

Rochelle Goldberg Ruthchild. *Equality & Revolution: Women's Rights in the Russian Empire, 1905-1917*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010. xviii, 356 pp. \$65.00 (cloth). ISBN-13: 978-0-82296-066-9.

Over the course of the last decade, a rich literature has emerged that tracks women's history and the status of women in Russia; scholarship on women's experiences of and contributions to the Russian revolutionary movement has increased exponentially. At times it seemed there was nothing more to be added. However, the book *Equality & Revolution: Women's Rights in the Russian Empire, 1905-1917* by Rochelle Goldberg Ruthchild – one of the leading specialists in the United States on Russian feminist history – makes a fresh and valuable contribution to the already rich literature on Russian women's studies by adding new accents.

This is a wonderful book. I liked it from the first pages. What impressed me most about this book was that Ruthchild looks at feminist history through the lens of Russia's political history and gives a radically revisionist account of the Russian revolutionary period of 1905-1917 that restores feminist activism to the center. This vantage point enables the author to deliver fresh insights and show Russian feminists as agents of and a driving force for revolution and social change, an integral part of a broad democratic movement that struggled for political and social reforms and transformation of the state.

Discussing the history of Russian feminism as political history, Ruthchild shows how the ideology of Russian feminism tied together the problem of equality of women with the problem of formation of the constitutional state. Having created an ideology, the feminist movement turned into a force which affected public consciousness, championing the adoption of laws on equality, and realized the objective of granting women political rights. Thus, contrary to the Soviet myth, it happened in September 1917, *before* the October Revolution.

As a whole, the book contributes a great deal to contemporary discussions about the success of Russia's women at gaining the vote in 1917 but, for the sake of brevity, in the rest of this review, I will devote my attention to the topic that interests me most.

The focus of the book is on a particular stage in Russian political history when the First Russian Revolution (1905-1907) created some preconditions for development of civil society and for emergence of women's autonomous political movement aimed at equal rights with men. Organizations grew in number, size and ambition (for example, the suffrage movement remarkably intensified). The political situation that gave rise to the Russian women's suffrage movement differed fundamentally from the situation in many Western countries. Women's organisations in Russia, making the best use of a frequently changing political situation, managed to achieve women's suffrage in an amazingly short period – within twelve years. In many respects this could be explained by specific political conditions: while revolutionary events were shaking the old order, it was easier for women to obtain their rights. At the same time we should not ignore the agency of Russian suffragists, keeping in mind that it was thanks to their efforts that Russian women were among the first in Europe to obtain political rights.

Ruthchild begins her study with an overview of the meaning of equality and stresses that in contrast to the Western democracies, where universal male suffrage came first after long popular struggles, the issue of women's and men's suf-

frage in Russia appeared simultaneously. She further explains that women's suffrage and women's rights were very much part of the political discourse in all parts of the Russian Empire between 1905 and 1917. She also shows the limits of liberation and difficulties when the events of 1905-06 failed. Reaction followed the revolutionary peak of 1907, and excluded the possibility of a women's enfranchisement bill being passed through the State Duma. The electoral law for the new State Duma made no provision for female suffrage, and the liberal opposition, while championing universal men's suffrage, would not support extending the vote to women. When the February Revolution of 1917 overthrew the monarchy in Russia and gave women an opportunity once again, Russian suffragists did not fail to use it. Subsequently, in July 1917 women were included among electors and Russia became the first great European power to grant women the right to vote.

What else impressed me about this book was that Ruthchild shows Russian feminism as not a separate movement of privileged women seeking rights only for themselves. She does not reject radicals and revolutionaries as feminists. Drawing on an impressive amount of research, the author rightly stresses that during the high point of Russian feminist activity "feminism appealed to and was strengthened by women workers; ideas about women's rights had appealed across class, to peasants as well as workers" (p. 7). At the heart of the book is a concern to explore their role as agents of political history. I was particularly taken with the less explored topic dealing with the breadth and creativity of women's struggles in the period from 1909 until the outbreak of World War I.

Another key theme of the book is how *political* becomes *personal*. Ruthchild devotes many pages to biographical sketches of feminist leaders who laid the foundations for feminism at the end of the nineteenth century and to the women who edited and published feminist periodicals at the dawn of a new century and contributed to the development of gender consciousness. One of the reasons this book is so interesting and bound to be of importance is that it draws out the activities of these women in different periods of their struggle for equal rights.

This study relies on extensive sources of Russian feminists, both printed and archival, among which are archival materials, the periodical press, works by the movement's participants, and political parties' documents. Archives include those of various international institutes, but most of the material comes from Russian archives, having become available only recently, since the fall of the Soviet Union. Presenting feminist texts of the early twentieth century by itself deserves huge respect, especially when it is presented so beautifully. Other doubtless advantage of the book is that the author stresses the contribution made by Western and Russian scholars who added to our knowledge of women's roles in civil society in the late imperial period and Russian feminist history.

The book is interesting not only in terms of the content but also in terms of design – the photos reflecting the era, an informative chronology of women's movement in Russia and the illustrative card of the center of old Petersburg – the witness of revolutionary events and women's movement for equality.

In conclusion, *Equality & Revolution: Women's Rights in the Russian Empire, 1905-1917* is a clearly organized, highly readable, engaging and informative study. Rochelle Goldberg Ruthchild writes fluidly, vividly, accessibly and with passion for her topic, yet she retains academic rigor. This book provides an excellent resource for teaching Russian and women's history as well as for comparative

research projects on women's lives. It will be an asset to Russian political history courses and, additionally, will be really informative – even inspirational – for the general reader.

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