Equality and Revolution: Women's Rights in the Russian Empire, 1905-1917

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BOOK REVIEW


The history of women’s suffrage presents an apparent paradox: while women in countries with representative government fought for decades to win the right to vote, the same struggle took a mere 12 years in autocratic Russia. Taking up the challenge of explaining this paradox, Rochelle Ruthchild’s well-researched book reconstructs the short, dramatic history of women’s rights in Russia, from the emergence of the first feminist organisations in the 1890s, through the revolutionary struggles of 1905–06 which gained women the vote in Finland, to the Provisional Government’s universal suffrage law of 20 July 1917. According to Ruthchild, Russian historians have often dismissed the women’s suffrage movement as an effort by elite women to obtain rights important only to them. Most texts ignore the mass suffrage demonstration in Petrograd in March 1917, the July law and the participation of women in the Constituent Assembly elections. Similarly, the contributions of Russian suffragists receive scant attention from historians of women. Yet this twice-neglected history, Ruthchild argues, is important for understanding not only Russian political history, but also the evolution of modern democracies.

Ruthchild see the reasons for the rapid achievement of equal rights in the persistent efforts of women themselves, led by members of the ‘female intelligentsia’. Most of chapter 2 is devoted to biographical sketches of the *intelligentski* who laid the foundations for feminism in the 1890s in the form of voluntary associations and publications for women. These feminists were a socially and politically diverse group that encompassed veteran philanthropists like Anna Filosofova and younger, self-supporting physicians, teachers and journalists like Anna Shabanova and Liubov’ Gurevich. They regarded the struggle for women’s rights as part of the larger struggle for civil and human rights for all Russians; but the 1905 Revolution, discussed in chapter 3, laid bare the extent of the opposition they faced not only from the government but also from socialists and constitutionalists. Their petition campaigns and energetic lobbying, while failing to budge the central government, won the support of most liberal leaders by the end of 1905. The struggle for equal rights continued in the decade following 1905 in the realms of politics and civil society. Chapter 4 contrasts the failure to make progress in the first two Dumas to the victory in Finland. There, all political groups embraced women’s rights as part of the nationalist struggle against Russia, but the Finnish victory, Ruthchild concedes, owed much to Nicholas II’s desire to quiet the revolt there with concessions. No such imperative moved the government to introduce equal rights in the rest of the empire.

Yet social opposition to women’s suffrage was remarkably muted. There were no Russian counterparts to well-known Western anti-suffragists like Woodrow Wilson,
or Mrs Humphrey Ward’s Women’s National Anti-Suffrage League; even Pavel Miliukov, adamantly opposed to women’s rights in 1905, converted to the cause. Ruthchild identifies the detested tsarist government’s opposition as one factor that moved public opinion toward consensus in support of suffrage. Equally important was the work by feminists between 1905 and 1917 to raise awareness. Nor was support limited to the liberal elite; Ruthchild argues that working and peasant women, whom the socialists characterised as indifferent, cared about the right to vote. The attitudes of socialist leaders toward suffrage were more problematic. Ruthchild maintains that feminists shared more similarities than differences with their socialist counterparts, and the boundary between them was ‘permeable’, but the evidence of suspicion and conflict remains strong. The 1908 Women’s Congress, to which Ruthchild devotes all of chapter 5, disclosed the diverse views within the feminist movement on such issues as marriage, as well as differences with socialists over priorities. Another interesting case is International Women’s Day, first celebrated in Russia in 1913 and embraced by feminists and socialists; while the former ‘emphasized the holiday’s original demand for women’s suffrage’, socialist women used it to organise women workers and accentuate their differences with feminists (p. 188).

When war erupted in 1914, few would have predicted that women would win the right to vote in only a few years, not just in Russia but also in the US, Britain and other nations. Chapter 7 provides a detailed reconstruction of the events that led to the feminists’ victory. Ruthchild downplays the war as a direct cause, emphasising the agency of women themselves. Although the fall of the autocracy cleared the way, women’s suffrage was not a foregone conclusion in 1917; neither the Soviet nor the Provisional Government explicitly supported equal rights, and the left suspected women’s innate conservatism. Under pressure from the women’s demonstration on 19 March, a delegation headed by Vera Figner and feminist leaders to Prime Minister L’vov two days later, and relentless agitation by socialists like Kollontai, the Soviet and Provisional Government capitulated, though women continued to apply pressure to make sure their promises were kept. If Equality and Revolution can be said to have a climax, it would be the November elections to the Constituent Assembly, which, according to Ruthchild, drew a large turnout of newly enfranchised women.

Restoring visibility to Russian feminists’ struggle for equal rights is, in Ruthchild’s words, ‘a necessary part of reclaiming Russia’s and the world’s lost legacy, understanding Russia’s rich tradition of female civic participation, and adding greater complexity and nuance to the history of international democratic reforms and civil rights’ (p. 10). Equality and Revolution goes beyond filling historical gaps, however. Political historians can learn a great deal about the political culture created by the 1905 Revolution and the introduction of parliamentary government. Legal historians will be interested in the account of legislative victories and setbacks with respect to women’s property rights and equal access to education and professions. Ruthchild’s book also updates the history of the ‘woman question’, revealing how educational and professional gains by women complicated attitudes towards gender roles and male–female relationships. Finally, the conclusion briefly turns to present-day Russia where, in contrast to the late imperial period, feminism evokes ‘resistance, even visceral hostility’ (p. 246). Ruthchild raises the intriguing point that feminism — ‘women fighting for themselves rather than others’ — still arouses suspicion in Russia because it challenges deep-rooted cultural expectations of female self-sacrifice. One shares her hope that
early twentieth-century feminists examined in Equality and Revolution might serve as ‘positive role models’ (p. 247) for Russians engaged in the difficult work of improving the status of women in Russia today.

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