Editing and publishing periodicals by women was not unusual in Russia. Between 1860 and 1905, over two hundred thirty women received government approval for such activity.¹ As the numbers of literate women grew, so did publications addressing their interests, but for the most part these focused on traditionally accepted subjects, such as fashion, food, charity, and childrearing.² Several more “serious” journals for women attempted to move beyond socially prescribed realms, but they proved short-lived, financially precarious, and unable to attract subscribers. Thick journals, appealing to both men and women of the progressive intelligentsia, did publish articles by and about women. Indeed in the 1890s, with Liubov’ Gurevich at its helm, Severnyi vestnik (Northern Herald), filled with women’s writing, was dubbed “Zhenskii vestnik” (Women’s Herald).³ But it was not until the turn of the twentieth century, spurred by social and political upheavals in Russian society and the rise of the international women’s movement, that a longer-lasting and more visible feminist press emerged. By this I mean publications promoting full equality for women and projecting their vision of the emancipated woman.

Feminist publishing was nowhere easy, even in countries without censorship. The U.S. suffragist leaders Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s The Revolution survived two and a half years under a constant cloud of debt and a struggle for advertisers, subscribers and backers.⁴ French feminist physician Madeleine Pelletier’s La Suffragiste (The Suffragist) remained in print from


1907 to 1919, but she paid the price of losing editorial autonomy to her financial backer. 

Although feminist periodicals appeared in other parts of the Russian Empire, I will focus in this essay on those published in the imperial capital, St. Petersburg, none that far from the official residence of Tsar Nicholas II. Despite censorship, government hostility to any democratic rights, and the confiscation of opposition journals such as Osvobozhdenie (Liberation), several feminist periodicals appeared, beginning at the turn of the twentieth-century. Initiated with ambitious aims, their fates depended less on the censors and more on the persistence of their editors and publishers and the support of their readers. While other publications aimed at the growing number of women readers appeared throughout this period, the publications I discuss here represent the most sustained pre-revolutionary attempts to articulate an alternative model of womanhood.

Each reflected the particular approach to the “woman question” of their editor-publishers, but they shared many commonalities. Consciously differing from traditional women’s magazines, the feminist periodicals eschewed articles on fashion or food. Advocating a more egalitarian model of Russian womanhood, the feminist journals and journalists set themselves squarely against patriarchal Tsarist or any other rationales of female subordination. They sought to bring their female readers into the traditionally male public spheres of politics, literature and art as well as providing exposure to a spectrum of ideas, opinions and information about the status of women in Russia and the world. Each sought to form, shape and reflect the views of the emerging social grouping, the female intelligentsia, which was their primary audience.

Zhenskoe delo (Women's Cause), edited and published by the writer Aleksandra Nikolaevna Peshkova-Toliverova, tested the waters at the cusp of the new century. The January 1899 inaugural issue featured a survey of the zhenskii vopros (woman question) penned by Nadezhda Belozerskaia, one of the founders of the Bestuzhev women’s higher courses. Belozerskaia defined the woman question as: “women’s striving for the attainment of human rights, equal employment rights,

