

# Women and the Russian Revolution

Lenin's Bolshevik Party, which in October 1917 led the only successful proletarian revolution in history, understood that Soviet women would never achieve political and social equality unless they were allowed out of the stultifying isolation of the home and into the workplace. Even in the midst of a civil war and foreign invasion, the early Soviet government did what it could to socialize "women's work" while instituting, for the first time in history, full legal and political equality for women. Free abortion was available on demand; dining halls, laundries and day-care centers were established, and the new regime sought to ensure equality of economic opportunity in the civil service, in industry, in the party and in the armed forces. In his 1936 book, *The Revolution Betrayed*, Leon Trotsky explained the aims of the early Soviet workers state in relation to women and the family:

"The revolution made a heroic effort to destroy the so-called 'family hearth'—that archaic, stuffy and stagnant institution in which the woman of the toiling classes performs galley labor from childhood to death. The place of the family as a shut-in petty enterprise was to be occupied, according to the plans, by a finished system of social care and accommodation: maternity houses, creches, kindergartens, schools, social dining rooms, social laundries, first-aid stations, hospitals, sanatoria, athletic organizations, moving-picture theaters, etc. The complete absorption of the house-keeping functions of the family by institutions of the socialist society, uniting all generations in solidarity and mutual aid, was to bring to woman, and thereby to the loving couple, a real liberation from the thousand-year-old fetters."

Eventually the revolution succumbed to international isolation and the social backwardness of peasant domi-

nated Russia; a conservative, parasitic bureau-crazy, headed by Joseph Stalin, emerged and usurped the political power of the working class. Under the banner of "building socialism in one country," the newly-privileged bureaucracy acted as the arbiter of a system of generalized want. Many of the gains for women established in the early years of the revolution were reversed. In 1934 homosexuality, which had been legalized after the revolution, was once again criminalized, and in 1936 legal access to abortion was restricted. In the course of the Stalinist political counterrevolution, women were once again relegated to the nuclear family and the provision of free domestic labor and child care:

"It proved impossible to take the old family by storm—not because the will was lacking, and not because the family was so firmly rooted in men's hearts. On the contrary, after a short period of distrust of the government and its creches, kindergartens and like institutions, the working women, and after them the more advanced peasants, appreciated the immeasurable advantages of the collective care of children as well as the socialization of the whole family economy. Unfortunately society proved too poor and little cultured. The real resources of the state did not correspond to the plans and intentions of the Communist Party. You cannot 'abolish' the family; you have to replace it. The actual liberation of women is unrealizable on the basis of 'generalized want.' Experience soon proved this austere truth which Marx had formulated eighty years before."

—*Ibid.*

Despite the legacy of sixty-five years of Stalinist rule, the early years of the Soviet state still stand as a guidepost to the future for women's liberation. ■