

## **A Revolutionary Vanguard: Aleksandra Kollontai and the Deconstruction of Bourgeois Feminism in Eastern Europe**

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### **Introduction**

This work seeks to reassess the conventional representation of feminism as a "western", bourgeois or "lifestyle ideology" within a post-Soviet context, utilizing the works of Alexandra Kollontai as a pivotal reference point. Kollontai, an influential early 20th-century theorist and political figure, was a pioneering Russian revolutionary. She held roles as the inaugural People's Commissar for Welfare and the world's first female ambassador. As a staunch advocate for women's liberation, Kollontai endeavored to reinterpret feminism within a socialist paradigm, embedding women's rights within the broader discourse of social and economic class.

To juxtapose Alexandra Kollontai's Marxist-feminist perspective with Western feminism, it's important to briefly outline liberal feminism. According to Tong and Botts' (2017) "Feminist Thought," liberal feminism is a reformist approach towards equality achieved through civic reform, articulated in works like Mary Wollstonecraft's "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman" and John Stuart Mill's "The Subjection of Women" (Tong and Botts', 2017). The ideology seeks to overturn customary and legal constraints that perpetuate female subordination, fostering unfair discrimination against women in academia, the public forum, and the marketplace. In this essay, we use this definition to contrast the liberal feminist approach with Kollontai's theory of Marxist feminism, which espouses more radical structural transformations within the socio-economic sphere.

This study specifically employs the term "post-Soviet" to encapsulate the unique social, cultural, economic, and political transitions that have been unfolding within the countries formerly constituting the USSR, including but not limited to Belarus, Ukraine, Lithuania, and the Warsaw Pact countries such as the GDR, Hungary, and Poland. These European "post-socialist" states embody distinctive geographical characteristics that set them apart within the broader socialist bloc. To sidestep entanglements with more complex cultural variances manifested in the Asian territories of the previous USSR as well as diverse socialist states across Africa and Asia, this study narrows its scope to the European portion of the post-socialist landscape.

Feminism in post-Soviet countries presents a complex contradiction. While Eastern European women have a long history of emancipation in areas such as education and the job market—often seen as key indicators of gender equality in Western academia—they face heightened levels of both structural and individualized discrimination. These include demands for balancing multiple roles as breadwinners and caregivers, domestic violence being decriminalized in a number of states, and societal expectations such as conforming to strict beauty standards, sometimes referred to as a "third shift." In many Western countries, federal laws, such as the US Equal Pay Act and Title IX, exemplify efforts to recognize and legislate against various forms of gender and sexual inequalities. Regrettably, these inequalities persist as glaring points of distress for women in post-Soviet countries, indicating a regional-specific ideological demand for the feminist movement.

Furthermore, as Kristen Ghodsee argues, the introduction of western liberal feminism along with neoliberal capitalism to the region in the early 1990s set off a wave of retraditionalization by the late 90s (Ghodsee, 2021), with calls to return women from their work occupations to the private sphere. This discourse shifted the focus from addressing structural inequalities to individual-level issues, bolstered by Western Liberal Feminism, promoted through NGOs, contributed to the rise of far-right politics. These movements exploited the narrative of feminism as a Western import, threatening local traditions and values while overlooking the rich history of Eastern European feminism's evolution before and during the socialist period.

In response, this essay will examine the work of Alexandra Kollontai, one of the most prominent feminist theorists from the Eastern-European bloc. Through delving into her scholarship, this work attempts to offer a perspective on her normative theory of Marxist feminism, an ideology inherent and influential to the gendered reality of the post-Soviet space, as opposed to Western Liberal feminism, labeled as a bourgeois, imperialistic, and singular ideology by Marxist, Intersectional and of-Color feminist movements. The main point of criticism toward the Liberal Feminism in this work is its accusation of expanding the privileges available to the higher classes under the "universal women question" label, providing a shift from the structural foundations of inequality to identity politics and the disjunction of the men and women of the proletarian class. This essay aims to scrutinize and challenge these perspectives by shedding light on Kollontai's distinct, historical, and regionally-embedded approach to feminism, address the main points of criticism toward the Kollontai's scholarship, and approach it from the normative and descriptive approaches toward marxism-feminism.

### 1. Aleksandra Kollontai's Trailblazing Approach to Feminism in Eastern Europe

"The New Woman" (Kollontai, 1919) essay opens by identifying some general patterns of the emergence of a new type of representation of the modern woman without reference to a specific class dimension. In this essay, Kollontai analyzes the peculiarities of the new type of representation of the modern woman in the work of predominantly female authors. Kollontai believes that although not all of these works can claim high artistic value, most of them are more relevant for sociological analysis since they reveal the unpalatable realities of the new female experience, by which she postulates the importance of the gendered nature of personal history: "Since women writers no longer blindly follow male models, ... since women writers have begun to speak their own idiom – a wholly feminine idiom – their works, even though at times lacking in artistic beauty, will assume a special value and significance" (Kollontai, 1919). These autobiographical accounts and deviations from male-centric models provided invaluable insights into the nuanced experiences of women during the period, effectively questioning established narratives and enriching our understanding of gender dynamics and societal transformations. Significantly, these writings, as Alexandra Kollontai singles out, underscored the autonomy and personhood as the main characteristics of the emerging type of the "new woman," who asserted her agency in the public sphere, distinct from her role in relation to men, by prioritizing personal and professional self-realization as an independent subject rather than a subordinate object within the traditional framework of family relations. The new type of fictional heroine described by Kollontai is notable for its universal character and is not exclusively limited to Russian or Soviet prose. In contrast to the preceding type of the female character as a passive companion of the man and his "resonator," Kollontai gives the new type of protagonist the name "single women" ("Die junggesellinen"), which she defines as: "heroines with independent demands on life, heroines who assert their personality, heroines who protest against the universal servitude of woman in the State, the family, society, who fight for their rights as representatives of their sex" (Kollontai, 1919).

In her writings, Kollontai linguistically contrasts "primitive" instincts and expressions of feeling characteristic of bourgeois morality, such as possessiveness, emotionality, and jealousy, to the principles of comradeship. She uses metaphors associated with the animal world to describe such expressions of feeling, contrasting high humanistic matter: "woman-samka" or

"woman-baba"<sup>1</sup> versus "woman-person," "man-samez"<sup>2</sup> or "zver"<sup>3</sup> versus "man-comrade" (Kollontai, 1919). Here one can already read the premises of her idea of free Marxist love, in which a woman no longer needs a man as the sole source of material wealth or social status. In contrast, a man must learn to see a woman as "not the representative of sex, but the human being, the personality," not a "female" who guarantees the reproduction of his lineage. Furthermore, Kollontai opposes the male consumerist perception of women as "mere instruments of pleasure," from which comes another prominent feature of the "new woman"—an increased demand for a man to accept women as equals and pay attention to her inner world, personality, aspirations, and vocation. For Kollontai, the ideal of interpersonal relations is "harmony between passion and spiritual kinship, the reconciliation of love and freedom, comradeship with mutual independence" (Kollontai, 1918). Thus, in contrast to the bourgeois values of romantic love, she proposes a form of a relationship built on the principles of comradeship, personal freedom, and female independence.

Advocating for the sexual emancipation of women, Kollontai calls for a rejection of the binary perception of women in the form of the archetype of the Madonna/Prostitute complex. Kollontai also raises the question that in "bourgeois-proprietors morality," only the sexual purity of women, not men, mattered, the only women who could transcend this puritanical sexual ethics belonged to the intelligentsia. Thus, this privilege belonged only to those not subject to intersectional oppression—men or women of the upper class. Kollontai elaborates on this intersectional point in the "Love and the New Morality" (1919) essay, in which she comments on a psychosociological study entitled "The Sexual Crisis," in which Greta Meisel-Hess addressed the critique of the bourgeois morality of sexual relations, based on religious asceticism and prostitution, as two sides of the degeneration of the love life.

Following Meisel-Hess, Kollontai proceeds from the premise that the moral rules governing sexual life have two primary purposes: to promote sexual selection for the health of the offspring (a remnant of the scientific fallacies of early 19th-century Europe) and to help enrich the sensual experience of human beings. Kollontai identifies three fundamental forms of sexual relations: legal marriage, free union, and prostitution. The "marriage" form is based on the principle of non-dissolution derived from the false premise of the constant human psyche and needs, including the choice of a partner, and the perception of one's partner as property. On the other hand, "free unions" lead women to the risk of unplanned motherhood, demanding

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<sup>1</sup> rus. "sissy"

<sup>2</sup> rus. "real man/macho"

<sup>3</sup> rus. "beast"

sacrificing professional fulfillment for the sake of performing reproductive labor in the absence of any social guarantees. As for the "prostitution" form, Kollontai addresses it as a byproduct of the ideology glorifying female celibacy, as well as the result of "growing insecurity of the female labour force" due to the gendered wage gap. Thus, all three forms of engagement are the product of a capitalist system based on unpaid or marginalised female labor. Therefore, the only way out of this sexual crisis is through a systematic change in all economic, social, and cultural realms—a transition to communism, which will enrich the human psyche with "love potency." Following Meisel-Hesse's position, Kollontai instead proposes "love play" or "erotic friendship" as a transitional phase in the assimilation of a deeper connection—relationships in which partners, not bound by a formal commitment, learn to respect their autonomy to avoid absorption, in which women's self-actualization is relegated. Kollontai concludes that Meisel-Hess pursued a classic socialist strategy in her reforms addressing "love impotence:" creating conditions for the economic and political emancipation of women, combating prostitution, protecting motherhood through social guarantees for reproductive work, and desacralizing bourgeois sexual morality through civil marriages with the option of dissolution.

Kollontai's attitude to the universal women's question, the class struggle, and bourgeois feminism is most fully expressed in her works, "Sexual relations and the class struggle" (1919) and "The Woman Worker in Modern Society" (Kollontai, 1998). In the first article, "Sexual relations and the class struggle" (1919), she invokes the theme of historical materialism to explain the transformation of the code of sexual morality, by turning to the Renaissance and Reformation eras to describe the period of incipient bourgeois values, challenged by the shift in modes of production following a labor movement's rise. This shift was supposed to trigger a consequent alternation of cultural and social areas, including sex-moral codecs: "It is an old truth that every new class that develops as a result of an advance in economic growth and material culture offers mankind an appropriately new ideology. The code of sexual behaviour is a part of this ideology" (Kollontai, 1972). She recalls the classic dichotomy of private and public, in the context of transferring a new form of freedom and self-realization to the private realm, from which she derives a theory of eros as a means of salvation from individualism—a characteristic feature of bourgeois morality. Finally, even though we examined the subject of love potency extensively in discussing the previous section, according to Kollontai, the sexual crisis is caused three-quarters by socio-economic problems and only one-quarter by love impotence. Kollontai identifies the following socio-economic issues underlying the women's question: self-centeredness, physical and spiritual spousal ownership, the idea of female "backwardness," addressed by a patronymic attitude toward female counterparts (Gorshuch,

1996), and a "double morality" in evaluating male and female actions. Thus, Kollontai suggests that only by eliminating all forms of exploitation, both gendered and capitalist, we could achieve a state of true gender equality—by establishing the principle of "comradeship" as a legitimate outcome of the class struggle.

Kollontai believes that a qualitative transformation of the family structure will originate from the working class since a new ethic of relationships is closely linked to the social tasks of the proletarian movement of the early 20th century. As a consequence of the constant deterioration of workers' conditions and the intensification of capitalist exploitation, the working class goes through a double adjustment process: passive and active. The passive process, relevant to all social strata, includes belated marriage, prostitution, and the regulation of procreation, often through infanticide. Active adjustment is characterized by resistance against any form of exploitation and prioritizing class interests over individual happiness. This process is specific to the working class since participation in the revolutionary movement requires the presence of emancipated women in the public field (as opposed to housewives depending on their husband's wages) and an expression of "comradely solidarity." On the contrary, bourgeois morality is built on the principle of subordination and individualism: "For Kollontai, comradeship is a mode of belonging characterised by equality, solidarity, and respect. Collectivity replaces isolation, egoism, and self-assertion. It makes people capable of freedom" (Dean, 2017b). Analyzing the use of this term in the works of Alexandra Kollontai, Jodi Dean emphasises that, although the address "comrade" in Russian is a masculine term, "yet its power is such that it liberates people from the chains of grammar," (Dean, 2019, p.56) being used to express political belonging regardless of gender: "A Soviet book on literary language published in 1929 gives the example of "comrade sister," a formulation that sounds funny in Russian but evokes the new language and emotions of the revolution" (Dean, 2019, p.56-57). Jodi Dean describes the transformative power of comradeship as a form of political belonging through the example of Maxim Gorky's article "Comrade," published in English in 1906 in *The Social Democrat* journal. When a prostitute feels a man's hand on her shoulder, she is frightened of being treated with objectification as a woman engaged in a socially condemned profession. However, when the woman hears the address "comrade," she relieves herself because this addresses her as an equal subject in subsequent interconnection. According to Jodi Dean, comradeship is a unique form of human relationship because it focuses on the political rather than on the individual level of sympathies/antipathies: "What matters is not the uniqueness of a skill or experience but its utility for party work. In this sense, the comrade is liberated from the determinations of specificity, freed by the common political horizon" (Dean, 2019, p.67).

In this respect, the relationship of comradeship cannot be personal. It is always political and differs from allies in sharing a commonplace in the political structure. Therefore, it cannot be devoid of the class dimension in the form of the unified women's question, since in this liberal stance it deprives the feminist and proletarian movement of its radical revolutionary goals of eliminating all forms of oppression in favor of the gendered adjustment to the existing social hierarchies, which is expressed in the Kollontai's essay "Woman Worker in Modern Society" (1998).

In a work entitled "Woman Worker in Modern Society" (Kollontai, 1998), Alexandra Kollontai articulates to the most explicit extent the reasons for her opposition to bourgeois feminists. She characterizes bourgeois feminism not as a conscious struggle for women's emancipation but as an attempt by the privileged class women to expand the social benefits available to the men of their class through the hands of others: "Equalizing women's rights with the men of their class"—what, except equalization in powerlessness with their fellow proletarian, can the favorite motto of feminists give women?" (author's translation from Russian, Kollontai, 1998) Proletarian feminism, according to Kollontai, addresses the immediate problem of the double burden of private and public sphere work faced by all working-class women, thus, they do not seek access to the labor market, but the State's intervention in the contract between labor and capital—the social security of labor conditions and reconsidering the "frozen forms of social coexistence" that have become rudimentary under industrialization and the need for female labor power, which does not address the bourgeois feminism. Therefore, Kollontai questions the possibility of addressing a unified "women's issue." Kollontai points out that only as class representatives do women have real influence in the political arena. Only through fear of mass strikes and revolts can the exploiters improve the working conditions of the workers. Therefore, it is a question of class, not gender interests: "The history of the struggle of female workers for better working conditions, for a more tolerable life, is the history of the proletariat's struggle for its liberation" (author's translation from Russian, Kollontai, 1998).

## **2. Challenging Feminist Frameworks: State Patriarchy vs Marxist Feminism**

Historians and feminist theorists have controversially evaluated Alexandra Kollontai as an author and historical figure. Jodi Dean, in her public lectures on Kollontai in 2020, says that the main criticism of Kollontai can be categorized in two directions: first, she does not challenge the sexual division of labor in the home; second, Kollontai rejects the idea that reproduction

labor does not produce value, to which her critics object that it produces labor since it produces labor-power. In addition, this work incorporates the critique expressed by Mihaela Miroiu in her discourse titled "Communism was a State Patriarchy, not State Feminism," (2007), which has been further explored by Brigitte Studer in her article, "Communism and Feminism" (2015).

Mihaela Miroiu provides the following arguments supporting her position: First, she believes that the term "communist feminism" is a contradiction in itself. Notably, Mihaela Miroiu does not give concrete definitions regarding the use of terms such as "communism feminism", "state patriarchy", as well as "room-service feminism", therefore we would try to deliver them from the context of the work. Since in Eastern European countries, according to Mihaela Miroiu, industrialization only partially took place, and women in society took the position of the family worker, the Soviet Union created a new type of "state patriarchy," bypassing the stage of "modern patriarchy", rooted in industrialization and characterized by a woman's dependence on her husband's wages: "East European countries were only superficially and partially industrialised, and remained massively peasant societies" (2007). While Mihaela Miroiu's writings acknowledge the potential reliance on a Western approach that emphasizes autonomy as the ultimate goal of the feminist movement, her analysis heavily draws upon the historical trajectory of female rights and struggles based on a Eurocentric model. This includes the recognition of stages such as the "modern patriarchy" following industrialization, and subsequent waves of feminism fuelled by grassroots activism. However, it raises questions about the applicability of this normative framework in evaluating the unique gendered experiences of women in socialist and post-socialist countries. This inquiry extends beyond concerns about eurocentrism. It confronts the challenges of attempting to replicate the Western trajectory of feminist development—an evolution that was shaped by distinct historical elements such as feudalism, the rise and struggle of the bourgeois class in cities against feudalism, and the advent and expansion of capitalism—in the unique context of Eastern Europe. This context, devoid of these Western historical constituents, makes the application of such a model questionable, limiting the creation of proactive strategies for future feminist progression in Eastern Europe and leaving the room for criticism.

Mihaela Miroiu criticizes the "state patriarchy" for the following reasons: First, the socialization of the child-rearing process helped women raise their children but reduced the possibility of private influence over them, despite the state's failure to intervene and change the private structure of the family, in particular, the division of labor within the family. Secondly, the state established unequal wages for light and heavy industry workers, expressing the system of privileges created by the state patriarchy, backed by a quota system that promoted the



apparent rather than actual representation of women in high positions: "Women's promotion by quota system aimed to assure their physical presence as obedient soldiers under the party's command. It barely had to do with the political representation of women's interests" (Miroiu, 2007). Finally, Miroiu argues that the paternalist state formation in the USSR leads to the damaging "feminization" of men and women into self-sacrifice in favor of communist ideals, in other words, the state patriarchy. The major argument against "state patriarchy" is that communist ideology did not have the emancipation of women as an ultimate goal but viewed female freedom as a necessary component of the deconstruction of a system of capitalist oppression. In her writings, Kollontai indeed supports this thesis, constantly stressing out that the true emancipation of women would be possible only after the combating of capitalist oppression: "The followers of historical materialism reject the existence of a special woman question separate from the general social question of our day" (Kollontai, 2006b), "Only the overthrow of capitalism and the establishment of soviet power will save them from the world of suffering, humiliations and inequality that makes the life of the working woman in the capitalist countries so hard" (Kollontai, 2017), etc. However, the lack of seeing the topic of women's liberation as a "goal in itself" is not a sign of a lack of interest in the topic of women's liberation, nor was it a reason for abandoning these goals in a society of building communism, as Kollontai repeatedly notes, here is an excerpt from the text, written two years after the October Revolution: "We are only in the process of struggling for communism and we are surrounded by the world we have inherited from the dark and repressive past. The shackles of the family, of housework, of prostitution still weigh heavily on the working woman. Working women and peasant women can only rid themselves of this situation and achieve equality in life itself, and not just in law, if they put all their energies into making Russia a truly communist society" (Kollontai, 2017).

This crucial aspect of societal transition is overlooked by Mihaela Miroiu, who approaches the history of the USSR as a whole entity without considering the significant shifts that occurred over time: "Lenin firmly opposed the autonomy of women's organizations, and Stalin turned the Zhenotdel into an openly gender-conservative tool. He was, in fact, the official founder of the politics of the double working day (burden) together with those of maternity in service of the state" (Miroiu, 2007). While acknowledging the initial establishment of the Zhenotdel by Kollontai in 1919 and the party's early commitment to gender equality, it is important to recognize the critical divergence that took place after the 1930s under Stalin's leadership (Goldman, 1993). During this period, the Soviet Union witnessed a shift towards a more gender-conservative approach, abandoning the socialization of reproductive domestic

labor and adopting a traditionalist rhetoric that justified a double-shift system for women. It is crucial to acknowledge that the Soviet Union's pursuit of women's emancipation was a complex and evolving political project, characterized by fluctuations and changes in various spheres of life, including the regulation of women's issues. Consequently, making sweeping generalizations about the Soviet Union's approach to gender equality based on works written in the early 20th century would be inappropriate and irrelevant.

After briefly summarizing Mihaela Miroiu's main arguments regarding the "state patriarchy", we may now proceed to challenge this position. Firstly, Mihaela Miroiu begins her work by defining feminism as a struggle for female autonomy in the form of the categorical imperative—ideology/activism may only be considered feminist if they are ultimately objectives toward female emancipation, aiming at women as members of the sex, not the class. Such an interpretation ignores other forms of feminism as a political ideology, such as intersectional feminism, eco-feminism, Marxism-feminism, black feminism, etc. Miroiu's account of feminism operates through a "negative conception of freedom" in terms of Berlin (1959), which is peculiar to right-wing ideological thought, and considers it as the only universal one, or at least as a minimum requirement of "feminism." Miroiu argues that the ideologues of the USSR, including Kollontai, actively denied their involvement in feminism as an element of bourgeois ideology. However, as Brigitte Studer points out in her article (2015), by such accusations, we miss the marginalization of this category in that historical and cultural context. Even though not all of the reforms aimed at promoting gender equality proposed by Kollontai were successfully implemented due to the lack of resources and disagreements inside the party's body, even the partial implementation of these reforms had already presented a significant change in the status quo. For instance, the historian and sociologist Anne E. Gorsuch (1996) classifies the 1918 Bolshevik Code on Marriage, the Family, and Guardianship as the most advanced in the world in protecting women's rights during this historical period. Thus, we can consider the reforms proposed by Kollontai and enshrined in the Bolshevik Code on Marriage, the Family, and Guardianship as having promoted women's emancipation, bypassing their association with bourgeois political strategies. Even if we assume that socialism addressed the women's issue from an instrumental point of view rather than as a goal in itself, it nevertheless achieved an outstanding result in this regard: "so-called 'top-down' socialist model of women's emancipation undertook the project of socializing domestic labor that has yet to be replicated under capitalism" (2018). Therefore, evaluating such directives in terms of intentionalism rather than consequentialism, in the absence of the possibility of testing a

different political strategy due to the marginalized notion of feminism in the historical period, is questionable.

The following argument presented by Mihaela Miroiu was that the socialization of child-rearing helped women raise their children but reduced the possibility of private influence on them. Many authors have criticized the transfer of socialization of children into the public sphere, a topic that also requires examination from various counter perspectives. Firstly, as Anne E. Gorsuch (1996) suggests, the desired parental influence level in children's upbringing is subject to individual author and ideological variations, casting doubts on universal assertions. Secondly, as Kollontai articulates in "Sexual Relations and the Class Struggle" (1919), bourgeois and noble families often delegated child-rearing to nannies and governesses, while proletarian mothers were already burdened with double shifts, reducing their interaction time with their offsprings. Still, such a transfer was not received as critically as the proposal to hand over this process to the sphere of state responsibility. Lastly, following Althusser's theory of ideology's universality (2013), all child education methods inherently carry an ideological component—be it within families or public institutions.

The following argument presented by Mihaela Miroiu in favour of her concept of state patriarchy is the feminization of men and women through the idea of self-sacrifice for the party's sake: "The state patriarchy negatively 'feminised' both women and men ... Men's celebration had the same negatively feminised pattern (read obedience and self-sacrifice), minus Fatherhood" (2007). Firstly, Miroiu's argument risks perpetuating essentialist notions of femininity by attributing traits like obedience and self-sacrifice solely to women, which overlooks the agency and complexity of the "new women" who emerged in literature as a reflection of evolving societal standards and gender dynamics.

Secondly, the concept of self-sacrifice in communism, inherently linked with comradeship, warrants further clarification. Within the context of a normative communist ideology, self-sacrifice does not pertain to a surrender to a leader or dictator, representing a voluntary commitment to the collective cause instead—a cause that, theoretically, is driven by the people and for the people. According to Jodi Dean, comradeship is defined as a "generic figure for the political relation between those on the same side of a political struggle" (Dean, 2019), and functions in three forms: "as a mode of address, figure of belonging, and container for shared expectations" (Dean, 2017). In this context, comradeship surfaces as a unique political bond, untainted by personal sympathies and prejudices, and rooted in a shared commitment to collective goals. Consequently, the act of self-sacrifice becomes a dedication to one's own objectives, which are aligned with the goals of the broader collective. In this stance

of Marxist ideology, the party embody the common goal of the collective as a creative vanguard of a grassroot proletarian movement where the constituents are both the leaders and the followers of the movement - the party is envisaged as an organ of the people, by the people. However, during the actual implementation of socialism, there was a notable divergence from this normative ideology when the party eventually became estranged from its people to various degree (from representatives of the people who drive limousines in the place of the ordinary people" to "ordinary people themselves who drive limousines through their representatives", as Slavoj Zizek (2020) framed it), highlighting a disconnect between theoretical Marxism and its practical realization. Therefore, it's imperative to distinguish the normative theory of communism from its real-world applications. Even within liberal and democratic systems, concepts such as non-aggression, individual property rights, and law obedience can necessitate personal sacrifices. Miroiu's explicit definitions of "self-sacrifice" and "obedience" would further contextualize her argument.

To understand whether "state patriarchy" in socialist states was indeed more harmful than beneficial in addressing women's issues, it is essential to provide a more accurate comparison. We need to contrast the position of women in socialist and capitalist countries during the same period, rather than compare the descriptive analysis of women in communism with the normative concepts of its ideologues, such as Alexandra Kollontai. While such normative theories provide value guidelines for political course choices, they do not serve as direct action guidance, making this comparison methodologically inaccurate. To this end, this work suggests referring to an article by Kristen R. Ghodsee and Julia Mead (2018). They argue that state socialism, on the contrary, effectively equalized men and women in their dependence on the state, reducing reliance on husbands for basic needs and allowing for some control over their lives and autonomy comparatively more remarkable than that of women in capitalist societies at the time. The authors draw our attention to the example of the gendered division of labor in post-war Germany after 1949, comparing the communist German Democratic Republic (GDR) and the capitalist Federal Republic of Germany (FRG). After a territorial and symbolic division, the FRG opted to return to the traditional form of family relations to assign jobs to men by returning women to unpaid domestic work. In contrast, women retained their jobs and greater social, economic, and political autonomy in the GDR. A similar situation unfolded in capitalist Austria and communist Hungary following World War II. Despite receiving monetary assistance via the Marshall Plan, Austria did not significantly increase women's employment; by 1951, about one-third of women worked outside of the household. In contrast, Hungary, which did not receive such assistance, had an equal rate of women's employment in 1949.

Notably, over the next two decades, this number skyrocketed to 65% in Hungary by 1970, while Austria saw a slight decrease to 31%. Furthermore, Kristen R. Ghodsee and Julia Mead cite Eva Fodor's argument that, during this time, "the Austrian state was invested in keeping women out of the workforce" (2018). On the contrary, the Hungarian socialist state promoted female emancipation by recognizing the biological differences between the sexes through access to reproductive control, public childcare, maternity leave, and access to abortion, as well as through the "top-down" emancipation policies including, but not limited to, promoting women's employment in higher positions through workplace quotas, investment in women's education, and legal gender equality. At the same time, grassroots women's self-organization for equal rights in Austria only began to appear in the 1970s, alongside the emergence of second-wave feminism. Kristen R. Ghodsee and Julia Mead do not dispute that full equality has not been achieved. In Hungary, for example, men were two to three times more likely to hold managerial positions in 1972, but in Austria, the ratio was more than five times as high. Thus, we conclude that the factual position of women under socialism was often more favorable than in neighboring capitalist countries in the same historical periods. Mihaela Miroiu's critique does not provide a comparison between the descriptive positions of women in two types of socio-political organizations, capitalism and socialism. Instead, it compares the descriptive analysis of women in communism with the normative concepts of its ideologues, such as Alexandra Kollontai. The latter, normative theories, provide value guidelines for political course choices rather than direct guidance for action, therefore this type of comparison is not methodologically accurate.

While elaborating on this idea of normativity, it is also relevant to recall that the Soviet Union was viewed as a transitional period toward communism. Thus, we need to keep the specific temporality of a communist project in mind. The transition issue is also raised in Anne E. Gorsuch's article (1996) through the example of ignorance toward the family law or labour division in the Bolshevik Code on Marriage. The reason for the latter was that Alexander Goikhbarg, the author of the original document, had expected the family relations issue, particular to Soviet Russia, to become irrelevant once the transition to communism was over. Similarly, one might respond to Kollontai's criticism of her neglect of the division of domestic labor—the issue should have lost its relevance with the advent of the dictatorship of the proletariat due to her proposals of socializing reproductive labor throughout the system of public services, such as canteens, laundries, etc. This line of argument is deemed to partially address the criticism raised by Mihaela Miroiu and Jodi Dean concerning the difficulty in altering the private structure of the family and the distribution of labor within it.

Furthermore, the division of labor within the family, as well as the status of motherhood, radically varied between proletarian and bourgeois families everywhere, especially in Imperial Russia. This is elaborated in the article "Working Woman and Mother" by Alexandra Kollontai (2006a), where she not only retrospectively reviews different types of womanhood experiences determined by the class dimension in pre-Soviet Russia, but also puts it into comparative perspective with some other states that had partially implemented the welfare system by 1916: "In all countries where the capitalists control the economy and the workers sell their labor power and live in poverty, the percentage of babies to die in early childhood is very high. In Russia the figures are higher than anywhere else. Here are the comparative figures for the number of children that survive early childhood: Norway 93%. Switzerland 89%. England 88%. Finland 88%. France 86%. Austria 80%. Germany 80%. Russia 72%" (Kollontai, 2006a). Comparing child mortality rates and their correlation with the overall welfare of the family, as well as the availability of maternity protection and insurance policies within the state, Kollontai posits that the privilege of experiencing motherhood without the need to provide an income or perform domestic labor was only available to bourgeois women. Meanwhile, from the time of industrialization, most proletarian women were compelled to work double shifts in harsh conditions of factories or bourgeois households. These conditions often included a lack of legal protection from sexual assault, a standardized workday, access to medical care, or the possibility of adequately caring for their children and their own health. This resulted in record mortality rates among proletarian mothers and infants in comparison to the bourgeois ones, as well as long-term health consequences: "The children of working men and women die like flies. ... there are several provinces in Russia, especially those with many factories, where 54% of children die at birth. In the areas of the big cities where the rich live, child mortality is only 8-9%; in working-class areas the figure is 30-31%" (Kollontai, 2006a).

Therefore, Mihaela Miroiu's argument that the professionalization of women's labor for the sake of modernizing the Soviet economy resulted in a double burden and the impossibility of providing personalized care for children appears elitist. It seems to dismiss the lived experiences of working-class women who never had access to these privileges. It also overlooks the state's efforts in protecting women's rights and wellbeing, which included the establishment of civil marriage and divorce laws, access to medical care, education, and high-ranking positions within the party. Additionally, partially realized measures such as state-provided motherhood monetary support, and socialized reproductive labor—through systems of nurseries, schools and kindergartens in a narrow sense, and through public services like canteens and laundries in a wider sense—should also be acknowledged.

In conclusion, Mihaela Miroiu's critique of "state patriarchy" in socialist states veers towards oversimplification by attributing obedience and self-sacrifice to feminization. In evaluating women's reality in socialist states against normative theories, Miroiu overlooks the relative progress made compared to contemporaneous capitalist states. Her analysis misses the increased autonomy women gained under socialism and disregards the ideological variations on parental influence in child-rearing, as well as the factual differences in motherhood experiences across the upper and proletarian classes. While the socialist project did not completely resolve the issue of double burden, this problem was prevalent among lower-class women even before the proletarian revolution. Moreover, Miroiu's critique does not adequately account for the distinct temporal and transitional nature of socialist projects. Therefore, her perspective is somewhat limited and calls for a more nuanced assessment.

### **Conclusion**

In this study, we explored the primary aspects of Alexandra Kollontai's scholarship as a normative theorist of early 20th-century Marxism-feminism in Eastern Europe. Despite her lifelong reluctance to identify herself as a feminist, a stance attributed to the marginalization of this ideology as bourgeois, imperialistic, and singular, Kollontai made significant contributions towards incorporating feminist reforms into the Bolshevik Party's program of that era.

Kollontai's work currently presents an invaluable resource for envisioning a regionally specific feminist ideology that diverges from the Western-centric narrative. It highlights an alternate trajectory for women's rights and freedoms in Eastern Europe, taking into account unique challenges peculiar to the regional logic of historical development. Furthermore, it enables a recontextualization of feminism as an ideology deeply embedded in regional history and praxis. This perspective rejects the right-populist portrayal of the women's emancipation movement as a Western neoliberal import that only emerged in the region during the 1990s and 2000s.

Furthermore, Kollontai's work offers a robust counterargument to the fallacy that the USSR achieved comprehensive gender equality through the legal establishment of formal indicators of female equality, a perception that can erroneously suggest that there is no longer a cause for contention. Although socialist governance significantly improved the status of women during its time, including the introduction of voting rights, civil marriage, education and labor market access, and social support for motherhood, Kollontai herself persistently

stressed that the USSR was merely in the incipient phase of its journey towards establishing gender equality. She outlined a broad range of future endeavors spanning both the economic and sociocultural domains.

Furthermore, Kollontai contested the claim that the USSR promoted the notion of achieved gender equality to legitimise the double exploitation of women, a view that could ostensibly be mitigated by reassigning women to the private sphere. This argument is reminiscent of the first wave of retraditionalization as described by Ghodsee (2021), and forms part of an escapist fantasy currently reflected in media discourse through the idealisation of the "IT wife" status. Contrary to the notion of returning to the private sphere as a route to liberation from the so-called double burden - a proposal as implausible for the proletarian class in the early 20th century as it is today for the working class - Kollontai advocates for the socialisation of reproductive labour. Such an approach would alleviate women from the onerous demands of the double burden, thereby enabling their self-actualisation as independent individuals.

Potential areas of future research could include an examination of Kollontai's work as an alternative to liberal feminism, particularly in relation to Women-of-Color feminism and intersectional feminism, both of which emerged in America as reactions to suffragist and second-wave feminism; as well as the discordancy in relation to the continuity of the feminist movement in Eastern Europe.

Another intriguing avenue for analysis lies in how Kollontai's work can be conceptualized within contemporary feminist thought. Many of her innovative ideas find echoes not only in Marxist and socialist feminism but also among cultural radical feminists, existential feminists, and care feminists. Cultural radical feminists resonate with her ideas about motherhood and the necessity for systemic change. Existential feminists align with her perspective on marriage as a mechanism for transforming voluntary emotions into obligatory duties. Care feminists can relate to her principle of comradeship, which foregrounds a style of moral reasoning identified by scholars Carol Gilligan and Nel Noddings as typically feminine, in particular, the prioritization of relationships and individual needs over abstract principles such as autonomy and rights, focusing on tangible harm rather than the violation of abstract legal constructs (Tong & Botts, 2017).

In conclusion, by delving into Kollontai's visionary ideas and their relevance to contemporary feminist discourse, we ignite a dialogue that transcends temporal and geographical boundaries. Through her work, we can continue to explore the nuanced intersections of gender, class, and politics, creating a legacy of thought that both honors the past and paves the way for a more inclusive, diverse, and equitable future.



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