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HIST 130-01

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23 April 2018

Impact of the Bolshevik Revolution on Soviet Women

The Bolshevik Revolution in Russia was a revolution that occurred near the end of World War I to get rid of those that were in control of Russia at the time and the movement ultimately led to the rise of the Soviet Union. Many historians argue as to whether or not the Bolshevik Revolution led to an improvement in the lives of Soviet women. Richard Stites, author of, *Women and the Revolutionary Process in Russia*, argues that the Bolshevik Revolution did improve the lives of women as the Bolsheviks dismantled gender roles and established gender equality. Françoise Navailh, author of, *The Soviet Model*, disagrees with Stites and refutes that although women enjoyed some new freedoms, these freedoms ultimately backfired and resulted in a much harsher life for women, not to mention the instability of the government was unable to protect the rights of women and ensure equality for very long.

Stites begins his argument by briefly summarizing the role of women before the Bolshevik Revolution and how feminist parties were unsuccessful in gaining any type of rights before the revolution and therefor remained unrepresented in the government and the decisions it made. Before the end of the monarchy in Russia, political parties did not put any emphasis on advocating for women’s rights and many parties even treated the issue as illegitimate; however, by the end of the 1906 many parties, most influential being the socialist party, began to support the cause of women and strove to help women establish gender equality. In addition to these socialist parties that helped women, Alexandra Kollontai helped to continue to pressure the Russian government by actively going into the workplace of women and teaching them about Marxism to bring awareness to the injustice the government was doing to them. These various political organizations helped to improve the lives of women during the revolution as they provided the momentum needed to get large groups of women active in politics to fight for gender equality and different freedoms.

Another factor that Stites views as crucial to the movement towards an improvement in the lives of women in Russia is the unification of women in 1917 and their joining with the Bolshevik’s in overthrowing the monarchy and establishing a Soviet regime. After the tsar was removed from power, “revolutionary parties linked up with the masses of women,” which helped reinvigorate the feminist movement and create a more powerful movement that shared similar ideals for government and life overall, like equality for all under the law (Stites, 169). Stemming from the work of Kollontai and other feminists, the ways in which women partook in rebelling against the government through demonstrations and riots managed to prove useful in the Bolshevik Revolution as they managed to help put the Bolsheviks in power in October of 1917. The unification of the feminist movement and the Bolsheviks proved to be beneficial for women as they were rewarded for their efforts in overthrowing the old government of Russia as the Bolshevik’s ended up passing legislation to establish gender equality.

The freedoms and rights gained by women that Stites mentioned in his article were substantial for women at the time as women in the rest of the world did not have those same freedoms. Women under the new Soviet rule found equality in marriage, which allowed them to keep their last name and even divorce their husband whenever they wanted, unlike how it used to be where only the husband had the power to declare divorce. Even the right to an abortion was granted at this time, something that was not established in the United States until a few years ago, which shows the vast difference in women rights and how Soviet women enjoyed freedoms that many would not experience until decades later. Households in the Soviet Union also experienced a change that benefited women as gender roles were unestablished with men partaking in chores and running the household.

Despite these improvements in the lives of women mentioned by Stites, Navailh refutes that none of these privileges enjoyed by women remained intact for very long as the stability of the government declined. Due to the relative instability of the government in the 1920s it had no choice but to leave the rights of women behind in order to pursue economic stability and prosperity to try and save the new government from imminent failure. Also, the socialist revolution did not start as a movement that had a goal of obtaining rights for women as its objective was always getting the socialist party in power, in a leadership position, which meant that ultimately the socialist party did not care if the rights of women had to be sacrificed for their party’s goals as women were essentially used for the numbers they could add in overthrowing the government.

Also, Navailh mentions that the rights that women gained for a brief time in Russia were actually very constrictive and led to a declination in the lives of women as the freedoms given were not well integrated into the new socialist society. The right of women to divorce ultimately led to widespread suffering as if either the husband or wife was unsatisfied with the marriage they could simply leave. This led to many women being abandoned after an affair and the government tried to help by requiring men to give financial support to the woman they were involved with so they could provide for themselves and any children, “ but women had to prove that an affair had taken place, and the law failed to specify what constituted proof” (Navailh, 180). In addition, the right to divorce did not necessarily mean that a woman would be separated from her spouse as housing was under a monopoly in Russia at the time, which meant that it was a struggle to get a new house or to even be relocated to a new location as the process was slow due to only one institution having the power to move people.

I agree with the views of Navailh as even though women were able to achieve many rights that women in other parts of the world were struggling to achieve, these rights gained by women living in Russia were only temporary and fell apart as government instability increased and resources dwindled. Navailh reveals that the right to an abortion also resulted in a much harsher life for women living during the 1920s as it led to high rates of children being left for abortion, high child death rates, and a decline in the birthrate. Even women who wanted a child had to get an abortion as the living conditions in the new socialist country were too harsh to raise a child as housing was very scarce, resources of every kind were very low, and sometimes a woman would have to endure being a single parent, which was hard as they had to endure a lack of monetary support from a spouse.

Navailh’s argument is presented in a very logical and organized manner that gets to point of the argument much faster than Stites who gave lots of background information instead of going straight into the facts. Also, the organization of the argument was in a format where Navailh stated a right or improvement women received under the socialist government and then presented facts that refuted the improvements, which showed that Navailh understood that improvements were made, but they were only temporary, so the effect was not long lasting. As Stites presented a lot of background information the argument was not as direct and did not immediately grab my attention as I did not know when it would get to the improvements made in the lives in Soviet women; however, the background information did help me to better understand the political situation in Russia and how the Bolsheviks rose to power.

A weakness in Stites’s argument was that after he had mentioned how the lives of Soviet women had improved due to the rights and freedoms gained by women working with the Bolshevik government he mentioned that these freedoms were taken away due to the government lacking stability. As Stites said that the effects were not long lasting, he basically gave the reader, myself in this case, more reason to side with his opponent Navailh. Even though he was honestly stating the facts that these freedoms enjoyed by women were revoked, this honesty made his argument less effective than it could have been if he did not mention it; however, I value his honesty greatly as he did not limit the truth in his writing.

Both arguments are supported by a plethora of facts and cite many political events and figures during their arguments, like how they both mention Alexandra Kollontai as a key figure in gaining women rights. In addition, both authors use a lot of specific dates and time periods in their arguments showing the amount of thought and time they put into their writings, increasing their credibility as reliable sources of information for this time period in Russia. As well as maintaining a high level of credibility, both authors manage to separate opinion and fact relatively well as they use the facts to get their opinion across to the reader. I believe that Navailh came across as slightly more opinionated than Stites at times due to her word choice being more aggressive than Stites’s more platonic approach.

Stites’s article on the lives of women after the Bolshevik Revolution lacked in emotional appeal compared to Navailh’s argument mostly due to word choice. Also, the argument by Stites came across as more of a history textbook kind of feel due to the large dump of information about Russia before the Bolshevik Revolution. This information dump was very helpful in understanding how the Bolshevik Revolution occurred, but the information came across a bland and thrown in solely for the purpose of informing instead of arguing on the issue at hand.

From these two arguments I conclude that women in the new government under the Bolsheviks did gain new freedoms and rights that women all across the world would not enjoy for years to come. These freedoms they gained ultimately established gender equality and eliminated gender roles in the workplace and in home life; however, these improvements were only temporary and did not last very long, not to mention they presented many problems for women, like how men could freely leave a marriage or affair and possibly not have to pay anything to the woman involved due to unclear laws by the government.

Ultimately the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia had a profound affect on the lives of many due to the change to a socialist style government and the beginning of the Soviet Union. Richard Stites and Françoise Navailh both conclude that the revolution in Russia had a very profound impact on women but differed on whether they believed this impact was positive or negative. In the end the impact of this radical change led to women gaining rights that most women around the world only hoped for, but these freedoms ended up only causing women more trouble than improvement in their lives.

I have neither given nor received help on this work, nor am I aware of any infraction of the Honor Code.

Word Count: 1900