

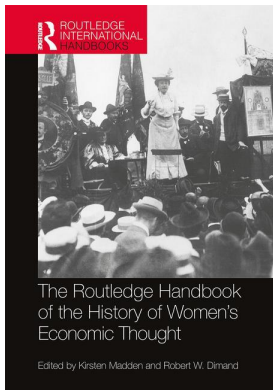
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### **Contextualizing women's economic thought in late Imperial Russia and in the early years of revolution**

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## 6

# CONTEXTUALIZING WOMEN'S ECONOMIC THOUGHT IN LATE IMPERIAL RUSSIA AND IN THE EARLY YEARS OF REVOLUTION

1870–1920

*Anna Klimina*

### Introduction

The particular reality of women's economics in late Imperial Russia was largely determined by Russia's socio-economic backwardness, which resulted in limited participation in Russian economic studies by women before the 1917 Russian Revolution. Russia's backwardness included all the debilitating characteristics of a feudal society: arbitrary autocracy,<sup>1</sup> conservative social values, deep aversion to radical political and social reforms, and perpetual struggle for women's higher education, even in the upper classes. Russian women did not pursue advanced degrees in economics-related fields; consequently, they did not do economics, and left no formal economic writings.

In late Imperial Russia, the best and most historically interesting contributions by women to socio-economic scholarship were always part of the larger political struggle of thoughtful Russians against the autocratic regime, and for political, social and economic freedoms. That direct involvement in political struggle is clearly evident in the political speeches, popular articles and actions of a few educated women<sup>2</sup> – mostly members of the privileged classes – who were either activists like Vera Figner, Vera Zasulich, Catherine Breshko-Breshkovskaya, Maria Spiridonova, and Alexandra Kollontai, or political journalists like Ariadna Tyrkova and Ekaterina Kuskova.

In the late 1860s, as Russia began its move toward modernity, animated debates about the transformation of Russian society took place across the country among the educated and involved. Reviewing these widely diverse and often intensely held opinions as thoughtful educated Russian women acted upon them and wrote out their perspectives reveals a hitherto unwritten chapter in Russian intellectual history. This is the main purpose of this essay.

### Contextualizing women's socio-economic thought in pre-1920 Russia

At the boundary of the 19th and 20th centuries, Russia's economy, despite state-led industrialization, remained the least developed of all the major European countries (Gregory 1994: 35). The overriding concern in Russia at the time, because of its very backwardness, was the acceleration of comprehensive modernization. However, in their visions for modern order and, consequently, for the directions of social change, Russian would-be modernizers differed substantially.

These differing views on Russia's liberation from its feudal past this chapter conceptualizes as revolutionary (radical) and moderate; in Russia, as Pavel Milyukov explains, radicals were primarily "socialistic" while moderates have always been known as "liberals" (1906: 222).

The Russian liberal reformers supported pro-Western capitalist development, argued for establishing in Russia a popularly elected legislative parliament, and advocated for solutions to the ills of Russian society through peaceful and constitutional means. They viewed a market order, nurtured and maintained by a constitutional and democratic Russian state, as a viable alternative to revolution and unanimously considered socialism both disastrous and utopian. In contrast, Russian radicals, whose views prevailed in public discussion, wanted to free Russia from "both paternalistic monarchy and capitalist exploitation" (Raef 1959: 221, 229) through socialist revolution and a subsequent collectivist order. Each of these currents of Russian modernization thought included women writers and activists.

The uniqueness of the Russian situation lay in the surprisingly prominent role that women played in the Russian radical movement. Robert McNeal acknowledges, "Few if any political movements or parties can surpass Russian radicalism before 1917 with respect to female participation", both "in proportionate numerical strength and in leadership" (1971: 143, 145). Several scholars have noted women's high participation in radical activity; Engel, for example, suggests that in backward Russia, left-wing opposition "provided women with unprecedented opportunities for initiative and leadership" (Engel 1977: 101), and McNeal points out that revolution had become one of the few options through which women could achieve "equality with men", and rise to influence and power (McNeal, 1972: 4-5). Vera Zasulich, one of the prominent revolutionaries of the 1870s, confessed in her memoir ([1931] 1975: 69):

Even before I had revolutionary dreams, I made elaborate plans to escape becoming a governess [the only probable career, given her gender and social position as impoverished gentry<sup>3</sup>]. The specter of revolution . . . made me equal to a boy; I too could dream of "action", of "exploits", and of the "great struggle."

Historians also see a connection between increased educational opportunities for women<sup>4</sup> in 1860s and 1870s Russia and increased scope in their revolutionary involvement (Engel 1977; Knight 1975). However, as Richard Stites argues, that rise in women's radicalism happened not because "education itself generated radical thought and behaviour" (Stites 1977: 44), but because those newly established educational institutions, in addition to becoming training centres for a generation of professional women, also provided fertile ground for radical groups who wished to recruit women to their cause. Given the limited opportunities for professional employment, many educated women were eager to seek fulfilment and meaning through a radical fight against the tsarist regime.

At the same time, there was "very little separate female radicalism", since Russian women were accepted as full-fledged members of mixed revolutionary groups, and "literally fought

tsarist autocracy shoulder to shoulder with men” (McNeal 1971: 143). As a matter of fact, most of the female revolutionaries “had been attracted to radicalism by the people’s cause, not by the women’s” (Stites 1991: 127); politically radical women tended to regard any special women’s cause as less important than the common cause of the socialist revolution, which sought to liberate all people and build socialism in Russia.

However, in their understanding of a desirable economic foundation for socialism, revolutionaries differed substantially. Russian Marxists, considering the industrial proletariat the most advanced socio-economic class, advocated first a dictatorship of a proletariat as the new form of post-revolutionary state, and then centralized state control of the economy on behalf of the proletariat as the future economic model (Lenin [1917] 1974: 402–410). In contrast, non-Marxist socialists, wary of replacing the capricious tsarist autocracy with an equally authoritarian proletarian state, began with the assumption that economic democracy had to be the foundation of a new order. These reformers imagined socialism almost exclusively in conjunction with workplace democracy, worker (“toiler”) ownership, local governance and economic decentralization. To them, democratizing the economic system of post-capitalist Russia required the freedom of working people to form and control production, and to cooperate voluntarily with other producers (Chayanov 1919: 31).

Since socialist radicalism attracted far more women than did liberal reformism, the larger portion of this essay is devoted to discussing the views and actions of revolutionary women. The next section focuses on economic ideas of non-Marxist women socialists in detail, after which the following sections respectively present the economic views of Russia’s women Marxists and liberal reformers.

### **Non-Marxist socialism in Russia as democratic socialism: Vera Zasulich, Catherine Breshko-Breshkovskaya, and Maria Spiridonova**

In late Imperial Russia, non-Marxist socialism was comprised of two successive socio-economic movements: Radical Populism in the 1870s and 1880s, and neo-Populism in the 1900s and 1910s.

Radical Populists, whose clandestine organization “Land and Liberty” was formed in 1876, argued that Russia could skip a development of capitalism and move directly to a democratic socialist order, based on decentralized small-scale farming, situated in the context of village communal governance,<sup>5</sup> known for its “connectedness, selflessness and cooperation” (Zasulich 1884: v). These communes were viewed by Radical Populists as an embryonic form of a socialist organization of production, a form that already epitomized collectivism and primitive democracy (Gerschenkron 1955: 27–28). Since most land in Russia belonged to the landed gentry, the development of an advanced collectivist society from the commune was envisioned through confiscatory land reform. The Populists demanded the requisition of all privately owned land and its subsequent transfer to the rural communes and small landed proprietors for cultivation either individually or collectively, “but only by those who were toiling in it” (Figner [1881] 1964: 411). The federation of independent peasant communes (republics) was imagined as a model of Russia’s future democratic governance.

Because of a disagreement over how to speed up the coming of peasant socialism, in 1879, “Land and Liberty” broke up into two factions: the terrorist “People’s Will”, which advocated political terror as the only historically justified form of action, and the much smaller non-terrorist “Black Repartition”, which favoured peaceful propaganda in the countryside.

The majority of women members of “Land and Liberty” joined the terrorist “People’s Will”, and participated equally with men in violence; in the Executive Committee of the “People’s Will”, almost 30 per cent were women (Engel 1977: 92). However, as McNeal admits, “the first

generation of narodnik [populist] radicals did not produce female theoreticians” (1971: 160); most revolutionary terrorist women simply acted on their beliefs, revealing in that way their views concerning the desirable direction of Russia’s socio-economic development.

The “People’s Will” plan began with killing the tsar, then Alexander II (1818–1881), and his key officials, which they expected would ignite the peasant revolution. This revolution, in turn, would result in a transfer of land to the peasantry, the first major step in building peasant socialism in Russia. Even before that, in 1878 Vera Zasulich (1849–1919), a beautiful young daughter of gentry, attempted to assassinate the Governor-General of St. Petersburg, Fyodor Trepov, the first act of terrorism in Russia. The dramatic trial and her unjustified acquittal<sup>6</sup> turned her into a revolutionary icon that “helped give [emerging] terrorist groups the . . . pedigree they needed in order to legitimize their existence” (Bergman 1979: 244). It could be argued that pardoning Zasulich’s violent action sparked a dramatic increase in political warfare in the country.

Among the most well-known members of the terrorist “People’s Will” was one of its leaders Vera Figner (1852–1942), who, being convinced that only killing the tsar could bring socialism to Russia, helped organize several assassination attempts, and maintained a clandestine flat where Executive Committee meetings were held and bombs were assembled. After the successful assassination of the tsar in March 1881, and ensuing arrests of nearly all members of the Executive Committee, Figner held the remnant of the quickly disintegrating “People’s Will” together for almost two years, practically singlehandedly, and even coordinated one more successful assassination, this time a high-ranking Russian police official. When she was eventually arrested in 1883, she was given the death penalty, which was later commuted to life imprisonment. Figner spent more than 20 years in solitary incarceration, becoming a symbol of revolutionary martyrdom (Hartnett 2014: 205–219).

Another prominent member of the “People’s Will” Sofia Perovskaya (1853–1881) actually directed the final assault on Alexander II. She arranged the locations of the lookouts and bomb-throwers and, from a concealed position, gave the final signal for the bomb that actually killed the tsar. All bomb-throwers were arrested and sentenced to death, but Perovskaya became “the first Russian woman to be executed for a political crime” (Engel 1977: 100).

A more recognizable contribution to socio-economic thought, primarily through correspondence with Karl Marx, was made by Vera Zasulich who, despite having become an inspirational figure for many female radicals, never actually justified the terrorism. In fact, in 1879, she joined the non-terrorist “Black Repartition”. Its members originally saw the peasantry as a basic revolutionary force, but in the early 1880s, after reading Marx’s general analysis of capitalism and its laws of motion, they realized that capitalist development of large-scale industry in Russia was necessary for a successful revolutionary transition to an advanced collectivist society. They therefore abandoned their Populist stance and converted to orthodox Marxism (as generally understood then and now). A decade later they welcomed the emergence of the Russian proletariat, recognized as the principle agent of revolutionary change in Marxist teaching.<sup>7</sup> In 1883, in Geneva, members of “Black Repartition” established the first Russian Marxist organization, the “Emancipation of Labour” group, led by Georgi Plekhanov (1856–1918).

Zasulich, however, was still not fully persuaded by the Marxist conception of socio-economic development. In March 1881, she wrote to Marx and asked whether the Russian rural commune would be “capable of developing in a socialist direction, that is gradually organizing its production and distribution on a collectivist basis”, or would be “expected to perish” in which case Russian socialists would have to reconcile themselves to the inevitability of capitalist industrialization in order to move successfully to industrial socialism (Zasulich [1881] 1983: 98).

What is significant in Zaslulich's letter to Marx is what might have motivated her to question, precisely when her fellow Populists from "Black Repartition" began converting to Marxism, its vision of socialism, based on "the most determined centralization of power in the hands of the state authority" (Marx [1850] 1950: 106–107) and state-directed large-scale industrial production. Though no direct statement of opinion is evident in her letter, her very questioning seems to imply that the socialized peasantry organized around democratic institutions of the commune would, in her view, be a better alternative. In essence, Zaslulich doubted the democratic promise of centralized socialism.<sup>8</sup> In 1884, in her foreword to the Russian translation of Fredrick Engels' *Socialism: utopian and scientific*, Zaslulich emphasized that nurturing democratic institutions of peasant commune, above all its cooperative organization of labour and self-governance, "would be of the greatest service in Russia" (1884: vii).

In his reply to Zaslulich, Marx acknowledged that "his special study [of the Russian commune] has convinced [him] that the commune is the fulcrum for social regeneration in Russia", and admitted that "history offered Russia a chance to avoid the full-blown capitalist stage of economic development" (1944: 354–355). However, nowhere in his subsequent writings (from 1881 to 1883, the year of his death) did Marx further elaborate either on the means through which the commune could move backward Russia to an economically advanced society; or, most importantly, on potential negative consequences of centralization under socialism. The newly converted Russian Marxists chose not to focus on this one letter with its unorthodox musing on the commune and accepted as universally applicable his theory of history for Western society (Plekhanov [1885] 1948: 252–253).

To return to Zaslulich, it can be argued that, despite her evident economic romanticism, she saw the dangers of supplanting the tsarist's autocracy with the dictatorship of proletariat, and intuitively sensed an inverse correlation between the coercive power of a centralized socialist state and respect for personal freedoms and democratic self-governance. As Isaiah Berlin observes, "the majority of Radical Populists were deeply democratic; they believed that all power tended to be corrupt, that all concentration of authority tended to perpetuate itself, that all centralization was coercive and evil" (1978: 221–222). Small wonder that Zaslulich considered the October 1917 Bolshevik Revolution a "coup d'état" that, "from the point of view of socialists who remained faithful to the legacy of socialism", was "worse than no revolution at all" (1918: 286).

This strain of populist or democratic thought was not lost with Zaslulich's reluctant acquiescence to Marxist thought. In 1902, the successors of Radical Populists, the neo-Populists, founded the Socialist Revolutionary Party (known as Essers, from the initial letters), the party of the Russian peasantry. Although Essers were aware of the strong communal spirit among peasants, they linked the democratic potential of peasant agriculture more to the development of small-scale independent farming, and believed that democratic socialism would not be feasible without a strong class of small democratic owners and cultivators. Essers were opponents of industrial concentration, as they feared that large-scale production would alienate working people. For this reason, they favoured workers' artels and decentralization in industry (Radkey 1958: 43–45). In agriculture Essers supported socialization of land, most of which belonged to landlords, by democratically elected state authorities, and its subsequent transfer to peasantry under the condition that

no one was to buy land, or sell it, or rent it, or lease it; it was to belong to all people and was to be used equally by all who wished to cultivate it with their own labour, and only for as long as they worked it themselves.

*Chernov, cited in Radkey 1955: 69*

Instead of the dictatorship of proletariat, Essers favoured the rule of all toiling people, peasants and workers.

The Esser party owes much of its beginnings to its founding mother, Catherine Breshko-Breshkovskaya (1844–1934), a former member of the terrorist “People’s Will”, who in 1896 returned from prison eager to revive the ideas of Radical Populists. Many historians recognize the crucial role of Breshko-Breshkovskaya in “calling the elder generation of revolutionaries back into service” (Radkey 1958: 52) and recruiting new activists for socialist revolutionary groups through “carrying the written and spoken word to them” (Maxwell 1990: 140–141). Vladimir Zenzinov (1880–1953), one of the oldest party members, attests that “everywhere [Breshko-Breshkovskaya] went she left an organization behind her” (1953: 106). In his obituary for Breshko-Breshkovskaya, Alexander Kerensky (1881–1970)<sup>9</sup> wrote that

the period from 1896 to 1903 was for Breshko-Breshkovskaya the one of her most active work. While the police followed on her heels, she secretly travelled through literally the whole of Russia, creating the Party of Socialist Revolutionaries, and everywhere inspiring young people to fight for freedom for the whole people and for land for the peasants – under the motto of “land and liberty”.

*Kerensky 1935: 429*

Breshko-Breshkovskaya’s name is inseparably linked with the propaganda of political terror, which Essers, influenced by the example of the “People’s Will”, used to speed up revolution during their early years. Vindicating political violence, Breshko-Breshkovskaya, a veteran revolutionist, explained that a “terrorist’s self-sacrifice could not help but fire the hearts of thousands of others who also wished to champion the cause of the general good” (quoted in Zenzinov 1953: 106).

Breshko-Breshkovskaya’s call for violent struggle and self-sacrifice appealed most to educated, upper-class women, as in the early 1880s. They began actively participating in assassinations of high-ranking members of tsarist bureaucracy; according to Amy Knight, “from 1905 to 1908 alone, eleven individual terrorist acts were committed by Socialist-Revolutionary women” (1979: 139). However, mixed terrorist militant groups, in which men and women participated in political warfare together, were more common (McNeal 1971: 157). Essers’ most well-known terrorist exploits were the murders of the Minister of Interior Dimitri Sipyagin in 1902, his successor Vyacheslav von Plehve in 1904, and the Governor-General of Moscow, Grand Duke Sergey Aleksandrovich (uncle of then Tsar Nicolas II) in 1905 (Hilbrenner and Schenk, 2010: 166).

At the same time, as Victor Chernov (1873–1952) has clarified, “[Breshko-Breshkovskaya] was not a theoretician, a strategist or a tactician, but rather a preacher, an apostle with convincing words; even more, an active example” (1953: 316); in her public speeches Breshko-Breshkovskaya primarily propagated economic views of Socialist-Revolutionaries, most eloquently articulated in the works of party members Victor Chernov and Vladimir Kosinskii (1866–1938), and in the publications of non-party socialist Alexander Chayanov (1888–1937). Essers believed that at the base of land socialization small-scale peasant farming in agriculture would be preserved as the main organizational form, income differentiation among peasantry would be avoided, and conditions for decentralization and growth of regional democracies in Russia would be created (Chernov 1919: 45). Socialist-Revolutionaries were convinced that “the death” of numerous “self-governed peasant communities” would mean “death, or at any rate, a vast setback to freedom and equality in Russia” (Berlin 1978: 237).

Most non-Marxist socialists, and not just Essers, acknowledged a strong connection between the existence of thriving peasant family farming and the voluntary development of a cooperative movement. Chayanov explained that “peasant cooperation . . . is a part of peasant economy” and projected that under democratic socialism, small independent cultivators would constitute the basis of the agrarian system, while their various, freely formed cooperative associations would sustain its successful existence (1919: 21, 301). Non-Marxist socialists strongly objected to Bolshevik plans for land nationalization (Chayanov 1919: 42, 301) and argued against “tilling the land by large social groups . . . even within the framework of the socialist state” (Tugan-Baranovsky 1916: 364–365). Needless to say, the majority of Socialist-Revolutionaries did not support the October 1917 Bolshevik Revolution. Catherine Breshko-Breshkovskaya, like Vera Zasulich, considered the Bolshevik Revolution as “the reactionary coup d’état”, stressing that “where there is no freedom there is no revolution” (Kerensky 1935: 429).

Yet in April of 1917, a small fraction of the Socialist Revolutionary Party formed a subgroup, known as Left Socialist Revolutionaries. In late October 1917, just prior to the Bolshevik Revolution, they split entirely from the Essers. After establishing their own party in December 1917, the Left Essers joined the Bolsheviks to create the Bolshevik-Left Essers coalition government, “the only coalition government in the history of Soviet Russia” (Häfner 1991: 324). Their fear was that if the Left Essers’ representatives did not actively participate in the new Bolshevik government, Lenin would nationalize land and not transfer it to peasants (Boniece 1995: 408–409).

The most prominent woman representative of Left Essers was Maria Spiridonova (1884–1941). Spiridonova, of noble birth, studied to become a teacher, then, in 1905, began a nursing course, but gave up her studies for revolutionary work. On behalf of the Essers in 1906, she shot and killed General Luzhenovskii, an act for which she spent the next 11 years in prison (Steinberg 1971: 3–5). After her liberation by the Provisional Government in the spring of 1917, Spiridonova joined the emerging group of Left Essers and became their leader by election. After October 1917, she served the new Bolshevik government as the Head of the Peasant Section of the Central Executive Committee of the All-Russian Soviet of Workers’, Peasants’, and Soldiers’ Deputies. In her numerous speeches of the time<sup>10</sup> (she wrote little, not even in prison), Spiridonova advocated for what she considered the most important task of the Bolshevik Revolution – the socialization of the land and transfer of property rights to local communities, and not to the centralized state. She believed that “if Soviet Russia is to be saved, it will be saved solely by the peasants, who are working [on their land] to build their new Soviet countryside” (cited in Cinnella 1997: 72). However, in late spring of 1918, the Bolshevik-Left Socialist Revolutionary coalition was broken, primarily due to a food supply crisis. The Peace Treaty of Brest-Litovsk with Germany cost Russia its primary grain supply, to which Lenin responded with compulsory requisitions of grain from Russian peasantry with devastating impact. Shortly thereafter, in July, Spiridonova and her party attempted to organize armed insurrection against Bolsheviks; as typical Essers, they were convinced that a terrorist attack on the German ambassador, Count Mirbach, would spark a popular uprising (Häfner 1991). The uprising failed; Spiridonova (along with many Left Essers) was arrested, and spent the rest of her life in Siberian exile, which ended with her execution in 1941 (Rabinowitch 1995: 425–428). By the mid-1920s, many Socialist-Revolutionaries, not only Leftist, were either imprisoned (Jancen 1982), or already abroad, and the Soviet government stopped publishing their views. With their defeat, a viable democratic socialist alternative to Bolsheviks’ Marxism in Russia was lost.



## Women of importance in Russian Marxist economic thought: Nadezhda Krupskaya, Ekaterina Kuskova and Alexandra Kollontai

The Marxist Party in Russia – the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP) – was established in 1898; most members of Plekhanov’s “Emancipation of Labour” group joined it. In 1903 RSDLP split into the Bolshevik faction, headed by Vladimir Lenin (1870–1924) who perceived Russian Marxism as an elitist movement, and the much smaller Menshevik faction, led by Julius Martov (1873–1923) who wanted the party to be organized more democratically. Although Bolshevik and Menshevik views on the party’s organizational principles differed, “the economic and political program [up to the early 1920s] was identical for both groups” (Tyrkova 1919: 45). Leninist Bolsheviks, the dominant force in Russian Marxism, argued that the “vanguard”, a professional party elite, should assume state power on behalf of the proletariat, and create a single party state that would dictatorially govern the economy and lead society (Plekhanov 1906: 27; Lenin [1895] 1972: 102–118). The Bolshevik Party itself was run on the dictatorial principle of so-called democratic centralism that demanded unanimous compliance to party decisions and forbade the formation of any intra-party factions.

Almost all pre-1917 Marxist women intellectuals in Russia came from privileged classes; they began their revolutionary activities with “the mastery of the literature of Marxism”, and then “made their way to the factory courtyard, the barracks, or labour circle” (Stites 1991: 243) to organize the emerging industrial proletariat for socialist revolution. Thus, Nadezhda Krupskaya (1869–1939), a daughter of a democratically minded gentry family, acquired her intimate knowledge of the proletariat while teaching reading, arithmetic, history, and Russian literature to illiterate factory workers in the “Evening-Sunday” School from 1891 to 1896 (McNeal 1972: 32). In 1898, Krupskaya became Lenin’s wife.

Overall, the economic views and actions of Bolshevik women were obviously determined by their party’s dictatorial politics. Krupskaya, one of the leading women Bolsheviks, seems to epitomize the conduct of most Bolshevik women of the time in her submission to the party with “unlimited moral ardor” (McNeal 1972: 65). She was “only a follower, a devoted technician”, not a policy maker or independent critic (*ibid.*). She always “believed overwhelmingly in exclusive Bolshevik rule” and by 1920 completely accepted Bolshevik authoritarianism (Farnsworth 1973: 325). Yet in one field she dared to disagree with Lenin and the party – the training of the proletariat; she believed that all students should be exposed to the “fullest possible and most comprehensive education”, and not merely taught utilitarian skills. Krupskaya strongly argued against “narrow productionism in education” that “suppresses individuality”, insisting instead on establishing “socialist schools” that are “schools of freedom” and “creativity” ([1918] 1988: 52–54). She clearly realized that without such liberal education social progress in backward Russia would not be possible (*ibid.*: 59). Nevertheless, after Stalin destroyed political opposition and consolidated his power at the end of the 1920s, Krupskaya, understandably, did not openly oppose the establishment of the Stalinist model of utilitarianism and productionism in the Soviet educational system.

The most interesting economic ideas in the Bolshevik camp, however, came from those women who were not afraid to fight for establishing truly democratic foundations for the new economic order.

Ekaterina Kuskova (1869–1958) joined Plekhanov’s “Emancipation of Labour” group in 1897. She seems to be the first opponent, from within emerging Russian Marxism, who sensed authoritarian danger in Lenin’s vision for the Marxist Party as the exclusive shaping force in the Russian proletariat’s ambivalent journey to revolution (Lenin [1895] 1972: 102–116).

Kuskova disagreed with Lenin's vision for party monopoly over the labour movement. In her article *Credo*, published in 1899, she explained that in a truly democratic setting, workers should have the freedom to organize themselves spontaneously and work out their independent ideology without being manipulated into political struggle under the guidance of the party (1899: 14). Kuskova considered trade unions to be among the most important of such "spontaneously formed" workers' organizations. She argued that trade unions, while focusing on immediate demands for better wages and working conditions, could nevertheless become an "awakening" that would teach workers how to create the political "organizations" needed to "receive and enjoy political freedoms" (1899: 15–16). Equally important in Kuskova's vision of trade unions was her conviction that the desired improvement in workers' economic conditions did not have to depend exclusively on a socialist revolution. These improvements could also be achieved gradually, through the trade union's non-violent struggle for economic and social reforms (1906: 325). To that end, Kuskova maintained, trade unions should remain politically independent (1906: 325).

Lenin fiercely opposed Kuskova's reformist ideas, arguing that "only socialist revolution could bring serious improvements in the life of workers" ([1902] 1973: 373). For Lenin, his monopolistic Bolshevik Party was necessary to "subordinate [workers'] struggle for reforms . . . to the revolutionary struggle for socialism" (ibid.: 406). Immediately after publishing *Credo*, Kuskova was expelled from the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party.

In 1903, being convinced that only "participation in liberal-oppositional activity" (Kuskova 1899: 17) could help move Russia in a democratic direction, Kuskova joined Russia's Union of Liberation Movement, founded by Peter Struve (1870–1944). In 1905 Struve, together with Pavel Milyukov (1859–1943), created the first liberal party in Russia, the Constitutional Democratic Party (Cadets). Kuskova became a member. However, as a left-wing liberationist, Kuskova disagreed with many pro-capitalist Cadet policies, and left Cadets in 1910. She converted to syndicalism and became actively involved in the cooperative movement, echoing the democratic views of many Russian non-Marxist socialists discussed earlier. Kuskova argued that cooperatives are best situated to "serve as a conduit for democratic ideas" and "a mechanism for preparing Russia for [democratic] self-government" (quoted in Norton 1992: 104). She did not approve of the Bolshevik Revolution and, in 1922, together with other prominent anti-Soviet intellectuals, was exiled from Russia (Finkel 2003: 602).

Another dissident, whose criticism of the Bolsheviks' authoritarian approach to economics had definite consequences, was Alexandra Kollontai (1872–1952), a daughter of military gentry, who became involved in radical politics from the 1890s. Kollontai joined Russian Marxists in 1906, first on the side of Mensheviks, and then, in 1915, she joined the Bolshevik Party. Kollontai expressed open disagreement with increasing centralization of production after the Bolshevik Revolution and the weakening of trade unions. Before the revolution, Bolsheviks gained overwhelming support from Russian workers by promising worker control of industrial property through conversion of existing enterprises into cooperatives, collectively run by worker unions. Immediately after the Bolshevik Revolution, those syndicalist ideas were actually put into practice through establishing worker-run factories (Avrich 1963: 49–52). However, by the end of 1918, that collegial worker control over enterprises was eliminated because Bolsheviks thought it was "sectarian", "chaotic, shattering, primitive, incomplete" (Lenin [1918] 1974: 140), and not congruent with the state's plans to establish a strict industrial hierarchical order.

The elimination of worker-run factories provoked strenuous objection from workers who formed what is known as Workers' Opposition, a movement that Kollontai openly supported. Her self-printed pamphlet, circulated among party members under the title *The Workers' Opposition*, put together workers' demands. She clearly explained that the Bolsheviks' intended

move to centralization and autocracy would undermine worker independence, jeopardize natural development of workers' socialism, and further a proliferation of bureaucracy ([1919] 1977: 188–190). Workers' Opposition was heavily criticized by Lenin ([1921] 1973: 210–214), subsequently crushed in the early 1920s, and its leaders imprisoned (Allen 2005). Kollontai was forced to leave active politics.

Kollontai is also internationally renowned as a leading Bolshevik feminist; she wrote extensively on moral and political oppression of women, and argued for their emancipation through gender equality, personal autonomy, and socialization of domestic labour and child care<sup>11</sup> (1916: 571, 576; 1923). From 1918 to 1920, Kollontai was Head of the Commissariat for Social Welfare. From 1920 to 1922, the year she left Russia, she chaired the Women's Bureau<sup>12</sup> within the Central Committee of the Communist Party. Those positions gave her the authority to establish full state funding of maternity care “from conception through the first year of life”, to initiate the reform of the marriage code, and to advocate – in her numerous speeches of the time – policies supporting the promotion of women into positions of leadership in the government and in the party (Kollontai 1921: 10–12; 1923; see also Clements 1979: 149–176).

None of these women, despite the thoughtfulness of their convictions or their willingness to risk their safety, were able to affect the Russian Marxists' vision of capitalism as the necessary, but intermediate, step toward centralized, bureaucratic socialism. That left the clearest advocacy for social reformism and liberal democracy in the hands of Russian liberals. The liberals supported the development of capitalism, seeing it as the final stage of Russia's transformation.

### **Placing liberalism within Russian context: economic views of Ariadna Tyrkova**

Russian liberals advocated for a peaceful transformation of Russia's political regime from unlimited autocratic power to a rule-governed constitutional monarchy. They recognized that under Russia's conditions of socio-economic backwardness, “perfect democratic governance cannot be created overnight to replace the existing state” (Shapiro 1986: 76–78). Liberals believed that a modernized autocracy, restricted by a constitution created in the Western fashion, could (and should) be used together with a newly created legislative parliament to institute and nurture capitalism in Russia and find constitutional solutions to Russia's ills. They “were always willing to make peace with the monarchy and would at all times have preferred to have it grant political liberty on its own accord than to have liberty wrestled from it through revolution” (Pipes 1972: 75). However, as Milyukov explains, “Liberalism in Russia connoted the idea of state intervention”, and since no Russian “liberal” thought had existed in *laissez-faire* days, it was free to become “more socially reformist, without being inconsistent with a former tradition” (1906: 224). As a much smaller group than the ones previously discussed, and given their more moderate agenda, liberals seemingly attracted fewer women. Hence this essay presents the Russian liberal perspective through the voice of one woman only. Ariadna Tyrkova (1869–1962) was the sole woman member of the Central Committee of Cadet Party from its beginning in 1906 until the October 1917 Bolshevik Revolution.

Tyrkova, a well-educated woman from landed gentry, worked in the 1890s and 1910s as a journalist, a career opportunity available to her as “most professions were not” (McReynolds 1990: 285). Always keenly interested in politics, she chose to identify with the cause of Russian Liberalism, drawn by its “purpose to secure the basic human and civil rights and to establish a democratic system” (Tyrkova 1951: 8). In 1903, she joined Struve's Union of Liberation and began to write for its main publication, the oppositionist review *Liberation*. In 1904–1905, Tyrkova participated in the formation of the Constitutional Democratic Party, and wrote frequently for

the liberal press (Tyrkova 1953: 173–175). After the establishment of the Constitution (1906) and subsequent elections of the people's representatives to the Imperial Duma (the first Russian parliament), Tyrkova covered the Imperial Duma's political debates for various St Petersburg and Moscow newspapers from 1906 to 1912. She also lobbied for women's political rights in feminist newspapers (Stites 1991: 220) and at "all major feminist congresses" (Edmondson 1984: 173). Tyrkova was not a theoretician, but in her public speeches and newspaper articles, she explained and popularized the main ideas of the Russian liberal movement. In 1951, she summarized her vision in the autobiographical article "Russian Liberalism".

Like many Russian liberals, Tyrkova emphasized that Russia, economically and culturally backward, needed evolutionary change, which would include educating the masses for a responsible role, rather than radical revolutionary transformation (1919: 41). She saw the party's role as nurturing pro-democratic attitudes among Russian population through propaganda (1951: 12–13). Cadets opposed both Marxists and Socialist-Revolutionaries, who "denounced the liberals as [backward-looking] traitors and enemies of the people because the Cadet Party stood for constitutional monarchy instead of a republic and for social reform instead of social revolution" (Tyrkova 1951: 11).

Not until after the February 1917 Revolution and the tsar's abdication, did Russian liberals accept "the desirability of a republic in lieu of a constitutional monarchy", but this was "the only one serious alteration of [their] political program" (Tyrkova 1919: 41). Taking advantage of the new right of women to hold political office, in the summer of 1917, Tyrkova won election to the Petrograd City Council (Soviet). In her legislative capacity, she continued to advocate for the Cadets' vision of the country's socio-economic development.

As Tyrkova clearly explained, Cadets (like the Essers) insisted that the core of economic reform lay "in endowing the peasant with land out of state reserves and private holdings" (1919: 40). Although the top leaders of the Cadet Party were landowners, Cadets were convinced that "the land problem could be solved only by means of the compulsory alienation of the landowners' property for distribution among land-poor peasants" (*ibid.*). However, unlike Essers, who argued for the confiscation of private land without compensating owners, "the liberal program provided for a fair compensation of the landlords for the confiscated land", because liberals "recognized the right of [private] property as a necessary foundation of contemporary Russia's economic order and development" (Tyrkova 1919: 40, 117). They believed that Russian capitalism could mature only if a class of Russian owners of private property was created and protected (*ibid.*).

The Cadets' societal ideal highlighted both freedom and social justice, which, they believed, were realizable only by the combination of market economy and "state intervention through social legislation" (Milyukov 1906: 224). The purpose of such legislation, Tyrkova wrote, was "improving the lot of the workers within the framework of the capitalist system" (1953: 175), much as had already been done "by the progressives in all advanced Western countries [of the time]" (Tyrkova 1951: 10). Social legislation, advocated by the Cadets, included

the right to organize in unions, the right to strike, freedom of assembly, participation of labour deputies in factory inspection, an eight-hour working day, strict control of child and female labor, arbitration of labor disputes, insurance against accidents, disease, and old age.

*Tyrkova 1953: 175*

After the Bolshevik Revolution, when Lenin declared the Cadet Party a "party of enemies" and eliminated it, killing many of its leaders (Tyrkova 1953: 185–186), Tyrkova secretly fled

Russia. In 1919, soon after her arrival in England, she published “a volume of over five hundred pages” entitled *From Liberty to Brest-Litovsk*, a work of outstanding historical value as it provided English-speaking readers with the first eyewitness account of Russian Liberalism and its fate in the revolution of 1917 (Norman 1962: 280). Tyrkova articulated her conviction that the Bolshevik Revolution was a coup d’état, being inherently “hostile to all democratic forms of governance” (1919: 261). The revolution led to “a gloomy period of enforced communism” and Russia’s subsequent “relapse into the most terrible experiences of the Middle Ages” (ibid.). In fact, Tyrkova’s book was the first publication in the West that offered a direct and politically detailed critical narrative of the revolution. Not until after the beginning of the Cold War was a similarly critical assessment of the Bolshevik regime provided, by both right-wing and left-wing opponents of Soviet Communism in the West. Tyrkova anticipated their view by more than thirty years.

In her years abroad, Ariadna Tyrkova became one of the central figures in the Russian anti-Communist emigration, and, until her death in 1962, she “stood in firm opposition to the Soviet dictatorship” (Norman 1962: 281). Summarizing the Cadets’ position, which she defended for many years in exile, she said that Cadets had

stubbornly tried to explain to the public opinion of the free world what a threat to Christian civilization the Soviet regime represented. Hardly anyone listened to them. The Cadet party is no more. But Russian liberalism is not dead. Over there, in Russia, at the price of heartbreaking experience, people have learned to realize what becomes of life when it is stripped of justice, of rights, of human respect and freedom.

*Tyrkova 1951: 14*

Her key message, central to the Cadet’s Party political philosophy – that without respect for democracy, pluralism, individual freedom, and the rule of law a democratic Russia can never come into being – is what I consider her most valuable gift to future generations of Russian democrats.

## Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the particularities of women’s economic thought in late Imperial Russia and in the early years after the 1917 Revolution, years of dramatic changes, both political and social, as Russia sought to overcome its feudal backwardness. The prevailing currents of thought among those who opposed autocracy can be divided into two streams: the evolutionary advance of capitalism, advocated by Russian liberal reformers, and a revolutionary destruction of the existing state to make way for some form of socialism, advocated by both non-Marxists and Marxists. Educated women helped to disseminate both main currents of thought, primarily through action rather than in print. Among the Russian liberal reformers, the sole prominent woman is Ariadna Tyrkova, a political journalist and writer, whose contribution was primarily dissemination of liberal democratic ideas of the time. More women were notable among non-Marxists socialists – Radical Populists and their successors Socialist-Revolutionaries – but their contribution is primarily political activism, not theory or publications. The most representative women have been discussed in this chapter: Vera Figner, Vera Zasulich, Catherine Breshko-Breshkovskaya and Maria Spiridonova. All of them passionately believed that to be democratic, socialism must be decentralized and based on a strong class of small democratic owners and cultivators. Interestingly, among the Leninist Bolsheviks, the dominant force in Russian Marxism, the leading women, whose contributions are theoretically significant, played a role somewhat

different from merely disseminating or carrying out the ideas of the party. Ekaterina Kuskova and Alexandra Kollontai were not afraid to disagree with Lenin's vision for socialism in which the single party owns the state, and governs the entire economy through dictatorship. To their own detriment, they argued against party monopoly over the labour movement and advocated industrial democracy under socialism.

In summary, I argue that the crucial point of Russian democratic thought of the time, with which many of the above women would agree, is that without economic empowerment of people, political democracy cannot develop. Post-1917 Russian history has supported the views of these women. In October 1917, Leninist Bolsheviks successfully replaced tsarist autocracy with a more authoritarian state, accomplishing, as Ariadna Tyrkova put it, "the transition from absolute monarchy to absolute Communism – in terms of the historical process – with breathtaking speed" (1951: 4). Sovietologists and Russianists agree that there are few differences between the autocracy of tsarist rule and the autocracy of the Soviet regime (Mullerson 1993: 473). Richard Pipes, in fact, sees this continuity of authoritarianism in the current re-establishment of autocracy in Putin's Russia (2006: A14), which at present is known internationally – again, as pre-1917 Russia was known – as an authoritarian country (Habdank-Kołaczowska 2015: 4), characterized by the omnipotence of a centralist state and, necessarily, a disempowered society.

Hence, the main message of the women discussed in this essay still stands, as relevant and applicable as ever: only through creating and strengthening the economic power of the public is it possible to democratize and thus civilize Russia. While Russian women did not exclusively create this message, it motivated them to seize a unique opportunity to contribute substantially in the political and economic upheaval of pre-1920s Russia. They acted primarily as organizers, promoters, and even terrorists, but also wrote letters, asked important questions and spoke out for their passionately held vision for a new democratic Russia. It is unfortunate that their voices were not heeded enough to prevent the subsequent descent into autocracy and repression.

### Notes

- 1 Up until 1906 Russia was an autocracy in principle and in fact; from 1906 onwards it had become a constitutional monarchy.
- 2 Even at the time of the 1917 Russian Revolution, Russia's population was still 80 per cent peasants, mostly illiterate (Pipes 1994: 217); therefore, educated women comprised a very small proportion of society.
- 3 Cynthia Whittaker explains that "Besides literary work, the only professions traditionally open to educated women at the time were those of governess, school teacher, or midwife" (1976: 44).
- 4 In 1869 the opening of the Lubianskie evening courses in Moscow (which were modelled on the three-year liberal arts and science courses in the regular Moscow University curricula) and the similar Alarchinskie evening courses in St Petersburg made advanced education available to women for the first time (Johanson 1987: 44–45); in 1876, the first women's university – St Petersburg Higher Women's Courses, popularly known as Bestuzhevskie Courses – was established. Women's higher courses were also founded in Kiev, Moscow and Kazan. In the late 1870s, a medical school was finally opened for women.
- 5 The communal form of peasant society in Russia has been known since the 16th century. In 1877 some 89 per cent of peasant households were in communes (Mironov 1990: 29).
- 6 The day after her acquittal, Zasluch was sought by the police and would have been arrested if found, so she fled abroad where she spent 25 years, in total, avoiding arrest (Kucherov 1952).
- 7 Russia started to industrialize in the late 1880s. Most capital for industrialization came from foreign investors and tended, given the Russian state's interest in the development of its own heavy industry, to "favour heavy industrial branches" and "production of producers' goods" (Gerschenkron 1963: 152–153). This process led, by the end of 1890s, to increasing numbers of industrial workers (proletariat), employed in large-scale capital goods industries.

- 8 Jay Bergman, the author of Vera Zasulich's biography, appropriately asserts that "Zasulich's Marxism in the 1880s was hardly of an orthodox variety" (1983: 96).
- 9 Alexander Kerensky, himself a member of the Socialist-Revolutionary Party, was the last chairman of the Russian Provisional Government, which was established during the February 1917 Revolution that dismantled the tsarist autocracy and was itself overturned by Vladimir Lenin during the October 1917 Bolshevik Revolution.
- 10 Most of them are presented in *The Left Socialist Revolutionary Party: Documents and Materials, Vol. 1: July 1917–May 1918* (in Russian), 2000, Moscow: ROSSPEN.
- 11 Between April and June 1921 Kollontai delivered fourteen lectures at Sverdlovsk University on *Women's Labour in the Evolution of the Economy* (published in 1923), in which she discussed origins of women's oppression and questioned marriage and traditional sexuality. Kollontai argued that if society takes responsibility for domestic labour, a new morality that "[enables] individuals freely to express their love and sexuality" ([1923] 1977: 291) could be created. Feminist historians agree that Kollontai was the first Russian Marxist scholar to raise "sexuality and sexual relations as a proper topic for political discussion" (Engel 1992: 317).
- 12 The Women's Bureau was closed in 1929, as the Soviet Government declared that there was no "woman's question" in the USSR (Valkova 2008: 165).

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