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Feminism in Revolution: Women of the 19th Century Anti-Tsarist Movements

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The climate of political upheaval in Russia over the course of the 19th century reached a violent climax in the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in March of 1881. His death was the result of decades of civil unrest amongst Russian citizens who had taken hold of enlightenment ideas and sought justice for economic and social inequality. In a complex equation of issues and policies, the ways in which the women question combined with the surge of new ideas produced a unique and perfect storm. Russia was the epicenter of a collision between an underdeveloped infrastructure and changing philosophies about work, family, and society. This restructuring became ideal for the lives of anti-tsarist women and their deviant lives as activists, treasonous criminals, and feminist characters. Within the chaos, women who felt the sting of secondary citizenship could take their place as dissenters. Their unique perspectives allowed them to work for far different motivations than that of their male counterparts.

Decades after Alexander II's death, the work of former anti-tsarist revolutionary Vera Figner had become more about journalistic work than tumultuous political activism. Her project beginning in 1921 was the collection and publication of memoirs from people active in the 19th century anti-tsarist movements, creating a compiled revolutionary history. In doing so, she illuminated the relationships not only between the populists (as they were more commonly known), but between their outlooks as revolutionaries and their genders. Authors of the populist memoirs displayed many predictable attributes: they were educated and relied on theoretical ideas and intellectual concepts as the foundation for their activity. However, there was a discrepancy within the experiences of women and men: populist women often started recounting their memoirs with memories of their childhoods, whereas men did so at the time of their older years in formal education (when they were exposed to the ideas that became their livelihoods).

Women noted circumstances in their upbringing that tied into their involvement with the revolution, whereas men tended to have moments of enlightenment, witnessing injustice being done onto others. The reasoning behind such an interesting parallel arises out of the greater question of how gender both motivated and molded the experiences of these women.¹ It seemed that for them, their experiences with injustice and inequality began young, versus the revelatory experiences of their male counterparts: in short, women lived it, men learned it.

One of the primary sources of women's issues in Russia, one which would also personally affect Figner's life, was set in motion long before her birth in 1852. The turn of the 19th century saw the reign of Catherine the Great end, and in that the death of the most powerful advocate of women's issues at the time. Catherine's reign was a landmark in the development of women's education: her establishment of the Smolnyi institute was the culmination of efforts on her part to educate women into becoming more knowledgeable citizens as well as wives and mothers. With her death, her successor Nicholas I left the responsibility of the institute to his wife, Empress Maria. Her German upbringing with Rousseauian social principles made her views on women's education far less innovative than her mother-in-law's.

Maria's changes to the institute's curriculum employed a greater focus on traditional European womanhood and creating the ideal noble woman who was artistically inclined and exempted from any necessity for practical skills. Given that a large portion of girls attending the institute were from the lower working classes, the idea of grooming them to be successful social lites when they returned to their humble homes was an unrealistic one. They would either have to marry well, or inherit a fortune to match their new skill-sets.²

¹ Rosalind Marsh, ed. *Women in Russia and Ukraine*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 81.

² Barbara Engel, *Mothers and Daughters: Women of the Intelligentsia in Nineteenth-Century Russia*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 23-25.

The infiltration of German ideals was not just circumstantial to the Empress's management of the Smolnyi institute. Over the course of the enlightenment period, Nicholas I's restrictive policies were unable to stifle the surge of German social and intellectual ideas. Making their way initially into the minds of Russians via education at Universities, these ideas were the focus of Russian creativity and adaptation into their lives.³ Women's education became ripe with romantic ideas via music and languages, proclivities that Russian men had no practical need for from their wives; the contrast of expectations vs. reality left many young women dissatisfied with life.⁴ Vera Figner, a girl born to a financially comfortable family, entered schooling at Rodionovsky Institute at the age of eleven and stayed there for six years, noting in her memoirs that while she enjoyed companionship and acquiring discipline, that "as for scientific knowledge, or still more...intellectual training, these years at school not only gave me almost nothing, but even retarded my spiritual development, not to mention the harm caused by the unnatural isolation from life and people."⁵

For as much as Figner's family could afford to create a more enriched life for her, the experiences of Russian women in the working classes were much darker. The world of serfdom was an example of how gender roles proportioned what little power was available in the lower classes unequally between women and men. Serf owners had, for example, adapted the practice of quick and universal marriages within their peasant villages as to maximize the population of servants at their disposal. One letter from a woman to her bailiff who helped manage her peasant village in Murom commanded widowed young girls of appropriate age be married off

³ Riasonovsky, Nicholas V. "Russian Culture in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century." In *A History of Russia*. 5th ed. (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 360-361.

⁴ Engel, 26.

⁵ Vera Figner, *Memoirs of a Revolutionist* (New York: Greenwood Press Publishers, 1968), 27.

immediately, at the risk of a monetary fine.⁶ Within and beyond peasant communities, the lives of Russian women depended heavily on their relation to family, both close and extended. Her subservience was as relied upon as it was demeaned. Aleksandra Iakovlevna was ethnologist and historian born in 1848 who became known for her essays on peasantry from a populist perspective. In one of her essays, she notes that “a woman cannot be a full member [of the extended family], as a man is, and cannot have a voice in managing the affairs of the family. She must only work, work, and work. Any man in the family is senior to her.”⁷

Consequently, the reach of poverty and economic injustice was as wide as it was complex. Unsurprisingly, enlightenment ideas provided an energetic catalyst for movements like populism, which vocalized the needs of the people. The adoption of populist ideals connected people beyond class, and women from more affluent backgrounds proved interested in the wellbeing of the poor. Part of Figner’s evolution as a populist was her concern with helping those in need. After graduating from Ridionovsky, she experienced a period of time in which she found a need to help others and to have some greater goal in life. When reflecting upon that time, she asks rhetorically in her memoir, “Has not everyone passed through such a period, when standing on top of the temple, one yearns, simply, without philosophizing or remorse, to sow about the gold of goodness?”⁸ Figner illustrates a common cause found throughout the populist movement. Although Nicholas I’s censorship policies had been effective in stifling the circulation of revolutionary ideas, his success would backfire. Interestingly enough, it would be

⁶ "Opposition and Activism." In *Russian Women, 1698-1917 Experience and Expression, an Anthology of Sources*, compiled by Robin Bisha, Jehanne M Gheith, Christine Holden, and William G. Wagner, by Irina Vorontsova, 302-303. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002

⁷ "Family Life." In *Russian Women, 1698-1917 Experience and Expression, an Anthology of Sources*, compiled by Robin Bisha, Jehanne M Gheith, Christine Holden, and William G. Wagner, by Aleksandra Iakovlevna, 82. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002.

⁸ Figner, 37.

his son and successor Alexander II, referred to today in history as “The Good Tsar,” who would unfortunately suffer the consequences.

Inheriting the throne in 1855, Alexander II was as Tsar rather idyllic, though in the end disconnected from the issues he was trying to resolve. Creating an image of himself as liberal and receptive to change, he embarked on a series of reforms. His abolishment of serfdom nationally in 1861, for example, proved incredibly problematic for the serfs who then lost their economic security and felt cheated by the promises made by the government for true equality.⁹ Not only that, but serfs were responsible for paying landlords back for the insufficient amounts of land they were given after being liberated. When they couldn't, the government paid in loans which serfs were also responsible for repaying.¹⁰ Women, who depended entirely on familial connections, would have struggled considerably from this instability. The amount of unsatiated needs of the people began to tire out the Tsar and his efforts to appease his own people. The subsequent atmosphere was one of arrests, tumultuous political protest, and social discourse--a stage conducive to creation of the Narodnaya Volya , or “The People’s Will,” in 1879. A populist and anti-tsarist organization of people with diverse occupations ranging from medicine to mechanics, their membership included Figner, who was then 27 years-old and divorced. Then again, her primary motivation for marrying in the first place was so she could liberate herself from her father’s prohibition of her attending University. Figner described the intricacy of the Narodnaya Volya and its executive coalition as one of assembled secret societies, party

⁹ Engel, 47.

¹⁰ Riasonovsky, Nicholas V. "Russian Culture in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century." In *A History of Russia*. 5th ed. New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.

members, working men and intelligentsia, with the goal of revolution that would give power back to the Russian people.¹¹

What induced women's involvement in the Narodnaya Volya and similar movements were their growing abilities to self-determine. The enlightenment's effects on civil discourse had motivated certain women--Figner included--to join the class of Russian intelligentsia. Essentially a collective of people with the intent of circulating sociopolitical ideas, the intelligentsia proved forceful. In the early years of Alexander's reign, two provocative movements caught momentum in intelligentsia conversations and beyond: Radicalism, which called upon the peasantry for dramatic social change, and Nihilism, which found the status quo of religious and moral principles of society to be meaningless.¹² For women, the idea of liberation from the confines of tradition was sensational. Undoubtedly for women like Figner, it also proved advantageous in the path to achieving their revolutionist ambitions.

Figner came across and befriended fellow anti-tsarist women in her years as an executive. Sophia Perovskaya, for example, mirrored Figner's life path: a fellow Narodnaya Volya leader, she was an educated woman from an affluent background. Her childhood as the daughter of nobility instilled traditional, pro-tsarist values, but like Figner she dissented. Figner goes into rather reverent detail about her comrade, who was "always watchful, always ready" to act upon her orders with success.¹³ However, Perovskaya would not live long enough to contribute her memoirs: arrested shortly after Alexander's assassination for her participation in the plot, she was executed via hanging along with four of their comrades. Figner described Perovskaya during

¹¹ Figner, *Memoirs of a Revolutionist* (New York: Greenwood Press Publications, 1968) 78-79.

¹² Engel, 86.

¹³ Figner, 110.

her execution as “true to herself both in life and in death,”¹⁴ creating a symbol that anti-tsarist women must have attempted to achieve themselves. She was the first woman in Russia to be executed for a political crime.¹⁵

The image of Perovskaya just months before her death, holding a pistol while her fellow comrades dug a tunnel underneath a train track to implant a hidden explosive for a train possibly carrying the Tsar and his family, “ready to fire at a bottle of nitroglycerine and blow them all up should the alarm be rung on the upper floor to warn of approaching police,”¹⁶ is a rather heroic one. Although the concept of women being involved in revolution wasn’t foreign at the time of their heightened activities with the Narodnaya Volya, what motivated these women into risking their livelihoods and security, doesn’t quite fit in with the concept of women only becoming involved when there’s something to be gained for women specifically. For them, inequality was a human issue, and not a gendered one--not that it was any of their choice in the first place.

Remembering that Russia was still a patriarchal society, the platform of anti-tsarist movements were overwhelmingly fueled by the perspectives of men. The aforementioned intellectual sensations of radicalism and nihilism, while addressing women’s issues, did not ever make women’s rights a centrifugal goal.¹⁷ In the late 1860’s when anti-tsarist movements started solidifying, women had little room for pursuing their own interests seeing as “the radical generation of the 1860’s had absorbed the woman question into the cause of the working people to such an extent that the goals of the revolution...offered nothing of special interest to women.”

¹⁴ Figner, 114.

¹⁵ Figner, 108.

¹⁶ Alex Butterworth, “Spies and Tsaricides,” *The World That Never Was: A True Story of Dreamers, Schemers, Anarchists, and Secret Agents* (New York: Vintage Books, a Division of Random House, 2010) 144.

¹⁷ Engel, 101.

¹⁸ The disenchantment Figner's generation felt for the foundation of inequality and Russian internal decay, combined with the elitist shortcomings of their gendered education that contributed to their dissatisfaction, all surmounted into a greater sacrifice: removing gender from the equation entirely in the hopes that if universal change could occur, it could eventually be felt on the individual scale. Figner describes the coming-of-age process, how "the older generation...had profited from the institution of serfdom, with its disregard for human personality. But when this despotic order was introduced into family relations, it frequently aroused a protest and aversion to despotism on the part of the children," and says that both her and Perovskaya experienced it growing up.¹⁹ Figner, Perovskaya, and women like them had changed the prerogatives of women when it came to revolution. They made their choices for the sake of their people, and not their sex.

When the ingredients of the woman's experience are synthesized, it is no wonder why the experiences of populist women contrasted those of populist men's. Indeed, the childhood experiences of anti-tsarist women must have proven hard to unlearn in order to assume their roles as revolutionaries in a man's world. Figner illustrates a brilliant example in Perovskaya as a woman who juxtaposed her initial socialization with her experience as a populist revolutionary. Perovskaya, though entrusted with many a violent responsibility, had a "womanly gentleness and overflowing goodness toward the toiling masses," which compelled her to leave her elitist parents whom she found too morally reprehensible to endure living with.²⁰ Not only that, but "those who witnessed her life...have stated in their reminiscences that there was something maternally tender in her treatment of the sick, as...was in her entire attitude towards the peasants

¹⁸ Engel, 102.

¹⁹ Figner, 109.

²⁰ Figner, 109.

with whom she came in contact.”²¹ It is fascinating to imagine the internalized standards to which these women held themselves. Being raised to be maternal, to be providers of intimate affection as well as the foundation of the home, Perovskaya and her peers may have felt some sort of dual obligation to be both political deviants and empathetic caretakers. This might explain why issues such as poverty and inequality might have been so easily understood by Russian women, in tandem with their socialized secondary-citizenship as females.

Indeed, Figner describes the feeling underlying hers and Perovskaya’s motivations for their involvement in what she called “the political struggle,” The duty they felt that was later identified as “an aspiration towards a clean life, towards personal saintliness.”²² It was a feeling that must have extended beyond their own perspectives to the estimated ¼-⅓ of membership of the Narodnaya Volya who were women as well.²³ It was up to them to not only keep the woman question alive, if even just in the subconscious of the revolutionary movement, but to personify it. Their symbolism allowed themselves to assimilate with the greater cause of people’s inequality in a way that ensured their active inclusion versus inactive marginalization. Allowing their actions to speak for themselves and remain prevalent, instead of taking a passive role in supporting another men’s movement, was critical for the future of Russian women.

Ultimately, what occurred in the late 19th century was a shift in the desired structure of not just society as a whole, but that of the family. With the rising unrest in the infrastructure of Russia across the board, the hurting economy meant Russian families became less able to support their unmarried daughters. When those daughters had to seek financial stability on their own terms, the shift was felt in both the workforce and the traditions of the Russian family

²¹ Figner, 110.

²² Figner, 110.

²³ Engel, 107.

structure.²⁴ The shift ended up being beneficial for women's interaction in the Narodnaya Volya and political activism on the whole, as women started to rely on their involvement for some sort of ironic stability to substitute the consistency of a family.²⁵ While it may have felt disorienting at the time, the relationship between the traditional family structure falling apart, and the building up of the anti-tsarist movement was proof that women's roles were defined by their relation to family (or lack thereof). As new models for the successful Russian family began to change, women gained mobility for their interests. Even so, there were women like Perovskaya who went so far as to detach from her family's domineering presence. So, not only was there a strong bond to their relation to familial social definitions, but that bond was more than likely insufficient when it came to young women's desires to determine their own lives.

As evidenced by the examples of Figner, Perovskaya, and the voices of Russian women throughout the 19th century, anti-tsarist populist women relied on the experiences of their entire lives as moral justification for their activities as political criminals. The lack of realistic education attributed to their gender made them hungry for a life of actual substance. The appeal of a human issue to women who were socialized to be the more maternal and caring in comparison to men made them inclined to a movement for the greater good of humanity. The surge of enlightened ideas that empowered them to become involved led to the recreation of the revolutionary woman's image. The idea that women's issues could align with civil rights issues regardless of gender efficacy became invaluable to the progression of rights on the individual scale. These women had so much to lose, but had so much more to gain from their sacrifices.

²⁴ Engel, 51.

²⁵ Engel, 107.

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