

The dawn of our liberation: The early days of the International Communist Women's Movement and the Comintern's gender policies

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***'If women's liberation is unthinkable without communism, then communism is unthinkable without women's liberation.'* — Inessa Armand [1]**

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Women in Russian revolution rally for freedom and equal rights

“On July 30, [1920] in the evening, slender columns of women workers wearing red kerchiefs and holding banners make their way to the Bolshoi Theater from remote districts and outskirts of Moscow. The slogans on the banners run: ‘Through the dictatorship of the proletariat in all countries to the full emancipation of women.’

“A chorus of women’s voices singing the *International* is heard in the streets of Moscow. Moscow proletarian women are joyfully marching to the opening of the First International Conference of Communist Women at the Bolshoi Theater. Foreign visitors are also joining in.

“By eight o’clock in the evening the theater is packed. Parterre and tiers are occupied by women workers. The stage is occupied by delegates from Germany, France, England, America, Mexico, Austria, Denmark, Sweden, Hungary, Finland, Norway, Latvia, Bulgaria, India, Georgia, Caucasus and Turkestan.”[2]



Daria Dyakonova

This is how revolutionary women described the opening of their first conference held in Moscow in July 1920. Twenty-one women representing 19 countries gathered that month to discuss women's issues in the framework of the Second Congress of the Communist International (or the Comintern). The Comintern had been founded a year earlier, on Vladimir Lenin's initiative, to replace a (Second) Socialist International which had discredited itself by militarist and nationalist policies during the World War I.

Women's emancipation had long been an important point of socialist agenda. The Comintern's program included total equality of rights of men and women in law and practice, integration of women into political life, free education and medical care for women, social measures to ease the burden of housework and childcare, and measures to do away with the sexual double standard for men and women.

Communism and feminism: partners, rivals or a unity?



Inessa Armand

Although the studies of the Comintern's gender policies remain rare, many authoritative voices in western academia have tended to dismiss communist and especially Soviet policies toward women, as "largely inconsequential lip-service." [3] The same dismissive attitude towards the gains of international communist women's movement is largely present in scholarly contributions on socialist/communist women's movements. Liberal feminists of the Cold War era as well as some more recent commentators highlighted that after the World War 2 women's movements in socialist countries as well as allied international women's organizations (such as Women's International Democratic Federation and its American affiliate, the Congress of American Women) mobilized their

memberships primarily to serve Party goals rather than mobilize the Party to serve women. The same scholars, by contrast, stressed the autonomous agency and political neutrality supposedly found in Western non-socialist feminist organizations.[4]

Socialist feminists in turn have insisted on important shortcomings of classic Marxist theory's gender agenda: chiefly its inability to incorporate the centrality of the gender division of labour in all spheres and the lack of concern with sexuality and reproduction questions. It has also been argued that attempts so far to interweave socialist feminist critiques of classic Marxist theory and the history of the movements and political entities that tried to bring it into life remain inadequate.[5]

New and growing scholarship has recently nuanced and modified these interpretations, criticizing the reinforcement (after 1989) of the triumphalist Cold War paradigm. These new contributions posited that "liberal feminists underestimated the extent to which the program of women's emancipation was a fundamental component of the overall communist program for rapid modernization," which communist/socialist women believed was the best path to women's autonomy.[6] It was argued that communist women working in state women's and international socialist organizations strategically aligned their programs with larger Communist Party goals, seeing such policy as more efficient than using the so-called bourgeois feminist methods. This alignment resulted in significant achievements for women in terms of legal equality and family law, education, and formal labour participation, especially if one compares culturally similar socialist and non-socialist countries at similar stages of economic development. Finally, this scholarship stimulated the re-thinking of the origins of the so-called "Second Wave Feminism," suggesting that they were more diverse and complex than the received narrative allowed.[7]

This paper adopts this latter perspective to study the early days of the international Communist Women's Movement (CWM). [8] It will focus on three points in particular: the CWM's ideas on women's emancipation (including the issue of housework and gender division of labour, reproduction, and childcare); relationship with non-communist women's movements; and the problematic relationship with male comrades.

The First Conference of Communist women: A program for women's emancipation



'Women! Learn to read! / 'Oh mother! If only you could read, you could help me out!' Poster by Yelizaveta Kruglikova, 1923.

Unlike the Communist Youth International, which was organisationally independent of the Comintern, structures for Communist women were integrated into Communist parties. At the First

Conference of Communist Women it was decided, however, to establish within parties special agitation institutions for women (to which men could belong as well), which were to coordinate work by local women's committees on a branch level. By 1922 almost all European countries did indeed set up party structures for work among women.

Within the Comintern, an International Women's Secretariat (IWS) associated with its Executive Committee was established, with headquarters first in Berlin and later in Moscow. A member of the IWS was also a member of the Comintern's Executive. From the start the Women's Secretariat underlined its transnational character and urged the exchange of experience and information among different countries. This was to be achieved through annual meetings of Communist women and through the publication of an international monthly magazine *Kommunistische Fraueninternationale* (Communist Women's International), published until 1926.

In practice, however, international ties and exchange of information and experience developed slowly. In 1921 at the Second Conference of Communist Women, the outstanding German Communist women's leader Clara Zetkin pointed to the Secretariat's loose international ties due to the disorganisation of the railways in Europe, the difficulty of maintaining personal connections and the hostile political climate.[9]

The First Conference of Communist Women set up a commission to write the "Theses for the Communist Women's Movement," which Clara Zetkin drafted. The "Theses" highlighted that the "full social equality with men in reality and actual fact and not just on the passive pages of dead law books was to be achieved through the abolishment of private property and the integration of the activity of women into the "social production of a new order free of exploitation and subjugation." [10]



Alexandra Kollontai

The "Theses" also defined the more specific tasks of the CWM, depending on where the work was to be done: in socialist, capitalist, or pre-capitalist countries. One of the important points was the transformation of housekeeping - "the most backward, deformed, and stultifying of the old guild handicrafts" - into a social industry. Alexandra Kollontai, a prominent Russian women's rights fighter, wrote in this connection in 1920: "The individual household is dying. It is giving way in our society to collective housekeeping. Instead of the working woman cleaning her flat, the communist society can arrange for men and women whose job it is to go round in the morning cleaning rooms." [11] The idea was not very new. It was, however, the first time that the issue of housekeeping and labour division appeared as a crucial point of a socialist program for women's liberation. In the nascent Soviet state housework was recognized as major means of women's subordination, and the idea of creation of public amenities offering different kinds of services

(children's day care, public kitchens, canteens, communal laundries and cleaning facilities, clothes-mending centres, etc.) seemed to be taken seriously. For women in capitalist and pre-capitalist countries the "Theses" suggested striving for establishment of such institutions. In this way the Communist program put the women's question in the very centre of the socialist project, underlining that women's emancipation was not only the consequence but the very goal of socialist transformation. [12]

Communist women and bourgeois feminists

Communist women underlined their class identity in quite firm terms: the 1920s conference's "Theses" stated that "the demands of the bourgeois women's movement have proved incapable of securing full rights and humanity for the whole of womenkind as these aimed merely at reforming the capitalist order for the benefit of wives and daughters of the possessing classes." [13] This, however, did not mean that the Communist women were against all cooperation with non-proletarian women's movements.

One of the bourgeois feminists' demands that Communists saw as controversial, at least for a certain period of time, was that of universal suffrage. Initially some were suspicious of bourgeois feminists' demands for universal right to vote. Revolutionary Marxists in the Second International, although they unconditionally supported universal suffrage since 1889, opposed the reforms that would extend voting rights only to privileged women - given the property requirements associated with the right to vote that denied vote to both men and women of lower social classes. They also did not view suffrage as a heal-all that would complete women's emancipation. Thus in 1908 Alexandra Kollontai pointed out that "for the feminists the achievement of equal rights with men within the framework of the contemporary capitalist world [was] a concrete 'end in itself'; for proletarian women equal rights [was] merely a means to be used in the continuing struggle against the economic enslavement of the working class." [14] By 1917 support for suffrage proved ultimately unifying, in particular in the Russian context. Kollontai then advocated granting women equal voting rights in more unequivocal terms stressing that this would complete the revolution. [15]

Communist women were ready to cooperate with bourgeois feminists in other fields as well. They openly recognized the importance of many of feminists' demands and achievements. The "Theses" admitted that "carrying through these [bourgeois] demands, of course, entails a fundamental change - and one not to be underestimated - namely, that bourgeois society and its state officially abandon the old prejudice about inferiority of the female sex and recognize women's social equality with equal right." [16] Non-Communist feminists themselves in the early 1920s interest expressed in communist ideas on "women's question" and were ready to promote them. This was the case of the revolutionary Women's Union of Holland and a number of feminist newspapers in France. [17] In Canada the idea materialized in the foundation in 1924 of the Canadian Federation of Women's Labour Leagues (CFWLL) where Communist Women actively collaborated with non-Communist activists. Communist Women in Canada were also active in a number of women's sections of organizations based on ethnic and linguistic communities, such as the Ukrainian Labour-Farmer Temple Association (ULFTA). Memberships of such organizations had diverse left viewpoints and raised women's agendas that were not always considered important by the CP leadership. Moreover, throughout the 1920s they followed the united front policy of cooperation with certain labour, women's and farmers' organizations that were "reformist" in nature. [18] In Germany the Red Women and Girls' League (Roter Frauen und Mädchen Bund) was set up in late 1925 to broaden the female working-class constituency. The League succeeded in recruiting women who were reluctant to join the KPD by politicizing issues that working-class women faced in their daily lives, such as the prices of everyday women's wages, welfare, and reproductive rights. [19] This latter issue was an

important point of CWM's agenda.

Motherhood as a shared responsibility

The First Conference's "Theses" stressed that it was only the "old petty-bourgeois, reactionary ideology" that saw giving birth and taking care of children as the "only true natural calling" of women, thus attributing an inferior role to them. [20] Although Communist women obviously wanted to dissociate themselves from this traditional vision of women's role in procreation and upbringing of children, the "Theses" did not elaborate the question of reproductive rights and the issue of abortion. This does not mean, however, that communist women did not pay attention to this question. In 1920 the Soviet government legalized abortions. The IWS followed up by circulating Soviet literature on abortion among Communist women's sections outside Russia. [21]

A theoretical framework for Communists' ideas on reproduction and motherhood was first defined by August Bebel. It was later developed by Alexandra Kollontai who published in 1916 her 600-page *Society and Motherhood*. Kollontai saw childbearing as a social responsibility, shared between the family and society. [22] Her idea was that not only the mother (or the family) but also the socialized institutions should take care of the children's physical and psychological well-being, from infancy. Communist women, following the Soviet example where 1918 decrees legally protected motherhood and established socialized child care, [23] integrated this idea into the First Conference's "Theses": the state was to facilitate a harmonious combination of motherhood with employment through setting up welfare institutions to protect maternity, children, and youth. [24]

Given the demographic context of the post-World War I era and the fact that birth control was then advocated by many as a means for population control and eugenics, Communist women resisted attempts to stigmatize women for having either too few or too many children. They saw abortion as necessary so long as society was unable to guarantee the material means for a prosperous and happy childhood for all. [25] This did not prevent them from protesting against anti-abortion laws, which they did in France and (even) in Italy of the early 1920s. In Germany Communist women led a campaign against anti-abortion legislation under the quite ahead-of-its-time slogan "Your body belongs to you." In Denmark they set up the Working Women's Information Bureau, which made the information on birth control available to women. In Canada, where abortion was then illegal, Communists joined with non-Communist women to demand the de-criminalization of fertility control and establishment of "Mothers Clinics," which would provide information on contraception and free contraceptives. These initiatives often had a grassroots character, springing up independently of the IWS. [26]

Women and men in the Comintern and Communist parties

Research on the Comintern's women - scarce as it is - has noted the de-radicalisation of the CWM from mid to late 1920s. It has been argued that by the end of the decade the movement's aim was no longer the advancement of women but their mobilization for the advancement of the Comintern. [27] The movement indeed became weaker as the IWS was downgraded from an autonomous body to a department of the Comintern's Executive Committee. The weakening and subsequent de-radicalization has been attributed to the rise of the Stalinist system in the USSR, the domination of the Soviet CP within the international communist movement, and also the increasing centralisation of the Comintern's apparatus. [28]

These interpretations, certainly, reveal important truths as regards the history of the CWM. By

mid-1930s the CPSU indeed would become a major (although not omnipotent) decision-maker within the Comintern. Simultaneously in the Soviet Union the old conservatism would revive and bring about significant retreats as far as women's rights are concerned – the most important of which was the decision – even though not irreversible – to re-criminalize abortion (1936). Even though the Soviet retreat was not omnipresent and, arguably, did not prevent “the emergence of novel and unconventional gender configurations during the 1930s,”[29] it did affect Communist movement worldwide – although to varying degrees in different countries. These interpretations, however, appear to overlook another important factor of the CWM's decline – the male chauvinism and resistance of Communist men – both leaders and rank and file – to female activism within the CPs.

Such attitude on the part of male comrades was one of the questions that communist women discussed at their first conference in Moscow. According to the French delegate, within the pre-war socialist movements male workers were seen to “manifest not only indifference but even hostility towards the matter of women workers' organization.” The Danish delegate then posited that “male workers were not eager to involve their female comrades into social and political life, but preferred to see their wives as keepers of hearth and home.” [30] Similar attitudes – chauvinism in private life – were not infrequent within the Communist movement.



Clara Zetkin

Clara Zetkin was then well aware of such tendencies. In 1921 she pointed out that “leaders all too often underrated the importance” of the CWM, because “they [saw] it as only ‘women's business’.” [31] Zetkin stressed that “in most countries, the gains of the movement [CWM] have been achieved without support from the Communist Party, indeed in some instances against its open or hidden opposition.” At the same time Zetkin inferred that chauvinistic attitudes were more characteristic of national parties' male memberships rather than of the Comintern's Executive, which by contrast, “provided moral, political, and financial resources to sustain the efforts in each country to gather the Communist women in the parties.” [32]

The situation was not of course the same everywhere. The achievements of Communist women in different countries were uneven. During the 1920s, Communist Parties of northern and eastern Europe appeared to significantly increase their female memberships, while in France, Spain, and Italy women continued to represent less than 10 % of members. [33] However, even this proportion was high compared to women's penetration of bourgeois politics at that time, or compared to women's presence in the Comintern's pre-1919 parties, some of which had no women at all.

Conclusion

Despite the Comintern's equality discourse, the project was unable to escape the impact of a retreat

on women's emancipation in the Soviet Union and to fully overcome chauvinist pressures tending to exclude women from the revolutionary movement

To sum up, the CWM, despite some shortcomings, marked a historical advance, particularly regarding the interaction of women's liberation and revolution.

Although the CWM firmly linked the struggle for the liberation of women with the emancipation of the working class, it recognized that radicalization among women was present in all social layers. The revolutionary women thus favoured cooperation with non-Communist currents among women on such issues as universal suffrage and reproductive rights.

Communist women leaders became prominent political actors and, in this capacity, together with men, contributed significantly to revolutionary struggle. In addition, the international network of Communist women also fought for a number of specific measures that concerned only women. Such gains were seen as steps towards, not merely as the result of, the socialist transformation of society.

Daria Dyakonova

Notes

[1] Inessa Armand quoted in Barbara Evans Clements, *Bolshevik Feminist: The Life of Aleksandra Kollontai* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1979), 155.

[2] Alexandra Kollontai and Polina Vinogradskaja (eds.), *Otchet o pervoi mezhdunarodnoi konferentsii kommunistok* [Report on the First International Conference of Communist Women]. Moscow: Gosizdatelstvo, 1921, 19-20.

[3] Anna Krylova, "Bolshevik Feminism and Gender Agendas of Communism" in Silvio Pons, Stephen A. Smith (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Communism, Vol. 1: World Revolution and Socialism in One Country, 1917-1941*, Cambridge University Press, 2017, 425.

[4] See for example Barbara Wolfe Jancar, *Women under Communism*, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1978; Funk, Nanette and Magda Mueller (1993), *Gender Politics and Post-Communism: Reflections from Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union*, New York: Routledge; Brunnbauer, Ulf (2009); "'The Most Natural Function of Women.' Ambiguous Party Policies and Female Experiences in Socialist Bulgaria," in *Gender Politics and Everyday Life in State Socialist Eastern and Central Europe*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan; Einhorn, Barbara (2010), "Mass Dictatorship and Gender Politics: Is the Outcome Predictable?" in J. Lim et al. (eds.) *Gender Politics and Mass Dictatorship*, Palgrave MacMillan, pp. 34-62; Partridge, Damani (2012), *Hypersexuality and Headscarves: Race, Sex and Citizenship in the New Germany*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

[5] Sonia Kruks, Rayna Rapp, and Marilyn Young (eds). *Promissory Notes: Women in the Transition to Socialism*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1989, Introduction, 8. For Marxist feminist critiques see also Lise Vogel, *Marxism and the Oppression of Women: toward a Unitary Theory*, Leiden: Brill, 2013; Sharon Smith, *Women and Socialism: Essays on Women's Liberation*, Chicago: Haymarket, 2012.

[6] Kristen Ghodsee, "State-Socialist Women's Organization in Cold War Perspective. Revisiting the work of Maxine Molyneux." *Aspasia*, (10, 2016): 111-121, 115.

[7] Haan Francisca de (2010), "Continuing Cold War Paradigms in the Western Historiography of Transnational Women's Organisations: The Case of the Women's International Democratic

Federation (WIDF)," *Women's History Review*, Vol. 19, No. 4, 547-573, 564-565.

[8] The name (Communist Women's Movement) was not an official term and is rarely used in Comintern's documents. But this was how women comrades commonly spoke of it, see for example John Riddell. ed. *Toward the United Front: Proceedings of the Fourth Congress of the Communist International*, 1922, Leiden: Brill, 2012, 838.

[9] "Second International Conference of Communist Women," June 9 session, published in Moscow, June 11, 1921.

[10] John Riddell. ed. *Workers of the World and Oppressed Peoples, Unite!: Proceedings and Documents of the Second Congress*, 1920, New York: Pathfinder, 1991, vol 2, 977-978.

[11] Kollontai, Alexandra. "Communism and the Family" (1920) in *Selected Writings of Alexandra Kollontai*, edited by Alix Holt. London: Allison & Busby, 1977.

[12] Elizabeth Waters, "In the Shadow of the Comintern: the Communist Women's Movement, 1920-1943" in Sonia Kruks; Rayna R Reiter; Marilyn Blatt Young, eds. *Promissory Notes : Women in the Transition to Socialism*, New York, Monthly Review Press: 1989, 32-33.

[13] Riddell, *Workers of the World*, p. 978.

[14] See Kollontai, Introduction to The Social Basis of the Women's Question.
<https://www.marxists.org/archive/kollonta/1908/social-basis.htm>

[15] Goldberg Ruthchild, Rochelle. "Misbehaving women and the Russian Revolutions of 1917", ASEEES blog: International Women's day, March 17, 2017.

[16] Riddell, *Workers of the World*, p. 978.

[17] "Second International Conference of Communist Women," June 9 session, published in Moscow, June 11, 1921; Waters, 36.

[18] See Margaret Hobbs and Joanne Sangster (eds.), *The Woman Worker, 1926-1929*, St. John's, Nfld.: Canadian Committee on Labour History, 1999.

[19] See "Second International Conference of Communist Women," Report of Session of June 12, Published in Moscow, June 15, 1921, Sewell, 268-269.

[20] Riddell, *Workers of the World*, 983.

[21] "Second International Conference of Communist Women," June 9 session, published in Moscow, June 11, 1921.

[22] A. Kollontai, "Vvedenie" in *Obshchestvo i materinstvo*, in *Marksistskii Feminizm. Kolleksiia tekstov* A.M. Kollontai (Tver: Feminist Press-Rossia, 2003), 130-32, quoted in Anna Krylova, "Bolshevik Feminism and Gender Agendas of Communism," in *The Cambridge History of Communism*, vol. 1: *World Revolution and Socialism in One Country, 1917-1941*, edited by Silvio Pons, Stephen A. Smith, 424-448, Cambridge University Press, 2017, 431.

[23] The 1918 Labour Code provided at least one paid 30-minute break every three hours to feed a baby. The maternity insurance program decreed a fully paid maternity leave of eight weeks, nursing breaks and factory rest facilities for working mothers, free pre- and post-natal care and allowances.

At the same time the 1918 Family Code forbade adoption in the belief that the state would provide better care for an orphan than an individual family. See И.Я.Киселев, Трудовое право России, Москва, 2001 (http://www.hist.msu.ru/Labour/Law/kodex_18.htm#f1 – retrieved April 18, 2018); Сажина Н. С. “Социальная политика в отношении материнства и детства в первые годы советской власти” // Вестник БГУ. 2013. №2. URL: <https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/sotsialnaya-politika-v-otnoshenii-materinstva-i-detstva-v-pervye-gody-sovetskoy-vlasti> (retrieved April 18, 2018); Wendy Z. Goldman. Women, the State and Revolution. Cambridge, GBR : Cambridge University Press, 1993, 52.

[24] Riddell, Workers of the World, p. 989.

[25] Waters, 41; John Riddell. “The Communist Women’s Movement (1921-1926),” June 12, 2011.

[26] Margaret Hobbs and Joanne Sangster, eds. The Woman Worker, 217-222 ; Waters, 41-42.

[27] Waters, 51.

[28] See for example Waters, Studer and Bernhard H. Bayerlein.

[29] Krylova, Soviet women in Combat: A History of Violence on the Eastern Front. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, 23

[30] Kollontai and Vinogradskaja (eds.). Otchet, 61.

[31] Kommunistische Fraueninternationale, vol. 1, no. 2-3 (1921), p. 55 quoted in Riddell, John. “The Communist Women’s Movement (1921-1926).”

[32] See Sewell, Sara Ann. “Bolshevizing Communist Women: the Red Women and Girls’ League in Weimar Germany,” Central European History, 45:2 (2012).

[33] In the USSR the CPSU had 14% of women; Germany – 16,5 % ; Czechoslovakia – 24 % in 1929; France – 3%-4% in 1924; Italy – 1%-2% between 1921 and 1925. See Sewell, 280 ; Brigitte Studer. The Transnational World of the Cominternians. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, 48; Christine Bard, and Jean-Louis Robert. “The French Communist Party and Women, 1920-1939,” 323 and Mary Gibson. “Women and the Left in the Shadow of Fascism in Interwar Italy,” 398 in Helmut Gruber and Pamela Graves, Women and Socialism/ Socialism and Women. New York-Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1998; Gibson, 398.

P.S.

- “The dawn of our liberation: The early days of the International Communist Women’s Movement”. September 13, 2018:

<https://johnriddell.wordpress.com/2018/09/13/the-dawn-of-our-liberation-the-early-days-of-the-international-communist-womens-movement/>

- This text is based on a talk given by Daria Dyakonova in a French-language panel, “L’aurore de notre libération” at “The Great Transition: Preparing a World Beyond Capitalism” in Montreal May 20, 2018. Other panel participants were Aziz Fall, Ameth Lô, and John Riddell.

<https://thegreattransition.net/home/>

For the other presentations given in this panel, see “The Long March to Post-Capitalist Transition: Pan-Africanist Perspectives” (Ameth Lô) and “The League against Imperialism: An Early Attempt at Global Anti-Colonial Unity” (John Riddell). — JR

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