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The Emancipation of Russian Women:

a struggle for intellectual equality

The basic characteristics of the feminist movements during the second half of the nineteenth century in Europe and the United States could be summarized under two main headings: the struggle for complete political and social equality of women with men; and the struggle for equal educational opportunities which could eventually, with the fulfillment of the first demand, lead to the complete economic independence of women from men. In Russia, with the liberalizing laws and the great hopes of the 1860's, the question of political and social freedom was considered by most Russian women not as their own problem but as a common social problem. It was in the field of education that they felt separate and inferior and where they searched for special remedies.

> Emancipation now meant the approach of the woman to the man, the mastering by the woman of everything that was considered the domain of man and which supported the cultural and moral inequality.[1]

Thus the struggle of the Russian women for higher education, although closely linked to the movements of emancipation of women elsewhere in Europe and America, was basically a struggle for intellectual rather than social or political liberation. Although the Russian movement contained hard-core, militant feminists, basically it concentrated upon the question of education.[2] Russian women were willing to "behave" and actually to go a step backward in the eyes of the feminists, i.e. to dress "properly," not to take part in strikes, not mix with male students and so forth in order to retain their rights to higher education and keep their schools open.[3] They took up sciences and attended lectures at the universities, so long as they were permitted. They indulged in all kinds of scientific and literary readings. Those who could, engaged teachers and students as tutors in mathematics, physics, philosophy, economics and other "manly" subjects. A great number of the girls and young women went out to professional schools — medical, pedagogical or stenographic.[4]

When higher courses for women opened in Russia, the number of

women who joined them was quite high compared to that of French, English, Swiss or other European women attending their own national universities or institutes of higher learning. Indeed the number of Russian women attending foreign universities in the 1860's and 70's by far exceeded the local women's participation. For example, in 1872 at the Zurich University and Polytechnical Institute, of sixty-seven women students sixty were Russian.[5] Up to 1883, only two Swiss women studied at Zurich University. At the Paris Medical Faculty during the same period, out of sixty-seven women students thirty-three were Russian and only thirteen French. Although the medical schools were open to women in Denmark by 1882, there was not one woman in the medical school, the same was true of Belgium.[6] The first woman lawyer ever to graduate from the Paris school was a Russian woman — Bolokovskya.[7] There was the famous mathematician, Sonia Kovalevskaya, who studied mathematics under Weierstrass at Berlin. She was the first woman lecturer in mathematics at the University of Stockholm. A similar influx of women from one particular country into higher institutions of another can be found nowhere in Europe during that period.[8]

Furthermore, the women who clamored for education came from the nobility, the middle class, the peasants as well as from the clergy class. Those who were rich helped the poor. They organized their own money banks, dining halls and sleeping quarters. They were not only single girls but many were married and needed shelter and often employment.

All the higher courses which came into existence in the late nineteenth century were founded and financed by individuals and often administered by the students themselves. Special societies were organized to support these institutions and aid the needy girls.[9] Most of the professors who taught these courses, whether medical or mathematico-physical, natural sciences or history-philology, taught either for nothing or for a minimal salary.[10]

Although higher education of women, more than any other section of education in Russia, was the product of the efforts of the total society, both male and female, there were many — especially in the bureaucratic governmental circles — who did not sympathize with the women. Part of the reason for this was that radical political leaders actively supported the women's movement. They professed the equality of the sexes, regarded marriage as highly immoral, rejected parental authority and helped women to evade it by arranging for fictitious marriages and for study abroad.[11]

The government was quick to notice the ties of the women to the radical movements and it is not surprising that they linked radicialism with the drive for higher education which they refused to support.

Where the field of medicine was concerned, some well-known and respected physicians publicly theorized that:

> Women having a lesser developed physical organism and volume of brain and a more developed sympathetic nervous system had necessarily to be less capable [intellectually] than men.[12]

Others claimed that:

> A woman has other duties from God and Nature and she cannot bear such intellectual and physical strains as higher studies may require. And as far as Medicine is concerned, for it of all things, women are the least capable. A woman after graduating from medical courses would lose her beauty, her humility, her femininity and even her morality would degenerate.[13]

Another physician claimed:

> A woman by Nature and God is not equipped to study Medicine because the theoretical as well as the practical teaching humiliate the delicate feelings of womankind.[14]

Women who were fascinated by the idea of becoming useful members of society and developing their capacities for social work reacted strongly against these statements. They provided the Nihilist, Populist and other revolutionary groups of the sixties and seventies with a whole contingent of active members often more radical and ruthless than the men and hundreds of them were imprisoned or exiled to Siberia.[15] They rejected the frivolities of social life in fashionable salons and turned away from art, music, dancing or luxury in dress which they regarded as futile and demeaning. They wanted to break with the past at all cost, and launched themselves into a radicalism which surpassed by far that of the young men in its resolution and cynicism. They went to the extremes of dressing like men and adapting masculine manners.[16] Many ran away from home and went, almost penniless, to the larger cities and university towns in the quest for further education. They not only sacrificed comfort and luxury but in many cases social status, reputation, even families.[17]

According to one of the leading educators of the time, V. D. Sipovsky, who was a sympathizer of the higher education for women:

> When the wish of women to study brought animosity, when even highly educated men could not rid themselves of a "cavalier" attitude towards women studying, the women started to hate "femininity" as the obstacle to attain their goals. They replaced femininity by absurdity and extravagance: they dressed in male suits, cut their hair, put on "blue eyeglasses," adopted awkward manners, and affected cynicism.[18]

According to Likhacheva:

> Society as a whole, from the very beginning of the movement did not sympathize with women yearning for education, and the women themselves, seeing animosity everywhere, became angry and openly contradicted society in everything it valued.[19]

Nevertheless, there were some well-educated men, professors and physicians, who were on the side of women. Among them was the leading educator, Pirogov, who wrote:

> The results (of Sevastopol) prove that up to the present we have completely ignored the wonderful abilities of our women. . . . If a woman receives an adequate education she can pursue culture and science, art, or public life as well as a man.[20]

And

> If women-pedants, clamouring for emancipation, understand it only as the education of women, then they are right. But if they understand emancipation in terms of the social rights of women, then they themselves do not know what they want.
>
> Women are already emancipated in the latter sense, and perhaps even more than men. . . .[21]

It was in this atmosphere of controversy that the history of the emancipation of women, in essence the struggle for higher education, began in Russia. The situation was perhaps best summarized by Pirogov himself when he claimed that not the position of women but their education needed change. He divided women into two kinds "Marys" and "Marthas." The "Marthas" were engulfed in everyday life and enjoyed comfort and luxury, they lived well regardless of whether the problem of emancipation was resolved. Their road in life did not overlap with the road taken by "Marys." For "Marys" were idealists, inspired with the spirit of struggle and sacrifice and knew that emancipation lay in education.[22]

Thus the women who fought for higher education were not all the women in Russia, nor were they the average women who followed and still follow the centuries-old family- and husband-oriented pattern of life. The history of the higher education or the emancipation movement of women whether in Russia, or elsewhere in any other country, is the history of those women, who are often a small minority, who are more radical, perhaps more intelligent, definitely more dedicated and active and thus more capable of inducing major changes in the structure of the society. The majority always is and remains the mediocre and average, often sympathetic to the movements, sometimes against them, but always passive and never in the lead.

Where Russia was concerned, the number of women involved in the movement for higher education was perhaps more than a minority, for the movement was not an isolated phenomenon of the higher classes but had affected a considerable number of women from the middle and lower classes as well. Although one may claim with some truth that the leaders of the movement were women who belonged to the nobility and the well-to-do middle class intelligentsia[23] and that it was the women of the higher classes who organized the different societies for the financing of the institutions and helping the women students and donated large sums of money, books, apparatus, furniture and other necessities, it will be wrong to generalize that this was a movement solely of the higher classes.

It was certainly a grand movement, astounding in its success and instructive in a high degree. Above all, it was through the unlimited devotion of a mass of women in all possible capacities that they gained their successes. They had already worked as sisters of charity during the Crimean war; as organizers of schools later on; as the most devoted schoolmistresses in the villages; as educated midwives and doctors' assistants amongst the peasants.[24]

references

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Shoveller of the Winter Snow

No traveller should
Continue indefinitely
On the same road.

I recall that,
As a child,
I craved a symmetry
In my wanderings.

I chose a straight road,
With poplars to my right
And poplars to my left,
A straight road
With ancient purple stones
To my right and to my left.

Then came the winter
Of young womanhood.
Heavy snow covered
My straight road.
It covered my poplars
And my purple stones.
The symmetry of childhood
Was concealed.

I tried at first
To shovel all the snow away;
It blinded me,
I knew this snow would always stay.

I found a better road,
A crooked road this time.

And yet I think that other road was kind,
The road that was in league with blinding snow.
It taught me that a traveller
Can outgrow a road.

Deborah Eibel