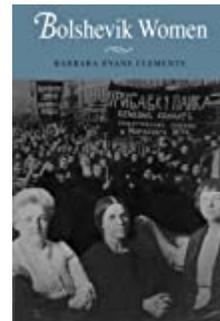




**Barbara Evans Clements.** *Bolshevik Women*. New York and Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1997. xiv + 338 pp. \$63.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-521-59920-7; \$95.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-45403-2.



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## A Social History of Bolshevik Women

Barbara Evans Clements has written an imaginative and well-researched history of the first two generations of Bolshevik women. Her monograph is pathbreaking in its subject and approach, as well as its efforts to present a representative portrait of these women, to integrate their stories into Soviet history, to cross over the daunting, historiographical barrier of 1917, and to create a sympathetic, yet even-handed history of these women's lives.

Surprisingly, though the first historical studies of Russian women appeared over two decades ago, other than Beate Fieseler's recent book, very little has been written about Bolshevik women ("*bolshevichki*").[1] Clements' book is the first comprehensive history of their experiences that takes the reader from the tsarist underground, through the revolution, civil war, and into Soviet period. In this reviewer's opinion, it is the most important book on the *bolshevichki* to appear to date.[2]

Initially planned as a set of short biographical sketches of four important *bolshevichki* – Inessa Armand, Evgeniia Bosh, Konkordia Samoilova and Elena Stasova – Clements' project eventually blossomed into a general study of the women who joined the Bolshevik party

up to the end of the civil war. By meticulously mining numerous newspapers, periodicals, published document collections, memoirs, and recently available archival documents, Clements was able to construct a database containing the personal information on 545 *bolshevichki*, whom she divides into two generations: 318 who joined the party prior to 1917 and 227 who joined during the civil war. Through judicious and sober use of this database, interwoven with the biographies of her four initial subjects, one more prominent *bolshevichka*, Rozaliia Zemliachka, and two more rank and file women, Alexandra Artiukhina and Klavdiia Nikolaeva, Clements has managed to paint a representative, collective portrait of the *bolshevichki*.

While recognizing that the women of the first generation became *bolshevichki* for various reasons, Clements finds common motivations in their origins, childhood and adolescent experiences. Growing up in "families sympathetic to political activism," and longing to escape conventional domesticity, these young, mostly middle and upper-class women were pulled into the revolutionary underground circles of tsarist Russia. The catalytic

event was often a moment of great social unrest, as in 1905 or 1912: “As demonstrators filled the streets, the young women who would be *bolshevichki* slipped away with their comrades into the parallel universe of the revolutionary movement” (p. 53). The women of this first generation were imbued with a great desire to self-sacrifice; they were in general well-educated (more so than their male counterparts), ambitious and assertive, though they preferred the technical tasks of daily underground work (*tekhnika*) at home, to the factional infighting and theoretical debates of the male leadership abroad. Strong and steeled personalities, such as Stasova, Zemliachka, Samoilova and Bosh, declared their defining characteristic to be “*tverdost*” (hardness or toughness); they were “unsentimental, determined, efficient, and industrious” (p. 60).

Like the *bolshevichki* of the first generation, those of the second, who joined from 1917-1921, were mostly of Russian, Ukrainian or Jewish ethnicity, were well-educated, and joined when quite young – the median age for both groups was twenty (p. 164). But the new *bolshevichki* were different in important ways: though still including a large number from the middling social ranks, the second generation was composed of more working-class and fewer noble women (though 3.5 percent still came from the latter group). While noting that the two generations were similarly inspired to join the party, Clements stresses that they became politicized under entirely different conditions: the new generation cut their political teeth not in the relatively egalitarian Bolshevik underground, but in the increasingly hierarchical, disciplined, power-hungry party of the civil war: “The new *Bolshevichki* learned not just hardness, although that was still highly prized, but also obedience to their superiors and submission to the will of the ‘great stern family’” (p. 171).

Thus, Clements’ collective portrait is not static, but evolves as the book moves through the most tumultuous period in which these women lived and worked. The reader is able to follow the effects of these great changes on their lives through the wealth of statistical tables included, but more so through Clements’ sympathetic descriptions of some of the older *bolshevichki*’s lives. The interweaving of these biographies with the statistical findings makes the text more readable and elegant.

Yet, Clements takes pains to present an even-handed treatment of the *bolshevichki*. As becomes particularly clear in her discussion of their behavior during the civil war and the purges of the late 1930s, this book is

no apologia. As members (though not leaders) of the new “ruling class,” the *bolshevichki* shared responsibility not only for its achievements, but its excesses. Rozaliia Zemliachka, “the hardest of the hard *Bolshevichki*,” who had taken an active and leading part in “cleansing” the Crimea of White sympathizers during the civil war, “flourished” during the purges. Working closely with the NKVD, Zemliachka zealously investigated and reported on any and all infractions, which might have helped uncover possible “enemies of the people.”

Sharing the “unhealthy Manicheism that prevailed among party leaders close to Stalin,” Zemliachka became a firm “believer in the plots alleged to be menacing the party” and “an adroit participant in destroying them.” By 1940 she was the only woman near the top of Stalin’s government. Clements also describes the tragic end of those *bolshevichki* purged in the late 1930s, but points out that most “managed to escape arrest during the Purges. Some, especially from the civil war generation, prospered during the late 1930s for they received promotions into the many vacancies the purges created. Many *bolshevichki*, perhaps the majority, hunkered down while the storm passed over them” (pp. 285-287).

Clements carries this balanced approach into the post-WWII period, in which she describes the ways that the now aging *bolshevichki* struggled to come to terms with the regime’s various atrocities, and their resistance to, participation in, or ignorance of them. Their dilemma is most poignantly expressed through Clements’ description of Elena Stasova’s experience at the Twentieth Party Congress (February 1956) and her reactions to Nikita Khrushchev’s Secret Speech. Reduced to tears by these revelations, Stasova went immediately home to bed, and never returned to the congress. To the Italian communist leader, Vittorio Vidali, at her bedside, she bitterly declared, “now everybody is being rehabilitated, but now they are dead!” (p. 309).

And yet, even Stasova recovered and reconciled herself to the regime’s excesses. “She decided that it was not wise to publicize the party’s sins because she believed that knowing the horrors of the Stalin era would disillusion young people about communism” (p. 311). Because so few left such full records of their later lives, we will probably never know how many reconciled themselves similarly, but as Clements suggests, “the only spiritual recourse such women had, if they were to remain communists, was to cling to their faith that the regime they had built would ultimately prove itself by making the lives of the people better” (p. 312). All would agree that they

were eventually proven wrong, but none of these women lived long enough to witness their regimes ignoble downfall.

Of course, there are some problems with this book. At times, this reviewer found Clements' use of the word "feminist" to describe various *bolshevichki* questionable, in particular because they did not (could not have) describe themselves with this term. One also might wonder whether Clements' biographical portraits could have included a few more rank and file women, who never rose to positions of great prominence. The two she describes, Artiukhina and Nikolaeva, rose to become successive heads of the Department for Work among Women (Zhenotdel) in the 1920s. Including less prominent *bolshevichki* would have made her general portrait more representative, particularly of the civil war generation. But these are really minor quibbles in a generally well-conceived and executed project.

Finally, it is worth noting that Clements submits no overall conclusions. Her study is a presentation of findings and interesting comparisons, interwoven with well-crafted, biographical narratives of Clements' leading figures. The book concludes with a poignant description of the death of the stalwart Stasova. Some will consider this an appropriate ending, others may object to the lack of summation. But this reviewer sees in this, as throughout this well-written monograph, an honest, open-ended attempt to explore a new topic, admitting of the complexity and diversity of these women's stories. Often, worthwhile conclusions must await further research and

monographs, hopefully, of the quality and seriousness that Clements has provided in this fine piece of social history.

#### Notes

[1]. Beate Fieseler, *Frauen auf dem Weg in die russische Sozialdemokratie, 1890-1917: eine kollektive Biographie*, (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1995). As her title suggests, Fieseler carries her collective biography only up to 1917. Some of Fieseler's findings were presented in: Beate Fieseler, "The Making of Russian Female Social Democrats, 1890-1917," *International Review of Social History*, XXXIV (1989), pp. 193-226.

[2]. Other studies of the subject include: Richard Stites, *The women's Liberation Movement in Russia: Feminism, Nihilism, and Bolshevism, 1860-1930*, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1978), pp. 317-421; Mark Chapin Scott, "Her Brothers Keeper: The Evolution of Women Bolsheviks," (Ph.D. diss., University of Kansas, 1980); Barbara Evans Clements, "The Enduring Kinship of the Baba and the Bolshevik Woman," *Soviet Union* 12 (1985), pp. 161-84. Since Clements book was published another closely-related study has appeared: Jane McDermid and Anna Hillyar, *Midwives of the Revolution: Female Bolsheviks and Women Workers in 1917*, (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1999).

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