Rochelle Goldberg Ruthchild

*Equality and Revolution* sets the struggle for female suffrage in Russia within the context of the revolutionary upheavals of the early twentieth century. Drawing upon periodical literature, reports from women's congresses, and personal papers of participants, among other archival and published documents, Rochelle Ruthchild reconstructs the attitudes and debates that shaped the Russian women’s suffrage movement leading up to the historic decision of the Provisional Government to award women the vote in July 1917. She stresses both the uniqueness of the Russian situation and the ways that the Russian women’s suffrage movement drew upon and contributed to broader international efforts at the time. In the process, she profiles the major figures involved in the movement, providing detailed accounts of the lives and efforts of these otherwise unknown women. In doing so, Ruthchild challenges assumptions about the relationship between socialists and feminists, the nature of reform and revolution, and the spread of democracy in Russia.

Noting the relatively short period between the first calls for female suffrage in 1905 and its achievement in 1917, Ruthchild presents Russia as a different model for obtaining women’s rights. The call for women’s suffrage, she argues, was one element of the broader struggle for civil and political rights in Russia embodied in the revolutionary movement, and an important dimension of the political discourse throughout the Russian empire in the early twentieth century. Although it is difficult to pinpoint exactly why the Russian women’s suffrage movement succeeded sooner than its counterparts in other Western countries, Ruthchild suggests that this was in part due to the rapid “evolution of civil society and voluntary associations in the development of the opposition to the autocratic state ... [as] progressive society changed and expanded its definition of civil rights and citizenship.” (p. 241) She also emphasizes that the Russian example shows democracy is not a necessary prerequisite for the emergence of female suffrage movements, since in Russia the struggle for women's political rights developed alongside efforts to redefine the meaning of citizenship in the modern state. While the Russian suffragists embarked on an accelerated trajectory in their quest for rights, some elements of the suffrage movement paralleled developments in the West. For instance, most suffragist women came to embrace the cause through their work in charitable institutions and philanthropic societies, making use of the limited avenues open to them under the tsarist regime to raise awareness of the plight of women. In addition, Russian
feminists, like many of their Western counterparts, placed a naïve faith in the ability of the vote to lead directly to social transformation, as Ruthchild notes in her discussion of prostitution reform efforts.

Ruthchild highlights the central role that feminists played in the struggle for Russian women’s suffrage. While socialists were the first to call for women’s right to vote, Russian feminists formed the earliest political parties and organizations dedicated to the cause in the aftermath of the 1905 Revolution. Ruthchild traces the evolution of these feminist political parties, the successes they obtained in convincing other groups to include women’s suffrage in their party platforms, and their efforts to lobby Duma members to pass suffrage legislation. She finds that by the eve of World War I there was a broad consensus within Russian politics in favor of women’s right to vote, even if the movement lacked active support among leading politicians. She even notes that the Third Duma, often considered the most conservative, actually passed a number of measures that reformed and improved women’s social, economic, and political position, although these laws were never enacted by the tsar. Ruthchild also argues that the women’s suffrage movement was not restricted to elite women; the women who participated in feminist organizations represented a broad cross-section of socioeconomic levels and political persuasions. In demonstrating the widespread appeal of these groups to women, Ruthchild challenges the label “bourgeois” that has been applied to Russian feminists. She suggests that Aleksandra Kollontai, the leading Bolshevik “feminist,” used the term “bourgeois” as a way to emphasize her own socialist credentials and to discredit feminists who were having some success in appealing to working women and thus represented a threat to socialist organizations. Indeed, the Bolshevik inability to understand the attraction of the suffrage movement to women workers indicates a possible failure in the socialists’ efforts to expand their base of support.

Ruthchild concludes that the success of the Russian suffrage movement was a result not only of the revolutionary upheavals, but also of the activism and agency of the feminists themselves. Through their continued efforts, despite opposition, repression, and lack of resources, these women managed to raise awareness of their cause and win widespread acceptance for the principle of women’s suffrage. Indeed, Ruthchild notes that granting the vote to women remains one of the few enduring legacies of the Provisional Government. Overall, this work provides a detailed portrait of both the Russian women’s suffrage movement and the women involved in it. Although Ruthchild could have paid more attention to the impact of World War I on the movement and the activities feminist women engaged in during the war, the volume adds an important dimension to our understanding of the process of revolutionary transformation. While sometimes the biographies of the women involved are