

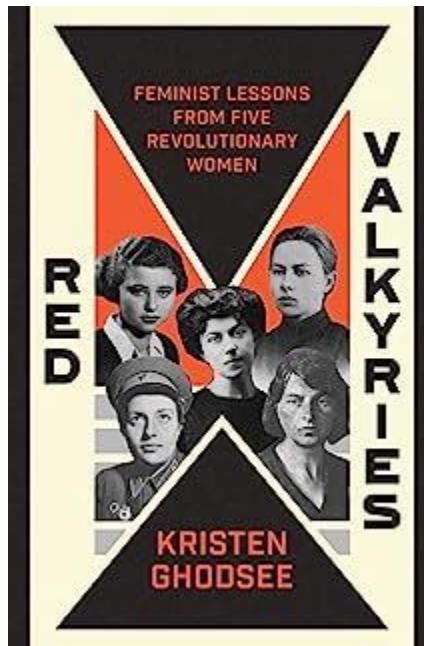
Red Valkyries: Feminist Lessons from Five Revolutionary Women

Kristen Ghodsee

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“Socialist women’s activists understand that capitalists benefited from women’s oppression and would therefore fiercely resist demands that might erode their profit margins (p.8).”

Kristen Ghodsee’s fascinating expositions of the lives and work of five socialist feminists makes the point that their examples have been consistently omitted from compendia of feminist thought. Western feminist thought, she argues, tends to focus on victories on the individual level. Socialist feminist thought, however, recognizes that capitalism is the real enemy and so equality will only be possible when it is replaced. Meanwhile, greater equity for women in the existing system can be achieved through “... the expansion of social safety nets in the short term and for a more just economic system in the long term (p.9).” It is, therefore, more convenient for corporations to protect their profits by hiring a few female executives rather than providing social services for all employees.

The five women portrayed are used to illustrate different aspects of the two approaches outlined above. The first, Lyudmila Pavlichenko, achieved fame as a sniper during WWII with hundreds of confirmed kills and a role as counter-sniper. Ghodsee compares her situation and the situation of other women in the Soviet army who, rather than being rejected from active service, were directed towards roles in which their physicality was not an important issue: pilots, parachutists, anti-aircraft gunners and snipers among them. This approach may have reinforced stereotypes of gender differences but it meant women progressed directly in the Red Army to an extent that was not matched in the USA military until 2015. The next woman considered is possibly the one best known in the west, Alexandra Kollontai. Ghodsee portrays her as groundbreaking in understanding the relationship between Russian patriarchy and emergent capitalism. Under a patriarchal system, domestic and reproductive labour tied women to the world of the household

and prevented them from contributing to society as a result. For this to change, it would be necessary to create a workers' state that would provide the necessary level of support for women and children so that the former could pursue their talents in the wider world. At the same time, she argued (through action as well as by word) that monogamous relationships, whether based on romance or not, could neither provide all the forms of personal interaction needed for a rounded life nor survive demands placed on them by social strictures enforcing such situations of isolation. Kollontai was able to introduce reforms in the nascent Communist state that helped to bring about such changes, although much was later lost under the Stalin regime, which is a recurring theme in the book. Ghodsee is convinced, nevertheless, that their efforts were worthwhile even if they have been largely ignored subsequently. Despite the terrible circumstances in which they were forced to struggle, "... their work lived on in the daily realities of hundreds of millions of lives, especially in the lives of women who had opportunities for education, professional training, and work experiences that their mothers and grandmothers had never dreamed could be possible (p.156)."

This success, relative though it may be, is further reinforced in the account of Nadezhda Krupskaya. In addition to her long-term relationship with Lenin, Krupskaya is significant as a reformer of Soviet education, even if she too had her reputation suppressed by Stalin as he sought to make himself appear the legitimate bearer of Lenin's legacy. She rejected all forms of bourgeois education as attempts to enforce conformity on young minds and suppress the possibility of dissent. Instead, she championed child-centric learning environments in which teachers facilitated the search for meaning and self-expression by individual workers. Her creation of the Komsomol and the Young Pioneers were attempts to create institutions that were deliberately established to promote those aims. As Ghodsee observes (p.92), whereas Kollontai supported socialized childcare so as to enhance women's interests, Krupskaya saw the benefit to the children themselves as well.

The fourth woman presented is Inessa Armand, who is shown as being greatly put upon by Lenin, who valued her organizational and presentational skills rather than her intellectual development. Armand's relationship to Lenin and indeed to Krupskaya has long been a matter of speculation and her lifestyle, similar in this regard to Kollontai, was a representation of a new way of considering personal relationships and a challenge to the patriarchy and its societal norms. In Ghodsee's telling, Armand was among the women who were able to begin creating the social networks necessary for equality as a result of the Civil War period following the Revolution, since everyone was needed to build the new society and "Patriarchal privilege was a small price to pay for the survival of the revolution (p.123)." Armand would have gone further, since she believed that the creation of the new person under socialism absolutely required the abolition of the old ways of enacting the family, domestic life, education and childbearing.

The final Valkyrie described was somewhat different from the others and had a personal relationship with the author. While the first four women had their lives reconstructed electronically during the COVID-19 lockdown period, the fifth, Elena Lagadinova, was a person with whom Ghodsee had reached an understanding through research interviewing over an extended period of time. She had spent some years in Lagadinova's native Bulgaria and an amusing sketch of her life there may be divined by some notes in the acknowledgements, in which her dogs play a prominent role. Lagadinova was a scientist and was drawn into a political role as a technocrat. However, she was well-versed in the needs of state-building in revolutionary times and was instrumental in devising a raft of policies that would help to increase the population rate at a moment when reduced fertility followed as a result of Bulgarian women being able to play an active role in the labour force. As ever, there was resistance and not all she wanted to bring to pass actually occurred. However, Ghodsee concludes, she was part of a group of women who, as previously mentioned, did make a difference.

This is a well-written book that unites history and ideology and is framed within an overarching argument. The five women chosen are, of course, not the only ones whose story deserves to be told and there was much more taking place in their lives than there is space to include in this book. Nevertheless, this is a valuable contribution to the creation of a genuinely international record of feminist thought and practice.

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