Chapter 26

Choice: Alexandra Kollontai Becomes a Revolutionary

This activity corresponds to the “Alexandra Kollontai Becomes a Revolutionary” feature in your textbook. The following questions are designed to help you discover a woman who gave up what she saw as the illusions of family life for revolution. Once you have answered the questions in the Comprehension section, submit your answers and move on to the questions in the Analysis and Outside Sources sections. Each section is designed to build upon the one before it, taking you deeper into the subject you are studying. After you have answered all of the questions, you will have the option of emailing your responses to your instructor.

Introduction

Alexandra Kollontai was unusual because she was an old guard Bolshevik revolutionary, who survived the Stalinist purges by being sent overseas as a diplomat. She managed to live out her life and criticize the Soviet regime, while others who did so were liquidated by Stalin and his henchmen. She advocated free love, a marriage-less society, and communal living, among many other non-socialist concepts. Among the women of the Soviet revolution, she was one of the few who were able to remain true to herself and her ideals and not be compromised by fear or danger.

Comprehension

1. How did Alexandra Kollontai discover her freedom from the bourgeois notion of marriage and women’s non-role in society outside the family?

2. What was Kollontai’s reaction to her discovery? How did she go about rectifying her perceived inferior role in society? How did she move from bourgeois family life to a life of revolutionary activism?

3. How did the Soviets deal with Kollontai’s outspokenness? Was she punished?

Analysis

1. What was Kollontai’s characteristic response to policies she opposed? Was her choice of words prudent or were they symptomatic of her need for personal integrity and honesty?

2. During her heyday, Kollontai was the most prominent woman in the Soviet government, founding the Zhenotdel or Women's Section of the Soviet Communist Party in 1919. This organization worked to improve women’s lives in the Soviet Union, tackling issues such as child care, employment, and literacy, as well as introducing new education and labor laws. Was Kollontai a feminist for
her time? Did the Soviet Union’s treatment of women after the Revolution inadvertently inspire the women’s feminist revolution of later years?

3. Compared to Leon Trotsky—a self-imposed exile in Mexico, where Kollontai had been Soviet ambassador—Kollontai escaped liquidation. How do you think that she managed to escape the fate that awaited people like Trotsky?

Outside Sources

1. The story of Alexandra Kollontai reminds us of another famous, albeit fictional Russian who gave up everything for another purpose, Anna Karenina. Read the story of Anna Karenina by Leo Tolstoy at http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/1399. This novel is more than a tragic romance; Anna Karenina can be interpreted as a moral parable on the struggle for self-truth in the face of the illusions of society. Compare and contrast the story of Anna Karenina with the life of Alexandra Kollontai.

2. Read the story of Alexandra Kollontai and her writings, and listen to her speech from the 1920s to the proletarian workers at http://www.marxists.org/archive/kollonta/index.htm. Discuss your reactions to her writings and her speech.

3. Kollontai realized her perceived subjugation as a woman and wife by reading Woman and Socialism by August Bebel. Read about Bebel and his work at http://www.marxists.org/archive/bebel/index.htm. Further documentation of the varied Marxist viewpoints concerning women can be found in multiple excerpts at http://www.marxists.org/subject/women/index.htm. Compare and contrast these viewpoints of women’s roles with Kollontai’s. How do you think Kollontai would react to these excerpts?