

Elizabeth A. Wood. *The Baba and the Comrade: Gender and Politics in Revolutionary Russia.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997. vii + 328 pp. \$35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-253-33311-7.



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Published on H-Russia (April, 1998)

In last couple of decades scholars have begun to examine the role of women in politics, society, and the family during the eras of the Russian revolution and the consolidation of the Soviet regime. Elizabeth A. Wood adds to this invaluable body of work in her superb study, *The Baba and the Comrade*. Her original and well-researched book augments our understanding of women and society in the first decade after the Revolution. In particular, it provides an original and instructive overview of the *Zhenotdel*, the women's section of the Communist Party, and the major challenges its central and local sections confronted.[1]

Wood enriches the existing tradition of women's history by focusing not only on the experience of real women's lives, but also on "gender as an organizing principle." [2] She investigates how representations of women functioned in Soviet efforts at state-building and the construction of a socialist political and social order. In examining the language and practices of Soviet authorities and women's sections, Wood finds multiple, and often contradictory, conceptions of gender sameness and difference in the struggles over how women

would be integrated into the new society. She shows how the image of the *baba*, a pejorative Russian term used to denote a backward, uneducated woman, was effectively mobilized to serve as a "foil to, and assistant of, the (universal gender-neutral) comrade in the creation of a new Soviet order" (p. 9).

The book begins with a discussion of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Russian ideas about women. Here, Wood sets the historical context for the Bolshevik approach to the woman question. She explores how Tsars and Tsarinas, members of the intelligentsia, and political radicals often associated Russian backwardness with women, and as a result, targeted women in their respective efforts to transform the larger Russian populace. Wood argues that the Bolsheviks too viewed women as symbols of "backward Russia." While this negative image initially made Bolsheviks reluctant to organize women, over time Bolsheviks came to see them as potential targets of revolutionary agitation.

In the book's second section, Wood delineates the shifts in the rhetoric of gender before, during,

and immediately after the Civil War. She demonstrates how gender became a powerful vehicle for consolidating the Soviet state.

Wood reviews the early Bolshevik legislation in December 1917 and 1918 that supported women's equal rights. Although some gender differences remained in labor statutes, much of early Bolshevik law promoted women's sameness to men. Once the Civil War began, however, women's sections' organizers and top party officials emphasized women's differences from men. Wood's attention here to the contradictory and multiple representations of women is particularly incisive. Debates over possible obligatory military training for women faded as women were encouraged to play traditional female roles in the war effort instead of that of the proletariat. Women's sections enlisted women to join the Civil War cause as "natural" caretakers and to use their "tender hearts" to nurse wounded soldiers, collect money and presents for them, and provide loving words. The party implored women to serve as maternal watchdogs and to persuade male relatives and comrades not to abandon the Red Army. Women were also supposed to contribute to the national economy by using their "sharp eyes" to detect corruption and engage in inspection and supervision. Thus, Wood points out, even as the Bolsheviks legally declared women to be men's equals, women's organizers and Soviet leaders used "dichotomies of male and female behavior" and cultivated "traditional gender stereotypes" to engage women in support the Revolution.

Nevertheless, the cause of the Civil War did not mean that Bolsheviks gave up on the question of how to draw women workers and peasants into the general movement to transform the citizenry itself. Soviet authorities still hoped to produce the new "citizen-comrade," that is, to make women Soviet. As a result, in late 1918 the Party sanctioned women's commissions on agitation and propaganda among women workers and peasants. In 1919, these commissions were reconstituted

as the national and local women's sections of the Communist Party, the *Zhenotdel*.

The identity of the *Zhenotdel*, and its attendant tasks, involved conflicting issues that divided women's sections' leaders. According to Wood, the women's sections used the image of the backward woman to justify their separate agitational efforts among women. Since women's consciousness was not on par with men's, women workers and peasants needed to be educated. At the same time, however, women activists maintained that there was no ultimate difference between women and men. Women's sections faced a similar contradiction in their practical organizing endeavors. On the one hand, they argued that women had no women's issues separate from their male comrades. On the other hand, they found that the best way to reach women was to appeal to them as mothers, single women, and female workers with particular female issues, such a need for child-care. Wood argues that the very ambiguity of gender created opportunities for the women's sections to gain some autonomy. As a result, women's sections acted not only as "transmission belts" for the Party; they appealed to government authorities on behalf of women's needs.

With the end of the Civil War and the introduction of labor conscription in January 1920, the *Zhenotdel* shifted the emphasis of its work to the exigencies women workers faced. Women's sections continued to teach women workers and peasants the language of Bolshevism through their delegate meetings, but they no longer needed to mobilize the female population to support the Civil War cause. Instead they intensified their efforts to bring about the construction of additional daycare and communal dining facilities that would ameliorate the double burden most wage-earning women faced. *Zhenotdel* leaders also pursued maternity and labor protection, the decriminalization of abortion, and the defense of women in legislative proposals about prostitution.

In the book's final section, Wood demonstrates the difficulties that the post-Civil War period and the New Economic Policy (NEP) posed for women activists in particular and women in general. Aleksandra Kollontai and other women's sections' leaders saw NEP as a "new threat." Adverse labor and economic changes challenged the Bolshevik solution for women's emancipation--a strategy predicated on the inclusion of women in the waged labor force and on the construction of state-run institutions. New economic policies and political objectives displaced women workers from the work force at a much higher percentage than men on account of layoffs, the demobilization of Red Army soldiers, "male return migration" to the cities, and discrimination in hiring. One reason for this turn of events, Wood finds, is that enterprise administrators, factory managers, and trade union leaders saw women workers first and foremost as mothers or potential mothers, instead of as workers. Moreover, the state allocated fewer funds for the development of communalized facilities and let many of the existing ones fall apart. Because the women's sections had fewer female workers to work with and fewer state resources with which to establish social services, its *raison d'etre* was in question.

The transition to NEP provoked an institutional crisis for the women's sections. According to Wood, the *Zhenotdel* suffered from low turnout at meetings and a sense of purposelessness. While women's sections continued to try to involve women in public life, fewer working women and peasants joined in their efforts. Meanwhile provincial party committees and members of the women's sections started to raise the question of whether or not to abolish the sections. Wood argues that the issue of "liquidationism" arose because of the numerous difficulties the women's sections faced: a lack of strong central leadership and staff shortages, estrangement from general party work, resistance from party committees, and uncertainty about the continued existence of

the women's sections due to recent Party discussions about restructuring.

In its effort to stay afloat and bolster its significance, the *Zhenotdel* reasserted its expertise in drawing women workers into the Communist Party and reminded Bolshevik authorities of the need to continue to incorporate women into the new political and social order. Once again, using the long-standing image of the dangerous, counter-revolutionary woman, the women's sections argued that women's mass unemployment might contribute to the reemergence and strengthening of petty-bourgeois views among women. Removed from or unable to enter the waged work force, they said, women might resort to subversive tactics for survival, and in the process, corrupt men's political purity. Hence it was incumbent on the *Zhenotdel* to continue work among women.

The final chapter focuses on the 1923 turn by Soviet leaders and the *Zhenotdel* toward questions of *byt* (daily life) and the domestic sphere. According to Wood, the harmful effects of NEP on working women, a popular perception of moral decay in families, and concerns about women's emancipation and new roles fueled their anxiety about political deterioration and their subsequent attention to everyday life and the domestic sphere. This shift marked a change in the Bolshevik approach to women's liberation. In this period, journalists, party leaders, and *Zhenotdel* members focused less on how to liberate women and more on how emancipated and unemancipated women might affect family relations, personal habits and behaviors, and morals. The press provided images of both the emancipated female comrade who no longer would cook for her husband, and of the reactionary wife, who contributed to the decay of her husband and children's political allegiances. The *Zhenotdel* was inclined to emphasize the positive role that women could play in the family and in the transformation of *byt*, while Party leaders tended to focus on women's negative influence.

Wood concludes her book by reasserting how the Party and women's sections used concepts of gender in their endeavors to make "citizen-comrades" out of women. During the early Soviet years, manifold and sometimes opposing conceptions of gendered identities and roles served to legitimize and mold political objectives and social practices.

Wood's study adds complexity to our understanding of politics and social relations in the 1920s. In addition, Wood's evidence calls into question the way historians have tended to periodize changes in the Bolshevik approach to the woman question. Indeed, Wood's study, in this reader's view, along with a recent paper by Michelle Fuqua,[3] implicitly suggests that the so-called death of the proletarian women's movement as a proletarian movement did not happen with the abolition of the *Zhenotdel* in 1930, but much earlier.[4] Whereas initially the *Zhenotdel* defended working women's interests and targeted wage-earning women to support the Bolsheviks, join the Party, and engage in public life, by the mid-1920s the *Zhenotdel* had altered its foci and broadened its constituency considerably.[5] Women activists actively began to organize unemployed women and housewives and to try to influence the culture of everyday life and women's roles in the domestic realm. Thus, further investigation of the *Zhenotdel* and on gender as an organizing principle for the second half of the 1920s would be worthwhile. Wood's examination of gender and politics from 1917-1924 provides a laudable foundation for such inquiries. The challenge remains for other scholars, and one hopes Wood herself, to continue her fruitful line of inquiry.

Another avenue of analysis that Wood opens up, but does not discuss in detail, is the continued gendering of men in the early Soviet era. While her exploration of the representations of female gender speak indirectly about male gender, additional research on how men were gendered when they were not being depicted as the "conscious,

active, dedicated, skillful male worker comrade" would be valuable. How did men's difference and sameness get deployed in efforts at state building?

This fine book will be of particular interest to specialists in and students of the the early Soviet state and gender studies. Using a wide range of sources and gender as an analytical framework, Wood provides a new perspective on politics and social relations in the early Soviet era.

Notes

[1]. In contrast to earlier scholarly literature on the *Zhenotdel*, Wood's study investigates the institution from the perspective of its "practice of gender definition and representation." See Carol Eubanks Hayden, "The Zhenotdel and the Bolshevik Party," *Russian History*, III, 2 (1976): 150-173, and Richard Stites, "Zhenotdel: Bolshevism and Russian Women, 1917-1930," *ibid.*: 174-193.

[2]. Historians of Imperial Russia have thus far been more prolific on the question of gender than those of the Soviet era. It should be noted, however, that some scholars have begun to examine the visual and literary representations of gender in the Soviet Union during the 1920s. It also appears that there is growing interest among historians of the Soviet period in using gender as a lens for historical analysis. For example, see Anne E. Gorsuch, "A Woman is Not a Man: The Culture of Gender and Generation in Soviet Russia, 1921-1928" *Slavic Review* 55, No. 3, Fall 1996: 636-660.

[3]. Michelle Fuqua, "The Politics of the Domestic Sphere: The *Zhenotdely*, Women's Liberation, and the Search for a *Novyi Byt* in Early Soviet Russia," *The Donald W. Treadgold Papers in Russian, East European and Central Asian Studies* No. 10 (September 1996).

[4]. See Richard Stites, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Russia: Feminism, Nihilism and Bolshevism, 1860-1930* (Princeton University Press, 1978): 344; and Wendy Z. Goldman, "Industrial Politics, Peasant Rebellion and the Death of

the Proletarian Women's Movement in the USSR," *Slavic Review* 55, No. 1, Spring 1996: 46-77. Stites and Goldman offer an important perspective on the indisputably significant death of the *Zhenotdel* as an institution.

[5]. Of course, we already knew this for the tactics that women's sections employed in Central Asia in the 1920s. For more on this, see Gregory J. Massell, *The Surrogate Proletariat: Moslem Women and Revolutionary Strategies in Soviet Central Asia, 1919-1929* (Princeton University Press, 1974).

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Citation: Amy E. Randall. Review of Wood, Elizabeth A. *The Baba and the Comrade: Gender and Politics in Revolutionary Russia*. H-Russia, H-Net Reviews. April, 1998.

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