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The Man Question: How Bolshevik Masculinity Shaped International Communism

Lisa A. Kirschenbaum

It was a communist romance. In 1923, Croatian American communist Steve Nelson (born Stjepan Mesarsoš) met Margaret Yeager, the daughter of 'radical' German immigrants, at the Communist Party office in Pittsburgh. As Nelson recalled in his 1981 memoir, 'everything happened' very quickly, and the two married the same year. Both understood that Yeager, the 'better educated' and 'more sophisticated' of the two, would not accept a 'passive role' in the relationship. Indeed her mother gave the nineteen-year-old bridegroom a copy of August Bebel's *Woman and Socialism* as a wedding gift. Nonetheless, they soon took on stereotypical roles. He became an important activist, while she 'tailor[ed] her life to what was required of me'. Recognising that an outsider might 'conclude … that Maggie accepted a traditional female role because she shared the accepted view of a "woman's place" at the time', Nelson assured his readers that she did not: 'As a revolutionary she consciously gave me all the breaks, feeling this would be best for the movement'. Thus a self-consciously revolutionary union produced a paradoxically traditional marriage.[1]

This story offers a useful way into the question of why and how international communism remained a man's world, despite communists' endorsement of the Marxist orthodoxy that 'any proper revolution had to liberate women'.[2] The revolution's failure to fully include women and to revolutionize women's lives can be understood as a consequence of the Marxist tendency to champion women's emancipation, but see it as a by-product of proletarian revolution. As many historians have persuasively argued, the Marxist conviction that 'class trumped every other identity' produced 'rhetorical and institutional ambivalence' about women as political actors and a profound 'gap between intention and performance' in communist efforts to resolve the 'woman question'.[3]

Nelson's story, however, suggests not only a failure to think beyond class but also the consequences of communists' deeply gendered conceptions of revolution and revolutionaries. If Nelson had read even a

few pages of Bebel, he would have learned that women were 'oppressed and wronged by the other sex' and that it was 'to the common interest of all women to remove their disabilities by changing the laws and institutions of the present state and social order'. At the same time, as Bebel also emphasized, the 'proletarian woman' had a 'duty ... to join the men of her class in the struggle for a thorough-going transformation of society'.[4] In that class struggle, women might have different 'instincts' than men.[5] Nelson implicitly supported difference, but also and importantly choice. Yeager 'consciously' decided that the best way to serve the movement was to set aside her political activism in order to help her husband. As Nelson framed the situation, the issue was less his wife's emancipation than his political development. They agreed that: 'If I had the ability to become more effective among immigrant workers, it was essential that I be allowed to develop this ability'.[6] What mattered here was manhood.

Moreover, communist conceptions of men and revolutionary masculinity were at least as ambiguous, fraught, and contradictory as communist understandings of women and feminism. Set against 'ever-changing' images of model women communists – who might be factory workers, aviators, nurses, or mothers – representations of the ideal male communist appear 'fixed and unchanging': he was a muscular, tough, and disciplined fighter. The repetitive visual imagery may have made it look easy to 'attain the party's construction of masculinity'.[7] But the images offered no clear guidelines for balancing the contradictory imperatives facing communist men. A hardened fighter, militant, brave, and self-sacrificing, the true Bolshevik was also a 'respectable' worker, who maintained communist (and earlier socialist) norms of 'sobriety, clean language, neat dress, sexual restraint, political involvement, and educational improvement', eschewing 'heavy drinking, brawling, womanizing, and cursing'.[8]

Being a true Bolshevik thus required the right 'amount' of masculinity.[9] Too much, and a man became unreliable and undisciplined. Too little, and a man became an effeminate and ineffectual revolutionary. In short, revolutionary masculinity was difficult to attain and maintain. However, communist men, drawing on a long tradition of figuring the worker as male, never considered that a commitment to women's equality might require them to rethink revolutionary masculinity.[10] They never acknowledged the existence of a 'man question' that fundamentally shaped efforts to resolve the 'woman question' in the years between the wars.

Women in a man's revolution

For women, the communist movement was full of ambiguities, contradictions, and failures. Committed in theory to gender and sexual emancipation, it was in practice unwelcoming to women and gender-based organising.[11] The 'Theses of the Communist Women's Movement' issued in 1921 urged women to enlist in communist parties as 'as members with equal rights and duties', while also emphasizing the need to 'educate women', who under capitalism constituted a uniquely 'intellectually and politically backward' segment of society. These contradictions can be explained in ideological terms as a consequence of Marxist hostility to allegedly 'bourgeois' feminism.[12] They can also be understood as a product of communist cultures that defined revolution and revolutionaries as masculine.

The communist commitment to gender equality was often quite powerful. Communist parties did more to recruit women than other contemporary political organisations, and the emancipated woman became an emblem of communist modernity. The new Soviet state seemed to confirm the socialist truism that social revolution would bring a revolution in gender as it quickly legalised abortion, reconfigured marriage as a union of equals, and began constructing networks of communal kitchens, laundries, and childcare facilities designed to free women from domestic burdens.[13] These achievements added to the international appeal of the Bolshevik Revolution and inspired women militants to free themselves from the fetters of the old world .[14] Comintern parties led campaigns for gender and sexual (and also racial) equality. The French party advocated for women's rights at work, in education, and in private life, fighting until the mid-1930s for access to abortion and contraception. It also supported women's suffrage.[15] The German party sponsored a popular campaign to decriminalize abortion under the slogan 'Your body belongs to you'.[16] The Soviet state's 1922 decriminalisation of 'sodomy' – same sex relations between men – similarly energized German communists to work for the decriminalisation of male homosexuality.[17]

But even as communist parties promoted an agenda of gender equality, communist cultural norms produced and maintained aggressively masculinist environments. We can see this happening in Soviet Komsomol (Communist Youth League) cells, where young men addressed young communists women not as 'comrade' but as '*baba*', a word that could mean 'peasant woman', but that in communist circles was profoundly pejorative.[18] The baba served as the 'foil' for the comrade: 'No man wanted to be called a baba'.[19] French communists similarly distinguished

(male) 'comrades' from 'the charming female comrades'.[20] Both practices confirmed men's revolutionary masculinity by defining woman as 'backward', frivolous, and in need of male tutelage.

Accepting the assumption that 'real' revolutionaries were male, some women communists fashioned themselves as 'pseudo-men'.[21] Communist media supported this strategy. The first woman worker to appear in Soviet propaganda in 1920 was a blacksmith's assistant who 'except for her skirt and hair style' replicated the appearance of her male counterpart.[22] By the late 1920s, the image of the Soviet 'new woman' as 'desexualized', 'defeminized', and 'boyishly masculine' was firmly established.[23] Nonetheless, when women acted like men they encountered male resistance and hostility. Women in the Komsomol who donned leather jackets, pants, boots, and greatcoats found themselves marginalised as excessively and unattractively masculine.[24] German women who joined the paramilitary Red Front Fighting League (*Rotfrontkämpferbund*, RFB) wore the same military-style uniform as the men, participated in the same demonstrations and military drills, and in some cases 'held key positions at the district level'. Ultimately, however, men responded to them as interlopers. Concluding that women threatened to 'destroy' the 'front-fighting character' of the RFB, its leaders excluded them in 1925, and demanded that they relinquish their uniforms (not all did).[25] This reflected not simply 'ambivalence' about feminism, but anxiety about the feminisation of the 'man's party' and the man's revolution.[26]

Revolutionary masculinity

The International Lenin School in Moscow was the Comintern's most prestigious institution for training foreign communists. Founded in 1926 as part of the effort to 'bolshevize' national parties and closed in 1938, the school graduated roughly 3,000 students from fifty-nine countries.[27] Its student body was predominately male, hardly surprising as women constituted a minority of communist parties' memberships, ranging from a quarter of the Czechoslovak party in 1924 to perhaps four percent of the French party in the same year.[28] Yet even in this male-dominated institution, moulding international communists into tough but disciplined Bolsheviks proved difficult. The conceptions of appropriate working class masculinity that the students brought with them did not always line up with the preferred Bolshevik model. More fundamentally, Bolshevik masculinity itself was rife with contradictions as it demanded displays of both virility and submission to the will of the party.

The school's curriculum and culture emphasized revolutionary discipline. The 1934 'rules of conspiracy' that students affirmed in writing required them to exercise extreme caution with acquaintances and strangers, 'especially women' with whom they entered into 'intimate relations' – a regulation that underscores both the degree to which, for all the efforts to recruit women, the Lenin School remained an overwhelmingly male environment as well as the presumed dangers of undisciplined masculinity.

Violations of the rules of conspiracy and comportment – and they seem to have been common – were handled by the school authorities as evidence of political deviance. The school's rigid, abstinent code of conduct often became the flash point in conflicts between students and administrators. In his 1972 memoir *My Generation,* Welsh communist Will Paynter, who attended the school in the early 1930s, recounted that a simple 'frolic', a boisterous 'booze up' with two roommates resulted in 'a special party meeting … where we were condemned and classified as "petty bourgeois degenerates"'.[29]

That students violated rules against drinking and carousing is perhaps unremarkable –'boys will be boys', one might say. That is certainly how Paynter represented his 'frolic'. I would argue that the easy recourse to 'natural' male behaviour is exactly why the conflicts around alcohol and sex are worth considering: They illustrate how competing constructions of working-class masculinity could complicate efforts to define and enforce appropriately communist behaviour. While the Bolsheviks aligned themselves with and attempted to inculcate 'respectable' working-class manhood that prized abstinence and self-discipline, working-class communists like Paynter, who was an organiser in the coal fields, saw the occasional 'booze up' as a harmless, even necessary, expression of 'rough' masculinity.

By the early 1930s, questions of masculinity became increasingly politicised as communists equated fascism, effeminacy, and homosexuality. In 1934, two years before the re-criminalisation of abortion, the Soviet state recriminalized same sex relations between men. The decision drew justification from the 'propaganda war' between fascism and communism.[30] *The Brown Book of the Hitler Terror and the Burning of the Reichstag,* written by a collective of German communists in exile, translated into twenty languages, and published in 1933 in twenty-six countries, constituted a particularly prominent weapon in this propaganda war. Debunking the myth of the Reichstag fire as the work of a communist conspiracy, the book proposed instead 'a conspiracy of homosexual Nazis'.[31] It asserted that inquiries into the arsonist Marinus van der Lubbe's life 'definitely

established the fact that he was homosexual', and alleged that his 'homosexual relations' with Nazis made him 'willing to carry out the incendiary's part'.[32] Characterising Nazi masculinity as at once brutal and effeminate, communists asserted their own disciplined but aggressive masculinity.

Defining themselves against both purportedly homosexual fascists and 'backward' women, communist men maintained a fundamental and unquestioned linkage between 'authority and masculinity'.[33] Their commitments to gender and sexual equality fell victim not only to ideological concerns about deflecting attention from class struggle. Admitting women and gay men as equals in the revolutionary struggle was incompatible with the equation of masculinity and revolutionary power. Thus communist men dismissed both women and homosexuals as weak or suspect revolutionaries. Long before Stalin, the communist project foundered on this naturalisation of patriarchy. Communist women sometimes tried to call attention to this blind spot, as Clara Zetkin did in 1922 at the Fourth Comintern Congress, reminding the male comrades that women 'are no worse and no more stupid than you'.[34] But communists never imagined world revolution as entailing a reconfiguration of masculinity. Instead, they worked to construct a revolutionary masculinity that combined ostentatious virility with submission to party discipline and, later, the patriarchal authority of Comrade Stalin.[35] Before they could solve the 'woman question' and make good on the emancipatory promises of October, communists had to address the 'man question': What would communist revolution mean for masculine identity? But they, like so many revolutionaries and radicals who followed them, failed even to acknowledge that the question existed.

Notes

1. Steve Nelson, James R. Barrett, and Robert Ruck, *Steve Nelson, American Radical*, Pittsburgh PA 1981, p27.
2. Elizabeth Wood, *The Baba and the Comrade: Gender and politics in revolutionary Russia*, Bloomington IN 1997, p15.
3. The quotations are from: Karen Hunt and Matthew Worley, 'Rethinking British Communist Party women in the 1920s', *Twentieth Century British History* 15, no. 1 (2004), p27 (trumped); Wood, *Baba and the Comrade,* p5 (ambivalence); Elizabeth Waters, 'In the shadow of the Comintern: The communist women's movement, 1920-43', in Sonia Kruks, Rayna Rapp, and Marilyn Blatt Young (eds), *Promissory Notes: Women in the transition to socialism*, New York 1989, p31 (gap).

4. August Bebel, *Woman and Socialism*, Mete L. Stern (Hebe) (trans.), New York 1910, p6.
5. 'Communist work among women', in John Riddell (ed.), *Toward the United Front: Proceedings of the Fourth Congress of the Communist International*, Leiden 2012, p857.
6. Nelson et al., *Steve Nelson,* p27.
7. Eric D. Weitz, 'The heroic man and the ever-changing woman: Gender and politics in European communism, 1917-1950', in Laura Frader and Sonya O. Rose (eds), *Gender and Class in Modern Europe*, Ithaca NY 1996, pp313, 351.
8. Quotations from Laura L. Phillips, 'Message in a bottle: Working-class culture and the struggle for revolutionary legitimacy, 1900-1929', *Russian Review* 56 (January 1997), pp25, 26. Elizabeth Waters, 'The female form in Soviet political iconography, 1917-32', in Barbara Evans Clements, et al. (eds), *Russia's Women: Accommodation, resistance, transformation*, Berkeley CA 1991, p232; Anne E. Gorsuch, '"A woman is not a man": The culture of gender and generation in Soviet Russia, 1921-1928', *Slavic Review* 55 (Fall 1996), pp644-645. Paul Michel Taillon, '"What we want is good, sober men": masculinity, respectability, and temperance in the railroad brotherhoods, c. 1870-1910', *Journal of Social History* 36, no. 2 (Winter 2002), pp319-338.
9. On masculinity as 'a matter of degree' see Mark Meyers, 'Feminizing fascist men: Crowd psychology, gender, and sexuality in French antifascism, 1929-1945', *French Historical Studies* 29, no. 1 (2006), p140.
10. Karen Hunt, '"Strong minds, great hearts, true faith and ready hands"?: Exploring socialist masculinities before the First World War', *Labour History Review* 69, no. 2 (August 2004), p214.
11. Waters, 'In the shadow', p31; Choi Chatterjee, 'Ideology, gender, and propaganda in the Soviet Union: A historical survey', *Left History* 6, no. 2 (1999), pp18-19.
12. Marilyn Boxer, 'Rethinking the socialist construction and international career of the concept "bourgeois feminism"', *American Historical Review* 112, no. 1 (2007), p134; Bridgette Studer, 'Communism and feminism', Regan Kramer (trans.), *Clio,* 1, no. 41 (2015), pp139-152.
13. Wendy Z. Goldman, *Women, the State, and Revolution: Soviet family policy and social life, 1917-1936*, New York 1993, pp1-13, 48-58.
14. Robert F. Wheeler, 'German women and the Communist International: The case of the Independent Social Democrats', *Central European History* 8 (1975), p132; Joan Sangster, 'The Communist Party and the woman question', *Labour/Le Travail* 15 (Spring 1985), pp26-28; Hunt and Worley, 'Rethinking', p21.

15. Christine Bard and Jean-Louis Robert, 'The French Communist Party and women, 1920-1939', Nicole Dombrowski (trans.), in Helmut Gruber and Pamela Graves (eds), *Women and Socialism, Socialism and Women: Europe between the two World Wars*, New York 1998, pp321, 333, 338-340.
16. Atina Grossmann, *Reforming Sex: The German movement for birth control and abortion reform, 1920-1950*, Oxford 1995, pp79-98.
17. Dan Healey, *Homosexual Desire in Revolutionary Russia: The regulation of sexual and gender dissent*, Chicago 2001, pp115-124; Laurie Marhoefer, *Sex in the Weimar Republic: German homosexual emancipation and the rise of the Nazis*, Toronto 2015, pp114-115, 206-208.
18. Gorsuch, '"A woman'", op. cit., pp650-651. On the term *baba* see Victoria E. Bonnell, 'The representation of women in early Soviet political art', *Russian Review* 50, no. 3 (1991), p285.
19. Wood, *Baba and the Comrade,* p17.
20. Bard and Robert, 'French Communist Party', pp331-332.
21. The term 'pseudo-men' is from Sue Bruley, *Leninism, Stalinism, and the Women's Movement in Britain, 1920-39*, New York 1986, pp114-115 as cited in Hunt and Worley, 'Rethinking', p5.
22. Bonnell, 'Representation of women', p278.
23. Lilya Kaganovsky, *How the Soviet Man Was Unmade: Cultural fantasy and male subjectivity under Stalin*, Pittsburgh PA 2014, pp75, 73.
24. Gorsuch, '"A woman"', p656.
25. Sara Ann Sewell, 'Bolshevizing communist women: The Red Women and Girls' League in Weimar Germany', *Central European History* 45, no. 2 (June 2012), pp273, 294, 286.
26. Hunt and Worley, 'Rethinking', p3; Marci Shore, '*Czysto babski*: A woman's friendship in a man's revolution', *East European Politics and Societies* 16, no. 3 (2003), p859.
27. This account of the Lenin School draws on Lisa A. Kirschenbaum, *International Communism and the Spanish Civil War: Solidarity and suspicion*, New York 2015, pp17-49.
28. Studer, 'Communism and feminism', pp128-129; Bard and Roberts, 'French Communist Party', p323; Catherine Epstein, *The Last Revolutionaries: German communists and their century*, Cambridge MA 2003, pp32-33.
29. Will Paynter, *My Generation*, London 1972, p54.
30. Healey, *Homosexual Desire*, p182.
31. Harry Oosterhuis, 'The "Jews" of the antifascist left: Homosexuality and socialist resistance to Nazism', *Journal of Homosexuality* 29, no. 2/3 (1995), p233.
32. World Committee for the Victims of German Fascism, *The Brown Book of*

the Hitler Terror and the Burning of the Reichstag, New York 1933, pp46, 48, 52.

33. Meyers, 'Feminizing', p140.
34. 'Communist work among women', in Riddell (ed.), *Toward the United Front*, p850.
35. Kaganovsky, *How the Soviet Man Was Unmade,* pp154-156.