

The Bolsheviks and the Sexual Revolution

Sean Egan

Sexual liberation, experimentation and the upheaval of gender norms are not often associated with Bolshevism or the Russian Revolution. Bourgeois historians portray the revolutionaries as so stoic and so miserable they may as well be carved from stone, the masses of ordinary people impossibly backwards, incapable of embracing the rapidly changing times. In reality the opposite is true. When the Bolsheviks captured state power they burnt the Tsarist law books and set about undermining the oppressive, antiquated culture they emerged from. The bonds of traditional sexual morality were broken and soon the sexual revolution was as ubiquitous in the letters pages of Pravda as it was in bedrooms across the new soviet republic.

This new sexual permissiveness was not just about pleasure or individual freedom, it was an outgrowing of the Marxist understanding of the family; the combination of strict sexual conduct with unpaid reproductive labour as the nexus of women's oppression in class society. Engels' seminal work *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, traced family structure and class divisions throughout history to create a historical materialist understanding of family structure and gender relations. Engels said of marriage in class society: 'It is based on the supremacy of the man, the express purpose being to produce children of undisputed paternity; such paternity is demanded because these children are later to come into their father's property as natural heirs'.¹ Engels goes on to outline the cultural (and legal in the case of Napoleonic Code) right men, particularly upper class men had to infidelity. He contrasts this to the harsh punishments faced by female adulterers. Marxists understood that this sexist double standard was not just the product of antiquated ideas about gender roles but rather it was

a result of the family's role as an economic unit. Women's chastity and monogamy were required for the smooth transition of accumulated wealth across generations. The family's function as an economic unit under capitalism represents the root of women's oppression. Trotsky said of this: 'You cannot abolish the family; you have to replace it.'² The Bolsheviks set about to do just that; undermining the economic necessity of the family, the sexual morality it enforced and providing a collective alternative to 'women's work' by establishing collective kitchens, laundries and childcare facilities. Alexandra Kollontai said that sexual freedom meant that relationships would be 'purified of all material elements, of all money consideration'³ for the first time attraction, affection and choice would be the sole constituents of partnership.

There was a wave of legislative reform around gender and sexual issues after the revolution. The 1918 family code introduced by Commissar for Social Welfare Alexandra Kollontai removed the religious basis of marriage.⁴ Marriage became a secular state contract between two equal individuals. Marriages could be dissolved at the behest of either party and in some regions marriages were even performed for same sex couples. This liberalisation of divorce law had an immediate effect in 1918 where the divorce rate exploded, eventually exceeding the number of marriages. Thousands of women were liberated from abusive, unloving marriages and with access to collective kitchens and nurseries, decent work and alimony payments mandated by the new soviet court system their economic reliance on their husbands ended. With rapidly changing social relations and access the nature of marriage was transformed even in rural areas. In the countryside the marriage rate was nearly 100% and relationships were characterised by vi-

¹F. Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, Chicago, Pathfinder Press, 1972 p. 102-103

²L. Trotsky, *The Revolution Betrayed* New York, Dover, 2004 p. 110

³A. Kollontai *Alexandra Kollontai on Women's Liberation*, London, Bookmarks, 1998 p. 30

⁴G. Carleton *The Sexual Revolution in Russia* Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005

olent men and subservient women. These changes were even reflected in the folk songs of the time, where once peasant women sang of praying for kind husbands they now described men as being tamed by the looming threat of divorce. For the first time women had the legal status and material support to live independent lives. Russia soon became a beacon of social progress for reformers everywhere. Trotsky reportedly responded to an American journalist's incredulous question about whether divorce was available on demand by asking was it true that elsewhere it was not.⁵ The revolutionaries refused to concede to tradition and in doing so set out a road map for more equal forms of partnership.

Women workers had played a key role in instigating the February revolution leaving their workplaces on mass and leading violent clashes with the police. Women also participated in the storming of the Winter Palace during the Bolshevik seizure of power. This experience of revolution proved to have a transformative effect on many working women. A young Bolshevik tramway worker Aleksandra Rodionova was put in charge of coordinating the Petrograd railway during the insurrection, she said of the time: 'I felt that all of my familiar life was falling apart, and I rejoiced in its destruction'.⁶ The Bolsheviks were eager to deepen the involvement of revolutionary women and also organize women across Russia and from this ambition the Zhenotdel was founded. The Zhenotdel (the women's section of the Russian Communist Party) was designed to empower revolutionary women to direct their own liberation. They directed a huge educational effort producing their widely read journal *Kommunistka*, publishing *stranichki* (pages in newspapers devoted to women's issues) and soliciting submissions from working women. It served as an essential forum for discussions on early soviet family, health, welfare and sexual policy. Women delegates were elected

to the Zhenotdel from factories and were made leaders in their communities. Zhenotdel members also fought in Trotsky's Red Army in some cases even rising to commanding positions. Evgeniya Bosh was described by anti-Stalinist writer and dissident Victor Serge as 'one of the most capable military leaders to emerge at this stage'.⁷ She was later a vital part of Trotsky's Left Opposition and was one of Stalin's original critics. During the depths of the Civil War the Red Army secured a train dedicated for Zhenotdel use and secured their journeys as they travelled the country recruiting women and setting up branches. It is a testament to the centrality of women's liberation during the revolution.



Evgeniya Bosh

The Zhenotdel was also an essential part in early soviet experiments involving collective living. During the civil war Russia was plagued by famines. To address this, the Bolsheviks introduced forms of rationing. Unlike conventional rationing this didn't mean just the restriction of commercial exchange, it had a communal character.

⁵H. Dee *Red in the Rainbow* London, Bookmarks, 2010

⁶L. O'Shea, 'Women in the Russian Revolution' *Red Flag*, <https://redflag.org.au/article/women-russian-revolution>

⁷'The Russian Revolution and the emancipation of women' *Spartacist*, <http://www.icl-fi.org/english/esp/59/emancipation.html>

Collective laundries, kitchens and restaurants were set up and children were given priority. This was a vital step in providing for the legions of destitute orphans that had semi-homeless existences. This crisis began under Tsarism and worsened with the ongoing civil war. The priority given to children stemmed from the new understanding the raising the next generation was a collective, societal responsibility. The seized lands of nobility and empty government buildings were used to construct new orphanages for homeless youth and they were given access to education and culture, sometimes for the first time in their lives. The collective kitchens also did an important service in easing the burden of individual working women. Collective labour was significantly more efficient and allowed them more free time. This reorganization of traditionally domestic labour also externalized housework from its traditional private sphere. In other words it legitimized 'women's work' as an essential public good on par with male dominated agricultural or manufacturing work. This highlighted the double burden of women workers: involvement in paid productive labour in the public sphere and unpaid reproductive labour in the private home which had been a central theme of socialist feminism.⁸

One of the most striking elements of early soviet policy is their full legalisation of abortion in 1920. It was the first time in the world that the procedure was available without restriction. This fact is particularly jarring in an Irish context, that 97 years later we retain a constitutional ban on an essential medical service. Due to the immense poverty of the civil war years and the highly limited access to contraception there was an immense demand for abortion. This had not changed from Tsarist times but now women could access a significantly safer procedure than the back-alley operations of the not distant past. However, these efforts to provide a high standard of care were blunted

by long waiting times, lack of consistent access to anaesthesia and a shortage of doctors, almost all of whom were trained under Tsarism and were not supportive of Bolshevik health policy. As a result abortion in the early Soviet Union was still a traumatic experience for many women and many abortions were carried out in less than rigorous conditions often by midwives instead of doctors. It remains part of a pattern in early soviet life where ambitions were curtailed by the physical limitations of economic underdevelopment, civil war and imperial blockade. A blockade that contributed to this crisis by drastically limited the supply of rubber, making the production of condoms impossible and leaving coitus interruptus and abortion the most common birth control regimen.⁹

It is disputed whether the Bolsheviks considered abortion a social right or whether legalisation was purely a public health matter. Wendy Goldman argues that the Bolsheviks maintained an uneasy and ambivalent attitude to abortion and that legalisation was always a harm reduction method and not a long term strategy.¹⁰ However, in his forceful critique of Stalin's recriminalisation of abortion Trotsky wrote: 'These gentlemen have, it seems, completely forgotten that socialism was to remove the cause which impels woman to abortion, and not force her into the 'joys of motherhood' with the help of a foul police interference in what is to every woman the most intimate sphere of life.'¹¹ Trotsky and other prominent revolutionaries staunchly defended women's unfettered access to abortion as an expression of bodily autonomy and individual freedom. This is an important lesson for socialists fighting today for free, safe and legal abortion.

The October revolution changed the lives of LGBT people as radically as it did women's. The tsarist anti-sodomy laws were torn down with the rest of aristocratic rule

⁸R.C. Elwood, *Inessa Armand; Revolutionary and Feminist* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002.

⁹'The Russian Revolution and the emancipation of women' *Spartacist*, <http://www.icl-fi.org/english/esp/59/emancipation.html>

¹⁰W. Goldman, *Women, State and Revolution: Soviet Family Policy and Social Life 1917-1936* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993.

¹¹L. Trotsky, *The Revolution Betrayed* New York, Dover, 2004, p. 114

and they were deliberately not replaced. Grigorii Batkis the director of the Institute for Social Hygiene Moscow outlined the Bolshevik position in 1923: 'It declares the absolute non-interference of the state and society into sexual matters, so long as nobody is injured, and no one's interests are encroached upon.'¹² The Bolsheviks were resolutely libertarian in their approach to sexuality. Sexual morality was a highly contested issue in which there was a seemingly endless array of positions. A common theme was that strict, codified regulation of sexual desire was a hangover of bourgeois society and an impediment to social progress. While we know that decriminalised homosexuality was part of a broader rush of sexual freedom the lack of a sizeable organised LGBT movement or organisation impedes our understanding of the time. At the time any individual who displayed unconventional sexual preference or gender expression was considered to constitute a third gender. This obviously lumps a great deal of disparate identities together and further obscures the public or state attitude towards LGBT individuals. We do know in the tsarist era anti-sodomy laws were used regularly to punish sexual disobedience and also as part of the state's arsenal against political and artistic dissidents. A small sub-culture of gay men existed in several larger cities centred on cruising in public parks and saunas. It was a community based primarily around the search for sexual partners and only a few very wealthy individuals were able to lead somewhat open lifestyles.¹³ After the revolution this changed. Although LGBT rights were never centred as a political goal the way women's liberation was it was widely understood that homophobia was a vestige of a dying sexual order.

The rapid evolution of gender roles was also liberating for LGBT people. There are many reports of women who began dressing as men and entering the military and heavy industry, some of these individuals had husbands some took on female part-

ners. Several doctors applied for permission to perform gender confirmation surgery on transgender patients. While these operations were certainly rudimentary it would have been unheard of in the capitalist world. Similarly there are also scattered reports of same sex marriages performed as part of the secular marriage regime.¹⁴ I argue that these achievements even if they only altered the lives of a minority of LGBT people in the early Soviet Union are extraordinary and are a testament to the emancipatory power of socialist politics. The revolutionary women's movement benefited from the leadership of pioneers such as Inessa Armand, Alexandra Kollontai and Clara Zetkin among many others. They expanded on the traditional Marxist conception of women's oppression. Adding nuance, addressing flaws and most importantly applying the lessons learnt from decades organizing working class women. They also benefited from the surging confidence and revolutionary zeal of women struggling against capitalism and sexism. Had there been a similar cadre of revolutionary LGBT leaders and a visible section of working class LGBT radicals the scope of liberation brought about in 1917 could have been expanded. Still, the Bolshevik's determined sexual libertarianism and struggle to free workers from the bonds of gendered expectation should continue to serve as inspiration to contemporary socialists.

Perhaps unsurprisingly no one embraced the tide of sexual revolution more vigorously than the young men and women of the Komosol (youth section of the Communist Party). Speakers at Komosol functions were bombarded with requests for information and literature on 'the problems of everyday life a useful euphemism for questions of sexual morality. While there were still many shades of opinion about such matters and casual sex was still seen as exploitative there was a noticeable shift away from the traditional notion of strict monogamy or mar-

¹²G.Batkis quoted in S.Wolf, *Sexuality and Socialism*, Chicago, Haymarket Press, 2009, p. 96

¹³D. Healey, *Homosexual Desire in Revolutionary Russia* Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2001

¹⁴'Sex and Sexuality in Soviet Russia', *wearemany.org*, <http://wearemany.org/a/2013/06/sex-and-sexuality-in-soviet-russia>

¹⁵*Ibid.*

riage at a young age. A 1922 survey showed that only 22% of Komsomol women believed marriage was the ideal family structure.¹⁵ The debates raging in the Komosomol and elsewhere were at times contradictory and unclear but they represent an attempt at the construction of a new gender and sexual order, dictated by oppressed people themselves.

The October Revolution and early soviet policy represented a festival of the oppressed, where the self-emancipation of oppressed people was a key objective; the defeat of the revolution and the rise of Stalin represents the return of distorted bourgeois sexual morality. Under Stalin any effort to build the revolutionary capability had been side-lined or smashed. The Zhentodel was shut down in 1930. In 1936 Stalin's Communist Party claimed that the Bolshevik's radical critique of capitalist family structure, strict gender roles and enforced monogamy had been a crude mistake. They called for a return to the ideology of the family on a socialist basis.

This is not only a refutation of the Marxist foundation of early soviet policy it also eroded almost all of the victories achieved by women workers since the revolution. In 1934 Stalin reintroduced anti-sodomy laws.¹⁶ This erased the foundation of LGBT life in the Soviet Union. Sodomy laws were used as they were under the Tsar to punish dissidents and those whose lifestyle contravened the established sexual morality. Defending the law Maxim Gorky said that homosexuality was 'a form of bourgeois degeneracy.'¹⁷ The association of homosexuality with affluence and corruption would become a common theme in Stalinist homophobia. The 1936 family code bore no resemblance to the radical objectives of Alexandra Kollontai's 1918 code. The communal laundries, kitchens and restaurants that alleviated some of the burden faced by women workers and worker to address deprivation were closed. Divorce be-

came a bureaucratic ordeal, complete with an extensive waiting period and incumbent fees that discouraged poor women. Abortion was recriminalized and the return of back alley medicine caused a spike in maternal mortality. Around this time the state began to award women with large families medals and financial incentives. In 1942 single people and childless couples were subjected to higher rates of taxation. From 1944 the state refused to recognize common law marriage and divorce became dependent on the discretion of the courts.¹⁸ In 1918 the Bolsheviks wanted to liberate women from compulsory motherhood and establish personal relationships based on love and desire not coercion and economic necessity. Under Stalin the family became another tool in a counter-revolutionary arsenal. The purpose of these attacks on individual freedom was to disempower and atomize revolutionary women. The revolutionaries of 1917 recognized proscribed gender roles and bourgeois sexual moralising as blunting revolutionary consciousness, Stalin used them to that end.

Trotsky was unequivocal in his response to this disaster: 'The triumphal rehabilitation of the family, taking place simultaneously— what a providential coincidence!—with the rehabilitation of the rouble, is caused by the material and cultural bankruptcy of the state. Instead of openly saying, 'We have proven still too poor and ignorant for the creation of socialist relations among men, our children and grandchildren will realize this aim,' the leaders are forcing people to glue together again the shell of the broken family, and not only that, but to consider it, under threat of extreme penalties, the sacred nucleus of triumphant socialism. It is hard to measure with the eye the scope of this retreat.'¹⁹

Stalin's attempt to inculcate party members with a 'socialist' person morality to replace the decidedly anti-socialist direction of his leadership had some profound and

¹⁶G. Carleton *The Sexual Revolution in Russia* Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005

¹⁷Quoted in Van Gosse, *The Movements of the New Left 1950-1975* New York, St. Martin's Press, 2005 p. 40

¹⁸G. Carleton *The Sexual Revolution in Russia* Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005

¹⁹L. Trotsky, *The Revolution Betrayed* New York, Dover, 2004, p. 114

bizarre effects. Young revolutionaries in the Komosomol were given bizarre directions against drinking and smoking. Even more alarming were the strange fruits of Stalinist sexual morality. Masturbation became a scourge to be defeated and the crusade produced baffling statements like: ‘all auto erotic processes, moments of self-satisfaction that do not require contact with another, occasion a pathological increase in ego-centrism and produce shy loners impressed in themselves and unconcerned with the life of society’²⁰. Many people deeply internalized the new ‘socialist’ Puritanism and were scarred in the process. One Communist student said to researchers: ‘when I think about masturbation my hair stands on end, it rises before me like a gigantic monster clutching me in its claws. As a result of 10 years of daily masturbation I have turned from a man into a monster.’²¹ Years on statements like these are almost comical but they reflect the immensely repressive conditions familiar to people who grew up in the clutches of Catholic fundamentalism. Bogus sexual morality designed to prey on shame and fear.

The October Revolution upended every aspect of Russian society. It represented the realisation of workers’ power as a creative, emancipatory force. It occasioned a rapid and profound change in gender relations and it created a new framework for sexual politics unlike anything across the capitalist world. These victories were achieved by revolutionary women and their allies, fighting against capitalism, the state and traditional values. They created a new world in their image: as free from abusive husbands as they were from heartless bosses, liberated from compulsory child-rearing and humiliat-

ing back alley abortions. LGBT people for the first time had a society not out to destroy their way of life. They had glimpses of freedoms the capitalist world wouldn’t see for another 90 years. Self-activity and self-determination were at the core of Bolshevik social policy: a recognition that liberation comes from the resistance and ingenuity of oppressed people, a principle that underpins radical politics to this day. There were revolutionary leaders like Inessa Armand and Alexandra Kollontai who were not afraid to disagree with Lenin, just as Clara Zetkin broke with Bebel on women working in factories. The determined core of revolutionaries in the Zhentodel who worked tirelessly to recruit women to the socialist cause and build them up as leaders and advocates within communities and factories. Central to the success of early soviet policy was, a Marxist, historical materialist understanding of oppression and an uncompromising programme for its eradication. This programme was hindered not by a lack of will or vision but by the material reality of an isolated, underdeveloped country ravaged by plague, famine and war. The destruction of the gains made by women and LGBT people, through brutal authoritarian laws, purges of key revolutionaries and the resurrection of bourgeois sexual morality and proscribed gender norms is an unbearable tragedy. It mirrors the counterrevolution seen in every aspect of life in the Soviet Union. It reflects the destruction of self-determination, workers’ power and of Bolshevism. Still, like the Paris Commune before it, the October Revolution serves as an inspiration for revolutionaries everywhere. It shows that we have it within ourselves to build a society in which everyone can live with freedom and dignity.

²⁰‘Sex and Sexuality in Soviet Russia’, *wearemany.org*, <http://wearemany.org/a/2013/06/sex-and-sexuality-in-soviet-russia>

²¹*Ibid.*