

Women in the Russian Revolution

The letters of Natalia Sedova to Leon Trotsky

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The 1917 Revolution in Russia not only raised millions of workers and peasants to historical life. It also advanced to the center stage of world events a whole layer of distinguished representatives of the socialist intelligentsia, bearers of the revolution's political consciousness, who had imbibed the international traditions of European social democracy and the best heritage of European culture in general.

Women played an important role in this milieu. Such vivid and versatile figures as Larissa Reissner, Alexandra Kollontai and Inessa Armand were best known, of course, but they were not exceptions. Behind these stood dozens and hundreds of other women who entered the history of the revolution and left their own indelible traces.

If we remember the classic phrase of Charles Fourier that the degree of society's progress may be measured by its attitude to women, then the Russian Revolution must be considered a great leap forward towards social liberation of that part of humanity that over the centuries was considered the most dependent and deprived.

Informed by knowledge rather than outdated prejudices, free revolutionary attitudes towards the family were inseparable from the revolution's political perspective. This morality had a real material existence and was expressed in personal relationships between the men and the women who made the revolution.

One of the best examples of this sort may be found in the relationship between Leon Trotsky and his wife Natalia Sedova (1882-1962). Unfortunately, we possess but a few written pieces of evidence; for almost 40 years they lived side by side and had no need of correspondence, and even less need of publicizing their personal relations. We therefore place great value on those few letters written by Natalia to Trotsky in the 1930's, during the period of their last exile, and which are preserved in the Trotsky Archive of the Houghton Library at Harvard University (## 5560-5578).

Natalia Sedova was Trotsky's second wife. He had two daughters, Nina and Zina, from his first marriage with Alexandra Sokolovskaia, a fellow revolutionary from the south of Russia. When fleeing abroad from his first czarist exile to Siberia, Trotsky was forced to abandon his first family. However he would continue to maintain very warm and friendly relations with his first wife and daughters.

Trotsky met Natalia Sedova in Paris in 1903 at an art exhibit. She was a supporter of Iskra in a circle of émigré youth, and he had just arrived from London as Iskra's representative to present a talk. Soon they moved in together. In 1906, they had their first son, Liova; then in 1908 in Vienna, their second son, Sergey was born.

In 1933, following some years of exile in Turkey, to which Stalin expelled them in 1929, they left their home in Prinkipo and moved to France. Natalia traveled to a health resort by herself and sent Trotsky a few letters. The other set of her letters dates from 1937, when they both lived in Mexico, to which they had been expelled from Norway.

It is natural that these few letters from Natalia to Trotsky are primarily of a personal nature. She starts them usually with the words "My sweet

lion cub" (Trotsky's first name Lev means "lion" in Russian—trans.), and the letters' contents normally avoid current politics or historical and social issues. Her husband's health and mental state concern Natalia, and she tells him of her own feelings and circumstances. But from time to time she does address more general issues or reminisce about their common past.

For example, while in Paris during a trip to her health resort, she regrets her youth, the time when they both lived in this city and enjoyed the freedom and charm of this world capital (the letter of September 3, 1933).

"I have changed tremendously," she writes, "a change between what was and what is now, between youth and old age. It is sad and frightening sometimes, and quietly satisfying that it is possible to see it again, and yet everything feels different; it is painfully impossible to sense past sensations. We shall wander around Paris together ... but is that even possible? This is just like reading old letters.... It is difficult to retrace old steps, or to read old letters."

In another letter, dated October 9, 1933, she refers to how difficult their life had turned out; that much had been lost (plans, possibilities—trans.), that they had to struggle through many difficulties: "This is the sort of life we lived together, such a fix, that we cannot return after these experiences to the former simplicity, to 'a single room'".

In a letter written on July 21-22, 1937 she remembers her work as an official of the Soviet museum directorate and says that she was ill-prepared for this kind of activity, that many mistakes were made and everything was difficult. When Trotsky had once congratulated her on a well prepared report, she was happy to have been able to prepare something worthwhile.

Here is how she described this: "Morning, July 22. I told you many times that my work in the museum section was an important task, very unusual for me, very different. My status put me under an obligation. I always had a feeling of inadequacy, that I am not doing my job correctly, that I need to do more, but to perform adequately I would have to spend even less time at home, devote my evenings to work. It was necessary to travel to the localities. Sometimes my colleagues, especially those from the provinces, told me as much. And you never quite understood my difficulties, my lack of preparation and my responsibility. I could not decide for a long time whether to accept this job. I discussed this with you, and you advised me to take a more modest position. But the Commissariat of Education insisted on my taking this position. My work resembled a preparation for an examination, examination lasting years. I remember that when I attempted to speak to you about my work, about the personal relations there, you tried to avoid the subject, sometimes politely, but often quite sharply. I remember that when you once read a letter I wrote to the Central Committee about professional specialists you said: 'This is well put'. This was my moment of triumph. I wanted to show you this letter for a while, but could not find a proper moment since you were busy at that time. We saw each other in snatches during lunch and dinner. I spent evenings at home hoping to see you, and I would worry

that my colleagues would reproach me for missing another evening conference. Usually you would arrive home after I had gone to bed. I remember your mornings, how energetically you rose from bed, dressed quickly, called for your automobile, and indirectly, by a glance or a gesture would encourage me and Seriozha, who always woke up and dressed in a depressed state of mind. How well I remember you, so sweet, so kind, how I wanted to embrace you. I hurried to catch up to you and leave for work together.”

In a letter written on September 12, 1933, Natalia reproaches Trotsky for working too hard, for exhausting himself. This was the period in which Trotsky was leading the struggle to draw the lessons of the catastrophic defeat of the German working class earlier that year and to turn the International Left Opposition to the perspective of building a new international revolutionary party, the Fourth International.

Natalia wrote: “... even a powerfully built person cannot bear for long the work you do, without a rest, without a break, it is unthinkable. My dear, you ask superhuman demands of yourself and think that old age is responsible for failures, which in reality are not failures at all. It is truly astonishing that you can bear on your shoulders so much! One cannot work at such a limit of inner physical ability, and do it day in and day out.”

In Mexico, Natalia longingly reminisces about their life on Prinkipo Island outside Istanbul. She suggests that they compensate for the absence of fishing and walks by the sea with some gardening.

In another letter, dated September, 29, 1933, she discusses the complicated character of Jeanne Molinier, Leon Sedov’s wife, and then remarks about her son: “I would say that generally speaking, Liova is not absent-minded. Remember him at Alma Ata or Constantinople? I would say that he was precise and had a good memory. But now he appears to be nervous and distracted. Optimism is quickly succeeded by depression. Now, he places high hopes for rapid successes of the Opposition.”

These few letters of Natalia Sedova speak for themselves. They constitute a living human document: of a mother and wife who sensitively reacts to the surroundings and often is hurt by the difficulties encountered by herself and those near and dear to her. At the same time, these letters show us the far-from-ordinary character of a courageous person who defends her own view in life and is unafraid when necessary to struggle against unfavorable external circumstances.

Unlike the dreary and terribly boring—albeit enormously voluminous—literature published by the Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union about the “moral character” of communists, these letters truly help us understand the moods and feelings of that extraordinary layer of socialist intelligentsia who carried the moral and intellectual weight of the Russian Revolution.

Trotsky deeply loved Natalia. He was tied to her not just by the years spent together. They were also united by their common struggle and the severe human trials to which they were subjected (it is only necessary to remember that both their sons were murdered by Stalin). In his “Testament”, which Trotsky wrote on February 27, 1940, six months before his assassination, he said of Natalia: “In addition to the happiness of being a fighter for the cause of socialism, fate gave me the happiness of being her husband. During the almost 40 years of our life together she remained an inexhaustible source of love, magnanimity, and tenderness” (*Writings of Leon Trotsky, 1939-40*, p. 158).

Vadim Rogovin, the author of a seven-volume study about the struggle against Stalinism within the USSR in the 1920s and 1930s, correctly noted that “world literature and biographies of great persons in history would very rarely find such inspired words of love and tenderness, which a person expecting death would utter about his partner in life, who had spent almost 40 years at his side.” (*Beginning means the End*, Moscow, p. 341).

There are authors, nevertheless, who by ignoring the facts, attempt to ascribe to Trotsky an arrogant attitude towards women, to paint him as

some sort of a patriarchal tyrant. Among such authors there is a British historian, Ian D. Thatcher, whose biography of Trotsky was recently published in London.

The level of this book is so low that it deserves attention only as an example of a catalogue of accusations and reproaches directed at one of the leaders of the Russian Revolution. We shall limit ourselves to an examination of how Thatcher tries to discredit Trotsky on a personal and ideological level.

Starting immediately from his own evaluation of the general approach of Bolshevism to the gender problem, Thatcher writes:

“Gender analyses of early Bolshevik poster campaigns, for instance, show that women were portrayed primarily in ‘backward’ or subservient roles. Perhaps this was to be expected from a government in which men occupied the leading positions. There seems to have been little recognition of how unattractive the Communist Party was to women, beginning with its youth organizations and continuing to the Central Committee. One can even claim that Trotsky was as dismissive of his female compatriots as any other egocentric man” (Ian D. Thatcher, *Trotsky*, 2003, p. 137).

To support this categorical statement Thatcher cites the diary of the Russian historian Yu. V. Gauthier, written in the spring of 1918, when Gauthier was a violent enemy of the Bolsheviks, supported the White armies and yearned for the return of the monarchy.

On April 20, 1918, Gauthier wrote that Natalia Sedova appeared at his place of work (he worked as a librarian at the Rumiantsev Museum) and requested the loan on behalf of her husband of the files of the newspaper *Kievskaiia Mysl* dating to 1915-16. He sent her away, referring to the need to obtain official loan permission. Natalia returned the next day bringing the requested official forms. Having provided her with the requested materials the monarchist historian gave vent to his frustrations in his diary. Describing her as a “person of short height with a Southern accent and a turned-up nose”, he wrote that “she arrived richly dressed but tastelessly, in a car with a soldier who stood to attention before her” (*ibid.*).

This is about it. A person blinded by his hatred for the Revolution expresses his hostility to Trotsky’s wife. This is a common example of historical detritus surrounding world events. Thatcher, however, manages to find here a proof of Trotsky’s “abuse of his wife as his personal secretary”.

“It may not be surprising,” continues Thatcher, “that Trotsky did not take his own advice to view reality through women’s eyes very seriously. Certainly he did not advocate a female candidate to replace Lenin; nor did he produce the promised fuller account of what he thought a woman’s perspective on the world might be” (*ibid.*, p. 138).

This absurd tirade is typical of Thatcher’s “biography”, which ought to be named “Why I hate Trotsky.” Trying as hard as he can to present Trotsky in a negative light, this British author grabs at any far-fetched examples, no matter whether they have any bearing on the theme, and constructs amalgams out of them; i.e., he combines a partial truth with inventions and falsifications to produce a “debunking” of Trotsky that has nothing whatsoever to do with real events.

Really, what is the worth of his assertion that Bolshevik leaders approached women negatively, “like sexism”? Here Thatcher simply exploits the fact that any revolution, while opening up the path to women’s liberation, cannot all at once negate all the barriers of the past, that the most advanced movement needs some time to fully develop its possibilities.

The accusation that Trotsky “exploited” his wife sounds just as absurd and false. True, Natalia often helped him and acted as his assistant, but she did this consciously and without any coercion. She understood that her husband played a central role in preparing the Russian Revolution and, from late 1920s on, a unique role in leading the international struggle for socialism and opposing the gangrene of Stalinism. Her role as Trotsky’s

assistant was a form of her personal participation in the cause of liberating the working class and millions of toiling women from the shackles of social oppression.

Only the mind of a petty bourgeois debauched by the prejudices of commodity fetishism could understand the relations between a husband and wife from the standpoint of the need of a “just” monetary reward for services rendered.

But the greatest of Thatcher’s falsehoods lies in the fact that he deliberately confuses the real historical perspective of the Russian Revolution and its subsequent tragic fate. He ascribes to the Revolution the ills that it resolutely sought to abolish, and which reemerged later only as its counterrevolutionary negation.

The 1917 socialist revolution turned the equality of women into a basic law, it gave women the rights to education, work and to participate in running society equally with men; in other words, it opened for women a path from kitchen and family slavery into the light of a truly human existence. Many years of Stalinist degeneration and a bestial bacchanal of bloody sacrifices during the Great Terror were required to stamp out this cultural tradition and to replace it with the Old Testament morality and state-sanctioned subservience of a wife to her husband that became the norm in the USSR.



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