

# Reviews

## ALEXANDRA KOLLONTAI, A BIOGRAPHY

Cathy Porter

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'Valkyrie of the revolution', 'the anti-christ', 'Revolutionary, Tribune, Diplomat' — this is how many contemporaries saw Alexandra Kollontai, undoubtedly one of the most flamboyant and dynamic figures on the Russian scene in the first half of our century.

Cathy Porter's is a very detailed life-story of this extraordinary woman who, born into an aristocratic family two years after Lenin, became an influential socialist and feminist agitator. As an exile from Tsardom, she kept untiringly addressing audiences in half a dozen languages all over Western Europe as well as in New York, Chicago and other rather sleepy and much less responsive provincial towns of the United States. In the dangerous days of 1905 she was back in Russia, courageous, resourceful, and displaying a superb defiance of all the agents of Tsarist 'law and order'. In the heady atmosphere of 1917 her fiery speeches were heard by hundreds and thousands and resounded all over the revolutionary capital.

By temperament and conviction Kollontai was a revolutionary socialist, though it is not easy to place her in the various currents of Marxist thought. For a time she was with the Mensheviks, then joined the Bolsheviks, although she disliked Lenin's 'hardness' and what Ms Porter terms his 'sectarian narrow-mindedness'. While Lenin was straining to 'convert spontaneous action into one of political consciousness', Kollontai, as teacher, propagandist, and agitator was more concerned with encouraging the spontaneous expression of needs and demands among women who had as yet hardly any political or social awareness. Ms Porter tries to convey 'the excitement and spontaneity' of those early illegal 'flying schools', at which women from all walks of life gathered together to read Krupskaya *The Woman Worker* and to debate their own role in society. Lack of literature on

that subject was certainly a great challenge to Kollontai and her friends who were forced into 'spontaneity' in their teaching and their talks. Whether their 'ultimate strength' lay in this is, however, doubtful.

Immediately after the uprising Kollontai, as Commissar for Social Welfare, briefly joined Lenin's government, although her relations with him were never smooth. His calm rationality was as uncongenial to her as her stormy temperament and emotionality must have been to him. Not unexpectedly, when in doubt, Ms Porter sides with Kollontai rather than with Lenin whom she accuses of persistent 'vote-rigging' (pp85, 300, 368), and other misdemeanours.

In 1918 Kollontai joined Bukharin and the Left Bolsheviks and became one of the most vociferous opponents of the Brest Litovsk treaty, in which she saw Lenin's 'opportunism' and 'compromise with imperialism'. To his passionate pleading to preserve the revolution at all costs, her answer was: 'If our Soviet Republic perishes, another will raise our banner . . .'

It seemed only natural that she should have thrown herself body and soul into activity on behalf of the Workers Opposition, of which she became a fervent spokeswoman if not the brain. She saw another example of Lenin's 'opportunism' in the NEP and denounced it 'as an insult to the revolutionary class', though the Workers Opposition was quite incapable of presenting an alternative policy.

With anguish she watched the defeat of the Kronstadt rebels with whom she was in sympathy. Her heart was all the heavier as it was Dybenko, the love of her life, who was instrumental in crushing the rebellion. Dybenko was also one of those 'judges' who, in 1937, condemned Marshal Tukhachevsky to death, only to perish in Stalin's purges soon afterwards.

Cathy Porter quite rightly does not claim too much for Kollontai as theorist, thinker or politician. Nor does she overvalue Kollontai as a novelist. To the end of her life Kollontai herself remained grateful to the friend who had sternly criticised her literary attempts, and, at 78, she wrote modestly: 'I don't consider myself a talented writer . . . just very average . . . my images are pale . . .'

The main significance and — alas — the continuing relevance of Kollontai's work lies in her struggle for women's emancipation. Here she still has a few useful lessons for our time. Even today many feminists do not see what was for Kollontai over 70 years ago self-evident, namely that 'no movement can unite women whose class interests are diametrically opposed'. In her own lifetime she had to contend with deceptively attractive aristocratic ladies and bourgeois benefactors

trying, sometimes quite sincerely, to improve the lot of nannies, girl-servants or 'fallen women'. She firmly believed that only in the fight for socialism would women achieve their equality. Klara Zetkin's words (of 1896) are perhaps worth recalling: 'Bourgeois women struggle *against* men of their own class while working women fight *with* the men of their own class against capital.'

Kollontai was deeply convinced that women should create their own exclusive organisations, meetings, and unions, and she fervently combated the view that such 'separateness' within the mainstream of the socialist movement might be divisive of that movement as a whole. This view was held not only by 'male chauvinists' among the members of the party, but also by such passionate revolutionaries as Vera Zasulich, Klara Zetkin, Krupskaya and others. Ms Porter joins Kollontai in her indignation at such an attitude, but she considers the dangers to which 'separateness' could lead, dangers of narrow-mindedness and parochialism. Whatever view one holds, Ms Porter shows convincingly how Kollontai and her devoted collaborators succeeded in organising not only masses of urban female workers, but even in awakening to some degree the dormant women of the countryside, for centuries resigned to their slavery as the will of god. This hard uphill struggle and all it entailed is perhaps epitomised in one of the most memorable scenes of Cathy Porter's book:

On 30 January 1918 Kollontai was putting the last loving touches to a former Tsarist Institute which she, with superhuman effort, had managed to transform into The Palace of Motherhood, the first model centre for child care, to be solemnly inaugurated the following morning. At midnight she was aroused by the news that the Palace was on fire.'... it was sabotage. The fire was started on several corners of the building . . . 'Only one wing, occupied by a philanthropic countess, her infant charges, and some nannies loyal to her, escaped destruction. As Alexandra Kollontai approached the ominous glow, 'she felt frozen with fear'. 'Suddenly from out of the intact section of the building a strange dishevelled procession of nannies emerged, moving towards the smouldering rubble in their nightdresses . . . "There she is, the anti-christ!" they yelled . . . "She took the icons down!", "She wants to turn the orphanage into a brothel!"' One nanny tried to throttle her — the bruises on her neck were visible for weeks; those on her heart, one might add, were not. Such was the depth of obscurantism facing the first woman Commissar for Social Welfare in the first Soviet government.

Like other great fighters, Kollontai reached her most inspiring apogee when the revolution was on the ascendant, when the heroic period was over, when the masses were frustrated, weary, and longing for peace and bread, her powers declined. When the flat, unimaginative committee-men emerged and came to the fore, little room for her remained.

From about 1923 Kollontai was spending most of her time abroad in 'honorary exile', first at the head of a trade mission and later as an ambassador in Oslo. This appointment was followed by further diplomatic posts in Sweden, far away Mexico, and later in Finland, the country of her childhood. She was indeed well equipped to conduct diplomatic and other deals with bourgeois governments; her aristocratic upbringing, her manners, her elegance in dress and behaviour and, last but not least, her fluency in eleven languages, made her quite a 'respectable' and even attractive ambassadress.

She survived the purges, perhaps, as Cathy Porter says, because Stalin, whose 'personal views on women were despicable', had an old-fashioned resistance to subjecting them to harsh punishment. She 'served the revolution' as she thought best, but already in 1930 she had to admit: 'I've put principles into a corner of my conscience and carry out . . . the policies dictated to me.'

Cathy Porter has written a sad, serious, and very readable book. She has used such Russian sources, as were available, with skill and managed to keep clear of all 'academese'. It is a pity therefore that the book is sloppily produced. A good editor could have shortened it and kept out errors of fact, and a good proof reader could have cleared it of innumerable printing and spelling mistakes.

**Tamara Deutscher**