

a chequered  
history and an  
important future

# March 8 International Women's Day

Kathy Porter



This year International Women's Day is 70 years old. In most European countries its history has been so blurred and buried that its celebration here after the mid-20s can unfortunately have only a small part in this exploratory account of it. Since it's really only in the Soviet Union that socialist women have managed to make it a major holiday in the political calendar, my main focus will have to be on its organisation and celebration there. But there's surely more evidence of this long-established holiday than I've been able to stitch together, and I hope it will soon be the subject of more serious research as Women's Day takes on increasing importance. For we're now reclaiming March 8th as an exciting and psychologically valuable political holiday, an avenue out of apathy in depressing times and a day to raise important political demands.

March 8th has already been reclaimed by the women's movement as a high holiday of defiant sisterhood, a day to enjoy ourselves, celebrate our strength and commemorate our past. In 1971, women's groups in London and Liverpool organised rallies for free 24-hour nurseries, contraception and abortion on demand, equal pay and job oppor-

tunities, and there was a large march from Hyde Park to Trafalgar Square with floats, street theatre, literature, leaflets and balloons, a group of nightcleaners, a TGWU banner and several men marchers. Four years later, when the United Nations gave our militant holiday its bland blessing, we worried that it might either be trivialised — dressed up as some sort of glorified mother's day — or lost in misty myths of Petrograd 1917 (where it had been so gloriously celebrated) and stuck there, useless and irrelevant to us, a monument to women's powerlessness within two dead Internationals.

Women particularly sensitive to these fears were adamant that men shouldn't join the 1975 march and organised a women-only contingent, and from then on March 8th demonstrations here have always reflected these and other differences in the women's movement. We have lost sight of so many traditions: March 8th has traditionally been a day when women demonstrated without men, and the 100,000 Iranian women demonstrating last Women's Day on the streets of Teheran were an inspiring example of women-only marches. This sketchy account of Women's Day origins may suggest some new ways of thinking about and organising for Women's Day now.

## Origins

It started in February 1908. While groups of socialist women in America were organising demonstrations for the 8-hour day and for working women's political rights, women in the needle trade on Manhattan's Lower East Side came out on strike, and it was decided to dramatise these new political talents and celebrate the day annually as a political holiday. Two years later, the Women's Secretariat of the 2nd International organised a women's conference on women's suffrage and how to campaign within the International against war, and these became the slogans for a new socialist holiday, International Women's Day, on March 8th. Over the next 4 years, Women's Day demonstrations in Germany, Scandinavia, Switzerland and Russia all helped raise women's confidence. And since their anti-war rallies meant confronting not only national governments and the masters of the war industries, but chauvinists in the various countries' socialist parties too, women socialists, particularly in Germany, were by 1914 claiming a real leading radical edge over the rhetorical windbags of the International.

Women have often had to hoist this militant tradition out of the realms of abstraction. That struggle against militarism which gave the early Women's Days such discipline and passion must be part of all our demonstrations now, for challenging the nuclear doomsday policies of (mostly male) scientists and governments is central to our struggle to control our lives.

Women's Day arose out of many strengths and weaknesses we experience now in organising alternatives to male-dominated political groups and unions; it arose at a time when skilled workers, in organised resistance to capitalism, had already 'left behind the mass politics of the early 19th century . . . and in doing so had left behind the unskilled workers and women, whose lives didn't allow their participation in these more structured political forms.'<sup>1</sup> But this neglect had some unexpected side-benefits. For Women's Day was conceived just as the political impact of that first great holiday of workers' strength, May Day, was losing out (in Germany anyway) to the unions' increas-

<sup>1</sup> D Thompson, 'Women And Nineteenth-Century Radical Politics,' in A Oakley and J Mitchell, eds, *The Rights and Wrongs of Women*, Penguin 1974, p137.

## Note

For help in writing this, many thanks to Connie Seifert and Molly Keith of the NAW, and to Sheila Rowbotham, Jean Gaidiner and Sue Bruley. Thanks also to Mrs Beever for the photograph; she's sitting 2nd from the left, 2nd row from the front, wearing a white blouse.

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ingly materialistic concerns. Women workers, on the other hand, still largely ignored by the unions, and the Women's Secretariat, always unanswerable to the International, were in no such danger of having their holiday thus coopted.

It was in Germany, mother and father of European socialism, that May Day was most conspicuously celebrated and most ignominiously ditched. Its purpose, according to long socialist tradition, was to raise morale to the point where workers could eventually steer mass strikes into a full-blown revolution; the risks involved — the layoffs and lockouts — ensured that for at least one day in the year politics predominated over pay and conditions. Russia's 1905 revolution and the employers' counter offensive in Germany changed that. In Germany, the unions, pointing to the thousands of May Day lockouts, demanded that the day be celebrated quietly, after work; with the issue of the unions' relationship with the party decided in their favour, they pushed through a resolution ensuring that the party call off May Day strikes wherever lockouts seemed likely, and that workers would be heftily compensated wherever such strikes did lead to victimisation.

The issue became one of accountancy and the allocation of funds. Soon even radicals were admitting that party and unions had created such confusion in people's minds that May Day had been utterly drained of political significance. And so May Day limped along in small afterwork meetings, until collapsing in 1914.

March 8th was eagerly seized on by women in Germany and Austria as a day for presenting, to socialist parties and governments alike, their demand for the vote. Yet nobody anticipated the vast Women's Day demonstrations (the largest suffrage demonstrations ever seen) in 1911 in these two countries. Socialist men gave support in various ways — by staying at home with the children to allow the women to demonstrate, and by intervening to avert bloodshed when police started breaking up a demonstration of 30,000 women in Vienna. The following year women in Switzerland and Sweden had also organised support within their socialist parties for large Women's Day suffrage parades,<sup>2</sup> and by 1913 the day was being celebrated in Russia.

Since one weakness of the Women's Secretariat was that its resolutions were often ignored by those disinclined to adopt them — notably the British and the Belgian socialist parties — Women's Day didn't catch on in a big way, in Britain or elsewhere, until World War Two. Apart, that is, from in Russia.

### Women's Day in Russia: Out of the Underground

The exiled Russian Social Democrats, whose interests in women's matters was still sporadic, certainly didn't make Women's Day an immediate priority either.

It was during the 1912 strike wave in Russia that women workers, against unbelievable odds and the threat of arrest, began campaigning for proper representation in the new discriminatory insurance laws being passed; they'd clearly forgotten nothing since 1905, but had developed altogether more sophisticated ways of organising. By 1913 women in the textile unions were discussing Women's Day and how to organise it in an atmosphere of savage state repression. Work started in various clubs in St Petersburg where young women factory workers, newly arrived from the villages, illiterate and eager to learn, felt sufficiently comfortable to raise troubling questions about their new lives. A number of women militants and literacy workers — mostly Bolsheviks — there and in Moscow, helped them prepare Women's Day speeches, and soon the Bolsheviks' paper *Pravda* was

carrying a special Women's Day page. But as Alexandra Kollontai emphasised in a letter to August Bebel, it was the women themselves who'd taken the original initiative.

Throughout February there were large illegal women's meetings throughout Russia, and in St Petersburg, tickets for a 'Scientific Morning on The Woman Question' were distributed to women at factory gates; under pressure from socialists in the Tsar's parliament, the day was recognised as a holiday. This didn't prevent mounted police from surrounding the Stock Exchange on March 8th, and chivvying the women who poured in. Every woman, however poor, was wearing her best clothes and the hall was as bright as a May meadow by the time the first speakers nervously stepped onto the platform. Unable to communicate intimate thoughts past the thick impromptu accounts of their lives. 'Our masters oppress us and make us sleep with them on pain of losing our jobs — how dare bourgeois ladies tell us about "equality" and accuse us of immorality!' cried one veteran textile union official<sup>3</sup> Subsequent speeches — on women's suffrage, prostitution, women peasants and women's political consciousness after 1905 — all reiterated this commitment to fighting 'bourgeois feminism' within a united labour movement. That night many women speakers were arrested in the capital, police broke up a women's rally in Moscow, and women were rounded up in Kiev, Samara and Tiflis too.

Women's Day 1913 was a catalyst for socialist feminism in Russia and the start of the Bolsheviks' organisational commitment to women. In September some Bolsheviks women started work on a new women's magazine, whose first issue was to appear the following Women's Day. On the evening of March 7th 1914, police swooped on an editorial meeting and arrested 30 women who were to have addressed Women's Day meetings. Yet the day was celebrated — in suffrage and anti-war meetings in most Russian cities — and the magazine did appear, spelling out the Bolsheviks' commitment to confront working women's needs. Although many Bolshevik men denied the existence of any 'woman question' at all, and resisted even the narrow analysis there of women's political backwardness — rather than of their double oppression — the Bolsheviks were nevertheless the only European socialist party that managed to make Women's Day an established reality.

### Against 'War

When the International caved in to war in 1914, only the Women's Secretariat preserved its original radical integrity, planning anti-war demonstrations for March 8th in the neutral countries, and an international Women's Day conference of socialist women from neutral and warring countries. The Bolsheviks became their natural allies — though at some cost.

On March 8th 1915 some 30 women gathered in the small Swiss town of Berne, near where Lenin was living. Throughout that Easter week, the moderate socialist majority defended their simple pacifist resolution against a group of Bolshevik women who demanded an immediate break with the International and the transformation of the war into a revolutionary civil war. While Lenin drank tea in a nearby cafe waiting to be called in case of difficulties, Klara Zetkin of the Women's Secretariat implored the Bolsheviks to modify their resolution in the interests of a united statement. It was passed nonetheless<sup>4</sup>

The resolution actually bore little resemblance to the concerns of most women socialists. 1915 saw large anti-war rallies in Switzerland and Scandinavia, but in Russia there was no significant anti-war women's movement, and most students outdid even the most ardent of patriots. On the eve of Women's Day that year, Bolshevik women in Petrograd flyposted the city: 'Working Women! Comrades!' read their poster, 'This is our day of solidarity!' Capitalism has sent our

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sons to die — now we must unite, organise in the factories, and shout 'Enough Blood! Down With War!' Pro-war students tore it down, the Bolsheviks put it up again, and again it was torn down. There were a number of illegal flash Women's Day meetings in Russia, but these paled beside the intensifying wave of women's food pogroms, and by 1916 women in the food queues were throwing stones at bakeries, smashing up meat stalls and creating havoc in market-places.

In 1917 the women of Petrograd defied all the hungry rage and suffering of the past years of war; the most spectacular of all Women's Days exploded into food riots, economic and political strikes, mass demonstrations of women, civil disorders which toppled the autocracy and a revolution which inscribed women firmly into the history of that extraordinary year.

On the eve of Women's Day 1917, women textile workers in Petrograd had asked the Bolshevik central committee how to organise events, and were told to 'follow party instructions' and not to demonstrate. Yet they went off and organised meetings, and were soon marching to the Tsar's parliament, shouting 'Come out and join us!' at every factory and barracks they passed. When workers were locked out of the Putilov armaments plant later that day, women drivers at the trolley terminus sensed a general strike in the air and sent one of their number to talk to the soldiers encamped nearby. She returned with the promise not to shoot if a strike became general and the others promptly came out on strike. Traffic ground to a halt.

By midday, the wives, mothers and daughters of soldiers, previously as downtrodden as prostitutes, were storming the streets. Women queueing outside one bakery were told there was no bread. Smashing it up, they rushed on to other bakeries and wrecked them too before abandoning the bread-lines and pouring into the city centre. 'Bread!' read their makeshift banners. 'Our Children Are Starving!' Women surged across the Neva bridges and thronged the streets, gathering passion over the next days to the point where they were soon invading the officers' barracks to seize guns. The factories stopped. The Bolsheviks' response to Women's Day 1917 was to set up a party women's bureau. But after the October revolution a national women's conference, planned by a few bold Bolshevik women for Women's Day 1918, was thought by many men to reek of 'feminism', and in the event, with the Bolsheviks critically involved in their peace negotiations with Germany, it was hard to see how Women's Day could be made a priority.

Only when the Women's Department was established in 1919 did Women's Day once again become a major political holiday there. But even then its celebration was increasingly tied to general political programmes rather than to specifically women's concern. In the terrible civil war years it was a day when women donated wages and rations to hospitals, maternity homes were opened, and special recruitment drives were launched. In the Eastern republics women's day had a far more theatrical impact, with women gathering in marketplaces to tear off their hated veils and so risk ostracism and even possible death.

Unsurprisingly, given the breadth of union and party hostility to the Women's Department — and the erosion of so many autonomous activities as potential opposition bases after the post-1927 collectivisation policies — there was growing opposition to a proper celebration of Women's Day.

However, at a Comintern women's conference in 1921, various European delegates agreed to organise March 8th celebrations in honour of the women who'd made Russia's first 1917 revolution.



### Echoes in Europe

Although it wasn't until World War Two that Women's Day was properly celebrated in Europe, it certainly survived throughout the 20s and 30s: in 1926, when women in Shanghai, supported by communists and nationalists, celebrated March 8th with strikes and an insurrection in which they fought and fell in the front line; and in England in that year of the General Strike, when hundreds of women were infused with the courage to celebrate it for the first time in demonstrations in London, Manchester and elsewhere. In the following years women from the Communist Party, the Women's Cooperative Guild, various smaller unions and the National Unemployed Workers' Movement organised March 8th demonstration against war, inflation and capitalism (see picture). In 1929, there were Women's Day demonstrations in Wales, Shipley, Manchester and London; and in France women munitions workers celebrated the day with anti-war rallies, while women strikers and miners' wives in Rouen and the Loire also made impressive Women's Day arrangements.

In 1930, the Bolsheviks' Women's Department was closed. Women's Day, however, survived, in rather reviled and attenuated a form — the March 8th slogan for that and subsequent years as 'For 100% Nationalisation.'

In Britain, women organisers like Lily Webb, of the NUWM, called for large Women's Day demonstrations in 1931. In a lively

<sup>2</sup>Alexandra Kollontai, *International Women's Day, A Socialist Women's Special* 1972 pp4-5.

<sup>3</sup>Alexeeva-Grigoreva, 'Shenskou Utro' (Women's Morning), in *Zhenschiny Goroda Lenina* (Women of Lenin's Town), Leningrad 1963, pp 65-70

<sup>4</sup>Angelica Balabanova, *My Life As A Rebel*, New York, 1938, pp 131-6.

article addressed to the 500,000 women shuffling down the dole queues, she depicted the ways March 8th demonstrations could bring women's impossible lives to the attention of the unions and the party. Wherever industrial struggles were imminent or already underway, as in Yorkshire, women's factory groups could organise meetings to connect specific workplace grievances to the broader issues raised by the employers' offensive. Women's meetings at feeding centres and factory gates, on picket lines and dole queues — this was one way to strike back at men's indifference to women's sufferings. Regular open meetings at factories and meetings of women factory-worker delegates



— this was another way, tested by the (now defunct) Bolshevik Women's Department, of tackling the isolation experienced by most women workers.<sup>5</sup>

### The Popular Front

Underlying women's increased presence in Europe throughout the 20s and 30s on strike committees and picket lines was a real understanding of fascism's need for women's labour for war purposes. By 1936, with Hitler slashing away at women's sickness pay and maternity benefits, Mussolini invading Abyssinia, Franco uttering Spain with concentration camps and Japan invading China, Women's Day slogans had begun to link demands for suffrage, equal pay and labour conditions with calls for a united popular front opposition to fascism. In Italy women lay across the railway lines with their children on Women's Day, tore down mobilisation orders and forced their way into barracks to harangue the soldiers. In Brussels there was a Women's Day demonstration in support of Abyssinia; women in Vienna protested to the Italian ambassador; 20,000 Swedish women demanded that the League of Nations take sanctions against Germany; and in Norway, Finland and Poland there were large anti-war women's demonstrations on March 8th.

That year in the Soviet Union, the stage was set for popular front Women's Day demonstrations on a massive scale. At meetings, concerts and socials in every factory, farm and theatre, Stakhanovite milkmaids, parachutists and shorthand typists were feted; women factory workers and farm workers were given radios, bikes, sewing

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machines and bonuses, and there was a meeting for former prostitutes in Moscow's Academy of Sciences. Speeches and articles proclaimed the security of the family, urged men to assume an equal share in the care of their children and assured women that their equality was now a reality.

Women's Day didn't have quite this resonance in Britain; a serious and self-critical article by Communist Party organiser Ted Bramley in 1938 revealed the male labour movement's contempt for women which in the past had so thwarted women's resistance and Women's Day demonstrations. Only if party and unions supported March 8th

demonstrations that year under slogans for an end to women's wretched living and working conditions could women be expected to demonstrate also for aid to Spain and China and a collective security pact with France, Russia and America<sup>6</sup>.

There is actually little evidence of any such demonstrations here at the beginning of the war, and quiet Women's Day gatherings and knitting circles seem to have been the rule. In 1941, it appears there were rowdy fracas in various shopping centres, with women demonstrating elsewhere for 'Peace, Bread and Freedom for British Women!'<sup>7</sup> The party-backed International Women's Day Committee was set up to organise equal pay meetings at St Pancras Town Hall, Beaver Hall and the Palace Theatre in London, with similar meetings held in other towns too.

By the end of the war, the IWD Committee became more imaginative, and in 1949 two peace buses began two-week tours of Britain which culminated in March 8th meetings in London and Glasgow. Although they had to leave Cambridge in a hurry after students pelted women speakers, the press generally gave the buses some good publicity. In 1950, an equal pay trial on March 8th in Beaver Hall, with D M Pritt advocating, was equally well publicised.

Over the next 10 years the IWD Committee broadened its interests, and on March 8th 1952 the National Assembly of Women, supported by the Labour and Communist Parties, the Women's Cooperative Guild and various unions, held two inaugural meetings — open forums in London on prices, health, education and housing. Over 2000 women attended the second NAW convention in Glasgow held the following year under the slogan 'The World We Want For Our Children', and 'Bring Our Husbands Back From Korea!' was the slogan for large NAW meetings in 1954 in Glasgow, Manchester and London.

Yet some women at this time felt even this slogan to be unsuitably radical for Women's Day<sup>8</sup>. A massive 50th anniversary Women's Day congress in 1960 in its Copenhagen birthplace was attended by women from various countries' socialist parties, catholic organisations and trade unions; from the pallid resolution passed, it was clear that the desire for numbers and agreement at all costs was threatening to drain Women's Day of much of its original spirit. The Bolsheviks' 1936 celebrations had already set the tone for subsequent Women's Days — in the Soviet Union now, despite advances in women's position, a day when complacent commonplaces serve to reinforce the cult of motherhood, ignore women's underrepresentation in the party and the professions, and fail to confront all the anguish of the double burden.

At a Moscow Women's Day meeting 1970 organised by the Committee of Soviet Women, its president Valentina Tereshkova urged a 'thorough-going study of the problems involved 'in blending women's dual role as mothers and workers, but beyond such vague declarations and the commitment to 'maximise the liberation of women from unproductive housework,' the Committee has achieved little that would be apparent to foreign observers.

The problems evident in the history of March 8th needn't dull our consciousness or numb memories of more exciting Women's Days, far from it. As more and more women become involved in March 8th demonstrations for equal pay and increased child allowances, against the arms race, Corrie and the cuts, we can see more and more possibilities ahead for our day of action: a day of strikes, demonstrations and general hell-raising, a day to write our maximum political demands onto our banners. •

<sup>5</sup> Lily Webb, *Communist Review* March 1931.

<sup>6</sup> Ted Bramley, 'International Women's Day', *Discussion*, March 19, pp 18-20.

<sup>7</sup> Rose Smith, 'Bread Peace and Freedom for British Women', *Imprecor*, March 1941.

<sup>8</sup> According to Molly Keith, of the National Assembly of Women.