

## **Alexandra Kollontai: Revolutionary** **By Conrad Moore**

### **Personal Reflection**

One of the greatest things about history is the story it tells about the people living in different times. Revolutionary Russia has many stories to tell. I found Alexandra Kollontai's story to be particularly fascinating because it not only gave me a window into Russia at that time, but specifically showed how it was experienced by women. Women are so rarely discussed in mainstream history as it is, but to learn and understand what life was like for women in Kollontai's Russia was especially interesting. It helped flesh out that time more. Whereas before I was only familiar with the political goings and doings of the time, the Russian Revolution has now taken on a more personable feel for me. I feel as though I know what people were going through, not just what was being done to them by their government and its new laws.

### **Biography**

The 1917 Bolshevik uprising in Russia heralded the beginning of a new age. Never before had humanity witnessed such a revolution. Russia, a country that had the historic reputation in the eyes of its contemporaries of being "backward," changed radically from a monarchy to a socialist state. All over the new Soviet Union a metamorphosis occurred. It was during these exciting times that a woman named Alexandra Kollontai rose to prominence and attempted to deal with the age old Woman Question. Her ideas about love in regards to this question led her from the home of an aristocratic Russian general to the halls of the new Soviet government and beyond. She brought a singular perspective to both Russian and women's history alike, a perspective that could only be advanced by a woman of Kollontai's unique life and experiences.

Alexandra Kollontai's life began on March 19, 1872. She was born into the home of her father, Russian general and aristocrat Mikhail Domontovich. Domontovich was a man whose ideas were more liberal than most, but as a servant of the Tsar he had little power to develop them.<sup>1</sup> Still the seed for Kollontai's future ideas was planted by her parents. Kollontai later wrote in astonishment at the unconventionality of her parents' marriage. Her mother had been no more than a peasant girl, her father from Russia's landed class. To cross such distinct class lines was scandalous enough but to make things worse, Kollontai's mother Alexandra had to be divorced from an arranged marriage in order to marry Mikhail. Already before her was an example of love that defied accepted norms.

Kollontai's childhood was spent mastering German, English, and French, and reading many books in her father's library.<sup>2</sup> At sixteen her parents wished to bring her to the St. Petersburg marriage market, but young Alexandra had other plans. She vehemently opposed her parents, using her mother's failed arranged marriage as an argument. Her true desires lay in studying abroad but instead she stayed home and took up writing.<sup>3</sup> Her battles with marriage were far from over however. She eventually fell in love with the son of a family friend, a young Captain named Vladimir Kollontai. Her parents disapproved of the match at first but when Alexandra threatened to leave home they acquiesced to her demands. Young Alexandra thought she had escaped the fate her mother dealt with by marrying for love, but it would be this very marriage that would stir within her an intellectual and philosophical fire. This fire would be the catalyst for the rest of her life's work.

Kollontai's marriage to Vladimir brought her a son. Women of Kollontai's Russia were expected to live and life of domesticity, and she stayed home to care for her child. Domesticity was a common

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<sup>1</sup> Cathy Porter. *Alexandra Kollontai: The Lonely Struggle of the Woman who Defied Lenin*. (New York, 1980)

<sup>2</sup> Flyer advertising one of Kollontai's lectures, as seen at the "Alexandra Kollontai Image Library," <http://www.marxists.org/archive/kollonta/images/ap21915.htm>

<sup>3</sup> Cathy Porter. *Alexandra Kollontai: The Lonely Struggle of the Woman who Defied Lenin*. (New York, 1980)

ideology in European culture, fueled in Western Europe by the harshness of industrial labor and the idea that women were too delicate and graceful to be dirtied by the drudgeries of labor. Though Russia was not nearly as industrialized as her neighbors, domesticity found a home there too, backed by centuries of conservative and oppressive thought. The domestic lifestyle proved to prison-like for the capable and fertile mind of Alexandra Kollontai. She began to refer to Vladimir as her “tyrant,” and long to “revolt against love’s tyranny.”<sup>4</sup> Love at this time seemed like a cage. She began to write about the role of women in Russian society.

When she met Vladimir, Kollontai had been studying in St. Petersburg. There she had drifted from the populist leanings she developed in her childhood readings towards the rising prominence of Marxism. As her marriage with Vladimir deteriorated, she looked to Marxism for guidance. If workers were being enslaved by capitalists, so too were women being subjugated by men. The relationship seemed obvious to Kollontai. Her political spark caught fire in 1896 when she and Vladimir visited a factory he was to manage. When Kollontai saw the horrid conditions there she became enraged. An argument with Vladimir and her political notions all fell into place. She saw now what her purpose was. Alexandra Kollontai would help the worker and, more importantly, the woman, to emancipate themselves from society’s chains. She started with herself. In 1898, she left Vladimir forever, taking their son, Misha, with her.

Her pursuits eventually led her into the Bolshevik Party. Under its militant organizer, known by the nom de plume Lenin, Kollontai finally found an outlet. She journeyed to factories and tried to organize the women working in them. She found her ideas clashed with other “bourgeois” feminist thought. Such feminists were pushing for women’s suffrage and through this, they thought, equality. Kollontai saw this as daydreaming. Even if women did attain the right to vote they still would find themselves oppressed in a male- and capitalist-dominated society.

Eventually the Bolsheviks came to power, bringing with them perhaps the most radical change to a country in history. Lenin, now a long time colleague of Kollontai’s, had led the movement and now found himself at the head of a new Soviet government. But while many of the ideals Kollontai had fought for were slowly becoming a reality, there was one area in which she and Lenin differed, an area that would cause a rift between them and ultimately lead to Kollontai’s political impotence. This area was, of course, the Woman Question.

Over the years Kollontai’s answer to the Woman Question had moved away from the ideas over her contemporaries. Critics called her a proponent of “free love,” the notion of casual sex without love. In truth, Kollontai’s ideas did not promote this at all. Rather, her work focused on two ideas which she saw as inseparable: private and public life. In the intensely politically charged environment that was the early Soviet Union, Kollontai struggled to make sense of love and civic duty. More importantly, what did this new environment mean for love and women? She wrote:

How much energy and time we wasted in all our endless love tragedies and their complications! But it is also we, the women... who taught ourselves and those younger than we that love is not the most important things in a woman’s life. And that if she must choose between love and work she should never hesitate: it is work, a woman’s own creative work, that gives her the only real satisfaction and makes her life worth living.<sup>5</sup>

Her writing would later describe her ideas about how love might work. In *Love of Worker Bees*, a fictional work, Kollontai described what she saw as destructive relationships fueled by love. A short story within that book, “Three Generations,” describes the plight of women through three different generations and how they each dealt with it according to the accepted ideologies of their time. The newest generation sees no qualms in sex outside of a romantic relationship. In explaining how purely physical love removes emotional road blocks from a simple act of pleasure,

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<sup>4</sup> Cathy Porter. Introduction to her translation of Kollontai’s *Love of Worker Bees*. (Chicago, 1978)

<sup>5</sup> Cathy Porter. *Alexandra Kollontai: The Lonely Struggle of the Woman who Defied Lenin*. (New York, 1980)

Kollontai's character Zhenya says: "...I don't part with anyone as an enemy – when I stop liking them that means it's over and that's all there is to it."<sup>6</sup> To Kollontai, love was for those who were married. "If you love a person, then you think about him, you worry about him."<sup>7</sup> Such a love had no place in the life of Alexandra Kollontai. Its promotion as an ideal held women back from that "creative work" that ultimately satisfied a woman. "Free love," in the sense that sex is given and taken freely and indiscriminately, was not the idea Kollontai was promoting. Rather, she wanted women to be able to enjoy the carnal activities of marriage without the hindrance of emotional attachment.

This concept, as it became more developed, became too radical, even for the likes of Lenin. Marriage was unstable in the new Soviet Union. Kollontai had risen to a place of prominence in the Party, having held such positions as Commissar of Social Welfare, and a member of the Soviet Executive Committee. As her ideas diverged from Lenin's he began to see Kollontai as a nuisance. Her image was too public to attack her openly so instead Kollontai was appointed ambassador to Norway. She held many such diplomatic posts for the rest of her life, her voice muted and marginalized in the USSR. When Stalin came to power women's domestic role became exalted. With rigid industrialization plans in place and an almost dogmatic appeal for progress through national struggle, women were called to procreate for the nation, for the glory of the Soviet Union. As Stalin purged the Party of those he defined as dissenters, it became clear that Kollontai's ideas were not welcome in Russia anymore. Stalin was not a man to be argued with.

The fire and determination of Alexandra Kollontai cannot be ignored. Though she may have been unaware of it during her lifetime, she did make great strides in the quest for answers to the Woman Question. Feminists, socialist or not, cannot deny the power of her ideas. Kollontai's mobilization of women workers and her diagnosis of the effects of romantic love on women and society were groundbreaking in their day and still have validity today. Without Alexandra Kollontai the lens through which societies examine the relationships between men and women would be much different. That her work continues to be studied is a testament to its power.

## Bibliography

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## Timeline

- 1870 – Vladimir Ilych Ulyanov (Lenin) is born
- 1872 – Alexandra Mikhailovna Domontovich is born
- 1879 - Lev Bronstein (Trotsky) is born
- 1881 – Assassination of Tsar Alexander II. Leads to public execution of five terrorists, one of which is Sofya Perovskaya, a woman who will later serve as inspiration to Kollontai for her devotion to revolutionary causes.
- 1893 – Alexandra marries Vladimir Kollontai, their son Misha is born a year later.
- 1896 – Kollontai's first and life-altering visit to a factory where she sees the horrors of working class life.
- 1904 - Lenin seeks Kollontai for collaboration for a Bolshevik periodical, she eventually joins him.

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<sup>6</sup> Alexandra Kollontai. *Love of Worker Bees*. (Chicago, 1978)

<sup>7</sup> Alexandra Kollontai. *Love of Worker Bees*. (Chicago, 1978)

1905 – “Bloody Sunday,” a massacre of peaceful demonstrators. Kollontai is in the crowd. Revolution breaks out.

1906 – Kollontai begins serious organization of woman workers

1908 – Kollontai writes *Social Basis for the Women’s Question*.

1917 – Revolution breaks out, Kollontai staunchly supports Lenin

1921 – Kollontai joins “Worker’s Opposition,” a dissenting committee within the Party which Lenin later abolishes.

1923-26 – Her ideas about marriage and sexual morality are severely criticized.

1930’s-40’s – Kollontai works at a series of diplomatic posts and advisor positions.

1952 – Alexandra Kollontai dies of a heart attack