OUTSIDE THE CIRCLE OF PRIVILEGE

I thought I saw two people, but it was only a man and his wife.
A hen is not a bird and a woman is not a human being.
A dog is wiser than a woman; he doesn’t bark at his master.

Russian peasant proverbs

The Petrine revolution and its consequences brought the state more closely than ever before into the lives of Russia’s people. For the peasantry, constituting over 90 percent of the population in 1719, and for townspeople, a mere 3.6 percent, Peter’s innovations proved almost entirely negative, at least in the short run. They became the means for the state to satisfy its ever-increasing need for labor, soldiers, and revenue. The changes weighed most heavily on privately owned peasant serfs, whose numbers significantly increased. Approximately half of peasants belonged to noble landowners; the rest were attached to lands belonging to the crown, the state, or, until 1764, the church. The law code of 1649 had already reduced to the status of serfs those peasants who lived on the estates of noble lords. During the eighteenth century, privately owned serfs lost almost all semblance of a civil identity. Women shared the fate of their menfolk but also experienced it in ways specific to their gender.

It is difficult to capture the experience of women who lived outside the circle of privilege. Until the early twentieth century, the overwhelming majority remained unable not only to read but also to sign even their name. To tell their story, the historian must rely primarily on the words of others. Their narrative has a kind of timeless quality that reflects the fact that, despite the changes to be described in this chapter, from Peter the Great until the abolition of serfdom in 1861 and even thereafter, many of the basic patterns of peasant life continued. Women outside the circle of privilege first experienced the positive dimensions of change in cities and towns, rather than in peasant villages.

6. Portrait of a Peasant Woman in Russian costume, from The Female Portrait in Russian Art (Leningrad, 1974)

Peasant Women and Their Work

Peasant life was harsh. Peasants dwelt in a world over which they exercised little control. Subject to the demands of landlords or their bailiffs, to the exactions of the tsarist state, to the uncertainties of the weather, and to the
requirements of the agricultural calendar, peasants arranged their lives to suit their circumstances. Their life required long periods of intense, backbreaking toil. Peasant women’s labor was as necessary to survival as a man’s. Women performed all the work that sustained the peasant household. Tending the kitchen garden that produced most of the household’s food, women pickled the cabbage and brewed kvass, a lightly fermented, almost non-alcoholic beer that peasants consumed daily. Women cooked cabbage soup or borscht. They ground the grain and baked the rye bread or prepared the grain-based porridges and gruels that remained the staple of peasant diet. In the northern forested lands, women gathered and preserved mushrooms and berries to supplement their family’s diet or to sell for a little cash. Women sent the livestock to the fields and brought them back home in summer and tended them in winter. They milked the cow, and prepared butter, cottage cheese, and sour cream. During planting and harvesting, when the need for laborers was greatest, they joined men in the fields, where they harvested rye, winter wheat, and oats; tied grain into sheaves for drying; and raked the hay and loaded it onto carts. When harvesting was most intensive, from mid July until the end of August, peasant women and men essentially lived in the fields, where they slept no more than three to four hours each night. After the harvest was gathered, women gleaned the fields for leftover grain.

Women clothed their family. They made linen from the flax that they sowed in the spring and harvested in the fall. Removing the seeds, they would soak the stalks in water and then dry them to make the outer layer rot and crack. This process could take up to two weeks. Then they would soften the stems by beating them, and then comb and comb again the threads to separate them into single strands. These strands would be wrapped around a distaff, and two or three threads would be drawn out at a time to twist onto the spindle that in the winter was rarely far from a woman’s side. The resulting thread was usually left in its natural color. Weaving the thread into cloth, embroidering or decorating it, then making clothing was work that also occupied women in the winter months. Transforming fleece into woolen garments involved much the same processes. The family’s well-being depended on a woman’s diligence and skill.

**Becoming a Wife**

Peasant woman’s value as a labor resource shaped her life cycle. Marriage was the central event, her early life a preparation. Learning the skills that she would need as an adult while at the same time easing her mother’s burdens, a girl began to prepare at a tender age. Peasant “nurses” as young as six years of age tended younger siblings or the children of a neighbor. Girls fed the chickens and fetched eggs; as they grew, they gradually mastered the various tasks that constituted the work of the adult woman. Around the age of twelve, preparations for marriage grew serious. The girl assembled her trousseau, the clothing, sheets, pillows, towels, and pillowcases, much of it her own handwork, which would last her for most of her married life and remain her personal property. For all the preparation, a maiden was often in no hurry to wed and her parents, pleased to retain her labor power.

By comparison with the responsibilities of wifehood, maidenhood represented a carefree time in a young woman’s life. It was a time when relations with boys were playful, to be enjoyed as long as they remained within limits. Marriageable girls attended round dances and gatherings where young people sang, danced, and took part in kissing games. Girls had to exercise restraint, however. Ethnographers suggest that women’s sexual honor remained important in the countryside, and that men were its guardians. Through the middle of the nineteenth century, it remained widespread practice to display the blood-stained bridal shirt to demonstrate bridal virginity. Parents who had failed to guard their daughter’s honor became subject to public humiliation.¹

Marriage came more often sooner than later. Everyone except a maiden and her parents preferred early marriage. Local authorities, noble landowners, and the relatives of marriageable men seeking brides viewed women as both a demographic and an economic resource. Local administrators preferred early marriage because it not only created a new taxable unit (the tiaglo) but also promoted population growth, regarded by eighteenth century European rulers as a source of national strength. In pursuit of early and universal peasant marriage, administrators proved ready to exercise coercion. In 1771, for example, the governor, D. I. Chicherin, surmised that in many Western Siberian villages “large numbers of peasant males remain single and cannot find brides into their thirties, while girls remain single until the same age because their fathers keep them home for work.” Assuming that the threat of exile would convince unmarried women to wed, he ordered that all “wretches” above the age of twenty-five who remained single as of January 1, 1772, be sent off to Barba, a factory village near the Urals mountains, to be forcibly wed to male residents.² Noble landlords had an interest in early marriage, too: each marriage meant the formation of a tiaglo, a new workteam, and hence, greater productivity on the estate. Landlords encouraged and sometimes forced their peasants to wed. In 1777, Prince V. G. Orlov required that all women on his estates at Sidorovskoe marry by the age of twenty. When in 1779 his bailiff complained that widowed men were having difficulty finding new brides, Orlov ordered that brides be chosen and ordered to marry “without fail, any

excuses from the women notwithstanding." On the estates of Prince Usupov, unmarried girls older than fifteen were fined and so were widows younger than forty. Some landowners made peasants marry by lots and others forced peasants to move to other villages on their estates where spouses could be found, as did A. B. Golitsyn in 1772.3

Peasants themselves also exerted great pressure on reluctant women. Peasant men received their full allotment of land only after they married and only then did their community recognize them as adults. Peasant widowers needed a wife to care for children and to assume a woman's share of the farm work. The addition of a female laborer enhanced the well-being of a household. Consequently, although she might have her parents' support, a peasant maiden who wished to remain single gained no sympathy from her community. Viewing women as a crucial labor resource, peasants (female as well as male) joined together, if they were serfs or perhaps soliciting the help of their noble owner or the bailiff, to ensure that unmarried or widowed male kin found a bride.4 The consequence of these combined efforts was early and almost universal marriage. By the age of twenty, most peasant women had become wives.

Parents, rather than the young, had the final say in this all-important decision. To make parting with a daughter easier and to reduce the financial loss to her parents, in many locales a groom's parents presented the bride's family with a klodka, or brideprice, which also helped to defray the costs of the wedding. The klodka represented a major expenditure. Understandably, the parents of a marriagable son, eager to recoup their loss, sought a maiden who was healthy and a good worker. His parents took the initiative, dispatching a matchmaker (usually an older female relative) to view a prospective bride. If she proved satisfactory, the parents would inspect each other's households. Then, if both found the arrangement suitable, they would negotiate the content of the trousseau and the amount of brideprice and strike a deal orally, the fathers or heads of households clapping hands to make it binding. Then everyone would drink. The arrangement was primarily economic: "We've got a buyer and you've got the goods, the matchmaker would announce to the parents of a prospective bride. Celebrated with elaborate ritual, the wedding integrated the couple into the community. Ribald jokes and emblems of marital fertility figured prominently.

Early marriages were fruitful marriages. Wed young, peasant women (like other Russian women), spent far more of their fertile years as married women than did their contemporaries in the West. They lacked any knowledge of birth control so far as the literature reveals. The state, with its own vested interest in marital fertility, punished "ferociously" women who used infanticide as a means of birth control: the women were subjected to prolonged and painful execution.5 Fruitfulness carried risks for a mother, who faced death each time she gave birth. If she managed to survive her childbearing years, a peasant woman would give birth, on the average, to seven children. Perhaps half of those children would live to adulthood. The care of infants and small children necessarily took second or even third place to work required for a household's survival. And some child care practices were downright harmful: the ubiquitous pacifier, made from chewed bread or gruel, wrapped up in a rag and stuffed in the infant's mouth to satisfy hunger while her mother was working; swaddling; the custom of feeding an infant solid food at a very early age. "My early childhood was not accompanied by any particularly outstanding events, unless one counts the fact that I survived," wrote Semen Kanatchikov in his autobiography. "I wasn't devoured by a pig, I wasn't butted by a cow, I didn't drown in a pool, and I didn't die of some infectious disease the way thousands of peasant children perished in those days, abandoned without any care during the summer harvest season... [M]y only source, according to some sources, brought eighteen children into this world — according to others the number was twelve — yet only four of us survived."6 Born in 1879, Kanatchikov grew up in a child care culture little changed from a century before. Practices such as those he described contributed to making Russia's rate of infant mortality among the highest ever known.

Women and Peasant Patriarchy
Serfdom intensified the patriarchal patterns that governed the peasant household, the basic economic unit of peasant society. Instead of interfering in peasant life themselves, most noble landlords and their bailiffs relied on the control exercised by the head of the household, known in Russian as the bol'shak, or "big one." In a sense, the bol'shak became their agent, even as he sought to protect household members from bailiff and serfwoman. Allocating tasks to the able-bodied and punishing miscreants, he forced household members to conduct themselves properly and work hard, thus ensuring agricultural productivity and community stability. To this end, the bol'shak was invested with near absolute power over everyone else in his household, sons

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Outside the Circle of Privilege

as well as daughters and daughters-in-law. For the young, marriage rarely meant the establishment of an independent household; instead, the couple joined the household of the husband’s parents, bringing an additional worker (the bride) and an increased allotment of land. Serf households often consisted of three-generational multiple families. Not until well into adulthood would a married man normally form a household of his own, usually at the death of the bol’shak, to whose authority he remained subject until then.

Where a woman stood on the ladder of household authority depended greatly on her age, childbearing status, and relationship to the household’s head. She began at the lowest rung following her marriage, which brought her into an alien household, the bride of a man she might barely know. At the beck and call of her mother-in-law and sisters-in-law, living in a hut where in winter everyone slept in a single room and privacy was nonexistent, she was expected to perform the lowliest of labor. If her husband was underage or absent, she might even become subject to the sexual advances of her father-in-law. Sexual relations between the two were considered incestuous by the Russian Orthodox Church and condemned by the peasant community. Nevertheless, such sexual relations occurred sufficiently often to be denoted by special words in the Russian language: snokhachetskiv, derived from the word snokha (daughter-in-law), and meaning sexual relations between father and daughter-in-law; snoshnik, meaning a man who had sexual relations with his daughter-in-law.

The picture seems pretty grim. Yet when they evaluate peasant women’s status, historians disagree. Some, drawing attention to the unquestionably patriarchal character of the peasant household, have emphasized a woman’s subjection. Peasant custom, they note, granted a husband the right to “instruct” his wife, with his fists if necessary, and peasants exercised that right freely, often, and usually with impunity. Historians who have worked with court records from the 1870s and later have turned up occasionally horrific accounts of wifebeating; in the second half of the nineteenth century, many educated observers would describe in grisly detail the brutality with which peasant husbands treated their wives. This evidence has led them to conclude that peasant women were “slaves of slaves.”

Others, however, present a more complex and positive picture. Without disputing the power relations in the peasant household, they emphasize the many ameliorating factors. The community placed limits on wife abuse, they observe, and point to decisions by such communities to punish those who exceeded the norms or beat a woman “without good reason.” In 1741, for example, peasants in a Siberian village unanimously condemned one of their members for “living with his wife without love and beating her…prematurely and without cause.” In 1782, the fellow villagers of another denounced him to the authorities for beating his wife “for no good reason.” Faced with a brutal husband, some women simply fled, or they lived separately with the community’s approval, even remarrying without divorcing, or so cases from Siberia indicate. Other women gave as good as they got: when Savva and Ekaterina Balashev fell to quarreling in 1741 and he slammed her with his fist, she slapped him, seized him by the hair and beat his head against the wall, scraping his face with her nails. In 1818, Domna Khvostova explained to a local court that she could not bear to live with her husband, Grigori, despite the injunctions of the local authorities, because he always beat her. Wives sometimes resorted to magic to deal with difficult husbands, giving them the evil eye in order to force them to cease their abusive behavior or, sometimes, to do away with them altogether.

But most of all, such historians draw attention to the positive dimensions of peasant marriages. Russian popular culture was very far from prudish. Bawdy songs, jokes, and sayings often referred to sexuality quite explicitly and marriage rituals were saturated with erotic symbols and references to sexual activity. Relations between peasant couples could be warm and mutually supportive, these historians contend. The few documents left by literate peasants who lived in Siberia do, indeed, provide examples of great mutual tenderness and affection. In 1797, the peasant Ivan Khudiakov, working elsewhere, implored his wife Anna to “tell me as much as you can about your health, my dearest love.” Egor Tropin, likewise away at work pined so painfully for his wife that he fled back to the village to visit her. A third requested his wife, Katerina, to heat up the bathhouse so that he could bathe himself “there on your lap, like a little child, or rather like a great big child.” These court cases and letters derive from Siberia, where serfdom was never in force and central authority relatively weak; it is hard to know whether the relations they portray prevailed elsewhere as well.

What is certain is that other satisfactions awaited a peasant woman who proved patient and hard-working and whose husband remained alive. A married woman’s situation improved with time. The birth of her first child, preferably a son, established her position in her husband’s household. As she continued to bear sons, her status further improved and she assumed responsibility for their early acculturation. Around the age of forty, she and her husband would set up a household of their own, usually following the death of the bol’shak and his wife. Now the peasant woman herself was the

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8 Quoted in Minevlo, "Vseprobiuczestviva," 168-69.
9 Quoted in Nina A. Minevlo, Russkaiia krest’ianskaia sem’ia v zapadnoi siberi (sveti- pervyi polevyi xxv c. (Novosibirsk: Nauka, 1979), 138.
bol'shukha, the "big one's" wife, with authority over the female half of the household and greater stature in the community. Preparing food, welcoming guests, her hospitality provided a crucial ingredient in village social and religious festivities. It became her responsibility to allocate the labor of other women – to decide who would do the cooking, tend the animals, look after the children, and so forth. The rewards that came to a wife with time, however, depended on her husband’s survival and continuing role in the community.

In this patriarchal culture and household-based economy, the loss of her husband altered a woman’s status at once. High rates of mortality meant that the chances of widowhood were likewise high. Women’s inferior status vis-à-vis men made it difficult for a widow to remain head of her own household. Although most peasant communities recognized a widow’s right to a share of the household property, including an allotment of land, that plot of land was usually too small to support an independent household, especially if the widow was raising small children. Taking advantage of her vulnerability, fellow villagers might try to repossess the widow’s allotment. Grown sons brought more land and security but more problems, too, because sons might challenge the mother’s authority within the household. Widows’ requests for support from estate authorities suggest that such women often found it hard to manage adult sons. These difficulties surely encouraged widows to consider remarriage. In any event, the authorities and fellow villagers who sought to ensure that single women married applied much the same pressures to widows. The result was that widows rarely lived independently in the village. A few left the estate altogether. Most either resided in the deceased husband’s household or remarried, often to a bol shak, which made them bol’shukha in their new husband’s household.10

Nobles and Serfs

Peasant serfs dwelt in the shadow of their owners’ arbitrariness. To some nobles, power brought a sense of paternalistic (or in the case of women, maternalist) responsibility, or so some memoirs suggest. “When someone happened to fall ill in the village, my mother, eschewing medical assistance, treated all the illnesses herself,” remembered Anna Labzina. On festive days occasionally arranged for their peasants, mother and daughter would serve the peasants with their own hands. “I’m very worried about the fate of our servants,” wrote Maria Volkova in 1812. The servants had been left behind in Moscow to guard belongings when the family fled to the provinces during Napoleon’s invasion. “None of us care about the financial losses, however large they might be; but we won’t rest easy until we learn whether our people, both in Moscow and at [our estate] in Vysokii, have remained safe from harm.”11

Although most noble landowners refrained from interfering in the everyday life of peasants, it is indisputable that some female as well as male landlords sometimes abused their authority over their peasants in gross and destructive ways. Few were as cruel as the notorious Daria Saltikova, who inherited 600 serfs from her husband and over the course of seven years, tortured scores of them to death. Six years after the investigation was launched in 1762, Saltikova was stripped of her noble status, pilloried for an hour in Moscow and imprisoned in a convent in Arkhangelsk province for the remainder of her life. Less spectacular cruelty was more common, especially toward house serfs, who far more than field workers were likely to come into contact with their mistress or master. Avdotia Borisovna Alexandrova, who owned several hundred serfs, was a "holy terror" to her house serfs. She thrashed her favorite housemaid with a rolling pin, boxed the others’ ears, and flogged all her female serfs with nettles.12 In order to ensure that her seamstresses did not doze off in the evenings, Maria Neklyudova would fasten the irate Spanish fly to their necks and, to keep them from fleeing, would seat them in her own room and attach them to their chairs by their braids.13 Other mistresses and masters were simply very unkind, unwilling to recognize that their serfs had feelings just like theirs. Advertisements for serfs reflect this vividly: “For sale, a 33-year-old village baba [married peasant woman] of good behavior” or “for sale 27-year-old baba with her ten year old son.”14 Varvara Turgeneva, mother of the novelist Ivan Turgenev, sometimes ordered the marriages of her female house serfs. When an infant was born he was sent away from the house, so that Turgeneva could enjoy his mother’s undivided attention. Although women owners as a group were no more prone to cruelty than men, there is little evidence that the womanhood that mistresses and woman serf shared offered the latter either protection or a common bond.

Their sexuality made serf women uniquely vulnerable to their masters. Sexual relations between noble men and female peasants appears almost to have been commonplace. There was a lively trade in young serf women;

14 Hartley, A Social History, 69.
attractive ones brought good prices at the marketplace. At the turn of the
nineteenth century, a young man about town might spend as much as 500 rubles
for a woman who caught his fancy, while ordinary housemaids sold for no
more than 50. Even the writer Ivan Turgenev, an opponent of serfdom, proved
unable to resist the temptation. In 1832, after being exiled to his estate for his
writings about the injustice of serfdom, Turgenev entertained himself with
a young chambermaid whom he had reportedly purchased for 700 rubles.
A few men pressed their authority further, creating entire peasant harems
for themselves. One example is the wealthy A. P. Koshkarev, who divided
his house into male and female halves, and kept a harem of twelve to fifteen
female serfs. The young women were outfitted in European clothing, pre-
sented with a dowry, salaried, and educated. In addition to sexual services,
their position required them to read to their master and play cards with
him. Although their status left them subject to slaps and whippings for al-
leged misdemeanors, most apparently preferred it to the heavy toil that was
a peasant woman’s usual lot. Another example is Alexandr Lakovlev, Alexander
Herzen’s uncle, who “created a whole harem of country girls,” and was nearly
murdered by his serfs for his “interference” with their daughters.19

For peasant men, whose sense of honor rested in part on their ability to
uphold the chastity of their wife and daughters, the inability to protect their
women from an owner’s depredations must surely have intensified feelings
of helplessness and rage. In 1828, peasants owned by the landowner Iosif
Chesnovskii unanimously denounced him for “committing forcible forna-
tion with their wives and for corrupting the virginity of their young daughters
of ten years of age and younger,” in a case brought by a priest before the Synod,
which ordered that Chesnovskii be deprived of the management of his pe-
nants.20 Few peasants found such powerful protectors. Decisions such as the
Synod’s were difficult to enforce.

Between Elite and Peasant

In many ways, the lives of women who resided in cities or towns differed
little from those of the peasantry. Like everyone else, they were assigned to
estates – mainly artisans, townspeople (meschchane), and merchants following
Catherine the Great’s Charter to the Towns of 1775. Constituting somewhat
over one-third of urban dwellers through the end of the eighteenth century
according to Boris Mironov’s calculations (the remainder belonged to the

17 Boris Mironov, Razdebi vtoroi t 1734–1890 gody (Leningrad: Nauka, 1990), 82.
18 Harlley, A Social History, 201–2. 19 Quoted in Harlley, A Social History, 81.
20 Alfred Rieber, Merchants and Entrepreneurs in Imperial Russia (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of
21 Irina G. Kuskova, Razumovskoe khezhteistvo. Ocherki istorii xvi-nachala xxe vekh (Riazan: Matr, 1990),
112.
22 G. T. Polihov-Severtsov, Nahi deley-kuptsy (St. Petersburg, 1927), 109.
inducement of my father, I decided to marry," wrote the merchant Ivan Tolchenov in his diary. "On the 9th, we rode to Moscow on that matter. The 14th, I viewed the young woman, the daughter of the merchant Aleksei Ivanovich Osorgin in Kozevnyiki, who was destined by heavenly fate to be my spouse. The 17th the agreement [between the father of the bride and the father of the groom] was negotiated."23 In Moscow, elaborate "showings" of eligible merchant daughters took place regularly, the girls with their mothers proceeding slowly down a lane in the park, permitting eligible bachelors and matchmakers to survey them at their leisure.

Even if they lived in some respects as the Domostroi had instructed centuries before, merchant and townspeople nevertheless might play a role in business. Businesses were almost invariably family affairs. Wives and daughters sometimes helped behind the scenes, providing advice or keeping accounts, as Julia did at her father's behest. Or they took their turn behind the counter or at a desk, especially when family enterprises were small and new, very much as did their counterparts in France or Great Britain in the early phases of industrial development. Aided by the unusually high level of literacy in their communities and by their community's support, some Old Believer women took part in entrepreneurial activities and ran family enterprises. One example is the Vékula Morozov and Sons Manufacturing Company, founded by Savva Morozov while he was still a serf. In 1837, Savva's son, Elisei, established a dyeworks of his own. A devout Old Believer who devoted most of his time to religious activities, Elisei Morozov left the management of the business to his wife.24

Other women traded independently. It has been estimated that there were some 9,000 female hawkers and traders in Moscow in 1805 (as compared with 14,000 men).25 One such independent trader was Katryna Nikutenko, the wife of a serf. Married to a man unable to support her, she earned a pittance by buying and selling second-hand goods in the town of Ostrogoshch. Women who ran more lucrative businesses on their own were usually widows, such as Evgenia Rastorgueva. Married to a man who traded in gold, silver, and diamonds, after her husband's death in 1848, Rastorgueva managed the business for nine years until she married her own head clerk and transferred the responsibilities to him. Most women who traded independently owned only a small business or a string of small businesses: they made and sold an enormous variety of goods, from bricks to fish, from tobacco to steel buckets. They ran haulage and cab firms and owned grain-importing businesses and hotels. Most of the women traders probably lacked a husband because until 1863 married women faced substantial obstacles to registering as independent tradeswomen.26

The State Intervenes

In 1791, a peasant woman had her tongue cut out for spreading the rumor that Peter the Great was the son of a German, swapped at birth for a daughter. The belief that Peter was the Anti-Christ was widespread, especially among Old Believers. How else to explain the new burdens that Peter imposed on his people? The changes introduced by Peter and his successors affected women of Russia's taxpaying population, townspeople as well as peasants, in a number of enduring ways. The most profound derived from the military draft that Peter introduced. From the time of his reign until the reform of the military in 1874, recruitment into the army removed millions of able-bodied men from their families. The draft created a new social category, the soldier's wife (soldatkina). In times of warfare, recruitment could remove a substantial number of young men from their villages. On one large estate in Tambov province, for example, the war of 1812 took the husbands of over a quarter of the women aged twenty-five to twenty-nine. Initially, service was for life; in 1793, the term was reduced to twenty-five years and in 1834, to twenty. The impact on the woman left behind could be devastating. "What sort of use is it who destroys the peasants' homes, takes our husbands for soldiers and leaves us orphaned with our children and forces us to weep for an age?" a woman complained about Peter the Great.27

If she derived from the peasantry, the soldatkina often found herself in the most marginal position. Because conscription legally emancipated the serfs from the authority of the landlord, his wife and children, too, became legally "free." As free persons, they often lost their husbands' share of the communal land and all other benefits from the estate. Some were reduced to begging for alms in the village; others continued to live as dependents with their husband's family or with relatives. However, because each represented an extra mouth to feed and a potential threat to the other women of the household and community, soldatkina might be driven from the village. Such women became highly vulnerable. They might even be unlawfully re-enslaved, as was

26 Ibid., 65-6; Michelle Lamarche Marrese, A Woman's Kingdom: Noblewomen and the Control of Property in Russia, 1775-1881 (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2002), 130-1.
27 Quoted in Lindsay Hughes, Russia in the Age of Peter the Great (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 106.
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one soldier's wife who worked for a state official and bore him several illegitimate children. Claiming that she was the wife of one of his household serfs, he eventually sold her to another noble. She was freed after her original owners verified that she was a soldier's wife, but her children, having been raised and fed by her employer, remained serfs.

The cities to which such women migrated offered them little in the way of respectable employment, and large numbers of men who were prepared to pay for sexual companionship. Some women took up petty trade, many more hired out as domestic servants. A few became minor success stories, owning small workshops or commercial establishments. Others entered a bigamous marriage, as did Evdokia Ivanova doch', who married the state peasant Mikhail Dorofeev in 1739, ten days before he began his military service. Having heard no news from him for six years, in 1745 she married another man.28 However, enough women turned to prostitution as a temporary or permanent expedient that soldiers' wives acquired an unsavory reputation. In 1680, when Tsar Paul I ordered prostitutes to be rounded up and sent off to work in factories in the Far East, half the women who were arrested in Moscow turned out to be soldatki. Soldiers' wives also figured prominently among the mothers of illegitimate children. In the course of the eighteenth century, illegitimacy and infanticide became much more visible than they had been in the earlier period and perhaps more commonplace as well.

The social problems engendered by the Petrine revolution moved the state to action. Concern to increase the population prompted initial attempts to preserve the lives of illegitimate children. In 1712, and again in 1714 and 1715, Peter the Great ordered the establishment of hospitals in which mothers were permitted to deposit their illegitimate children in secret. After Peter's death, however, the shelters were dismantled. When, in the reign of Catherine the Great, the state again took steps to deal with illegitimate children, it adopted a substantially different approach. Prompted by Ivan Venskov, Catherine the Great established foundling homes in Moscow in 1764 and St. Petersburg in 1771. Catherine intended the homes to preserve the lives of illegitimate children, and equally important, to create an entirely new kind of individual, an industrious citizen imbued with enlightened morality, who would promote the welfare of the country. The homes, which raised no barriers to admission, became magnets not only for illegitimate children but also for the legitimately born offspring of mothers and fathers unable or unwilling to care for them, who abandoned their children to the homes in the hope of retrieving them later, when the children reached working age. Despite

problems with extraordinarily high infant mortality rates and the continuing abuse of the system by parents seeking to free themselves from the burdens of childrearing, the Russian government proved reluctant to adopt measures to limit open admissions. The foundling homes represented one of the very few state-sponsored charitable institutions in Russia. They served as a sign of imperial good works and of rulers' maternal or paternal care for their most vulnerable and unfortunate subjects.29

The state extended no such care to their mothers, however, should the women be known to engage in "vice." Instead, the state showed its strictest and most controlling face, incorporating into public policy the misogynistic and repressive aspects of popular and religious culture. Slavic ecclesiastical literature, which regarded all nonprocreative sex as sinful, drew little distinction between a woman who had sex in exchange for money and a woman who slept with a man other than her husband without financial gain. In both cases, she was called a Bludnietsa, a "loose woman," who offended morality and public decency. The view of women as sexually insatiable creatures who deliberately enticed men to sin was reflected in eighteenth century lubki (popular prints), which show women being beaten for having lovers. But the popular prints also suggest a "rough-and-ready equality and openness" about the relations between the sexes that resembled what we know of peasant culture. They depict men and women enjoying one another, singing, dancing, sledding on ice hills, drinking. In these prints, seduction is a game, deception is part of it and the relations between men and women are playful.30

As the state intensified its control over Russian society, the more repressive and misogynist view of sexuality became reflected in some aspects of law and public policy. Sexual relations became matters of political concern. The law code of 1649 ordered anyone who arranged "lecherous relations" between men and women to be beaten with a knout. Embraced by Peter the Great, the idea of the well-ordered police state (Polizeiordnung), which promoted well-being through active social intervention, intensified state concern with individual sexual conduct. In 1716, Peter the Great ordered that "loose women" be kept away from the regiments. If women violated his order, they risked being driven away naked. Two years later, Peter instructed the police chief of the recently founded city of St. Petersburg to close all "obscene establishments" in the city, such as taverns and gambling parlors. For the crime of adultery, women were sentenced to forced labor, usually in spinning mills. A decree of July 26, 1721, stated that women and girls convicted of "loose behavior" were


to be handed over to the College of Mines and Manufactures and given as workers to industrialists or sent to Moscow. In 1736, Empress Anna ordered all “debauched” women to be beaten with a cat-of-nine-tails and thrown out of their homes.31

Even as she permitted unwed mothers to abandon infants anonymously, Catherine the Great laid the foundation for police supervision of women’s public behavior and the regulation of their morality. In 1762 she designated a hospital in St. Petersburg for the confinement of women of “debauched behavior.” The intensified effort to control illicit sexual behavior resulted from growing fears about the spread of venereal disease. Women identified by soldiers as the source of their venereal infection were to be confined and, after treatment, sent to labor in the mines of Siberia if they lacked a means of support. In 1800, Emperor Paul I sentenced to forced labor in Siberian factories all women who “have turned to drunkenness, indecency and a dissolute life.”32 Laws also enjoined the police to pick up “vagrant maids” of dubious character who belonged to “the poorest and most disreputable classes” if they might be harboring venereal disease.33

Beginning in 1843, the government adopted a different approach to the problem of “loose women.” Following the example of the French, the Russians moved to regulate prostitution with the aim of controlling venereal disease. Illicit sexual behavior would henceforward be tolerated, but only within the boundaries set by the state. In a number of major cities, the police organized a system of licensed brothels, where physicians conducted regular examinations to ensure the venereal health of the prostitutes. Women who “traded in vice” on their own were likewise required to register as prostitutes, to carry a ticket attesting to the state of their health, and to undergo weekly medical examinations. If they sold their sexual favors without this official stamp, women risked prosecution for “secret debauchery.”

The policy clearly targeted lower-class women who lived outside the boundaries of the patriarchal family. The women identified as responsible for spreading syphilis were soldier’s wives living apart from their husbands, domestic servants, peddlers, factory workers, and vagrants. To ensure the health of the population, the police conducted periodic roundups near barracks and factories, in taverns and flophouses, and in places where members of the lower classes dwelled and disported themselves. Police forced women found to be diseased to register as prostitutes. Prostitution thus became tolerated, although not strictly legal. And “loose women,” now patrolled by the police, had been transformed into “public women.”

Across the Divide of Culture

By making education and culture as well as birth a measure of elite status, the changes introduced in the eighteenth century both intensified social distinctions and provided new ways to overcome them. Nonelite women gained access to education for the first time. In the 1750s, midwifery courses for women were first introduced; obstetrical institutes opened in St. Petersburg in 1785 and in Moscow in 1801. Attached to Smolny Institute was a school that admitted daughters of townsmen, although by 1791 nobles so inundated it that they outnumbered commoners. In 1796, Catherine also established state primary and high schools that admitted girls and educated them for free. Alexander I extended her work, establishing parish schools at the base of the educational system. Some nonelite parents were prepared to spend money to educate daughters in private schools. “During my childhood,” recalled the clergyman Dmitrii Rostislavov, born in 1809, “many clergymen, townspeople, and even rich peasants saw a need to teach reading . . . to their daughters.”34 In Anna Virt’s private school in Moscow, daughters of townsmen and a priest studied together with the offspring of officials, military officers, and foreigners in 1818–20. The numbers remained small. Altogether, there were 1,178 female pupils in Russia by 1792, and 2,007 by 1823 (of 24,064 total pupils). In 1824, it was calculated that there were 338 girls in district schools and 3,420 in private schools. Most female students undoubtedly derived from the elite.35

Education remained inaccessible to the overwhelming majority of women who were not of gentle birth. Literacy rates for Russia’s population were very low: in 1834, only 1 of 208 Russians could read and write; in 1856, 1 of 143, the vast majority of them male. And the opportunities for education that did exist aimed primarily at preparing women for family life. At Smolny, townswomen were taught to be “accomplished seamstresses and weavers, stocking knitters and cooks,” and once married, to divide their time among the nursery and the kitchen, the barn, the courtyard and the kitchen garden.36 The private schools to which townsmen and merchants sometimes


32 Ibid., 15.

33 Quoted in Laura Engelstein, “Gender and the Juridical Subject: Prostitution and Rape in Nineteenth-Century Criminal Codes,” *Journal of Modern History* 60 (September 1988), 484.


sent their daughters set themselves much the same goals. So did education for daughters of the clerical estate, whose women lived much as did their peasant neighbors. In 1843, in response to clerical concerns about lagging behind educated society and complaints about uneducated wives, the Russian Orthodox Church opened a special school for daughters of the clergy, with the goal of preparing them for marriage: “to provide pleasant company for their husbands, to help them keep church buildings in good order, to prepare medicine for the ill, to be occupied with the rearing of their children, and to maintain the household in good order.” The family remained women's destined sphere.

Conclusion

In some ways, the impact of the Petrine revolution on women of Russia's non-elite population was barely perceptible. Peasant women continued to conduct themselves much as they had for centuries, the struggle for survival shaping their choices, their own culture shaping their worldview, and village institutions governing their daily lives. The lives of townswomen and merchant women, too, differed little from those of their pre-Petrine forebears. To be sure, an upper crust came to share aspects of the new elite worldview. In the late eighteenth century, the wealthy Dmitrov merchant Ivan Tolchenov and his wife entertained dignitaries in their home and socialized frequently with the privileged. In 1812, the wives of bankers and wealthy merchants, like some noblewomen, joined the Women’s Patriotic Society, seeking to be “useful to society.” But the majority lived far more traditional lives, passing their days within the realm of the family, preparing for marriage, and thereafter, bearing and raising their children and tending their household. At least until the mid-nineteenth century, and arguably, even later, the Westernizing trends that Peter initiated made barely a dent on most women’s lives.

When the state did touch women’s lives, the impact was primarily negative. Serfdom intensified the patriarchal character of peasant household and community life. The extension of serfdom left peasant women vulnerable to sexual as well as economic exploitation. The state took the husbands of peasants and townswomen for soldiers; it burdened the lower orders with new demands for taxes and other services. Those women who wished – or were forced – to seek a life outside the family might become subject to police surveillance and punishment and after 1843, they risked being labeled as public women by officials and police. Policing women’s sexual morality had become a state concern.

REFORMERS AND REBELS

Whatever noble family you asked about in those days, you heard one and the same thing: the children had fought with the parents..."Their beliefs are different"—and that was enough. An epidemic seized girls in particular—an epidemic of flight from their parents' home. You would hear that a daughter had fled the household of one or the other noble family.1

The death of Tsar Nicholas I in 1855 and the ascension of his son, Alexander II (1855–81) introduced far-reaching changes into the lives of Russia's women and men. Censorship eased and the parameters of public discourse widened. The emancipation of the serfs was proclaimed in 1861; other reforms followed. In 1864, the government initiated a new judicial system, modeled on systems in the West, and a new, elective organ of local self-government, the zemstvo. These new public institutions, the first to exist relatively independently of the autocracy, fostered the development of a class of professionals whose role was to serve the public, rather than the state. An effort to overcome Russia's political, economic, and social backwardness, the reforms led to the emergence of a more vital, diverse, and assertive civil society. They also unleashed new challenges to the traditional gender and family order, increasingly from women themselves.

The Woman Question

Educated society experienced a sense of hope in the early years of Alexander II's reign. As controls were lifted, social forces long held in check burst forth in luxuriant profusion. Public opinion of a recognizable sort began to emerge, nourished by the proliferation of journals; at informal gatherings in private homes, heated discussions of contemporary issues might last far

into the night. People of diverse views and backgrounds debated and some eventually joined forces to work for the betterment of society during those early, optimistic years. Seeking curtailment of arbitrary political authority and enhancement of individual rights, among other changes, socially conscious Russians subjected every traditional institution to reevaluation, the patriarchal family included. Authoritarian family relations, some believed, reproduced and reinforced the social and political hierarchy; to foster the democratization of society, family relations would have to be democratized, too.

Social critics hoped that women would play a vital role in creating a new social order. They saw women as victims: of an educational system that retarded intellectual inquiry and individual development, of a patriarchal family order that distorted the human personality. At the same time, they believed that women possessed qualities that made their participation in social change essential, in particular, a capacity for moral action that seemed so lacking in public life and so crucial for social regeneration. Critics disagreed, however, about the character of women's contributions. Was women's primary role to devote themselves to the family and to appropriate mothering of future citizens? Or did the broader society need women's energies, too? As substantial numbers of women and men sought to answer these questions for themselves and others, the "woman question" emerged as one of the central issues of the day.

The debate unfolded in 1856, when Nikolai Pirogov (1810–81), the surgeon and educator, published an essay entitled "Questions of Life" that posed explicitly the question of women's social role. Pirogov had just returned from the Crimean War (1854–6), where he had supervised some 160 women who had volunteered as nurses. Moved by patriotism and the desire to sacrifice themselves for the fatherland, the women had served without pay and working right at the front, faced many of the same dangers and hardships as soldiers. To Pirogov, the women's exemplary work demonstrated that "up to now, we have completely ignored the marvelous gifts of our women."2 To his mind, those gifts were more applicable at home. "Woman is already emancipated, perhaps even more than man," Pirogov asserted in his essay. "Though she cannot, according to our laws, become a soldier, a bureaucrat, a minister. But can a man really nurse, raise and nurture children younger than eight years old? Can he really be society's bond, its flower and ornament? And so, let women understand their high purpose... that they, by attending to the cradle of man, setting up the games of his childhood, teaching his lips to babble their first words and first prayers, are the main architects of society."3

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3 Quoted in Adele Lindenmeyer, "Public Life, Private Virtues: Women in Russian Charity, 1762–1914," Signs 18, no. 3 (Spring 1993), 574.
For the sake of these responsibilities, Pirogov advocated improvements in women's education. Educated women would be better mothers to future male citizens and truer companions to their husbands, thus able to share more fully in men's concerns and struggles. "Let the thought of educating herself for this goal, to live for the inevitable struggle and sacrifice, permeate the moral fiber of women," Pirogov proclaimed. Pirogov set a goal that the tsar also could embrace. In 1858, Alexander II approved a proposal for secondary schools for girls. The purpose: to improve the quality of public life by providing that "religious, moral and mental education which is required of every woman, and especially, of future mothers." The new schools, called gymnasia, were to be day schools, open to girls of all estates. Modeled on secondary schools for boys, they offered a six-year course of study that included Russian language, religion, arithmetic, and a smattering of science. Progimnasia were opened the same year, offering a three-year course of training and a similar curriculum, exclusive of the science. The government offered the schools only a small subsidy; to cover the remaining costs, the schools depended on student fees and the contributions of public organizations. That support was forthcoming, but only slowly. By 1865, there were 29 gymnasia and 75 proginmazia in all of Russia; by 1883, there were 100 and 182 of each respectively, with an enrollment of roughly 50,000 students. In 1876 a supplementary year of pedagogical training became available to gymnasia students. It qualified graduates for employment as a domestic teacher or tutor and as teachers in elementary schools and the first four classes of girls' secondary schools.

Some social critics adopted a more radical stance. For the critic Nikolai Dobroliubov, writing in 1856, the family was a "Realm of Darkness," in which "despotism" bore most heavily on women. Although his essay by that title focused on the merchant milieu as depicted by the playwright Alexander Ostrovski, in Dobroliubov's view family despotism was more widespread. Almost everywhere, he contended, "women have about as much value as parasites." Degradation of women is so pervasive that even the men who allow their wives some say in the household would never think that "a woman is also a person like themselves, with her own rights. Indeed, women themselves don't believe it." A new concern with women's rights in the family prompted critiques of imperial family law, which endowed the head of the household with virtually unlimited authority over its members. There can be no true Christian love or hatred of vice and despotism in a family where despotism,

arbitrariness, and coercion reign and "wives are given over in slavery to their husband," declared the liberal jurist Mikhail Filippov in 1861.

The forthcoming emancipation of the serfs added an economic dimension to the woman question. The loss of servile labor would deprive many nobles of an easy living and force their daughters, who by custom had remained at home until marriage, to seek their own livelihood. Equally important, progressive young people of this era, in renouncing serfdom as an immoral institution, rejected the elite culture that they associated with it — a life of idleness and luxury, supported by the toil of others. For some, even dependence on a husband became unacceptable. The more radical were convinced that whether married or single, a woman must never "hang on the neck of a man."  

Women's Rights, Women's Opportunities

Discussion of the "woman question" took place in university hallways, in student apartments and the salons of the elite, and on the pages of the "thick journals" to which educated society subscribed. These journals had an immense impact, even in the provinces, where reading provided the primary contact with a larger world. The ideas prompted some readers to alter the way that they lived. Shortly after his article about the "woman question," in journals provided by a clergyman's son, Anna Korvin-Krukovskaya, the daughter of a well-to-do provincial noble family, put aside her fancy clothes and began to dress simply. She lost interest in parties, instead spending her time with her nose in her books. Anna's aunt criticized her unconventional niece in a letter to her own daughter: "Anna appears only at dinner," she complained. "The rest of the time she spends in her room, studying. She never keeps anyone company, never does needlework, never takes walks."

Encouraged by the attention of the press, elite women began to seek each other and to develop a sense of shared interests and identity as women. In 1859, noblewomen in the province of Vologda established separate meetings at gatherings of the provincial nobility. To minimize distinctions of wealth, they required participants to wear simple dress. Speaking in 1860, in the provincial town of Perm, a young teacher, E. A. Slovtsova-Kamskaia, emphasized the primacy of women's shared identity. "The morally developed woman of our time suffers for every injustice borne by another woman. Feelings of envy, ambition, coquetry, a slavish desire to please men at the expense of her sisters, should be alien to her.... Each act of kindness she performs for her sisters, she

4 Quoted in Barbara Alpern Engel, Mothers and Daughters: Women of the Intelligentsia in Nineteenth Century Russia (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2000), 32.
5 Ibid., 50. 6 Quoted in Engel, "Women as Revolutionaries," 349.
7 Quoted in William Wagner, Marriage, Property and Law in Late Imperial Russia (New York: Garland Press, 1991), 106.
8 Engel, Mothers and Daughters, 86. 9 Ibid., 66.
performs for herself.” In 1859, Russia’s first association aimed specifically at women emerged, the Society for Inexpensive Lodgings. Three well-educated women from elite backgrounds took the lead. They were Anna Filosofova (1837–1912), the wife of a high-ranking bureaucrat; Nadezhda Stasova (1822–?), the daughter of a court architect and godchild of Alexander I; and Maria Trubnikova (1835–97), the daughter of an exiled Decembrist (Vasily Ivashev), who had been raised by an aristocratic aunt and was married to the founder of the Stock Market News. With the goal of providing decent housing and otherwise assisting needy women, the Society resembled the philanthropic endeavors with which elite women had long been engaged. But it also went further. The Society established a sewing workshop to provide employment for the residents of their housing, and to free them from domestic chores, it provided day care for small children and a communal kitchen to prepare meals. To traditional philanthropy, the women had brought the democratic spirit of the new era.

Other women took action on their own behalf. In 1859 women began to audit university lectures, which had just been reopened to the public. The first to attend was Natalia Korsini, half Russian, half Italian, daughter of an architect. Simply dressed, her hair cut short, Korsini was introduced to the roomful of men by the rector of St. Petersburg University. Other women followed. Within a year, women’s presence during university lectures had become almost commonplace. Most of the women sought only to supplement their superficial educations, but a few studied systematically and attempted to earn a degree. In 1861, several scientists at the St. Petersburg Medical Surgery Academy opened their laboratories to women. Among those who began to audit medical lectures were Maria Bokova and Nadezhda Suslova, the daughter of a serf. Suslova went on to complete her medical studies in Zurich, where she earned the degree of Doctor of Medicine in 1867, the first woman to receive such a degree from a European university. Her success inspired hundreds of other women to follow her example.

Women’s aspirations for education and independence enjoyed the support of many men. By and large, professors and students welcomed women into lecture halls and laboratories and treated them respectfully. Asked for their opinion in 1861, university authorities in St. Petersburg, Kharkov, Kazan, and Kiev endorsed the presence of women in university halls. Some professors even advocated awarding women degrees on an equal basis with men. Progressive young men sometimes contracted “fictitious marriages” with young women whose parents forbade them to pursue their goals. In these supposedly un consummated unions, a man would wed a woman solely in order to liberate her from her parents. Not infrequently, a “fictitious marriage” became a real one. Such was the case with Peter Bokov, a medical student, who contracted a “fictitious marriage” to enable his wife Maria to pursue her medical studies. However, when Maria Bokova fell in love with the noted physiologist, Ivan Sechenov, her husband made no fuss.11 “New people” rejected the ownership of human beings and with it, sexual jealousy. The three settled down in a ménage à trois, one of two that are known about in the early 1860s.

This was a period when some women openly flouted conventional gender expectations. They cropped their hair, dispensed with crinolines, and simplified their dress; they smoked in public, went about the streets without an escort, and wore blue-tinted glasses. A few even donned the clothing of men in order to enjoy greater freedom (Fig. 7). Young rebels became known to their critics as nihilists (nihilisti is the female version in Russian) because of their rejection of “the stagnant past and all tradition.” Their aspirations sometimes brought them into conflict with their parents. “How can you express ideas without my permission?” queried a mother of her newly assertive


eighteen-year-old daughter. "What sort of disrespect is this?" rhetorically inquired another. "Remember, you are in the presence of your elders."13

A few went still further. Viewing family life as constricting for women, they sought to reject it altogether. Their views can be heard in the credo of Lelenka, the heroine of Nadezhda Khvoshchinskaya's novella The Boarding School Girl, published in 1860. Lelenka proclaims "I will never fall in love, never. It's stupid . . . I swear that I will never again grant someone power over me . . . On the contrary, I say to everyone, do as I have done. Liberate yourselves, all you people with hands and a strong will! Live alone. Work, knowledge, freedom - that's what life is all about." Similarly dismissive of the pleasures of personal and family life, Nadezhda Suslova confided to a friend in 1861, "The thought of locking oneself up in the tiny world of the family, where a person acts as the knight of one's own private interests strikes me as vile."13

Nikolai Chernyshevskii's enormously influential novel, What Is To Be Done? (1863), offered an answer to the "woman question." Drawing upon his contemporaries' efforts to create new ways of living, loving, and working, Chernyshevskii created a model for women and men to follow. The heroine is Vera Pavlovna, the daughter of humble parents. Oppressed by her greedy and materialistic mother, who tries to force her into marriage with a nobleman, she escapes with the help of her brother's tutor, who marries Vera to free her. They achieve near-perfect equality. Vera enjoys a room of her own, respect from her husband, and meaningful, socially useful work. She organizes a sewing workshop according to collective principles, sharing the profits with the women workers, who soon realize it is best to live collectively, too. Personal possessiveness has no place in the lives of these "new people," as Chernyshevskii entitled them. When Vera Pavlovna falls in love with another man, her husband gracefully bows out of the picture, leaving her to marry the other. Toward the end of the novel, Chernyshevskii introduced the issue of higher education for women. Vera Pavlovna trains as a physician and begins to practice medicine; she also becomes a mother, although it is never quite clear who cares for the children while she is at work. A satisfying and egalitarian family life, organization of labor and life according to collective principles, work for the social good - here was Chernyshevskii's formula for women's liberation, inspired by the writings of the French utopian socialists and the actions of his own contemporaries. By depicting the personal and productive relations that would constitute the socialist future, Chernyshevskii's novel linked women's liberation with the more sweeping goals of social


transformation and revolution. His book became a key work in shaping the outlook of this and subsequent generations.

Women and the Radical Movement

In their own fashion, conservative officials shared Chernyshevskii's belief in the radical implications of women's liberation. Almost from the first, they associated women's efforts to forge new lives with threats to the political order. The outbreak of student unrest in the early 1860s brought women's presence in university classrooms to an end, although women had played only a minimal role in the disorders. In July 1863, the Ministry of Education issued a directive to university councils banning women from the university; that winter, women were expelled from university lecture halls. A year later, the Medical Surgery Academy expelled women, too. "The question of the introduction of female physicians is, in my opinion, the first step in accomplishing the so-called emancipation of women, which has its origin and foundation in the communist theories of St. Simon and others," explained P. A. Dubovitskii, the president of the Academy.16 Varvara Kashevarova-Rudneva, an orphan of Jewish background, succeeded in remaining at the academy by promising to treat Bashkir women of Orenburg province, who refused treatment by male physicians on account of their religion. One of the physicians who sponsored her cautioned her to avoid student meetings at any cost. Recognizing that "the smallest slip would be grounds for expulsion," Kashevarova-Rudneva followed his advice "to the letter."15

Women such as Kashevarova-Rudneva, pursuing studies in fields that had previously been restricted to men, threatened to transgress the boundaries that separated women's work from men's. In response, the government reconfigured those boundaries by explicitly excluding women from state service for the first time and defining fields it considered appropriate for women. An imperial decree of January 14, 1871, encouraged women to train for work as midwives and elementary school teachers, but sought to limit women's employment in other occupations, among them clerical work, stenography, and telegraph operation. From some occupations, women were to be excluded altogether. The decree ordered government and public (obshchestvenny) institutions to fire any woman who was currently employed in a position other than those the decree defined as appropriate. Over the next sixteen months, agents of the political police sought out hundreds of "persons of the female
sex," as police reports invariably phrased it, who were employed, for example, as cashiers and ticket sellers in railroad stations, as librarians in public libraries, and as clerks in government offices and pressured their superiors to dismiss them. The decree became law. Although in the years to follow, public and semipublic institutions increasingly hired women to fill clerical and similar positions, and the law was both revised and flouted, civil service positions remained permanently closed to women. When, in the early 1880s, Kashchevareva-Rudneva sought to fulfill the obligation she had incurred to the Orenburg officials who had supported her education as a physician, this law prevented her from doing so. The only position the local military administration could offer her was in the military hospital. Part of the state system, the position would have granted her all the privileges enjoyed by male servants. Consequently, in the eyes of the authorities, it would have created a dangerous precedent. So, recalled Kashchevareva-Rudneva, "they decided not to give me a position, despite the money they had spent on my education!!"

It is a measure of the determination and skill of women's movement leaders that they accomplished so much in the face of such anxieties. By the late 1860s, they aimed to establish advanced education for women. Dmitri Tolstoy, the conservative Minister of Education from 1866 to 1880, adamantly opposed it. To admit women into universities, Tolstoy believed, "threatened to disturb the seriousness of university teaching and to lower the intellectual and moral level of these higher educational institutions." Women's personal connections and political skills helped to overcome his resistance. Anna Filosofova took to lobbying Tolstoy at the society functions and balls to which she accompanied her well-placed husband. Although Filosofova's behavior earned her the reputation of being a "red" in high government circles, she, like her colleagues, self-consciously adopted moderate tactics and avoided the violent confrontations that increasingly characterized the student and radical movements. Instead, the women sought to attain their goals through personal appeals and petitioning. They gathered signatures in favor of advanced education for women from hundreds of women, including members of high society, from liberal members of the government, and many male professors. These tactics worked. Thanks to them, women gained access to advanced secondary courses (the Alachinski courses, 1869), university preparatory courses (the Liubianskii courses, 1869), and courses that prepared women for secondary school teaching (the Guerrier courses, 1872).

Government fears concerning female radicalism actually assisted the campaign for women's higher education, at least in the short run. Frustrated by  

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60 Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Rossiskoi Federatsii, fond 159, Third Section, 2 ekspeditsia, 1870, d.60, l.685.  
62 Quoted in Johnson, Women's Struggle, 33.

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their inability to earn a university or medical degree at home, and inspired by the example of Nadezhda Suslova, women sought professional training abroad. Most went to Zurich, Switzerland, where the university admitted women: by 1873, 104 women had enrolled. But the Swiss canton of Zurich also harbored the largest and most active Russian émigré colony in Western Europe. The government grew concerned that in foreign lands, women students would imbibe dangerous ideas. To provide educational opportunities in the relative security of the homeland, as well as to satisfy Russia's pressing need for trained medical personnel, in 1872 the government established four-year-long Courses for Learned Midwives in St. Petersburg. The following year, a government decree ordered women studying abroad to return to Russia, threatening that those who resisted would be barred from licensing examinations in Russia. In 1876, an additional year was added to the Courses for Learned Midwives and the courses renamed Women's Medical Courses. Graduates became qualified to work as physicians. That same year, the government sanctioned the opening of "higher courses" for women, essentially women's universities that awarded no degree. Kazan University became the first to take advantage of the opportunity; in 1878, Kiev and St. Petersburg followed. The St. Petersburg courses, known as the Pestuzhev courses, became the most well-known and long-lasting. Within a decade, the advanced educational opportunities that Russia offered women had surpassed those of every other nation in Europe.

The Quest for Knowledge

Many women eagerly grasped new educational opportunities. When Elizaveta Kovalskaya organized free courses for women seeking higher education in Kharkov in the mid 1860s, so many women wanted to audit that she had trouble squeezing them all into her house. The first year that the Liubianskii courses opened, they admitted 190 students; the Alachinski courses admitted more than 100. The numbers grew rapidly. By 1878–9, some 1300 students attended higher courses during the academic year. Although the majority of these students derived from elite backgrounds, there were women of more humble origins among them. Praskova Ivanovskaya, the daughter of a village priest in Tula province, had long dreamed of enrolling in the Alachinski courses. After graduating from the local parish school, she set off for St. Petersburg together with her sister. The courses, she discovered, were set up "strictly on democratic principles.... Everyone who was fresh and alive passed through its laboratory, as water passes through sand." Alongside

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63 Ibid., 47, 48–51, 65.  
daughters of nobles and bureaucrats, merchants, clergy, and professionals sat the daughters of lower officials, townsmen, craftsmen, soldiers, and peasants. And although anti-Semitism was rife in Russian society, it appears to have been entirely absent in the hallways of the Women’s Medical Courses, where Jewish women comprised close to one-third of students at the end of the 1870s. The social distinctions that continued by law to divide tsarist subjects seemed to dissolve in the hallways of women’s educational institutions.

To gain access to those institutions, women often had to pay a hefty price, financial and, sometimes, personal. To be sure, some parents proved supportive. The three Subbotina sisters, for example, noblewomen by birth, were fortunate in their widowed mother, Sofia. In addition to subsidizing the studies of her daughters in Zurich, Sofia Subbotina also paid for the education of their friend, Anna Toporkova, the daughter of a silversmith. The father of Alexandra Kornilova, a merchant who oversaw a flourishing trade in porcelain, regarded benignly the behavior of his four daughters and their friends. To an aunt who was appalled by their “nihilist” appearance and the fact that the girls attended the Alarchinskii courses and returned home late and unescorted in the evenings, the father responded laughingly, “I can’t hire four governesses for them.” But other parents regarded their daughter’s aspirations with suspicion. Faced with her father’s adamant refusal to permit her to pursue advanced studies in mathematics, Sofia Kovalevskaya contracted a fictitious marriage in 1868. She went off to study at Heidelberg, and became Europe’s first woman doctorate in mathematics and the first woman to hold a university chair (in Stockholm). Closely guarded by her father, who hated “superfluous” learning, Anna Evreinova, the daughter of the high-ranking commandant of Pavlovsk, crossed the frontier illegally in order to pursue her studies at the University of Leipzig. Some women students bore the scars of the bitter struggle they had had to wage on behalf of their right to study. According to those who knew her, that struggle left Teofilia Poljak, a student at the Women’s Medical Courses and the daughter of a Jewish townsmen, sarcastic, distrustful, and pessimistic.

Students also endured material deprivations for the sake of their education. It cost an annual fee of fifty rubles per year to attend the higher courses, severely reducing the presence of women of the lower social orders. Daughters of the nobility, unlike sons, were ineligible for government stipends. On their own, women students lived in damp and crowded quarters, three or four of them to a room, often sleeping in the same bed by turns, eating meals in cheap cookshops and subsisting on sausage, black bread, and tea. To earn a few kopeks, they stayed up all night copying documents. Some failed to survive: at least three of the auditors of women’s higher courses died of starvation; of the eighty-nine students who enrolled in the Courses for Learned Midwives in 1872, twelve were dead before their graduation in 1876. One, the daughter of a rank-and-file soldier who had gained entry to medical school entirely through her own efforts, died during the final examination itself. In subsequent years, better funding increased the survival rate of women medical students. Even so, by 1880, death had claimed fifteen more of them.

Nevertheless, many found this an exciting time. In the classroom and student quarters of cities, students discovered others like themselves, young women with whom they could share ideas and experiences, often for the first time. The experience was electrifying, especially for those women who had grown up in provincial isolation or in sheltered households. Circles and discussion groups proliferated. In St. Petersburg, meetings of women’s circles became so common that women barely had time to go from one meeting to the next. In smoke-filled rooms, fortified by endless cups of tea, young women in simple clothing — the uniform of the migiliska — discussed “the woman question” and exchanged their views on marriage and the family, on women’s position in society, and on their purpose in life. Some adopted extreme positions, seeking “to liberate themselves from the stagnant past and all tradition, from the family and from the marital authority that had enslaved them,” as did Alexandra Kornilova and her closest companions. Social themes also drew women’s attention, partly under the influence of Chernyshevskii. In addition to their regular coursework, women read and discussed books that dealt with social problems and their solution. They read Chernyshevskii, John Stuart Mill, even Karl Marx, following the translation of Das Kapital into Russian in 1872.

After completing schoolwork, most former students sought employment as midwives, medical assistants (fel’dhery), pharmacists, physicians, journalists, and most commonly of all, teachers. Of the 796 women who enrolled in the Women’s Medical courses, 698 graduated, giving Russia a far larger number of practicing female physicians than other European nations. Most graduates of the Bestuzhev courses became teachers. The profession of teaching became increasingly feminized: in rural areas, women constituted 20 percent of rural teachers in 1880, and close to 40 percent by 1894. In addition to being a means to earn a living, many women viewed their work in broader terms as well. For some, it offered a means to improve women’s status: “in the name of advancing our movement forward... I would not only walk through the mud...”

13 Quoted in Engel, Mothers and Daughters, 112.
15 Johanson, Women’s Struggle, 64.
16 Quoted in Engel, Mothers and Daughters, 113.
but wallow in it,” declared Varvara Nekrasova, a graduate of the Women's Medical Courses who served at the front during the Russo-Turkish war of 1877–8. In 1885, after becoming the first woman to be appointed to the staff of a hospital, A. F. Zhegina confided to a friend: “If I do nothing else worthwhile in my life, this will provide a bit of comfort in my old age. I have cast at least one more stone amidst the countless stones that have begun to fill the immense chasm that separates one half of humanity from the other.” Others acted on religious and philanthropic imperatives that their mothers and grandmothers had fulfilled in more traditional ways. In their diaries, for example, women teachers commonly depicted themselves as having sacrificed lives of comfort and forsaken friends and family in order to teach the children of the peasantry.

These women professionals rarely lead easy lives. The demand for positions, especially as teachers, often exceeded the supply. Paid less than their male counterparts and often hired in less prestigious positions, many toiled in remote villages or in the most impoverished sections of the city. Ekaterina Slanskaia, who worked as a physician in the slums of St. Petersburg, received patients in the tiny apartment that was all that she could afford. Some patients waited in the entryway, some in her kitchen, some on the stairs. On the days she made house calls, she worked from 8:00 a.m. until late into the night. As women, they faced prejudice from their superiors and in the countryside, from those whom they sought to serve. Considering the woman teacher a buryshnia, that is, a lady, peasant villagers regarded her as incapable of disciplining their children. They distrusted her knowledge and believed she should be paid less than a male teacher. In some cases, peasants even tried to drive women teachers from the village by making life thoroughly miserable for them. Persevering in the face of such obstacles, these professional women devoted their lives to serving the people.

Service of Another Sort

Others chose to serve in a different fashion. Precisely as government officials had feared, educational opportunities eventually led a minority of women students to oppose the social and political order. Vera Figner was one of them. Born in 1852, the oldest of six children in a well-to-do noble family, she spent her childhood in the backwoods of provincial Kazan, her adolescence in the Smolny Institute. After her graduation, a liberal uncle drew her attention to the disparity between her own privileged status as a noble and the destitution of the peasantry, and she resolved to devote her life to working for their benefit. The example of Nadezhda Suslova convinced her to become a physician. Because it was impossible to study medicine in Russia at the time, she resolved to go to Zurich. When her father refused his permission, she accepted a marriage proposal from Aleksei Filippov, a young candidate in law, and convinced her smitten husband to accompany her abroad. She embarked on her studies in the spring of 1872, at the age of 19. In Zurich, discussions with women like herself eventually convinced her that her own privileged position rested upon the exploitation of “the people,” that is, Russia’s peasantry and that however dedicated, professionals of every stripe nevertheless “lived at the people’s expense.” The only way to draw close to “the people” was to abandon one’s privileged position and live among them. A semester short of earning her degree, Figner quit medical school, returned to Russia, and became involved in the radical movement that her schoolmates had already joined.

Hundreds of young women followed a similar path. Abandoning or neglecting their studies, they joined forces with men to serve the greater good. Convinced that the Russian peasantry was inherently socialist by virtue of its communal landownership and administration, these radicals (called populists, or narodniki, in Russian) aspired to devote themselves to “the people.” These populists wanted to repay the debt that they believed they owed “the people.” Some wished, sooner or later, to help foment a peasant-based socialist revolution. Very few were themselves peasants. Instead, the majority of women activists came from noble or bureaucratic or other privileged backgrounds; virtually all of them had received some advanced education. Most took up the cause of the Russian peasantry at a very early age (under twenty). They joined a movement that was self-consciously egalitarian and based on principles of honesty and mutual respect among comrades.

In 1874, women went to “the people” as men did, in an effort to overcome the vast social chasm that separated them from the peasantry. Some disguised themselves as peasants or factory workers. Praskovia Ivanovskaya reaped and bound hay alongside peasant women, ate the same watery gruel for breakfast and slept with her co-workers under an open sky after a workday that lasted from sunup to sundown. Beta Kaminskaia, the only child of a well-to-do Jewish merchant, labored in a rope factory. She, too, lived just like her co-workers, in an airless, filthy, and vermin-ridden dormitory, beginning work at 4:00 a.m., and ending it at 8:00 p.m., and working while sitting on a damp and filthy floor. Others took positions in the countryside that were somewhat less demanding — that is, they worked as teachers, midwives, and medical

22 Ibid., 169, 170.
23 Christine Ruscio, Gender, Class, and the Professionalization of Russian City Teachers, 1860–1914 (Pittsburgh, Pa.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1994), 33, 71.
25 Engel, Mothers and Daughters, 138.
aided. Vera Figner became one of these, finding a position as a paramedical worker for a zemstvo.

Everywhere, these young idealists met frustration. Co-workers, exhausted after a long day, proved deaf to attempts to promote socialist ideas, which bounced off them "like peas off a wall." Two or three months working in a rope factory was more than enough for Praskovia Ivanovskaya, who found the conditions difficult and depressing. Women encountered suspicion, too. Very quickly, Vera Figner found that a whole league of local officials had organized against her. "They spread all sorts of false rumors: that I had no identity card, that my diploma was false, and so forth. . . . People began to be afraid of me: peasants made detours through back yards when they visited my house." When they tried to spread socialist propaganda, few of the women exercised the necessary care; they spoke openly, carried leaflets on their person, rarely attempted to conceal their ideas and goals. Yet discussing socialism, or even hinting at injustice in the existing order, was cause for arrest. By the end of the 1870s, hundreds of populist women sat in prison.

A woman initiated the next phase of the radical movement. In January 1878, Vera Zasulich, a member of a revolutionary circle from the south of Russia, shot General Trepov, the governor general of St. Petersburg, before a room full of witnesses. A daughter of impoverished nobility, Zasulich had already suffered four years of prison and exile for her involvement in the notorious Nечаев affair of the late 1860s. At her trial for the shooting of Trepov, she explained that she had acted because Trepov had ordered a political prisoner beaten for his refusal to remove his cap in the governor's presence. "I waited for some response," she declared. "There was nothing to stop Trepov, or someone just as powerful as he, from repeating the same violence over and over. I resolved at that point, even if it cost my life, to prove that no one who abused a human being that way could be sure of getting away with it." The jury that considered her case acquitced Zasulich, ending the government's willingness to bring political cases before the new courts.

The revolutionary movement divided over the use of violence for political purposes. Some (including Zasulich herself) held to the peaceful populist program and rejected the use of terror. Others embraced terrorism, with bloody consequences. Their rationale was both personal and political. They wanted to avenge themselves for their comrades' sufferings in prison; they hoped to force the government to concede civil liberties such as freedom of speech, press, and assembly. Many had grown impatient for change. "My past experience had convinced me that the only way to change the existing order was by force," Vera Figner explained at her trial. The target was the tsar himself and prominent government officials. Five abortive attempts to assassinate the tsar preceded the successful assault of March 1, 1881. Each attempt cost the lives of innocent people. A woman, Sofia Perovskaya, led the successful attack on Tsar Alexander II. She became the first Russian woman to be executed for a political crime. Perovskaya claimed to have no regrets about what she had done: "I have lived according to my convictions; I could not have acted otherwise, and so I await the future with a clear conscience," she told her mother on the eve of her execution by hanging.11

To the modern eye as well as to their own contemporaries, these women appeared as strikingly self-denying. They brought an exaltation and intensity to their radical activity that often distinguished them from their male comrades. In order to act upon their commitment to "the people," women neglected or denied their conventional social roles. They refused to be dutiful daughters or submissive wives. Instead, they entered fictitious marriages to elude parents who sought to limit their freedom, and left husbands whose views did not coincide with their own, as Figner eventually did. To avoid pregnancy or emotional entanglement, some sought to avoid sexual relations altogether. This was the course adopted by the women's circle that Figner joined in Zurich. When the women negotiated their union with a group of men in preparation for activity back in Russia, the women pressed for the inclusion of celibacy in their organization's regulations. The men over-ruled them.

Sofia Perovskaya, who began an affair with her comrade Andrei Zhelilov in the final year of terrorist struggle, had insisted to her brother only a year before that she would never become involved with a man so long as the struggle continued. "That sort of personal happiness would be absolutely impossible for me, because however much I loved a man, every moment of attraction would be poisoned by the awareness that my beloved friends were perishing [in prison] . . . and that 'the people' still suffered under the yoke of despotism." Neither she nor Zhelilov allowed the relationship to interfere with their revolutionary work. Women who did become sexually involved with men and bore children usually left the children in the care of others and returned to the revolutionary movement. Olga Litvakovich, a former member of Figner's Zurich circle, posed the problem dramatically: "Yes, it's a sin for revolutionaries to start a family. Men and women both must stand alone, like soldiers under a hail of bullets. But in your youth, you sometimes forget that revolutionaries' lives are measured not in years, but in days and hours." At times, women's self-denying asceticism risked becoming

24 *Five Sisters*, 41. 30 Ibid., 78.
absurd, as for example, when Sofia Bardina, also a member of Figner's circle, confessed to loving strawberries and cream and thereafter, was considered a bourgeois by other members of her group. But for the most part, others found women's self-denial compelling and not ridiculous.

Radical women's asceticism had deep roots in Russia's culture. Although most of them were atheists, in explaining themselves, women sometimes invoked principles rooted in the Russian Orthodox religious faith that remained a powerful element in their culture. Vera Zasulich serves as one example. After fleeing abroad following her acquittal in the Trepopov affair, she became one of the founders of Russian Marxism. Later, reflecting on her own life, she attributed her first moral lesson to the Gospels, and wrote that it was her quest "for a crown of thorns" that attracted her to the revolutionary movement. Vera Figner, too, claimed the Gospels influenced her and her classmates. "It was the most authoritative source we knew, not only because we had grown used to seeing it as a holy book in childhood, but because of its inner spiritual beauty." From the Gospels, she and her friends drew the lesson that "self-sacrifice is the supreme act of which man is capable."34

Radical women's selflessness and readiness for self-sacrifice greatly endeared them to their comrades, who regarded them as moral exemplars and inspirations. "She seemed to us the embodiment of everything elevated, excellent, altruistic and ideal. She was self-sacrificing in matters large and small," reads a typical description.35 Such behavior also won them the sympathy of the educated public. "They are Saints!" declared the spectators at one political trial, the Trial of the Fifty (1877), which included many women who had abandoned lives of privilege to work in factories. These exemplary attributes were gender-neutral, in the sense that men, too, could embody them. But judging by the accounts of the people who knew them, men felt far less impelled than women to become exemplars.

Conclusion

The reform era offered far-reaching challenges to Russia's elite gender order. The subordination of women to men and the family became subject to biting critiques; progressive opinion encouraged women to contribute their special energies to the regeneration of society as a whole. Advanced education became available to women for the first time. New employment opportunities opened, especially in the fields of medicine and teaching. For the first time, thousands of educated women attained economic independence and a greater freedom to shape their own lives. Hundreds more joined radical movements that sought to overturn Russia's social and political order. Social boundaries dissolved when the daughters of townsmen, clergy, peasants, soldiers, and merchants joined the daughters of nobles and bureaucratic elites in lecture halls and prison cells.

Yet for all these changes, some things remained the same. When they rebelled against the confining aspects of the traditional female role, women often drew upon ideals of altruism and self-sacrifice that were rooted in religious tradition - just as the Decembrist wives had done half a century before. "We aspired to a pure life and to personal sanctity," recalled Vera Figner.36 These ideals offered a compelling alternative to the ideology of domesticity that some elites had embraced and they allowed women to insert themselves into the public events of their time. Despite the radical women's more visible role, their moral aspirations and rationale for activism resembled those of their law-abiding sisters. Like radicals, women teachers often sought to serve "the people" and they too, renounced their own sexuality to pursue their pedagogical mission. By caring for young children, teachers believed that they fulfilled their religious and family roles - but not within the family.

Self-denial and altruism - service of another sort - provided women with access to a life outside the home. It also set a standard of behavior that people of subsequent generations would expect from women in public life and that women themselves would often strive to emulate.

Suggestions for Further Reading


34 Quoted in Engel, Mothers and Daughters, 141. 35 Ibid., 680.
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PEASANTS AND PROLETARIANS

"I come from a peasant family with a home in the village of Muzhino, Kisemskeii
uezd, Vsevolozhsk district, Tver, where my family spends the summer; winters, they
live in the town of Krasnoi Kholm. I had not yet reached the age of sixteen [the
legal age of marriage] or become a woman when my parents, having overcome my
resistance, married me off to the nineteen-year-old peasant Dmitrii Kulikov... who
had already become corrupted..."

Thus began the petition, five type-written pages in length, that Evdokia
Ivanovna Kulikova addressed to the tsar on June 11, 1897. In it, Kulikova
claimed to have endured virtually every abuse that a peasant household could
inflict on a woman: an unwanted marriage to a drunken and abusive husband
who "tyrannized" and mistreated her and fooled around with other women, a
widowed father-in-law who seemed bent on seducing her while her husband
was absent for military service. Having fled the village, Kulikova earned
her living as a seamstress in the city of St. Petersburg. At the close of her
petition, she requested the right to separate formally from her husband.
Tens of thousands of peasant women deluged state and local authorities with
similar requests toward the end of the nineteenth century, encouraged by
new economic and cultural opportunities to sever their ties with their former
way of life. Yet although these numbers are substantial, they represent but
a tiny fraction of the more than 80 million peasants (about 86 percent of
the population, according to the census of 1897) who lived scattered over
the vast expanse of European Russia. Peasant women's petitions for marital
separation signified both how much and how little had changed in their lives.

The Post-Emancipation Village

When it finally began in 1861, the emancipation of the serfs made remarkably
little difference to the lives of most peasant women. Neither the terms of

1 Russian State Historical Archive (hereafter RGIA), fond 1412, opis 221, ed. kh. 204 (Kulikova,
1897), 1.
the emancipation nor its immediate consequences disturbed long-standing patriarchal patterns of village life. Indeed, in some respects, the emancipation intensified them by shifting to peasant institutions the powers that noble masters had once enjoyed. Peasant life remained a struggle for survival, requiring unremitting toil and offering to most peasants little more than subsistence. In this struggle, the collective “we” took precedence over the individual “I.” Although in the decades following the emancipation, far-reaching economic and cultural changes sweeping Russia began to impinge on village life, villagers accepted innovation selectively and only when the advantages were obvious and threats to the peasant way of life minimal or non-existent. Neither the emancipation nor subsequent changes upset the gendered hierarchy.

Peasant men, collectively, determined the community’s common good. As a result of the emancipation, the assembly of male heads of household (the skhod) acquired the responsibility to maintain peace and order and the authority that went with it. The skhod was also responsible for land, which was the property of the community rather than of individuals. Allocating land as well as tax and redemption obligations to each household, the skhod became the primary arbiter of village life. Ordinarily, the skhod allocated land according to the number of adult males. Thus, land and formal authority in the community remained “male attributes” except under unusual circumstances.

Women’s authority, by contrast, was informal. As did men, women gained authority with age. The hal’shukha, wife of the household’s head, supervised the women beneath her in the household hierarchy, assigning work, overseeing its performance, and punishing those who failed to do their share. Older women’s words carried weight in the community, where reputation remained key to honor, which women’s talk might make or break. Older women with the requisite skills served as healers or as the granny midwives (babki) who delivered virtually all village children. By contrast with male peasants who practiced a trade in the village and were paid in cash (blacksmiths and carpenters, for example), healers and midwives were usually compensated in kind: a loaf of bread, a few eggs, a length of fabric. Babki nevertheless enjoyed an honored place in village society.3

That women’s position in the community could empower them is evident in instances where women defended their community’s well-being against threats from outsiders. Take, for example, the behavior of the women of Arkhangelskaya, a village in Viatka province. In October 1890, the entire village mobilized to prevent the police from inventorying and confiscating the moveable property of villagers in arrears on their tax payments. The women figured among the more aggressive. One threw mud at a policeman and threatened another with her stick; another woman struck a policeman. Two more women pushed a policeman in the chest, while a third tore the scarf from yet another policeman’s neck as the crowd of peasants surrounded the intruders, calling them thieves and brigands. The police were forced to beat a hasty, if temporary, retreat. Brandishing hoes and pitchforks, women attacked policemen who sought to confiscate village property. Women figured prominently in other cases, too. They used their bodies to block efforts to survey disputed land. Axe-wielding women joined peasant men cutting trees in noblemen’s forests. In the decades following the emancipation, women often played a visible role in defense of household and community.4

Most women found it more difficult to defend or assert themselves as individuals, however, and as far as can be determined, few tried. The necessities of collective survival determined women’s choices and shaped their lives and life cycles. As long as the household formed the basic unit of production, marriage (and remarriage) remained an economic necessity as well as the expected mode of life. The young enjoyed somewhat more freedom to select their spouse than they had in the days of serfdom, engaging in lively courtship games and even, in some villages, pairing off and spending the night together in a version of the “bundling” practices that were widespread in colonial America. The final decision, nevertheless, belonged to the parents, who kept the interests of their household uppermost in their mind. Take the case of Evdokia Kulikova, whose impoverished peasant parents arranged for their daughter’s marriage to Dmitrii, the son of a wealthy household, in order to ensure her economic well-being and perhaps, their own. Dmitrii’s martial choices were limited by the bad reputation he had already acquired in the village. In marrying him off to a respectable and hardworking young woman, his parents hoped to settle him down as well as to add a woman worker to their household. Near-universal, early, and patriarchal marriage continued to be the norm. Most women wed by the age of twenty-two; by age fifty, only 4 percent of peasant women had not yet married.5 Some of these spinsters had declined to marry for religious reasons, one of the few reasons that villagers honored. Commonly known as chernichki (literally, black wearers because of the dark clothing they habitually wore), these women lived alone in a hut on the outskirts of the village. Practicing celibacy and living a life of prayer, they

earned a meager income from spinning, weaving, or hiring out by the day or from preparing the dead for burial and reading the Psalter for them. They, and widowed female heads of households, were unique in their freedom from male authority.

But most women spent their lives directly subject to male authority. Regarding women as potentially unruly and disruptive, peasants believed that a woman required a man’s control. Custom granted a husband the right to “instruct” a wife, by force if necessary, when the woman erred or was disobedient. “The more you beat your wife, the tastier the cabbage soup,” as the saying went. Women’s unchaste or adulterous behavior could sully a household’s honor; contentious or discontented wives might damage its economic well-being. When complex households divided prematurely, peasants usually attributed the division to women’s quarrels or to young wives’ eagerness to escape their in-laws’ authority. When a household’s well-being and a woman’s interests conflicted, village authorities almost invariably sided with the household.

This order of priorities is clear from the decisions of cantonal (volo1’s) courts, introduced by the government in 1864 to adjudicate disputes between peasants on the basis of customary law. Unlike the courts instituted by the judicial reforms of 1864, over which educated men presided, in the cantonal courts peasants themselves acted as judges. In respect to women’s rights in marriage, peasant courts and regular courts usually rendered very different decisions. Historians have found that in the decades after their establishment, post-reform courts often rendered decisions that enhanced the rights of women. To Jewish women, the courts offered a means to defend rights to alimony and property that had hitherto been denied them, making divorce more expensive and difficult for men. The reformed courts defended the rights of peasant women, too. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, the State Senate, Russia’s equivalent of a supreme court, rendered decisions that served to extend the grounds upon which peasant women might leave an abusive or neglectful husband, thereby increasing the ability of both regular courts and peasant officials to respond to such women’s pleas.6

Such trends offer a contrast to the deliberations of the cantonal courts, to which peasant women most frequently appealed. To be sure, peasant women enjoyed considerable success when they sought to protect their property rights against the incursions of others. They were far less successful, however, when they sought relief from a husband’s physical abuse. Many of the wifebeating cases that came before cantonal courts involved truly horrific treatment: a husband hitching his wife to a cart along with the horses, then flogging her and making her run all the way back to his village; a husband mercilessly beating his wife with an iron implement, and suchlike. However, even when a woman could provide evidence of chilling brutality by supplying the requisite witnesses, the court most often punished the husband by sentencing him to time in the “cooler,” or to a fine or beating. The court then ordered the wife to return to his household and admonished her husband to treat her properly in the future. In rare cases, a cantonal court or village elder might accede to a woman’s request to live separately; when that happened, they usually required her to pay a sum of money (known as diroko, or quittance in popular parlance), to enable her husband’s household to hire a replacement worker.7 A household’s viability remained the community’s highest priority.

Even the welfare of infants took second place. Thus, Russian peasants had an unusually high rate of infant mortality, even by comparison with their Muslim Tatar neighbors, in part because Russian mothers, unlike Tatar mothers, were not spared from fieldwork even when their infants were nursing. In summer when they worked in the fields, Russian women usually left their infants at home, in the care of the elderly or young children, to be fed when hungry with the soska (a rag covering chewed bread or grains), which quickly putrefied in hot weather. The resulting stomach ailments carried off “astounding numbers” of village children.8 Between 1887 and 1896, childhood mortality in European Russia was recorded as 432 per 1,000 live births. When physicians sought to ameliorate these conditions in the late nineteenth century, however, they encountered the resistance of peasant women. With the aid of scientific pamphlets aimed at a peasant audience, physicians campaigned against the widespread use of the soska and birthing with the aid of a “backward” village midwife, among other practices. Their campaign foundered, however, in the face of peasant women’s interdependence and mutual support, which somehow coexisted with the tensions that occasionally tore a household apart. A young woman giving birth ordinarily relied on older women of her household for assistance and advice. When the advice of medical experts came into conflict with the methods of female kin, mothers rejected the experts. As a result, physicians who tried to reform ingrained practices waged a losing battle.9

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8 David Ransel, “Infant-Care Cultures in the Russian Empire,” in Clemens, Engel, and Worobec, Russia’s Women, 115–19.

The Outside World Intrudes

Nevertheless, in the decades following the emancipation, the insularity of peasant life slowly began to give way. Efforts to increase popular literacy brought outside cultural influences to the village, the growing cash economy affected peasant consumption and patterns of work. Peasants adapted to these changes cautiously and selectively, however, and the changes were far more likely to affect men than women.

Education offers a good example. Following the emancipation of the serfs, the number of schools in the countryside expanded steadily. Between 1856 and 1896, the number of primary schools grew from 8,227 to 87,080 and the number of pupils from roughly 450,000 to roughly 3.8 million, the equivalent of 3.02 percent of the population. However, although the proportion of girl pupils grew from 8.2 to 21.3 percent, girls remained a distinct minority. Recognizing literacy as necessary for a son's future, most peasant parents regarded educating a daughter as frivolous. "Why should I teach a girl to read and write?" inquired one peasant. "She won't be a soldier, she won't be a shop assistant, and a peasant woman has no time to busy herself with reading books the way the lords do." "If you send her to school, she costs money; if you keep her at home, she makes money," declared another. Peasants regarded traditional skills such as a weaving and knitting as sufficient for girls. The results are reflected in rates of literacy. At the close of the nineteenth century, under 10 percent of peasant women could read and write according to the minimal standards of tsarist census-takers, by comparison with over a quarter of peasant men. Yet even this low rate represented an advance over earlier times, and rates were rising among the younger age groups. Peasant reluctance to send daughters to school eased only slowly. By 1911, when the number of primary school students reached more than 6.6 million (4.04 percent of the population), the proportion of girls stood at just under one-third. 10

The expansion of the cash economy in the aftermath of emancipation likewise affected the sexes differently. For women, it meant most of all a change in consumption patterns: the wearing of colorful wool or silk dresses, expensive shawls, belts and leather shoes, even hats on special occasions. Manufactured clothing and urban-style fashion increasingly became a mark of prestige in the countryside. Marriageable young women sometimes took up seasonal summer work to afford them. But initially, men rather than women were the more likely to participate in the marketplace regularly and as individuals. To pay taxes and redeem their land, as well as to purchase consumer goods such as kerosene, nails, tea, and sugar, or clothing for their daughters, peasants experienced a growing need for rubles. Increasing numbers took up other trades in addition to or instead of farming, especially in the area around Moscow known as the Central Industrial Region. Some men worked at home in their cottages, but ever more departed, leaving the wife to tend the land. The husband would visit on major holidays or during the slow season and send a portion of his earnings home. Because wives of absent husbands had to deal with local authorities and correspond with their men about domestic matters, literacy gained importance. In areas that had substantial male outmigration, women's literacy rates were noticeably above the average. But such women interacted with the marketplace mainly through men. "My dear husband, bring tea with you.... If there were money, we could have shoes made; in fact, one of the leather boots is falling apart and we need fur coats," wrote a wife to her migrant husband in the 1880s. 11

In some respects, men's absence made women's lives more difficult. If the wife remained in the household of her in-laws, tensions could escalate, as they had in the Kulikov household. If the wife lived separately, the burden of farm work and household responsibilities fell squarely on her shoulders. In addition to her customary work in the fields and at home, she had to perform her husband's labor, too, including plowing, which is physically very demanding. But in other ways, women's lives might improve. In villages with a high proportion of absent men, wife beating became less frequent and was judged more harshly by fellow villagers. As was the case in Cossack villages of the Don Region, where men's absence to perform military duties left women in charge of farming, peasant men's dependence on women's labor afforded women an unusual degree of independence. Some even gained authority over village affairs. In villages where substantial numbers of male heads of households worked elsewhere, their wives might participate in the decisions of the skliad, ordinarily an exclusively male institution. As one village correspondent put it, "Women's vote is necessary, because men are absent, and it is just, because women do all the work." 12 If a household also needed women's income, they initially sought it close to home.

Many of the trades women practiced in their cottages, such as producing homespun flax and hemp for the market, or wet nursing and raising children from founding homes in Moscow or St. Petersburg, were extensions of the work they had always performed. Laboring within the peasant household for the market added a new dimension to peasant women's work. The decades that followed the emancipation saw a rapid expansion of the number of women

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11 Quoted in Barbara Alpern Engel, Between the Fields and the City: Women, Work and Family in Russia, 1861-1914 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 42.

12 On Cossacks, see Shane O'Rourke, Warriors and Peasants (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 161; Quote from Engel, Between the Fields, 54.
and girls thus employed, some as young as six. Stuck in the countryside, peasant women offered a limitless reserve of cheap labor. Working in their cottages, they wound cotton thread on bobbins for a factory or sewed kid gloves or rolled hollow tubes for cigarettes from materials distributed by an entrepreneur, who paid them for their work and sold the finished product. Even independent craftswomen such as lace makers and stocking knitters often depended on middlemen to market their goods.

In many respects, these women had the worst of both worlds. Their intermediary position between household and market left them vulnerable to exploitation by middlemen and, much more rarely, middlewomen (often widows), who took advantage of the other women's inability to leave home to seek better terms. Nor did their modest financial contributions noticeably enhance women's status at home.13 Connected to the market by virtue of their income-producing activities, they nevertheless worked within the traditional patriarchal household. This was often the case even for the tens of thousands of peasant women who earned wages in nearby factories. Almost two-thirds of Russian industry, most of it producing textiles, was located in or near peasant villages. In the Vladimir-Kostroma textile region northeast of Moscow, women came to constitute over 40 percent of the rural-based industrial labor force by the end of the nineteenth century. However, household need continued to govern the rhythms of most peasant women's labor. Women labored at the factory while they were young and single, and they quit when they married or had children, unless there were older women in the household to raise the children for them. They regularly handed over a portion of their wages to the household head. As long as women remained in or near the village, patriarchal patterns continued to govern their lives. The vast majority of peasant women never ventured far from home.

Nevertheless, a growing minority of peasant women did leave to seek their fortune elsewhere. Many of them really needed the money, either for themselves or more likely, to help out the folks back home. Over time, it grew harder to earn money in the village. Factories began producing more cheaply the goods that women had once made by hand, reducing what women could earn from them to a bare pittance. Unmarried older women and widows found it relatively easy to depart, because they were the village's most marginal members. The obstacles were far greater for a marriageable girl or a married woman. Women's chastity remained important for a household's honor. Away from the patriarchal controls of village life and the scrutiny of fellow villagers, a woman might succumb to sexual temptation, might fall "despite herself."14 Married women needed their husband's permission to leave and if they had children, usually left them in the care of others.


Most women who departed did not go alone. Women from the same village or district might form *artels* (work collectives) and travel together to labor in other people's fields, cut peat in the swamps around Moscow, make bricks, harvest tobacco, or perform a variety of other poorly paid and backbreaking tasks. Women who worked year-round most often became domestic servants, as Evdokia Kulikova did when she first left her husband. Like most female migrants, Kulikova initially went to a place where she knew someone, in her case the town of Krasnoi Kholm. Kulikova eventually made her way to a larger city, another common pattern. By the early twentieth century, women constituted a significant minority of the migrant peasant population of both St. Petersburg and Moscow. Unlike Kulikova, however, most women migrants, having spent a few years in the city and scraped together a dowry, returned to the village to wed and settle down.

In the City

The move from village to city dramatically altered some migrant women's lives, although very few had sought the change for its own sake. Historians disagree about the impact of migration and waged labor on women. Peasant women usually left home in order to feed themselves, earn a dowry, and, if possible, contribute to their family economy. Economic necessity drove the women whom Praskovia Ivanovskaia encountered at an Odessa rope factory in the late 1870s; they had nowhere else to go "but the streets." They were "driven to the rope factory by the most pressing need, by the cruellest misfortune," Ivanovskaia concluded.15 Peasant women who earned wages, Kulikova among them, sent a portion to parents or in-laws.

Most women who worked experienced demoralizing working and living conditions. Women's proportion in the burgeoning factory labor force grew from about one in every five workers in 1885 to about one in every three by 1914. Before 1897, when factory legislation mandated a workday of eleven and one half hours, women workers often labored fourteen or more hours a day, six days a week. They lived in factory dormitories, where dozens crowded together in a single large room, or they rented a corner just big enough for their bed in an apartment. Factory women may have dreamed of a room of their own, but on their meager earnings, it was an unattainable luxury. The working and living conditions of the domestic servant were even more austere. In overcrowded urban apartments, many domestic servants lacked even the modest refuge available to their servant sisters in the West. Instead, they spent the night behind a screen in the passageway, or in the kitchen, or

even by the bed of their employer. The servant’s wage was low, her position often insecure, the work never-ending. Many enjoyed hardly any life outside the workplace. Did industrial labor leave the woman worker isolated and oppressed, so poorly paid that she was barred from the entertainments that her male counterparts enjoyed, as Rose Glickman has contended? Were domestic servants merely “white slaves,” performing the most degrading and undesirable of women’s work, existing as easy prey for sexual exploitation? Or did migration offer women a new kind of independence and freedom from patriarchal control?

There is evidence to support both sides of the argument. Particularly in the early post-emancipation years, the lives of laboring women were grim indeed, as radical women who attempted to organize women factory workers learned to their dismay. The women who labored beside Praskovia Ivanovskaia spent every break in their workday asleep, curled up on the filthy ropes on which they worked, breathing thick air with dust and smoke. She called the housewife at the center of the family and the deacon’s wife, the woman worker was “backward,” a “creature of a lower order,” an extension of the peasant milieu and an obstacle to men’s development. Men who embraced the cause of revolution often viewed a negative attitude toward the family, marriage, even women in general as “a necessity.”

Even so, cities offered peasant women opportunities. With a wage of their own in hand, women could extend their horizons and alter their fates in ways that were unthinkable in the village. Evdokia Kulikova was one beneficiary, aided by her ability to read and write. After a few years as a domestic, she enrolled in tailoring courses, where she mastered the craft of sewing women’s clothing and men’s and women’s underclothes, and began working as a skilled seamstress. Other women, too, felt “the ground of independence” beneath their feet, in the words of the weaver Taisia Slovachevskaia. Aspiring to emulate the appearance of their social betters, women workers spent their wages on urban-style fashions, skimping on food in order to afford a pair of boots or an attractive dress, which they paid a seamstress to copy from a shop window or a magazine (Fig. 8). Or like Kulikova, they made their clothing themselves. When, sporting a gold watch and fashionable dress, she returned to her husband’s village to renew her passport, to the villagers Kulikova looked “just like a lady.” In their free time, women workers sought to enjoy themselves. Urban fairs and pleasure gardens offered them inexpensive entertainments. Women eagerly participated in the amateur workers’ theaters that proliferated after the turn of the century, which cost them nothing. A few women workers attended the theater, too, purchasing the inexpensive tickets offered by the People’s House, an organization designed to provide edifying culture to the masses. Many more were likely to go to the movies, which became more accessible in the years before the outbreak of World War I. By inviting women to dress and amuse themselves in ways that women of other classes did, city life could erode social boundaries and make social distinctions seem less relevant.


Engel, Beyond the Fields, 132; RGIA, fond 1412, opis 212, ed. kh. 204 (Kulikova, 1897), 20.

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Quoted in Mark Steinberg, Moral Communities: The Culture of Class Relations in the Russian Printing Industry, 1867–1907 (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1992), 78.
Quoted in Glickman, Russian Factory Woman, 203.
Engel, Beyond the Fields, 137.
Engel, Between the Fields, 132; RGIA, fond 1412, opis 212, ed. kh. 204 (Kulikova, 1897), 20.
The experience of urban life could also leave women dissatisfied with circumstances that they had once taken for granted. Young village women, sent off to provincial towns for training as skilled midwives, refused to return to the countryside once their education ended. Instead, they took examinations to qualify them for urban practice and quickly moved to the city. Some migrant women lost the habit of fieldwork and developed a taste for urban amenities. City life could make social difference seem more burdensome and unjust. Proximity to the more well-to-do, the sense of new possibilities in life, raised laboring women's expectations without providing the women with the economic wherewithal to satisfy them or altering workplace practices that humiliated and demeaned women. Rising expectations would contribute to women's militancy.

Working women who had acquired a sense of their own dignity became more likely to resist abuses. Although women played a minor role in underground worker circles or in the strikes and labor organizations that remained illegal until 1905, in the 1890s a few working-class women sought to organize women such as themselves. One was Vera Karelova, born in 1870 and abandoned to a foundling home shortly after her birth. Following the death of her peasant foster mother, Karelova became a hospital worker and then a worker at a cotton spinning mill. In a workers' study circle, Karelova read radical literature at the end of a fourteen to sixteen hour workday and on Sundays. Another activist was Anna Boldyreva, a peasant from Tver province. Born the same year as Karelova, Boldyreva began her working life at the age of nine. A weaver at the Paul cotton weaving plant in St. Petersburg, she attended a Sunday school for workers in the mid-1880s and was drawn into an underground workers' study circle. In the early 1890s, the two women collaborated in organizing a small circle of women workers who read and discussed socialist literature together. They conducted themselves in the tradition of intelligentsia radicals of the 1870s. Living communally with working-class men, they shared wages, cooking, and housework. Equality and comrade-ship replaced traditional sex roles: "Among us there were no stupid jokes or coquetry. There was only purity of relations," remembered Karelova.53

Whatever the experience of an individual woman, and whatever the nature of her relations with men, it was women's freedom rather than its limitations that most struck many of their male contemporaries, tsarist officials among them. The growth of prostitution served as the most visible and troubling symbol of women's license. Suspecting all lower-class women on their own of "trading in vice," the state attempted to substitute for absent husbands and fathers its own patriarchal power. Women of the lower classes who thronged to Russia's cities in the latter part of the century felt the weight of laws governing prostitution, which were augmented following the emancipation of the serfs. The vague definition of the prostitute as a woman who "traded in vice" meant that women who plied the trade casually and intermittently—or perhaps not at all—risked encountering the police and becoming registered as a "professional" prostitute. A registered prostitute had to surrender her internal passport in exchange for a "yellow ticket" that clearly...

53 Quoted in Glickman, Russian Peasant Women, 173-80.
identified her trade and subjected her to police surveillance and weekly medical examinations to check for syphilitic infection.

The regulation system seriously reduced lower-class women's autonomy and freedom of movement. To ensure that women did not ply the trade secretly, special police agents encouraged yardmen (dvoriki) and landladies to keep an eye on unattached women suspected of prostitution. Ordinary citizens wrote letters to the medical police, anonymously denouncing women as prostitutes. "Such women spread disease and they should be given a ticket so that doctors will know who they are," reads one such anonymous letter, like most deriving from a lower-class male who had had sex with the woman he denounced.24 Unattached women who were temporarily without a job were the most vulnerable to enforced registration. Once registered as a prostitute, women found it difficult to leave the profession because the process was lengthy and cumbersome. Establishing a relationship with a man offered one of the easiest ways to escape, thus encouraging women's dependence on men.

Courtship and Family Life

Women migrants brought many peasant expectations with them to the city, including the expectation of marrying. Economics added a practical dimension. A talented seamstress, Kulikova, for example, earned about twenty-five to thirty rubles a month, which was roughly twice as much as the average for women in the tailoring trades. Most women barely scraped by. In every trade, men earned much more than women. Having a claim on a man's wage could bring greater comfort and a higher level of material well-being than most women could attain on their own, in addition, perhaps, to emotional satisfaction. Marriage also provided social security in a society with no systematic provision for sickness or old age. Some women nurtured romantic aspirations, perhaps because they encountered images of romantic love in many of the new urban entertainments. "I wanted to marry for love," remembered a woman worker.25 Others simply sought a refuge from the hardships of the world. But courtship, highly ritualized in rural areas, could prove problematic in an urban setting.

Urban life itself was not welcoming to families. In terms of housing costs, Moscow and St. Petersburg were among the most expensive cities in Europe. Most men simply could not earn enough to support a wife, let alone raise their children in a big city. Men's attitudes sometimes made matters worse. Conceiving of women as inferior to themselves, some tended to view relations with them as a contest from which a man should take what he could get. In the words of Maxim Gorky, "For the real-life working man, women were only a source of amusement — but a dangerous one: with women one always had to be cunning, or else they would get the upper hand and ruin one's life."26 Because in the city, migrant women often lacked the family or community backing that could ensure a man's honorable intentions, in the relations between the sexes men often held the upper hand. Just as successful courtships are reflected in rates of marriage, failed courtships can be quantified, if crudely, by looking at urban illegitimacy rates. In working-class sections of Moscow and St. Petersburg in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, women bearing illegitimate children usually outnumbered women who wed.

Most men who migrated to Moscow and St. Petersburg married a village woman and left her back home with their family. That way, their hearts were "more inclined toward the village," as peasant parents preferred. At the close of the nineteenth century, roughly 93 percent of married male workers in those cities did not live with their wives and children. Although the wages men earned elsewhere helped to make the peasant economy viable and provided men with a home to return to in difficult times, lengthy separations were hard on both partners. They could fray the emotional ties between a village wife and a migrant husband.

Urban Family Life

Married life in the city often represented little improvement. Lower-class families became somewhat more common in Russia's major cities as the nineteenth century drew to a close. Almost invariably, a married woman continued to earn an income herself: the cost of living was too high and most men's wages too low for any other arrangement. Besides, peasants expected women to labor and to contribute to the family economy — why else marry in the first place? But a married woman who continued to labor might find it difficult to cohabit with her husband. Some women worked as domestic servants, as did Olga Mitrofanova, who together with her husband Pavel left their village in Novgorod province in 1901 because they could no longer make a living there. Pavel found a job as a watchman in one part of the city; Olga worked for a family in another. The two saw each other on her day off. Cohabitation might be no less difficult for factory women. Donna Maksimova, a peasant from Riazan, had been employed for six years when, in 1887, at age twenty-one, she married a worker at another factory in the city of Moscow. After the marriage as before, the couple lived apart, until the Easter holiday when they took off for his village to spend some time together. Even couples who worked in the same factory might have to wait to obtain a place for themselves. Until then, the woman would sleep in the

woman’s quarters, her husband in the men’s, and their “conjugal life” would consist of the occasional stolen night together beneath his cot, with a curtain drawn to secure a bit of privacy.\textsuperscript{27} The high cost of housing, the lack of affordable and accessible transport, and employment in different locations made cohabitation unusually difficult in Russia’s major cities. For many, family and private life seemed an inaccessible luxury.

As a result, a sense of entitlement to the comforts of married life came to constitute part of working men’s self-assertiveness by the early twentieth century. “I didn’t marry for the village, but for myself,” one peasant worker declared to his father as they struggled over whether the wife should stay in the village or move to Moscow, where her husband had a job.\textsuperscript{28} The Stolypin reforms, which made it easier for peasants to sever their ties with the village, intensified the tendency of married men to bring wives to the city: in St. Petersburg, around 71 percent of married workers lived with their families by 1918.\textsuperscript{29} Marriage provided men with domestic services, such as laundring, cleaning, and cooking that most single men either had to pay for or do without. Women who worked outside the home rose earlier than husbands to do some of the housework before they left; at the midday break, if women factory workers lived nearby, they would race home, prepare food, serve it, clear up and then race back to the factory and work until closing. More chores awaited them when women returned at night. A woman worker with a family had not a second of free time and rarely enough sleep.

Pregnancy and childbirth added to a married woman’s burdens. Until 1912, no woman enjoyed maternity leave; thereafter, leave became available on a limited basis. Most women workers stayed on the job until the very last moment. The extended family that might share responsibility for child care in villages and factory settlements was rarely available in the city. Some women sent their babies back to the village to be raised during the early years. Other women left infants and toddlers to nurses of twelve, thirteen, or fourteen years of age, to landladies, to aged women, or to themselves, simply locking them in rooms. Such practices, combined with overcrowding, lack of sanitation, and poor food resulted in infant mortality rates that were even higher than in the villages. Working women and men who sought to improve their children’s quality of life attempted to control their fertility. Judging by birthrates, the methods they employed rarely proved effective.

Family life in the city could bring a conflict between work and home that women in the village rarely experienced. As the number of children increased, their demands might stretch a woman’s time to the breaking point. Yet few men earned enough to support a wife and children. The solution most women adopted resembled that of working-class women elsewhere in Europe: they substituted occasional wage-earning at home for regular, better-paid work outside of it. Olga Onufrieva, mother of four and wife of a metalworker in the Baltic Shipyards in St. Petersburg, contributed to the household income by taking in laundry and scrubbing the floors of well-to-do families.

\textsuperscript{27} Engel, \textit{Between the Fields}, 203–4.  
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 206.  
\textsuperscript{29} Smith, “Masculinity in Transition,” 103.
Conclusion

It was in the cities and factory settlements, rather than in peasant villages, that women became most likely to experience the changes that swept Russia in the final decades of the century. In villages, the patriarchal household remained the primary unit of production. Outside it, urbanization and the burgeoning market economy expanded women's menu of choices by providing opportunities to earn an independent income and to refashion and perhaps even indulge the self. Spending time in the city could increase a woman's concern for her own needs and well-being and arouse her dissatisfaction with traditional gender, social, even political hierarchies.

Yet the degree of freedom should not be exaggerated. Only a minority of women ever left home, and their mobility always depended on the willingness of household and village authorities to release them. Women's apparent freedom from patriarchal controls aroused anxiety in men across the social spectrum. Lower-class misogyny intensified and took new forms. Women who engaged in "disreputable" behavior or disported themselves in "inappropriate" places risked attracting the attention of their yardman or worse, of agents of the medical police. Most women who migrated to a city worked either as domestic servants or industrial workers, where long hours, low wages, and demoralizing conditions took a serious toll.

Nor did women invariably abandon their traditional aspirations in response to new circumstances. Marriage and the family remained the goal of most migrant peasant women's lives. Urban life raised formidable obstacles for those who sought to marry and remain in the city. The vast majority of women stayed away from home only long enough to acquire a trousseau and help the folks back in the village and then returned home to wed. As a result, although the city tempted some women to forge new lives for themselves, others with migrant experience continued to live much as had their mothers and grandmothers before them. Nevertheless, few women remained entirely unaffected by the transformations that took place in the second half of the century. The upheavals of the early twentieth century would provide evidence for both the continuities and the changes in their lives.

Suggested for Further Reading


Frieden, Nancy M. "Child Care: Medical Reform in a Traditionalist Culture," in David Ransel, ed. *The Family in Imperial Russia: New Lines of Historical Research*. Urbana,

Mrs. Aleksandrov, wife of a Putilov metalworker and mother of seven children, rented rooms in their three-room apartment to boarders, reserving the kitchen and dark storeroom for the family. Like many other landladies, Mrs. Aleksandrov maintained the apartment, fetched wood and water, heated the cook stove, and looked after her boarders.

In urban families, relations between the sexes remained much as they had been in the village. Working-class men assumed the prerogatives of their peasant fathers and brothers, running the affairs of their own household and managing financial and other transactions with outsiders. "My father was master of the house," remembered the son of one Moscow worker. Although women often established personal ties and developed friendships in their neighborhoods and in the marketplace, married women did not exercise the same informal power in the city that they did in the village. Nor could they look forward to enhanced household authority in the future, given the fact that the urban family was most often a nuclear one. A married woman's horizons tended to be more limited than her husband's; she was almost twice as likely to be illiterate, thus unable even to decipher a street sign or read an advertisement or scratch her name on a piece of paper. Straitened circumstances and multiple responsibilities limited her opportunities for amusement and leisure.

Their different experiences might also set women at odds with their husbands, and husbands with their wives. Men worked hard, too, but they could, and did, take refuge from overcrowded apartments, wailing infants, and dulling routine in taverns and pubs, which remained important sites of male sociability and self-definition. Alcohol, usually vodka, constituted an essential element in many workplace rituals. Few men, married or single, abstained entirely. Convinced that they enjoyed the right to dispose of what they earned, male workers often found themselves defending their wages against wives who sought to claim a share for the family before the money disappeared at the tavern. Every payday wives waited for husbands and "expropriated" their wages, remembered a Moscow metalworker. "This involved considerable struggle, and sometimes the couple wound up in a brawl, with male comrades standing on the sidelines, cheering on the 'oppressed' husband." Print workers called such wives "tugboats." In the Russian working-class community, where men forged bonds on the basis of gender as well as workplace and craft, women represented the obligations of home and family, and became "figures against whom this male worker community defined itself." A countervailing tendency, toward more companionate marriages, did emerge, however, among the "conscious" minority of workers, who adopted a more respectful, although not necessarily egalitarian, attitude toward their wives.

Peasants and Proletarians


6

A WIDENING SPHERE

“It is better to endure this domestic prison for three years and thereafter to be free, than [to marry] in a moment of despair and pay with the rest of my life,” the eighteen-year-old Elizaveta Diakonova confided to her diary in 1890. Rejecting marriage as a means to escape her provincial merchant milieu, Diakonova sought a broader sphere. Diakonova’s world, the world of the middling strata of Russia’s cities and towns, had remained largely untouched by the cultural upheavals of the 1860s and 1870s. Her prospects scarcely differed from her mother’s: an early marriage, most likely arranged, then motherhood and housekeeping. To Diakonova, as to countless other young women with similar prospects, higher education appeared to offer more: opportunity for intellectual development, greater freedom, a means to participate in public life. Such aspirations contributed to women’s prominence in Russia’s emergent civil society, both as individuals and as symbols, despite government policies that aimed to curtail their presence.

The death of Tsar Alexander II at the hands of populist terrorists and the ascension to the throne of his son, Alexander III (1881–94), brought far-reaching efforts to restore the prereform political, social, and gender order. The counterreforms eroded the already limited authority of the *zemstvo* (plural of *zemstvo*) and circumscribed that of the new judicial system. The government endeavored to restrict lower class access both to education beyond the primary level and to literature that might encourage critical thinking. It also attempted to remove women from public life and return them to their traditional place by ending their access to higher education and fortifying the patriarchal family. Regarding his own family as a “sacred personal sphere” and himself as the “guardian of the sanctity and steadfastness of the family


Yet what the government attempted to accomplish with one hand, it undermined with the other. The industrialization drive gained substantial momentum in the final years of Alexander III’s reign and continued into the reign of his son, Nicholas II (1894-1917). Industrialization uprooted hundreds of thousands of peasant women and men and brought them into contact with different modes of life. Industrialization, urbanization, and the growth of a market economy increased the demand for education and encouraged the expansion of schooling. The new market economy also engendered a consumer culture that blurred the social boundaries that autocracy sought to preserve and encouraged the pursuit of pleasure in a population long accustomed to subordinating individual needs to family and community. People grew more assertive, both on their own behalf and on behalf of others. Although the counterreforms severely restricted the emergent civil society, they failed to suppress it altogether. Instead, those who aspired to play a role in public life lowered their profile and found other ways to articulate and realize their aspirations.

Defining Woman’s Proper Place

In the reactionary years of Alexander III’s reign, the “woman question” assumed new meanings. For conservative officials, chief among them Konstantine Pobedonostsev, Chief Procurator of the Holy Synod, the tsar’s former tutor and his most trusted advisor, women’s exclusively domestic role served as an article of faith. Like other conservatives who now enjoyed unrestricted access to the ear of the tsar, Pobedonostsev believed that the patriarchal family constituted the foundation of Russia’s social order. Fostering hierarchical relations and discipline and respect for authority, firmly subordinating women to men, the patriarchal family served as a kind of dike that might hold back the flood of change that threatened to engulf Russia’s ruling elites. It was the responsibility of the state to shore up that dike to the best of its ability.

Restricting women’s access to higher education offered a primary means to that end. Blaming higher education for women’s political radicalism, conservative officials attempted to render it off limits. In 1882 the Women’s Medical Courses ceased to accept new students and, in 1887, ceased operation. Admissions to all other women’s courses ended in 1886, while the government considered its next moves. Only the Bestuzhev courses were permitted to continue. They survived mainly because Elena Likhacheva, president of the courses’ funding society, adroitly addressed the political fears of the tsar.

Women’s courses in Russia, she claimed, would deter women from studying at foreign universities, which spawned “ideals and an orientation that are incommensurate with our way of life.” Likhacheva also linked women’s education with conservative values: according to her, the truly educated woman “is the truest conservator of religiosity, morality, and order in the family and society.” Although Likhacheva succeeded in preserving the Bestuzhev courses from conservative assault, the courses did not emerge unscathed. The Ministry of Education now appointed all personnel and had to approve the hiring of academic staff. Curriculum was restricted to exclude the teaching of human and animal physiology and natural history. Non-Christians (meaning Jews) became subject to a 3 percent quota; admission grew more difficult for lower-class women. Enrollment was capped at 400 students. Auditors now required parents’ or husbands’ written permission. You are not preparing yourself for professional activity, but for life, “mainly family life,” the new director V. P. Kulin admonished incoming students in his speech celebrating the reopening of the courses in 1889.\footnote{Christine Johnson, Women’s Struggle for Higher Education in Russia, 1853–1920 (Montreal, Canada: McGill-Queens University Press, 1987), 155–161.}

Officials also attempted to shore up the patriarchal family against continuing challenges. In the early 1880s, progressive jurists undertook efforts to reform the family order by revising the laws governing marriage. The revisions that they proposed would have facilitated legal separation and expanded the grounds for divorce to include spousal abuse. Proclaiming their desire to protect women from the arbitrary authority of husbands, progressive jurists also pursued other, more ambitious goals; to reconfigure the family along more egalitarian and democratic lines, to enhance the rights of individual family members, and to limit the exercise of arbitrary authority. In so doing, progressives hoped to reshape society and politics, too. Conservatives resisted successfully. Efforts to revise marital law repeatedly foundered on the rock of opposition from the Russian Orthodox Church, led by Pobedonostsev.\footnote{Robin Bishara, Johanne M. Gheith, Christine Holden, and William Wagner (eds.), Russian Women, 1668-1917: Experience and Expression, An Anthology of Sources (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2002), 219–20.}

Although in 1914 internal passport law was modified to allow married women a passport of their own, until the fall of the autocracy in 1917, marital law continued to forbid the separation of spouses, to restrict access to divorce, and to grant virtually unlimited authority to husbands and fathers.


Nevertheless, reactionaries proved unable to turn back the clock, especially in the realm of education. Public demand for women’s education was substantial. During the reign of Alexander III, girls’ gymnasia, secondary schools dependent on donations and charging high tuition, almost doubled in number. During the height of the reaction, hundreds of Russian women traveled abroad to attend Swiss universities. Women continued to press for more opportunities, and after the death of Alexander III, officials became more receptive to their appeals. In 1894, so many applicants to the Bestuzhev courses qualified for admission that the ceiling was lifted; six years later, enrollment had expanded to almost 1,000. In 1893, the tsar approved the St. Petersburg Women’s Medical Institute. The Moscow Higher Women’s courses (the Guerrier courses) reopened in 1900–01. In 1903, a special pedagogical institute for women opened in Odessa, enrolling 600 students in the first two years. Over time, the social background of students grew increasingly diverse. For example, in the mid-1880s, close to a third of 851 Bestuzhev students derived from the families of merchants or artisans, with daughters of nobles and officials comprising most of the rest. Twenty years later, when the number of students had quintupled, the proportion of elite women had dropped below 45 percent, and daughters of townspeople and peasants constituted over a third of students. In lecture halls and reading rooms, young women from clerical, merchant and artisan, even peasant backgrounds took their places beside the daughters of privileged elites.

Nonelite students sometimes had to surmount formidable obstacles to obtain an education. When Elena Andreeva, daughter of a prominent Moscow merchant family, expressed a desire to attend the Bestuzhev courses, her mother initially opposed her, fearful that the impressionable Elena might come under the influence of “those short-haired nihilist women who deny God and morality.” The mother granted permission only after she was assured that the days of nihilism had ended and students now derived from good families and studied seriously. Long after merchant elites had accepted the idea of women’s higher education, those further down the social ladder and those who resided outside a major city remained decidedly ambivalent about education beyond the basics. “Why is it that the slightest desire to study is encouraged and praised in a man and distrusted, ridiculed and rejected in a woman?” Elizaveta Diakonova complained to her diary in 1890.

managed to enroll in the Bestuzhev courses only after she reached the age of majority, that is, twenty-one, and only after convincing the Ministry of Education to set aside the requirement of parental permission. Students who came from humble backgrounds continued to suffer pressing need, sharing rooms in cold, dark, roach-infested apartments and struggling to support themselves while attending school. The back pages of newspapers were peppered with ads from such women students, seeking employment as private tutors, translators, companions, copyists, part-time private secretaries, and the like. The growing proportion of women students from nonelite backgrounds thus serves as evidence not only of a greater acceptance of women’s higher education but also of the strength of women’s aspirations to break “a window to the world.”

The late nineteenth and early twentieth century saw a dramatic expansion of women’s employment in positions requiring education. Roughly 750 women practiced medicine in Russia in 1906, many of them employed by the public sector as zemstvo physicians or employees of urban councils. The number of women teaching in rural schools grew from 4,878 in 1880 to 64,851 in 1911, and their social backgrounds became increasingly diverse. By 1911, over 20 percent of the teachers were townswomen, another 21.6 percent were peasants, almost surpassing the number of clergyman’s and nobleman’s daughters, who had dominated the profession in the earlier years. Some

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8. Skolnik, 81.
laws that strictly forbade such separation. Petitioning local officials, the courts and finally the tsar himself in the hope of relief, women from all social strata declared their unwillingness to continue living with drunken, adulterous, and abusive men and their desire to "earn their own crust of bread," as so many of them put it. By enabling women to earn their own living, the economic changes of the late nineteenth century eroded institutions that reactionaries sought to preserve, the patriarchal family in particular.

The burgeoning marketplace had much the same effect. A by-product of Russia's industrialization drive, the market encouraged the desire for individual pleasure and gratification and fostered patterns of consumption that cut across social divides. The advertising industry enticed women to consume the fashionable clothing and other items displayed in department store windows and on the pages of popular magazines and to employ makeup, hair coloring, and other beauty aids to decorate the self. Advice books proliferated, aiming to instruct the newly wealthy on how to dress, how to furnish and keep the home, and how to behave with refinement. New pastimes such as bicycling enhanced women's mobility and personal independence. Stringent censorship did not prevent popular magazines from spreading the word of women's abilities and attainments. Aiming mainly to entertain literate urban women of moderate means, the widely read "Messenger of Fashion" (Vestnik Mody) offered its readers a popularized version of the "woman question," questioning notions of women's inferiority and extolling women's achievements in fields such as medicine. 

Niva (The Corafield), with a circulation of 100,000 the most popular magazine in Russia, likewise celebrated women who stepped outside their customary sphere. Among the women featured in 1890 were the singer Alexandra D. Kochetova, who had to overcome the suspicion of her family to make a career in music and for thirteen years was a professor at the Moscow Conservatory of Music; and the Americans Miss Nelly Bly and Miss Elizabeth Wayland, both of whom succeeded in circulating the globe in 72 days, "faster than Phineas Fogg." It is hard to avoid the impression that much of educated society, if not conservative officials, had come to accept women's presence in public life.

Most women who contributed to public life did so in more modest ways. Charity remained the main avenue for women's public action. In the decade following the ascension of Alexander III, it became far more difficult to form new charitable organizations, which were viewed as potential fronts for radical endeavors. But women could still act as individuals. The historian Galina Utianova has identified 79 female philanthropists from among the Moscow merchantry, who in the years before the outbreak of World War II

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13 Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Istoriicheskii Arkhiv, fond 1412, op. 243, ed. kh. 98 Maria Bolshikh, 1886, 19.
14 Carolyn Marks, "'Providing Amusement for the Ladies': The Rise of the Russian Women's Magazine in the 1880s," in Improper Profession, 110–12; Niva, 1890, n. 6 and 7.
donated millions of rubles to charitable endeavors and municipal organizations that contributed to the public welfare. Among them was Agrippina Abrikosova (1833–1901), married to the head of the famous Abrikosov and Sons confectionary factories and mother of twenty-two children, seventeen of whom survived. In 1889, Abrikosova established a free maternity shelter and gynecological clinic in Moscow, bequeathing 100,000 rubles to the city for a second maternity shelter when she died in 1902. More well-known, but by no means the most lavish in her generosity was the merchant Varvara Morozova, after her husband’s death in 1883 until 1892 the director of the family firm, the Tver Cotton Goods Manufacturing Company. Between 1883 and 1914, Morozova donated almost 280,000 rubles to the city of Moscow to fund, among other endeavors, a reading room, a primary school for girls, and, after the revolution of 1905, a people’s university. Taking advantage of Russian laws that endowed even married women with the right to dispose of their property independently, and in accordance with Orthodox religious traditions that endorsed sharing one’s wealth with the poor, such women established and supported a range of charitable endeavors. Women’s religious communities likewise provided charity to the poor, education to the young, and care to the sick, particularly in rural areas where such organized activities remained relatively free of government interference during the worst of the reaction. The numbers of such communities expanded dramatically toward the end of the century, part of a broader religious revival.

As restrictions eased in the early 1890s, unprecedented opportunities became available for women to contribute to and define the public welfare. Women began pressing harder for the reopening of women’s courses. New charitable organizations emerged in record numbers. City governments began to assume far more extensive responsibility for the untutored rural masses that had begun to inundate urban areas. In 1894, Municipal Guardianships for the Poor, a form of welfare organization, were established in all major cities. Private charitable organizations proliferated, offering a broad range of services. Women became involved at almost all levels. They directed charitable organizations, served on governing and advisory boards, and worked for charitable establishments either as volunteers or as salaried employees, influencing the goals and orientations of their organizations. Many such endeavors served the needs of mothers and children. Interestingly, most eschewed the maternalist discourse that dominated such charitable endeavors to the West, emphasizing instead the importance of child care institutions such as nurseries and asylums and the role of women as workers. The Elizabeth Society, named for a sister of the Empress, even developed day nurseries for middle-class working women, long before such institutions were developed in the West.

In addition, by writing about their encounters with the lower classes, educated women helped to shape the way that society perceived both themselves and the “others” whom they described. The results of Mina Gorbunova’s massive research on Moscow peasant women and their crafts appeared in 1882, under the auspices of the Moscow Statistical Bureau; Alexandra Efimenko’s ethnographic study “Explorations of Popular Life” was published in 1884. In 1894, the physician Ekaterina Slanskaia’s “House Calls: A Day in the Practice of a Duma Woman Doctor in St. Petersburg” appeared in the popular Messenger of Europe; four years later, the physician Maria Pokrovskia published a similar account, “My Duma Practice,” in another “thick” journal. Russian women journalists viewed journalism itself as “a venue for social action” and a means to transform society, by contrast, for example, with their British counterparts. In describing the situation of the lower classes, many of these women writers focused in particular on the experiences and needs of lower-class women and children. Speaking on behalf of those less fortunate than themselves, educated women sought to influence the concerns and perceptions of the emergent civil society.

A New Woman?

By the 1890s, thanks in part to the impact of the marketplace, a new concern for the self increasingly vied with impulses to help “the other.” The publication in 1892 of Maria Bashkirtseva’s diary both reflected and contributed to these trends. The diary, kept by Bashkirtseva from the age of thirteen until her premature death in 1884, had an enormous impact on some female readers. Initially preoccupied with her own personal appearance and erotic experiences, Bashkirtseva eventually turned to art as a means to express herself and to attain the fame she sought. Her willingness to sacrifice everything for her art and her struggles for self-perfection offered a new model of female behavior. Liubov Gurevich, the child of a liberal and cultivated St. Petersburg family, was a schoolgirl when she first read Bashkirtseva. The diary, she was convinced, enabled her to reject the dominant cultural expectations of her as a woman and live more “fully and intensely” than

she otherwise would have. The diary had an equally profound impact on Elizaveta Andreeva, the daughter of a well-to-do merchant family. Twenty years of age at the time she read it, Andreeva knew she wanted to be independent and to "do something," but she had little idea what to do. She found feminism, as embodied in the previous generation of feminists, unappealing: they were "old and unattractive, with their hair cut short, wearing loose gray overalls, with cigarettes constantly in their mouths." Bashkirtseva’s "bold self-assertion" provided a more attractive model. Andreeva elaborated a program for herself: first she had to overcome her own timidity and lack of confidence; thereafter, she would learn to ignore established authorities and the prejudices of her own merchant milieu. Her goal? "To be utterly true to myself."

Images that circulated in the popular media reinforced more individualistic trends. In the mass circulation press of the early twentieth century, personalities became important, including those of popular women writers, such as Anastasia Verbitskaya and Lydia Charskaya, beloved of teenage girls. Using their own images to market their works to a broader female public, women writers gained new visibility and popularity. Although many adopted conventionally feminine poses, none embraced the image of happy wife and homemaker, the "rigorously domesticated" womanhood still prevalent in Western societies. Consumer culture tended to promote individual indulgence over family values. Anastasia Vialtseva vividly personified the new trend. Born a peasant in 1871, the daughter of a woodcutter and his laundress wife, at the turn of the century Vialtseva became a celebrity who sang bittersweet romances about sexual desire, and she earned fabulous sums of money, which she spent lavishly and conspicuously on herself. With her blend of female charm and effective self-promotion, Vialtseva attracted hordes of worshiping fans. Her popularity, like the marketing of women writers, reflected a new acceptance of women in public spaces.

The new individualism coexisted with long-standing restrictions on women and hostility to women professionals. Practicing in village or city, women physicians encountered prejudice from the authorities and their fellow physicians, and earned less than men in comparable positions. Women who graduated from women’s higher courses received only a certificate of completion, not an academic degree, for which a person was required to pass

21 Andreeva-Bal'mont, Vospominaniya, 227.
22 Beth Holmgren, "Gendering the Icon: Marketing Women Writers in Fin-de-Siecle Russia," in Helena Gosink and Beth Holmgren (eds.), Russian Women, Culture (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1990), 234-41.
24 A state examination. These examinations, like state service and the Table of Ranks, were reserved for men. Women were barred from careers in civil service and law, offering women who graduated from higher courses few career options apart from teaching. Yet women teachers labored under disabilities from which their male colleagues remained free. Authorities expected women to be pure sexually as well as politically, and subjected woman’s personal lives to greater scrutiny than men’s: in at least one school district, women teachers actually had to submit proof of virginity. In a decree of 1897, the St. Petersburg city government forbade women teachers to marry, forcing them to choose between marriage and a career. Women who married were likewise dismissed from the classroom in the provinces of Arkhangelsk and Tobolsk.
25 But if women’s circumstances had changed very little, women were less willing to endure them. Ideas about the rights of the individual person, which circulated widely in the literature of this period, reverberate in the language of women seeking to improve their condition. Responding to condescending treatment by university officials and male students, at the turn of the century women students increasingly framed their demands for change "in terms of the individual right to self-expression and self-determination." The marriage ban limited the personal freedom of women teachers, argued Nadezhda Rumiantseva at a conference of teachers. Women professionals used their pens to enhance their professional standing. Writing of their experiences in the thick journals that circulated among the educated, they stressed their own competence and ability to overcome obstacles and presented themselves as performing as well as men or better.
26 Women’s new visibility in public life revitalized the "women question" or perhaps more properly, "women questions," at the close of the nineteenth century. In addition to long-standing concerns with education, work, and the relations between the sexes, the "women question" now embraced issues of sexual desire and power. In response to the increasing numbers of women who penetrated into public and previously male space, women’s bodies became part of the terrain over which educated society struggled for power. The restrictions on women, however, reduced their ability to shape their own fate. Marginalized by their exclusion from government bodies, women were rarely in a position to influence decisions that affected their lives. Thus, male jurists revising laws treating sexual crime and prostitution, by emphasizing female dependence and vulnerability, denied women’s capacity for independent action and ensured that individual autonomy remained a male preserve. When they opposed state regulation of prostitution, male physicians rarely argued
for complete abolition of the system of surveillance and regulation; instead, they wanted the system reformed, and for medical authority over women to replace the authority of the police.\textsuperscript{26} Although women spoke forcefully about these issues, too, as long as they remained excluded from the domains where policy was forged, they could affect public policy only by influencing men.

**Revolution of 1905**

The revolution of 1905 raised hopes for changing this situation. That year, long-suppressed discontents finally exploded. Industrial workers, students, professionals, even nobles and industrialists became caught up in the wave of resistance that swept Russia in the wake of Bloody Sunday (January 9, 1905), when tsarist troops fired upon a peaceful demonstration of working-class women and men, killing more than 100 people and wounding many more. In the ensuing upheaval, women across the social spectrum mobilized in enormous numbers, joining with men to demand an expansion of political rights and greater social justice. Women industrial workers, clerical workers, pharmacists, professionals, even domestic servants, joined unions and walked off their jobs to attend mass meetings and demonstrations that called for an end to autocracy and a representative form of government. The intense politicization and pervasive use of a language of rights stimulated women to speak on their own behalf and to claim their place in the expanding public sphere.

Working-class women were among the first to raise their voices. At the end of January 1905, they objected in print when the government called for the convening of the Shidlovskii commission to study the reasons for worker discontent, and permitted women to vote for representatives to the commission but only male workers to be elected to it. Only women, they claimed, could properly represent themselves. They protested the loss of an opportunity to “loudly proclaim ... the oppression and humiliation that no male worker can possibly understand.”\textsuperscript{27} Working-class women also took to the streets on an issue closer to home, initiating a boycott of taverns and alcohol stores in St. Petersburg and, in November, mounting an enormous demonstration to demand the closure of taverns serving liquor to workers. During 1905, violence against drinking establishments in St. Petersburg province cost the state more than 30,000 rubles.\textsuperscript{28}

Women also took active part in the increasingly political strike movement that became the primary medium through which workers expressed their discontent and aspirations. In factories where women predominated, the textile industry in particular, strike demands clearly reflected their presence. Factory after factory demanded day care, maternity leave, nursing breaks, and protection of women workers, reflecting not only the preponderance of women but also the influence of the Marxist Social Democratic Labor Party (SDLP) and liberals, both of which had long supported maternity-related benefits. Even as they claimed for women significant rights in the workplace, however, such demands also reinforced gender differences and a gender division of labor: virtually all the demands that applied to women touched on their role as mother, not on their actual working conditions, and only in a few known instances did workers claim that a woman should be paid the same as a man for performing identical work. Most commonly, existing wage differentials and women’s unequal status were reinscribed in strike demands that called for raises that would have maintained women’s earnings at a fraction of men’s. In a few cases, in an effort to assert a solidarity based on gender, male workers went even further and sought to exclude women workers altogether from “men’s” trades.\textsuperscript{29} Nevertheless, vast numbers of working-class women embraced the working-class movement as their own. This became clear in December 1905, during a last, desperate confrontation with the authorities, when working-class women and men took to the barricades. Alongside men, women labored tirelessly, chopping wood, breaking up telegraph poles, and disassembling tram cars to construct barricades against government troops, who nevertheless crushed the working-class movement.

During the revolution of 1905, women of the educated classes took political action of a different sort. Feminist movements reemerged on a much more substantial scale than before and embraced far larger numbers. The primary goal was women’s suffrage, which became an issue as soon as men claimed a political voice. The largest and most visible feminist group and the only one to play a significant role in 1905 was the All-Russian Union for Women’s Equality, a national women’s political organization established by thirty women liberals a month after Bloody Sunday. Their first public meeting on April 10 was also the first political meeting for women in Russia, and it attracted 1,000 people. By the time of their first Congress, held in Moscow, May 7–10, 1905, twenty-six chapters had formed. Feminist activists derived primarily from the middle classes; however, independent professional women such as journalists, physicians, and teachers appear far more numerous than historians have found them to be in other contemporary feminist organizations.


\textsuperscript{29} Glickman, *Russian Factory Women*, 190-94
From the first, the Union for Women’s Equality cast its lot with the broader liberation movement, embracing the idea that women’s liberation was inseparable from the liberation of society as a whole. The Union’s platform, adopted in May 1905, repeated the demands of the liberation movement in addition to its call for specifically women’s rights such as equality of the sexes before the law, equal rights to the land for peasant women, laws to protect women workers, and coeducation at all levels of schooling. Their common ground of opposition to autocracy led the women of the Union for Women’s Equality to collaborate with liberal and leftist men far more extensively than feminists did elsewhere. They participated in radical demonstrations and openly supported workers, raising money to help those on strike and the unemployed. In petitions and demonstrations, they demanded amnesty for political prisoners and abolition of the death penalty, as well as rights for women.

In addition, reflecting the social sympathies that had long characterized educated women, the Union worked to forge alliances across the social divide that continued to separate privileged Russians from the laboring classes and to encourage lower-class women to speak for themselves. In St. Petersburg, they assisted women workers to formulate their protest against exclusion from the Shlidslovskii Commission. At its very first conference, the Union invited “women of the toiling classes” to formulate their own demands and pledge to support them, in an effort to avoid the distrust that lower-class women “invariably felt” for demands formulated for them by others. Feminist demands included laws providing for the welfare, protection, and insurance of women workers. Abolition of the regulation of prostitution became a feminist demand in 1905. Feminists also tried to reach out to peasant women who, like men, had become far more militant and aggressive in 1905-7, although as earlier, mainly on behalf of family and community. Feminists joined the Peasant Union and convinced it to adopt the plank of women’s suffrage.

Feminist efforts to expand their social base bore some fruit. Women domestic servants in Moscow and St. Petersburg joined feminist-organized unions; they attended feminist-sponsored clubs. Women workers added their signatures to petitions favoring women’s suffrage. A number of peasant women’s groups were formed and some petitions signed by peasant men took up the demand for women’s suffrage. In 1906, peasant women in Tver and Voronezh provinces sent petitions to the newly elected legislature, the Duma, laying independent claim to the political voice so recently granted their men, and denying the prevailing stereotype of peasant women as backward and mute.

Protesting the assertion of a peasant Duma deputy that peasant women had no interest in the vote, fifty-five Voronezh women signed a letter stating: “There are no women deputies in the Duma who could represent all peasant women, so how does he know? He is wrong to say that the peasant woman doesn’t want rights. Did he ask us? We, the peasant women of Voronezh province, understand perfectly well that we need rights and land just as men do.”

Nevertheless, 1905 brought the feminists very little in the way of measurable political gains. To be sure, the granting of civil liberties, however limited, allowed more scope for organizing. In 1904, the physician Maria Pokrovskia began publishing a feminist newspaper, The Women’s Herald (Zhenskii vestnik), which, during 1905, maintained a barrage of propaganda on behalf of women’s rights and continued in print until 1917. Other, more short-lived feminist newspapers emerged. The revolution also marked a watershed in the history of women’s education. The curriculum of women’s higher courses expanded and between 1906 and 1910 new women’s courses opened in many provincial cities. In addition, a number of private coeducational universities were established, offering new curricula and electives. The enrollment of women students increased exponentially: in 1900-01, there were 2,588 women students enrolled in higher education in Russia; by 1915-16, the number was 44,017. However, the status of women’s education remained insecure and career options limited, leaving an enormous gap between education and employment opportunities.

Moreover, feminist support for the liberation movement, so generously given, was rather less generously returned. The October manifesto enfranchised only men, leaving women dependent on the loyalty of their former male allies. The liberal Kadet party, which dominated the first Duma, divided over the issue of women’s suffrage; parties to the left, although staunch advocates of women’s rights, because of their working-class orientation were with one notable exception suspicious of and reluctant to support “bourgeois feminism.” Further, the evidence suggests that working-class and peasant women felt more affinity with the men of their class than they did with middle-class feminists; however much lower-class women might have longed after fancy clothing or admired lavishly spending women artists. Even when feminists succeeded in organizing women workers, they had trouble retaining their loyalty. As one feminist lamented, it was relatively easy to establish circles among laboring women, but as soon as their political consciousness was raised, they wanted to work with the men of their class. “They quickly join the ranks of one of the [socialist] parties and become party workers. In

30 Gosudarstvennyi istoricheskii Arkhiv gorod Moskvy [hereafter GIAgM], fond 536, op. 1, ed. kh. 2, II, 45-59.
31 Linda Harriet Edmondson, Feminism in Russia, 1900-1917 (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1984), 38-47.
32 GIAgM, fond 536, op. 1, ed. kh. 4, l. 42.
33 Morrissey, Herald, 161.
A number of cities, the Union [for Women's Equality] has acted as a kind of preparation for party work. Thus, the social divisions that weakened opposition to autocracy divided the women's movement as well.

But more decisive than male ambivalence or social divisions was the fact that the revolution had ended and the tsar was regaining control. When the first Duma was dissolved after three months, its members were preparing to consider the fruit of feminist lobbying, a draft law on women's equality. The erosion of civil liberties and the "coup" of June 3, 1907, which gave still greater electoral weight to the proper- tized sectors of society, brought political demoralization: membership in the women's movement sharply declined, as it did in radical political parties in general. Despite the lack of concrete feminist achievements, women's experience of 1905 and, in particular, participation in acts of protest and the use of a language of rights left an irrecusable trace on the consciousness of thousands at all levels of society, from the most privileged to the most deprived. Nowhere is this clearer than in an unusual letter, signed by prostitutes in the provincial town of Vologda and published in the newsletter of the Union for Women's Equality in June-July 1907. Observing that everyone was now "gaining their rights," the signatories claimed rights of their own, including the right to leave a brothel when they chose, the subjection of their male customers to venereal examinations, and the limitation of their customers to no more than five a night. Most of all, however, the women wanted an end to state regulation of prostitution, which greatly limited the ability of lower-class women to control their own lives. If regulation were abolished, in the words of the letter, "Then a girl could sell herself only when she pleased and when she pleased, she could stop."

The Aftermath

Following the failure of 1905, new concerns eclipsed traditional feminist issues. Between June 1907 and the outbreak of World War I, the demoralized women's movement lost membership and momentum. Women remained divided along ideological lines. While liberals sought to expand women's rights in the public sphere, radicals, the Marxist parties foremost among them, believed that nothing short of a thoroughgoing revolution could achieve women's equality. The movement's most significant achievement, an All-Russian Women's Congress, held December 10-6, 1908, divided along these fault lines. In addition, other issues, especially "the sexual question," now absorbed the public's attention. Relatively free of censorship, newspapers and magazines provided the means for personal and commercial communication.

They listed the services of divorce lawyers and midwives who would deliver babies with "complete discretion" and enumerated the requirements of men and women seeking mates. Advertisements encouraged women to develop more beautiful busts; they offered cures for sexual troubles; they touted contraceptives. On the back pages of newspapers, "models" boasting "attractive bodies" offered to pose for a fee. Women were as likely as men to advertise for partners in newspapers with titles such as The Amour Post or the Moscow Marriage Gazette, which assisted the lonely to meet and mate. The educated public had come to accept the presence of women on the streets unescorted, without the male protection that was so central to the Western liberal vision. In 1910, the popular middlebrow Niva featured a lesson in female self-defense, complete with photographs demonstrating appropriate postures. (Fig. 11) By learning jiu-jitsu, the author explained, "Women can face the dangers of the city streets without needing the protection of a man."

The "new woman" symbolized the new era. Freed from the constraints of conventional morality, she dominated the imagination of the reading public. In the immensely popular boulevard novel, Anastasia Verbitskaya's The Keys to Happiness (published 1908-13) was one of the best-selling works of the time. In six volumes and 1,400 pages, the author explored the life of a sexually self-assertive modern heroine, Minya, a beautiful dancer, who takes several lovers and struggles to retain her independence and artistic ambitions in the face of intense passion. The novel addressed women of all classes who felt stifled by societal and professional restraints and emphasized their right to sexual adventure and professional achievement. Nonreaders might encounter the "new woman" on the silver screen. With tickets priced low enough for working-class patrons, film gained great popularity in the postrevolutionary years. The cinematic version of The Keys to Happiness became a box office sensation in 1913, setting the standard by which all other films were measured. The "new woman" likewise figured in the films of director Evgenii Bauer, whose heroines were more often rewarded than punished for their desires.

The prominence of the "new woman" prompted the feminist-oriented Marxist, Alexandra Kollontai, to revise Marxist theory in a 1913 essay, appropriately entitled "The New Woman." Exploring women's psychology and treating sexuality and sexual relations as proper topics for political discussion, Kollontai emphasized the historical significance of the single woman who earned her own living and found the meaning of life in independence and

35 Ibid., ed. kh. 6, p. 311-12.
37 Niva, 1910, no. 22, p.68.
38 Anastasia Verbitskaya, Keys to Happiness, edited and translated by Beth Holmgren and Helen Goschilo (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1999), xiii.
work. Unconstrained by “bourgeois morality” and its double standard, according to Kollontai, the new woman followed her sexual inclinations where they led her and claimed new rights in the public world, “walking the streets with a businesslike, masculine tread.”

Yet more restrictive ways of regarding women by no means disappeared and drew new life from the fears that revolution evoked. Thus, the debate over abortion acquired new intensity, as progressive physicians sought, unsuccessfully, to decriminalize abortion, which Russian law treated as a form of murder. Supposedly, its incidence had escalated dramatically following the revolution of 1905. At professional meetings, women physicians spoke vociferously on behalf of reproductive freedom. Among the most vocal was the feminist physician Maria Pokrovskaya, who denounced Russia’s punitive abortion laws as unwarranted restrictions on female autonomy. Invoking the concept of voluntary motherhood, she called for full decriminalization of abortion, claiming that only women were in a position to know their own needs. For her as for other proponents of decriminalization, abortion symbolized women’s autonomy. For others, however, abortion symbolized women’s sexual license and underscored the dangerous aspects of women’s liberation. Women’s freedom from legal and career restraints was one thing, sexual liberation quite another. The physician Dmitrii Zhirnov, a proponent of women’s rights and women’s education, nevertheless regarded the upper-class woman who wanted to abort as corrupt and self-indulgent. If women wanted to achieve equal rights, they would have to reject their culture’s emphasis on nonreproductive sexual gratification and return to their “natural” function of motherhood, he insisted. This period, too, saw new welfare initiatives that aimed to strengthen the family by supporting women as mothers.

Women themselves spoke with many voices. When questioned in 1900, women Bestuzhev students claimed to reject the new “pornographic” literature in favor of classical works. Despite Verbitskaia’s claim that her most loyal readers were women students, only 5 percent of the students queried acknowledged Verbitskaia as one of their “favorites” and then with reservations. Students were equally unenthusiastic about feminism. Most professed traditional intelligentsia values, including the goal of serving society and “the people.” Most feminists, too, promoted a view of female sexuality more conservative than that embodied in the “new woman.” While endorsing women’s sexual choice, they nevertheless regarded women more as sexual victims than sexual agents. Maria Pokrovskaya, advocate of decriminalizing abortion, promoted “sexual purity” rather than sexual freedom and encouraged men to

40 Engelstein, Keys, 368–90. 41 Ibid., 347–4. 42 Sankt-Peterburgskie tyzhde 4 No. 124; Morrissey, 174–2.
embrace chastity, too. The Russian Society for the Protection of Women offered a still more extreme version of sexual puritanism. Formed in 1900 as part of the struggle against “white slavery” and composed of women from the social elite, the Society sought to save working-class girls not only from “falling,” but also from sex itself.43

Conclusion

Despite the efforts of reactionary officials and concerns of conservative critics, by the outbreak of World War I, it appeared as if the “new woman” had come to stay. She was very much a product of the changes that had swept Russia, beginning in the reign of Alexander III. The expansion of women’s education, the growth of the market economy, and the new emphasis on the self and its gratification contributed more to undermining the patriarchal family than did the radical critiques of the 1860s and 1870s, although those critiques continued to resonate. While they might disagree about where the “new woman” should direct her energies and how she should use her body, only the most conservative of her contemporaries questioned her right to occupy public space. Significantly, wifehood and motherhood played a minimal role in the woman-related discourse of the early twentieth century, although those themes did become more prominent following 1905. In the 1920s, after revolution had utterly transformed the political but not yet the cultural context, the new government would struggle hard to harness the “new woman” to its own ends and to stuff the genie of sexuality back into its bottle.

Suggestions for Further Reading


43 Laurie Bernstein, *Sonia’s Daughters: Prostitutes and Their Regulation in Imperial Russia* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1995), 293.