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WHERE WOMEN ENJOY FREEDOM!

by

Tamara Rust

*A Graphic Account of the Rights and Freedom
enjoyed by Women in Soviet Russia*

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WHERE WOMEN ENJOY FREEDOM!

By Tamara Rust

THE present period of rationing and food shortage takes my mind back to the days of my childhood, the years following the Revolution of November, 1917, when the people of Russia suffered acutely from lack of food and even, in some districts, famine. Sometimes we went very short even after standing many hours in queues, but I cannot remember that mother grumbled very much or complained that there was inequality of sacrifice.

We all knew that all supplies available were equally distributed and that there was no profiteering racket going on behind the scenes. Neither were we enraged by the sight of luxury restaurants and hotels, frequented by a class of well-to-do people. That class was removed from power by the Revolution.

But those years of shortage have gone for ever, there is an abundance of food in the Soviet Union. But memories die hard and it was perhaps natural that, when the war broke out between the big capitalist states of Europe last September, quite a number of Moscow housewives were fearful of its effects and began to hoard food. But this was only a passing feeling. They were speedily reassured by Molotov, who told them that they need not fear the war in Europe and that if they hoarded food then it would only go bad on them.

Ration cards were abolished several years ago in the Soviet Union. Now that the Soviet people have firmly established their Socialist system there is no fear of famine again stalking the land. I wish I could say the same about other countries, but the war, devastation and loss of the harvests is causing acute suffering and misery and from the experiences of my early life

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I know that all the worry of bringing up families under the irksome conditions of rationing and food shortage falls on the shoulders of the women folk.

So when I am asked what is the difference between the life of women in the Soviet Union and those in capitalist countries I naturally answer that first and foremost there is certainty of the necessities of life, confidence in the future and no threat of starvation hanging over their heads. Perhaps I over-emphasise this somewhat, because of my own sufferings as a child, but I feel that the feeding of the people should be the first consideration of society.

The very newspapers which today print so many appeals against waste and for stringent rationing, were those which were so fond of contrasting Britain's plenty to Russia's shortage, and they persisted with these stories long after the food difficulties had been overcome and rationing abolished. When I first came to London and read some of these stories about food riots, etc., in Moscow I had many a hearty laugh and sometimes presented myself as the sole survivor of an exterminated race!

It must also be remembered that the shortage of food in the Soviet Union was not due to any failings of the Soviet system but to the conditions brought about by the last war and the years of intervention led by the Governments of Britain and France.

Happily, these conditions have now been overcome. The Soviet housewife has very few worries, as is shown by the fact that the consumption of such goods as butter, sugar and meat is going up rapidly. For example, in Moscow during the last year the sale of meat has increased by 50 per cent, butter by 30 per cent and sugar by 40 per cent. The increase in the population was by 5.2 per cent. No coupons required!

And it is not only the bare necessities that are plentiful. The shelves of the Soviet shops groan under a weight of good things. Poultry, hams, fruits, caviare, etc. Even champagne has become a worker's drink.

But it is not enough for food to be plentiful. It must be

cooked and served. In the Soviet Union women are proud and heartily glad that there is such a widespread system of communal dining rooms, restaurants and factory kitchens that they do not have to spend precious hours in cooking family meals, washing up and a dozen other household jobs. But I have had countless arguments about this with good housewives in this country, some of whom ask me in horrified tones if it is true that Soviet women are not allowed to cook at home.

They Prefer It

This attitude has always puzzled me a great deal because Soviet women regard this communal feeding as a great social achievement. This is one of the main reasons for the free life of Soviet women. It is all very well passing laws regarding the equality of women but it means nothing if access to the responsibilities of citizenship and the study of the arts and sciences is limited for the woman (not the man!) by the claims of domestic drudgery. I remember that Lenin was always strong on this point. Here are his actual words:

“You all know that, even with the fullest equality, women are still in an actual position of inferiority because all housework is thrust upon them. Most of this housework is highly unproductive, most barbarous and most arduous, and it is performed by women. This labour is extremely petty and contains nothing that would in the slightest degree facilitate the development of women.”

Large numbers of Soviet women still do some cooking at home but they greatly prefer to use the communal centres because this means good food at cheap prices and no shopping and household worries. Many of the restaurants, including those in the factories, are the last word in attractiveness and are real centres of social life.

Soviet women certainly do not despise the art of cooking. Soviet chefs are carefully trained and honoured for their services to society. But it is not the function of women in society to be a

cook to a male. That is condemning her to domestic drudgery. Life can be organised in a different way.

I must confess that when I first came to England I could not cook. I received, however, much good advice on how to begin and was repeatedly reminded of the proverb (I had never heard it before) that the way to a man's heart is through his stomach. My inability to cook was not due to flightiness on my part; at school we received hot meals, in the factory there was a splendid canteen and when the factory sent me to the university I obtained my meals in the student's home.

Living in Lancashire I got to admire the tireless energy and cleanliness of the women who cooked without end, scrubbed the doorsteps, polished the knocker and did their own washing. Do the women of Russia like their houses to be clean and spotless, they would ask me. Sure we do, I would answer, but we aim to reduce it to a minimum and to employ all kinds of labour-saving devices. Also our housewives do not omit to take part in public affairs. They sit on the housing committee of the estate or block of flats, run kindergartens, attend classes, etc.

Housewives Confer

A few years ago there took place the first congress of Soviet housewives, attended by a thousand delegates. A number of them were the wives of worker technicians and architects who had gone with their husbands to the distant regions of the vast Soviet Union which before the revolution were wildernesses and where now new towns, factories and railway stations are growing with incredible speed.

These women had some marvellous stories to tell. They had become first class organisers, setting up schools and libraries for adults, canteens and clubs, planning beautiful gardens around the factories, improving living conditions and social life. Very often, learning a skilled trade themselves. Real pioneers.

The mind of woman, held in chains for centuries, given a vision limited to child-bearing and housework in capitalist society, has been freed by the Soviet Power. Any woman can enter industry or agriculture with the opportunity of rising to high executive posts and with the knowledge that these aspirations can be made to harmonise with the claims of family life. Soviet women become engineers, doctors, scientists, statesmen and diplomats. The fame of the Soviet airwomen is known throughout the world.

In the Soviet Union today there are:

100,000 women engineers and technicians;

70,000 women doctors;

1,800 women station-masters and assistant masters.

Women receive equal pay for equal work, annual holidays with pay and free places in the rest homes and sanatoriums. Working women receive a maternity leave of 35 days before childbirth and 28 days after. Nursing mothers are given 30 minutes time off for feeding their infants, every three and a half hours.

In the countryside a most remarkable change has taken place. In Tsarist days a common saying in the village was "a chicken is not a bird and a woman is not a human being." Today women are in the forefront, about 19,000,000 of them work in the collective and state farms, many occupying leading positions and doing complicated and skilled work.

It would, however, be quite wrong to believe that the majority of the Soviet women are employed. In the Soviet Union workers and office employees total over 28 million, and of these only 40.5 per cent are women. It is, of course, true that the number of women in industry is on the increase and that they are being trained more and more for skilled jobs and executive posts.

Women play an important part in the Soviet public health system. The People's Commissariat of Public Health alone employs 58,978 women physicians. This does not include the

large number of women physicians employed by other medical institutions. The head doctors of 708 Soviet hospitals are women, and among the directors and assistant directors of medical research and curative institutes are 196 women. Fifteen women occupy the posts of People's Commissars or Assistant People's Commissars of Health in various republics of the Soviet Union.

Like other countries we have many talented and beautiful actresses but unlike other countries our actresses do not regard politics as a bore or a nuisance. I will quote you the words of Tarasova, a well-known actress of the Moscow Art Theatre, who is an active member of her district Soviet. "I am part of Soviet life," says Tarasova, "and have developed as an actress through these twenty years of Soviet Power. The two years I spent preparing for the part of Anna Karenina were the most interesting years of my life. It was difficult to get the realism of that society which no longer exists."

Soviet women are prepared to tackle any jobs, and in these days when the war ravages Europe and threatens the frontiers of Socialism, they are not afraid to tackle military jobs. There are, of course, women's auxiliary units in Britain, but I doubt if women are given the same opportunities and responsibilities in military affairs. Some examples are very interesting.

One girl who had been studying chemistry was transferred to a military academy in order to study the application of chemistry for protection against gas warfare. As a student of the military academy she was enrolled in the Red Army and upon her graduation was awarded the degree of engineer.

Later she was elected as a delegate to the All-Union Conference of Red Army Commanders' Wives. Can you imagine such a conference being held in Britain?

Then there is the story of a young woman chauffeur from Leningrad who offered her services as a lorry driver when the Finnish war broke out. She worked actually at the front and when sent to remove telephone wires came under fire that

wounded her two colleagues. She then took charge and became affectionately known as the "commander."

There were, naturally, a large number of Red Army nurses with the troops in Finland and some of them were awarded the Order of the Red Banner for their gallant conduct. The Red Air Force also includes women pilots, many of whom were ordinary village women but a few years ago.

But do not think that these women are odd creatures, who have forgotten their sex. They are fond of their husbands and children, like good clothes and make-up judiciously applied. Many are the stories told of the Red Army nurses in Finland who insisted on the use of the mirror, comb, powder case and lipstick even under shell fire!

Coming from a country where women are moving forward so splendidly it was something of a shock to me, when canvassing at election times, to receive the stock answer, "I don't bother with politics" or to be told "I'll tell *him* when he comes home." Some of the Lancashire women who gave me this type of answer are skilled cotton workers and splendid housewives. They turn out the finest cloth in the world but cannot afford to buy it, work in ramshackle sheds and often earn less than public assistance relief. Surely this is a reason for taking an interest in politics and not leaving it to *him*?

I also worked in a cotton mill, in Moscow, where the manager was a young woman. One old worker, who had been there 30 years and was somewhat politically backward used to grumble about being ordered around by a bit of skirt, but he got over that in time. It was a large factory, employing 7,000 workers, who were provided with a club, restaurant, kindergarten and factory hospital. The women there took a very deep interest in politics.

Women In Industry

As an example of the steady progress women are making in Soviet industry let me cite the Kirov engineering factory in

Leningrad where the women are doing highly skilled jobs and have mastered no less than 280 different skilled processes which were formerly monopolised by men. Large numbers of women are entering the engineering trades in Britain but their rates are lower than those of men and although some training is provided there does not seem to be much opportunity to acquire skill. Also, the attitude of the men cannot be very helpful as the largest engineering union has, up to now, refused to admit women to membership.

In the actual running of the Soviet Union women are taking increasing responsibility. The country is governed by a network of local soviets or elected councils, on which there are no less than 422,279 women members. Just imagine, over 400,000 women councillors. They certainly bother about politics.

In the Soviet Parliament women are not rarities as at Westminster; there are 189 of them. I shall introduce you to one of them, P. Pichugina, who has written a pamphlet about Soviet women and tells her own story as follows:

"I entered a collective farm in 1929, but after a short time I left for Moscow to join my husband. This was in 1930. Within a year I began to work on the construction of the new ball-bearing plant in Moscow as a common labourer. I studied hard and diligently, and soon became a skilled worker. In 1932, after the plant was completed, I was made foreman in the ball-bearing assembly shop. Within two years the workers of our factory had elected me as their deputy to the Moscow Soviet. I still continued to work in the factory. The Soviet Government decorated me with the Order of the Red Banner of Labour for distinguished service at work.

"At the beginning of 1937 the voters of my district, that is, the district where our factory is located, elected me chairman of the District Soviet. Shortly after, the people imposed a further trust on me and elected me as a Member of the Supreme Soviet of the U.S.S.R. I was nominated simultaneously by four

factories. But recently an unskilled working woman, I now take an active part in administering the country.

"The work of a chairman of a District Soviet is no easy task. One must be a builder, an architect, an executive and a financier. The Budget of our District Soviet amounts to practically 37 million roubles. The care and laying out of parks and greens, garbage disposal and street cleaning, road building, the local industries, public baths and laundries and a host of other public works all come under the immediate jurisdiction of the District Soviet. In addition to my duties as chairman, I supervise the work of the District Planning Department, the Department of Public Education, under which there are 46 schools, and the District Board of Health.

"Nor am I the only woman in the U.S.S.R. to fill such a post. The Soviet Union has many such women today—and will have still more."

One of the most frequent questions put to me is: why do women in your country go to work, especially seeing that there is no unemployment? I have tried to puzzle out the reasoning behind this question which seems so strange to me. It is apparently based on the assumption that "woman's place is in the home" and that women should only work if the husband is unemployed. There is also a feeling that women are not able to look after the home and the family if they go out to work.

Soviet women hold a quite different point of view. Do not think that they are indifferent to the claims of the family. On the contrary they believe in doing everything possible to strengthen family ties and in this they are assisted by the Soviet Government which grants big allowances to the mothers of large families.

Soviet Marriages

To the Soviet woman marriage is not a career, the opportunity of getting a nice home. I do not know any of my friends in Moscow who look upon their work as *temporary*, to be given

up when marriage takes place. And I do not think that there are any Soviet mothers who, when thinking of their daughters' future, include the prospect of finding a "nice young man" who can relieve the girl of the necessity of working.

I would like to say a few words about the attitude of the average Soviet girl to marriage.

From our very first days at school we sit side by side with boys, we work in the same factories and shops, we are members of the same unions and sports clubs. (Over half a million young women have passed athletic tests.) We study in the same high schools, and the same opportunities are open to us in life as to the boys.

Of course, we fall in love, go courting and get married like other young people all over the world. The economic factor in our Soviet marriages is the security which the Socialist system provides for women as well as men.

The basis of marriage in the Soviet Union is mutual affection and common interests, we enter marriage as equal partners. It does not mean that the woman completely changes her life, even when she becomes a mother. She usually carries on her work, when a suitable period has passed after childbirth; and there is a widespread network of crèches, kindergartens and nursery schools where the baby can be cared for while the mother is at work.

The fact that married women are not dependent on their husbands and that domestic affairs and worries do not dominate their lives means that they have many other common interests which help to make a full and happy married life. I think that there are less unhappy marriages in the Soviet Union than in any other country.

Marriages may be dissolved without extensive formalities but it would be a mistake to conclude from this that divorce is widespread and marriages frivolously entered into and subject to easy dissolution. On the contrary, the marriage institution has become more dignified, and divorce not the subject of barter

and legal haggling, but a serious step undertaken by mutual agreement or at the desire of either of the parties. During recent years the number of registered divorces in Moscow has heavily declined.

The State takes care that, in the event of divorce, the children shall be provided for by the parents, whether the marriage has been registered or not. There is no such thing as an "illegitimate" child in the Soviet Union. Usually, the mother has the right to keep the child but the father has to contribute towards the upkeep.

Laws affecting divorce and abortion have been the subject of widespread discussion during recent years, in the Press and the factories. The cost of a divorce rises very steeply after the first. This is one of the amendments to the original law of 1917.

Abortions are now prohibited except in cases where pregnancy would endanger the life or health of the woman or where there is danger of the child inheriting disease. This decree helps to strengthen the family and is an obstacle to any frivolous attitude towards parental obligations; it saves women from the bad physical effects of abortions and generally helps to still further strengthen the position of mother and child in society.

Mother And Child

Between the mother and the child there exist close bonds of affection. It would be a mistake to imagine that parental affection has been replaced by State care, rather is it the case that both fortify one another. Although there are so many nurseries and kindergartens, the greater part of the child's time is spent at home. Parents carefully discuss all the problems connected with the bringing up of a family, not only in the privacy of their own homes, but also at parents' meetings, in the trade unions and factories. Being a good parent is considered as vital as being a good worker in Socialist production.

There is no question that the widespread system of children's nurseries, kindergartens and children's health centres greatly contributes to the happiness of married life and safeguards the health of children and mothers. As such a large number of men have now been called up for service in the Red Army these services have now been increased in order to cater for their children and to ease the strain on the mothers.

These health centres provide an all-round medical service for children and expectant mothers. They despatch trained nurses and doctors to visit the mothers and children at home. Attached to them are special diet kitchens which issue, free of charge, specially prepared food for the children, including products containing vitamins, and even breast milk.

Seasonal or summer nurseries accommodate over three million children. This type of nursery is very valuable to the women collective farmers who can leave the children there with the knowledge that the kiddies are under the constant care of trained instructors and doctors. During this year accommodation will be extended so as to provide for four million children. Soviet law provides that nursery accommodation shall be free or charged at a nominal rate.

The famous Stalin Constitution of the U.S.S.R., which records all that has been achieved by the Soviet people since the great Socialist Revolution of 1917, registers the full rights of women and still further encourages their political understanding and activity. The Constitution declares that:

"Women in the U.S.S.R. are accorded equal rights with men in all spheres of economic, state, cultural, social and political life.

"The possibility of exercising these rights is ensured to women by granting them an equal right with men to work, payment for work, rest and leisure, social insurance and education, and by state protection of the interests of mother and child, pre-maternity and maternity leave with full pay, and the provision of a wide network of maternity homes, nurseries and kindergartens.

"Women have the right to elect and be elected on equal terms with men."

The education of women and the drawing of them into active political life has been a long and difficult process, which could not be achieved by the waving of a magic wand. The Soviet Union stretches across one-sixth of the earth's surface, embracing diverse nationalities of varying stages of cultural development. It was not sufficient to decree new laws, conditions had to be changed and the outlook of both men and women had to be altered.

Even after the Revolution male workers and peasants continued to behave as the "master" towards the women, who, in their turn, were often slow to assert their rights. This was shown, for example, by the fact that in 1926 only 28 per cent of the women took part in the elections to the village soviets, while the participation of women in the city soviets was but 43 per cent. Matters are entirely different today. In the last elections to the Soviet Parliament nearly every woman elector took part; a marvellous demonstration of their mass awakening and love of the Soviet Union which has made possible their new life.

Changes In The East

In the Eastern parts of the former Tsarist Empire women were sold into marriage at the age of 14 and often exchanged for a dozen sheep. At the age of 12 girls were compelled to wear a thick veil, called the "tchadra," and it was a mortal sin to unveil your face in the presence of a male stranger.

My mother's family was Georgian, and my maternal grandmother always seemed to me to be a living reminder of those dark days and the miseries of village life. From her youngest days she had been tied to the fields, firstly for her parents and then for her husband. She never had enough to eat and gave birth to children under conditions unfit for cattle. Everybody

was the boss; husband, tax collector, priest and constable. Everybody had to be listened to and obeyed. She lived and died illiterate, believing up to her last days that the world ended behind the mountains which surrounded the village, that railways were a device of "Shaitan" (the devil), and that she would go straight to hell for the sins committed by my mother who had cast off superstition and had become a free Soviet woman.

Ages of slavery and deeply ingrained superstition had left its mark on both the men and the women of these regions, with the result that many of the new decrees met with bitter opposition. Special measures were taken by the Soviet Government to facilitate the liberation of women in such backward regions. Hundreds of women organisers arrived to explain, to educate, to organise schools and discussion circles. Special homes had to be organised for women, sometimes married and with children, who, as a result of their fight for liberation, found life at home unbearable and had to escape from their parents and husbands.

Miracles have been performed in these Eastern villages. Socialism, culture and collectivisation has triumphed. The women of the villages, like those of the towns, have become capable managers and administrators. Going home to our village during holidays, now composed of well built houses, schools and clubs, we of the younger generation would gather round one of the old grannies and listen with anger and pain to her stories of the dark past, with the thought that only the Revolution saved us from a similar life.

N. K. Krupskaya, Lenin's wife, has told in one of her speeches, how moved Lenin was by the progress of this work amongst the women of the national minorities.

"The socialist revolution awakened not only the Russian working women," said Krupskaya, "but also the women of the national minorities, among whom the survivals of the old were still more deeply ingrained. Lenin paid particular attention to the matter of involving in socialist work the women of the national minorities, who were especially oppressed.

"Whenever I hear women comrades from Central Asia or the North Caucasus speak at meetings I cannot help recalling one fact. Some time during the session of the Second Congress of the Communist International, a women's conference was called to which women from Uzbekistan, Turkmenia and other distant regions came. They had taken off their veils, but if a man happened to come into their dormitories they would fling themselves flat on the beds to hide their faces—they were still ruled by old custom.

"But once when Lenin and I were going from the House of Trade Unions to the Kremlin we encountered several of these delegates from the national minorities. At the sight of Lenin they became greatly agitated. One of the women came up and embraced him. They began to speak, each in her own language, and then burst into tears. Lenin was greatly moved himself. When we went on he said, 'The very depths have risen: now the victory of Socialism in our country is assured.'"

Lenin and Stalin always taught the downtrodden people of the Tsarist Empire that they must build a new society by taking matters into their own hands. And they addressed themselves particularly to the women, whose immense powers lay crushed under the double yoke of capitalism and sex inequality. How happy we are to say that the mighty efforts of these great leaders have triumphed across one-sixth of the world.

Where there was once ignorance and apathy there is now shining intelligence and vigour. Soviet women conquer in all spheres of human knowledge and endeavour. The light of knowledge and freedom has replaced the darkness of oppression and superstition.

And nowhere do we see this with greater clarity and force than in that noble spirit of internationalism and passionate desire for peace which the women of the Soviet Union express during these dark days which now afflict humanity.

Out of the horror and devastation of the last war the Soviet women fought steadfastly to build anew, to help in the con-

struction of a brave new world, not only to establish plenty, security and happiness across the territory of the Soviet Union where the workers had triumphed, but also to preserve the peace of the world.

Feeling themselves as the advanced detachment of the world army of women, the women of the Soviet Union have always shown the deepest possible sympathy for the struggle of the people for peace and progress. To them the women of China and Spain did not cry in vain. The Soviet women who had fought against the White Guards and had suffered the tortures of the blockade, who had lost their men-folk in the struggle for the freedom which the Soviet people now enjoy, acted with great vigour in support of the heroines of China and Spain who fought so valiantly in defence of their independence and liberty.


In the towns, villages and factories they collected money, food and clothes for the people of the countries that had fallen victim to aggression. They expressed their solidarity at innumerable meetings.

And in these dark days when war and famine stalk the world, when the women of all lands fear for their sons and husbands, the women of the Soviet Union seek to help in the noble task of bringing peace to a troubled world. It is no wonder that very many people turn today to the country of the hammer and sickle, whose policy of Peace and Socialism is an inspiration to the war-weary people of all countries.

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