

# Solidarity between American and Soviet feminists

Tatyana Mamonova

Hartford College for Women

Translated by Walter Wiens, New York  
and Andrea Chandler, Carleton University

The feminist movement started in Russia during the same period as in America, in the middle of the nineteenth century. In the U.S., thanks to the diligent work and struggle of feminist activists, there now exists a body of research on the history and current status of women. But in the Soviet Union the names of prominent women have been forgotten, regardless of the fact that in their time they had exerted significant influence upon the life of Russian society.

Tsebrikova, Trubnikova, Filosofova, Khvoshchinskaia, and others—who remembers them?—maybe only specialists in the history of prerevolutionary movements? Among them, these women organized the first universities for girls in Petersburg, published their journals about education and upbringing, and took part in international conferences in Europe, which were also attended by women from America. The importance of Filosofova's work was recognized by the International Council of Women, who appointed her Honorary Vice President around the turn of the century, and asked her to form a National Council of Women in Russia.

Even then, women understood the need to unite, to exchange ideas, advice and assistance—a goal essential to people striving for a common ideal. They were convinced that in order to elevate the social status of women, and their scientific and professional activities, it would be necessary to create a sounding board that would finally allow a free and broadly-based forum for the development and comparison of various plans of action and experiences of feminists in different countries.

In one of the many newspaper and magazine articles written about the almanac, *Women and Russia*, the contemporary movement of Soviet feminists is described as “old fashioned.” As if there could be a fashion in humanism. As if all the problems raised by feminists in the second half of the nineteenth century had already long since been solved. The Women's Association of that era would even today have tremendous influence in eliminating differences between nations of different languages, customs and history, which are incompatible with progress and civilization, especially in

an epoch when the thermonuclear weapons of the two superpowers threaten with destruction the very life on this planet.

In 1897, prompted by the increasing danger of war, Khvoshchinskaia wrote Tsebrikova about peace: “Peace is the paramount, primary, only cause; without any exaggeration, I would give my very life for peace.” Yes, the circle of courageous and intelligent women of that time was imbued with high idealism, which never becomes “old fashioned.” Tsebrikova complemented Khvoshchinskaia's thought by replying: “In our times, the concept of geographic patriotism is the concept of the strength of the kulak. A girl asked me recently, ‘Why are the poor deprived of their voting rights? Don't they love their country as others do? Are they guilty because they cannot pay the voting tax?’”

That question was placed squarely on the agenda of the First All-Russian Women's Congress in Petersburg, in 1903. It should be noted that Petersburg (now Leningrad) to this day looms as the mainstay of Russian feminism; our neofeminist almanac *Women and Russia* was published in that city in 1979. Russian women expended, in the 1900s, more energy by comparison with their sisters in the West, but with lesser results. That is why the 1903 Congress was held.

At this time Tsebrikova superbly analyzed the problem of careerism, which exists even today. She spoke of the simple and obvious logic of the growth of careerism and bureaucracy.

Centuries of oppression and imposed dependence, rooted in laws, spawned the ideal of an autonomous female ‘self,’ which proclaims the overwhelming desire to be a useful member of society...In fact, society would gain enormously if to the existing number of males active in all walks of life and science, we would add a certain number of women...We have gathered forces to win for ourselves a better future, but we will not make any gains if women do not comprehend what gives a higher purpose and sanction to the women's movement.

The silent treatment accorded the feminist movement by the Soviet Union is so complete that the majority of the Soviet people do not know what the term feminism means. Those who do know, are familiar with it only in a negative sense. This applies not only to prerevolutionary feminism, the so-called "bourgeois" kind, but also to postrevolutionary feminism of the 1920s in the USSR, which can be correctly described as of the proletarian type. It suffices for one to acquaint oneself with the works of Alexandra Kolontay, who was in charge of women's affairs in the Soviet government. Shortly before the revolution, she had attended a number of feminist meetings in Europe and America. In 1915, she wrote in a letter from New York,

In America they—Russians, of course—pronounced me a Leninist agent. The American Organization Committee received a note from a poison-pen informer to beware of me...But I feel satisfied with my sojourn in America, as if there is some use in the idea of clearing minds from their chauvinist fog.

At present, precious little is being mentioned in the Soviet press about the works of Alexandra Kolontay—usually in the column "Party Publications" (obviously so nobody would read about them). Rare is the person who knows of her diplomatic work, and even rarer, who knows she was a pioneering feminist. She was far from in total agreement with Lenin, who condemned her, along with Ines Armand, for their view in favour of "free love"—a controversy known as the "glass of water debate" (Can the glass from which so many have drunk be clean? asked Lenin). Kolontay also championed free trade unions, which Lenin did not. However, if in the 1920s there was still the possibility of a debate, during the Stalinist era Kolontay was simply sent into "honorary exile" as an envoy to the Scandinavian countries and then to Mexico. Thus, she is known in Europe and America, but not in Russia, as an early feminist leader.

Alas, not only the official Soviet press is afraid of using the term "feminism" in a positive sense, but the same is true of the Russian emigre publications. Both avoid writing not only about the feminist movement of the early twentieth century, but also about the neofeminism of the early 1980s, which has been broadly discussed by all the world press, both on the left and the right. For example, I have received from Japan alone three offers to publish my Russian-language works on feminism, to say nothing of offers from publishing houses in Europe, but none from Russian emigre houses in the West, although Russian-language information on feminism is absolutely essential. In America, Ardis publishing house in Michigan stated that a book on feminism in the Russian lan-

guage would not have any commercial success, since as is well known, Russians are such sexists.

The characteristic conservatism of Soviet life is carefully conserved in our emigration. All this leads me again to the idea that what is needed is the creation of a Russian Feminist Press, a publishing house that could supply objective information to Soviet women covering our movement's history, its eradication during the Stalinist era, and the current feminist movements in various countries—all facts that are unknown to women in Russia today. Such information is denied them in the Soviet Union so that they cannot compare their pathetic status with that of women of other nations.

After I received an offer from the Women's Centre at Cambridge to form a nonprofit organization, a number of American feminists, upon whom this undertaking depended, supported this initiative. But *Ms* magazine, which initially was among the backers, has recently treated me with total indifference. In 1980, the editors of that journal asked me to tour American universities and women's groups. These speaking engagements were highly successful. The magazine further actively promoted the book *Sisterhood is Global*, which also contains my material. Naturally, I expected some financial assistance from *Ms*. Foundation and the recently established institute "Sisterhood is Global," but I have not received a reply to my queries. Through third parties I was told that *Ms* helps only American women. Feminist groups in other countries have treated me in the same manner. In Austria I was told that I was not Austrian; in France, that I was not French; and in America, as you see, not American. When my friends appealed to Jewish emigrant funds, it transpired that I was not Jewish. Similarly, in the Soviet Union I would not be considered Russian, as if I were, I would not have emigrated. Who then am I? To whom can I turn?

Universities in twenty-two countries had, years ago, shown an interest in the feminist movement in Russia. I delivered lectures in all of them on the "Groups of Trust" in the Soviet Union. Copies of the almanac *Women and Russia*, already published in eleven languages, are selling well. Unfortunately all these contacts have not contributed to giving me any personal success. When it comes down to supporting the Russian feminist movement, it is a different matter. It has been five years now that I have tried to organize assistance in the West for Soviet feminists. Graduate students often offer me their services, but once I give them addresses in Moscow, Leningrad or other Soviet cities, I almost never hear from them again. I know that many of them use the information I give them for their dissertation, but dissertations are not enough for me nor for the Soviet feminists. Radio stations

beaming programs to the USSR prefer to broadcast news about arrests. But apart from arrests, women in the Soviet Union suffer another type of repression—their miserable daily lives.

I joyfully accepted the invitation from the Bunting Institute for a year's stay there as it was linked with Radcliffe, which is famous for its feminist activities. I had an office at the Institute, which was an honour, but I was not given a salary or other financial help, which made it impossible to utilize either the office or the Institute's fine Schlesinger library which has a unique collection of women's history. They refused me a stipend but promised me funds—and these funds remained only promises. My husband, after half a year, tried to gain the right to work in America, and even if he did get permission, he would not at once find work in his profession. Of course, this means that, while working on research I have been compelled to search for work to provide for the basic needs of my family, look for an apartment (in this period, we have moved five times), and find inexpensive doctors, as the health of our son required special attention. Naturally, I appealed to the Bunting Institute and to Radcliffe College with the request that they prolong my tenure, but was refused. What can I say about the future of the feminist movement in Russia, if for practical purposes I alone bear the responsibility for it while no one would answer for the future of my family?

I was not the only one to find myself in this situation, but many other emigrants did as well, and this hardly solves the problem. To be an emigrant is a humiliating experience, and, understandably, many Soviet refugees reject this definition. The "emigrant" includes an element of racism. As an example, in Paris, a female journalist who was interviewing me said, "You are an emigrant, but you have an elevator. And here I am, I have to live without one." Now she can relax—I do not have an elevator here. In Berlin, when I went to local Slavists to request a translation of a letter written in German, that was important to our cause, I received the answer, "We don't deal with emigrants' squabbles," although the letter dealt with important matters far from the realm of individual relations. I could only answer, "If Dostoevsky had not concerned himself with "personal squabbles" as you choose to put it, then he would not have written even one of the books that you so carefully study."

Many American newspapers interviewed me, and although they knew my name well, they for some reason entitled their articles "emigree talks about feminism in the Soviet Union." I have never felt nor considered myself an emigre, but a citizen of the world, but maybe this idea does not penetrate the heads

of journalists. And the label "emigree" follows me everywhere.

The conservatism of the Soviet person inside the country can be explained by the oppressive power of ideology upon them, although their conservatism outside the Soviet Union can be explained no less by oppressive economic forces. One must pay dearly for independence, wherever one is.

If we do not unite our efforts in a spirit of true solidarity, then the prospects are that we will lose not only the feminist movement in Russia, but also in other countries. For feminism, the hallmark of humanism in our time, can prevail only on the basis of mutual understanding between people of good will in the US and the USSR—between the peoples of the two superpowers, which will decide the future of our children. It is dangerous to lock ourselves into local problems—it is essential that we learn from each others' experiences so that we may jointly strive for the development of the American and Russian feminist movements.