both men and women. They viewed the feminist vision as a threat to class solidarity, one that had to be discredited and co-opted. Alexandra Kollontai, the Marxist daughter of a tsarist general, led the charge, arguing that the feminists were "bourgeois" privileged women; their demands for suffrage and equal rights were removed from the needs and desires of the impoverished female masses. Kollontai, the most prominent Russian woman socialist in this period, argued forcefully that economics trumped equal rights, that "the woman question" was, above all, about "a crust of bread." Kollontai and some other socialist women had an understandable interest in attacking the feminists, as they feared their inroads, especially among the female proletariat. A century after Kollontai's polem-

ical attacks, the appellation “bourgeois feminists” is still uncritically accepted by scholars.²⁷

This book contributes to the current scholarship about the revolutionary year of 1917 in several ways. I argue for a reexamination of the initial phases of the February Revolution and the conscious role of women in these events. Those who contend that such demonstrations were consciously organized generally ascribe the action to male social democratic activists. Minimizing the significance and attraction of the first socialist women’s holiday and implying that women could act only spontaneously, and were incapable of organizing large-scale protest actions, renders invisible their emerging political consciousness. The February demonstrations were not an isolated eruption. Even the historians most attentive to the role of women in the February Revolution ignore the connection between the women’s actions that month and the subsequent suffrage demonstration in March 19. This march, seeking to extend democratic political rights to women, was a direct outgrowth of the February demonstrations, and belies the assertion that voting rights had no appeal to the working class. The women’s suffrage march in Petrograd simply could not have been of that size without substantial organization and the participation of the female masses.

Russian women’s attainment of suffrage in 1917, *before* the October Revolution, is significant because it represents the joining of two new social groupings, women workers and the female intelligentsia demanding political rights, and the embrace by the two main power centers, the Provisional Government and the Soviets, of the extension of democratic political rights to women as well as men. That the mass of Russian women was far from indifferent to having political rights can be seen from their involvement in the Constituent Assembly elections at the end of 1917. In the face of the difficult conditions of war, the October Revolution, and incipient civil war, Russian women’s participation rates were higher than their U.S. counterparts, who first voted in the 1920 presidential election. Some feminist historians, notably Ellen DuBois, have argued that suffrage is more than an institutional reform, that it must be seen in the context of “an active social movement.” The very process of building a movement and articulating its goals had a transformative effect on the women and men who were involved; this was “the first independent movement of women for their own liberation.” To DuBois, “the cause of woman suffrage,” a global struggle lasting more than a century, “has been one of the great democratic forces in human history.”²⁸

Feminism in the Russian Empire was a complex social movement, and more than the fight for suffrage. In all its diversity, it included some women active in the liberal and socialist parties, others who organized a separate women’s party,

progressives who joined no party, educated women, and workers and peasants. Some feminists allied with men, and some, calling themselves “patriots for women,” did not. All agreed on political strategies that eschewed violence, differentiating themselves from the relatively large number of female revolutionary terrorists. Some were what we would now call “difference feminists,” seeking rights but supporting women’s traditional domestic roles; others critiqued the entire structure of male power; still others focused on legal equality. Some challenged traditional sex roles in their own lives—as single mothers, or single, independent women, or married women with their own careers.

Seen in a global context, the attainment of women’s suffrage within the Russian Empire complicates the narrative about the evolution of democratic forms of government. The democratic revolutions of the late eighteenth century were not democratic for women. The leaders of the French Revolution ultimately denied women’s political rights; the American Revolution’s founding fathers did the same. Throughout the nineteenth-century, despite feminist challenges, democracy remained an almost exclusively male preserve. In contrast, Russia’s twentieth-century revolutions both sparked feminist movements and led to women’s rights victories. In the early twentieth century, once it became possible in the Russian Empire, feminists focused on suffrage. Compared with other suffrage movements, they were able to achieve their goals within a relatively short time frame, under conditions quite different from those in Western democracies or colonial outposts. The movement for women’s equal rights in Russia became part of the overall movement for a democratic transformation of the state. It cannot be seen as separate from that larger movement. The women who participated in this movement were generally part of the progressive democratic intelligentsia. Making these women visible is a necessary part of reclaiming Russia’s and the world’s lost legacy, understanding Russia’s rich tradition of female civic participation, and adding greater complexity and nuance to the history of international democratic reform and civil rights.