

Reviews

Women at the centre

Cathy Porter, *Alexandra Kollontai: A Biography*, The Merlin Press, 2nd revised edition, 2013, 530 pages, illustrated, paperback ISBN 9780850366402, £20

Cathy Porter's account of Kollontai's life is an unhurried, suspense-packed journey through one of the most troubled times in history, following the development of Marxist parties, the crisis of socialist politics during World War One, and the Russian Revolution. Woven in the historical make-up of the times are Kollontai's idealistic writings about women's equal role in a socialist society and free love's benefits. A generous and granular biography, *Alexandra Kollontai* reads like a Tolstoy novel stripped of the effusive love stories to the barebones of revolutionary ideas.

Born in an upper-class liberal Russo-Finnish family, Alexandra, or Shura as she was called, proved to be a temperamental and against-the-grain little girl. At the age of six, she read army generals' accounts and planned revolutions at a friend's sleepover; glimpsed what most adults tried to ignore, how the poor fared and perished; became guilt-ridden by her private, tutor-led education and her family's many riches; and started to despise the regime for the way it handled the Bulgarian revolutionaries. On all accounts, even from an early age, she was first a socialist, caring for the many, rather than a feminist.

Growing up, Kollontai's penchant for education became evident when, after passing her exams and getting her teacher diploma, she continued studying with hopes of becoming a writer. While her older sisters were getting married, she started teaching evening classes to workers at the local museum, sneaking in some socialist ideas between literacy lessons.

She fell in love with her cousin and, despite her parents' disapproval, she succeeded in marrying him and having a son, Mischa. Four years into her marriage, however, feeling suffocated and purposeless, she left her husband and son and moved to Zurich for a year to study Marxist economy. This was the turning point in Kollontai's life, when she decided that the continuation of her studies and passion for writing, as well as her activism, preceded her desire to have a family life. Despite the sacrifices, she had a deep understanding of what brought her true contentment in life and had the power to carry it through. It was an utmost feminist statement, although calling it so might belittle her agonizing compromise as a mother.

Freed from the confines of an old society, Kollontai started publishing articles in various socialist journals and writing books based on her workers' studies, met key members of the movement such as Rosa Luxemburg, Lenin and Bukharin, addressed factory meetings and took part in demonstrations. At the core of her work was the stoic organising of women workers inside the Social Democratic Party, while strongly opposing movements such as the Women's Union for thinking that one movement can represent all women with their opposing class interests.

Forced into exile in Germany, she continued her socialist agitation in workers' towns in the Rhineland where she was immensely successful, even without the support of her bureaucrat comrades. Following months of working all over Europe, she returned to Germany and was joined by her son a day before the First World War was declared in 1914. After a few days in prison as a suspected Russian spy, she fled to Denmark, Sweden and then Norway where being in close counsel with Lenin re-focused her efforts towards anti-war propaganda, encouraging soldiers to fraternise across national divides and turn against the real enemy, capitalism. Speaking against the war brought her fame in America, where she did a five-month long tour, exposed beautifully by Porter in its wildness, sense of adventure, exhaustion and disappointment that brought forth in Kollontai these words:

‘And as I finally saw it properly for the first time, on a cold clear day in spring, I couldn't believe my eyes. Was that the Statue of Liberty, so tiny and lost against the skyscrapers of Wall Street? Was this powerless figure, shrinking before the all-powerful guardians of capital, really the image we had imagined when we arrived? Is it the insolence of the kings of capital, daily curtailing the freedoms won by the blood of the forefathers of the modern Uncle Sam, that forces it to shrink and curl up in shame?’

With the Tsar's abdication in 1917, she returned to Russia in the midst of the revolution and for the next few years her activism focused on including women in the new country that was being built, advancing her seminal work on legislation on maternity protection, women workers' rights and marriage law. Kollontai's refusal to forego the 'women issue' and focus on the socialist dream, as well as her Bolshevik past and affiliation with Lenin, turned her into *persona non grata* when Stalin came to power. Due to her fame at home and abroad, she was not banished but 'rewarded' with diplomatic posts in Norway, Mexico and Sweden, while many other Bolsheviks were exiled or executed. However, with the Second World War ensuing, Kollontai's successful efforts to negotiate with Finland and

Sweden and keep war with Russia at bay brought her back into favour in Russia, as well as securing her a nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize at the end of her career.

Riveting and insightful about Kollontai's work and its magnitude, vignettes about workers all across Europe, including England, pepper the biography:

'Halls were so packed that women had to ask men to leave and give up their places to them. Husbands stayed at home with the children for a change, while their wives, the captive housewives, went to meetings. Berlin was a seething sea of women ... The day set the tradition for a working women's day of exceptional militancy.'

In this second edition of Kollontai's biography, Porter had the cumbersome task of sifting through thousands of pages of books, articles, letters, diaries and memoirs in order to deliver a story with a chronological timeline, without obliterating the substance of Kollontai's activism. Not surprisingly, the result is somewhat intimidating, through the sheer number of political events described and famous socialists mentioned, as well as the weighty ideas about women's emancipation and sexual revolution, ideas we still grapple with to this day. The writing is clear and earnest, which takes away from the burden, but the progress is slow and the main concepts are not explained further, which makes the pace of events and ideas almost too quick to follow. The book demands extensive periods of research as well as meditation. *Alexandra Kollontai* has the potential to be a true delight for the connoisseur by providing an alternative historical account of Russia and the socialist movement. However, what makes it transcend time is Kollontai's chief belief that women should be at the centre of the economy, not the periphery.