

Women and revolutions in Central and Eastern Europe (nineteenth-twenty-first century)

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ABSTRACT

Revolutions have punctuated the history of Central and Eastern Europe since the mid-nineteenth century. Whether they were bourgeois or popular (1848), Soviet (1917), or democratic (post-1991), they were tipping points that profoundly transformed the territorial, political, and social order. Revolutions created new states and regimes, in which new actors—including female ones—asserted themselves, demanding rights or, on the contrary, making laws harsher. It was through these upheavals that the gender relations shaping the lives of men and women in the European space were redefined.



International Women's Day, February Revolution in Petrograd, 1917. Source : Wikimedia Commons.



SPD poster "Same rights, same duties. Vote for the Social Democrats," January 1919 elections. Source: Wikimedia Commons.



Hungary 1956, a woman bearing arms. Source : Wikimedia Commons.

Demands for civil rights and liberties were at the heart of the European revolutions of 1848, which for a time shook empires and fostered the creation of feminist movements, for example in Germany in connection with Louise Otto

(1819-1895), or in the Austrian Empire. Women, who had previously been excluded from politics took part in armed combat and built their own political spaces, clubs, associations, and press organs in order to participate in change, make their voice heard, and achieve equality in education and the right to work. The repression was severe, as there were attempts to silence them by banishing them from political associations (Prussian law of associations, 1851), or by stripping them of the right to manage newspapers ("lex Otto" in Saxony, 1850). It was only a half-century later, on the occasion of the Russian Revolution of 1905, that liberal Russian feminists made political demands through the Pan-Russian Union for Women's Equality. By dint of their activism, petitions, and awareness campaigns for the women's cause, their requests succeeded over a decade later, following the major women's demonstrations (27 February/8 March 1917) that accompanied the revolutionary upheaval and fall of the Romanov family. In July 1917, the provisional government granted equal political rights to women.

A few months later, the First World War brought about the fall of continental empires. With the emerge of republican regimes, for instance in Poland or Czechoslovakia, women were included in the process of state and democratic restructuring. In Germany, the "November Revolution" (1918-1919) ended the war and opened up a large space for political experimentation, notably for communists such as Rosa Luxemburg (1871-1919), who committed themselves to the short-lived Bavarian Soviet Republic. The Weimar Republic, which was proclaimed on November 9, 1918, granted civic and political equality to women, thereby marking the successful realization of certain feminist demands, although in practice equality was far from complete. At the same time in Russia, the Bolsheviks who had come to power after the October Revolution (1917) revoked all political rights and established a "dictatorship of the proletariat."

In the new Soviet order, the break was radical: women's organizations, some of which had existed since the late nineteenth century, were banned and replaced by a "state feminism" that sought top-down solutions to the women's question. Aside from recognizing gender equality, the Communist Party implemented a wide array of integrating steps—such as founding, under the leadership of Alexandra Kollontai (1872-1952), women's sections attached to the party—in addition to emancipatory measures (liberalization of divorce and abortion, decriminalization of homosexuality, etc.), which were nevertheless severely challenged with Stalinization beginning in the 1930s. In order to check the declining number of births, authorities restored the patriarchal order and reminded women of their "socialist responsibility," namely the injunction to contribute as peasants, laborers, and mothers to the collective effort, and thereby to the shaping of a "new" people. At the end of the Second World War, the Soviet model was imposed on all of the states in the Eastern bloc, with the exception of Yugoslavia in Southeastern Europe, which practiced an independent socialism whose emancipatory virtue was relentlessly emphasized by the anti-Nazi resistant fighter, Tito supporter, and leader of the Women's Antifascist Front leader, Vida Tomšič (1913-1998).

The revolts and uprisings that broke out in Central and Eastern Europe during the second half of the twentieth century, for example in East Berlin in 1953 or in Poznań three years later, continued to challenge the grip of the USSR and the omnipotence of the Communist Party. In 1956 in Budapest, men and women—such as Ilona Tóth (1932-1957), the "Joan of Arc of Hungary" who was executed at the age of 25—waged an armed struggle for Hungarian peace and independence, an uprising that was violently quelled by the Red Army. In 1968 The Red Army also cracked down on the Prague Spring by cancelling the reforms initiated by Czech authorities, in an effort to establish "socialism with a human face." Even though "women's condition" was not among the priorities of reformist communists, a few voices, such as that of the sociologist Jiřina Šiklová (1935-), spoke out to criticize the utilitarian gender policy and to condemn the Soviet-style "exaggeration of emancipation". In Polish dissident circles of the early 1980s, women who had rallied to the Solidarnosc trade union, such as Alina Pienkowska (1952-2002), tried to impose discussions about the discrimination they were subject to on a daily basis as women, this despite socialism's doctrine of equality proclaimed by the state. They nevertheless ran up against the conservatism of a movement steeped in political Catholicism.

It took until Gorbachev's *Perestroika* (1985) for political movements to stand alone, for customized interests to connect—as in the USSR where a non-state women's movement was established for the first time—and for new "revolutions" to begin in the late 1980s: the Singing Revolution in the Baltic states, the Czech Velvet Revolution, or the "peaceful" revolution in East Germany, which marked renewed political momentum for women. Independent feminist groups formed within different protests movements (ecologist, Christian, homosexual, and especially pacifist) to demand equal participation in political change. The Independent Women's Association that emerged in

December 1989 was associated with a roundtable to develop state reforms and initiate its process of democratization. However, the reunification of the GDR with the Federal Republic (1990) took place to the detriment of women, as they emerged losers in the democratic transition that undid “state feminism” by massively exposing them to unemployment and cancelling their gains (harshening of abortion laws, elimination of childcare infrastructure, etc.). The same type of backlash generally applied to other “democratic revolutions.” In Slovenia (ex-Yugoslavia) for example, the modernization of the state ended in the political resurgence of traditionalists, who in a context of re-Christianization, called for women’s return to the “family”.

Post-communist transitions continued: the post-Soviet era was shot through with contradictory pressures, notorious instability, and new power relations, for instance in Ukraine, which experienced the Maidan Revolution of 2014 after the Revolution on Granite (1990) and the Orange Revolution (2004-2005). In Kiev’s central plaza, known as the Maidan, men and women took turns organizing the protest against the anti-European policy, corruption, and arbitrary rule of authorities. The distribution of roles was traditional: men fought, and women managed everyday affairs, medical care, and supplies. Feminist groups quickly denounced men’s appropriation of the revolution, and emphasized the “female makers” of the revolution. For these women, the Maidan Revolution was also a revolution against sexism and in support of women. The future will show what traces will remain. The time of revolutions, in any event, has not passed.

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