The February Revolution of 1917 in Russia was sparked on International Women’s Day by mass demonstrations of women in Petrograd who opposed the deprivations resulting from Russia’s involvement in the First World War. A massive strike movement, of which women formed the militant leading edge, swept the old regime from power. The appearance of large numbers of Russian women in radical street demonstrations, and the prominent role played by women in initiating the events which led to the overthrow of the autocracy, were unprecedented in Russian history. Since the war had led to the increased employment of women in the Russian labor force, by 1917 one-third of Petrograd’s factory workers were women; in the textile-producing areas of the central industrial region, 50 percent or more of the work force in many of the factories was composed of women.

Following the February demonstrations, observers of many political tendencies were quick to note new possibilities for organizing women politically. Both the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks announced their intention to begin publication of special working women’s newspapers (Rabotnitsa—the Bolshevik paper and Golos rabotnitsy—the Menshevik paper). The Socialist Revolutionaries proposed the formation of a “union of women’s democratic organizations,” which would unite trade-union and party organizations under the slogan of a democratic republic. The liberal “League for the Equal Rights of Women” moved quickly to organize a mass demonstration calling for electoral rights for women.

In the months after the February Revolution, a small number of Bolshevik women in Petrograd and Moscow took the initiative in beginning and organizing the Party’s work among women: among them were A. M. Kollontai, Inessa Armand, N. K. Krupskaia, K. I. Nikolaeva, V. Slutskaja, Roza Kovnator, L. N. Stal’t, P. F. Kudelli, and A. I. Ul’ianova (Lenin’s sister). Most of these women had been involved prior to 1917 in urging the Bolshevik Party to take an interest in organizing women, and many of them had been associated with the publication of

2. Pravda [hereafter P], 9 March 1917; Rabochaia gazeta, 15 April 1917; Delo naroda, 21 March and 29 March 1917. (In this paper all dates prior to October, 1917, are given Old Style, unless otherwise indicated.)
the journal Rabotnitsa for a brief period in 1914. All of them (except Slutskaiia, who was killed in 1917) later became leaders of the Bolshevik Women’s Department (Zhenotdel).³

The Bolshevik women based their political analysis of the “woman question” on accepted Marxist theory (Engels, Bebel) and on the work of native Russian Marxists, such as Kollontai and Krupskaia, whose writings on the position of women in Russia had become an accepted part of Bolshevik political literature by 1917. The Bolshevik approach toward women stressed that women workers, as a proletariat of “recent levy,” were the most culturally and politically backward sector of the working class in Russia, and that, through their passivity in the face of oppression, women had acted as a brake on the development of the working-class movement. Bolshevik literature also dealt extensively with the special position of women as the most oppressed sector of the exploited masses as a whole, and of the working class in particular. Women workers were subject to the dual oppression of household drudgery and wage slavery; they were discriminated against on the job, in the family, and in terms of social and political rights. There were thus theoretically two rationales for a special Party approach toward women. On the one hand the Bolsheviks felt that the political backwardness of women posed a threat to the revolutionary movement; on the other hand they recognized that a special effort would be necessary to raise women from their doubly-oppressed status.⁴

In 1917 the Bolsheviks were faced with the need to compete for the allegiance of women workers with other political tendencies of the left and with newly developing feminist organizations. In response, the Bolsheviks reaffirmed their traditional anti-feminist position, stressing that the interests of women workers were identical with those of the proletariat as a whole and quite distinct from the interests of the female “bourgeois equal-righters.” The Bolsheviks argued that bourgeois feminism was an attempt to obscure the class interests of women workers by proposing that all women had common interests over and above their interests as members of a particular class; bourgeois feminism would serve to co-opt women workers by directing their energies into a movement which concentrated only on political rights for women. The Bolsheviks’ opposition to the “equal-righters” was intensified by the feminists’ support for Russia’s war effort.⁵

³ For a survey of the history of the journal Rabotnitsa [hereafter R] and brief biographical sketches of the women involved in its publication, see V. Vavilina, ed., Rabotnitsa, vsegda s vami (Moscow: Izd. “Pravda,” 1964).
