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COMMENTARY

ON THE SOCIALIST ORIGINS OF
INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

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[Each March 8, I relate to my women's studies classes the story of International Women's Day. It's a story I have had recounted to me numerous times and therefore know well. A spontaneous demonstration staged by New York City women garment and textile workers in 1857, protesting low wages, the twelve-hour workday, and increasing work loads, was dispersed by the police, rather brutally. Many women were arrested; some were trampled by the crowds. Fifty years later, on the anniversary of that demonstration, International Women's Day was established in their memory. My students respond to this story with an emotion best described as gratitude. March 8 usually coincides with that moment in the semester when they feel most the weight of women's oppression: they are hungry for knowledge of women's resistance. The women garment workers of New York City fill their needs for heroic foremothers.

So it was with ambivalence—scholarly interest but political misgivings—that I read in the French feminist periodical *La Revue d'en face* (see no. 12, Fall 1982, pp. 67-80) an article by Liliane Kandel and Françoise Picq, "Le Mythe des origines, A propos de la journée internationale des femmes." The myth of the origins? Had there never been such an event as our 1857 demonstration? Indeed, Kandel and Picq report, the New York City garment workers' demonstration of 1857 was a legend born in 1955. In their quite illuminating article, they speculate on the origins of "the 1857 legend," on the likelihood that, in 1955, it was opportune "to detach International Women's Day from its Soviet history in order to give it a more international origin, more ancient than Bolshevism, more spontaneous than a decision of a Congress or the initiative of women affiliated to the Party, [and that] the date, 1857, was chosen as a tribute to Clara Zetkin, born that year. . . ."

Intrigued by this revision of our historical record, the editors of Feminist Studies asked Temma Kaplan, whose research on socialist rituals and holidays was familiar to us, to furnish us a truer record of the origins of International Women's Day. Kaplan's thorough analysis of the rise of International Women's Day demolishes a myth that many of us have relied upon to interest our students in the past. My students, who drew inspiration from the idea of a spontaneous demonstration, will surely miss the 1857 legend. But for the 1980s, when we need to understand better the effectiveness of organized resistance, is it not fitting that we draw inspiration not only from spontaneous demonstrators, but also from women who engaged in long-term struggle and who created rituals that sustained their struggle in the face of unrelenting opposition?

—Claire G. Moses]

One way late-nineteenth-century socialists and anarchists attempted to establish secular communal traditions was through holidays. Even in Spain, leftists held festivals on July 14, French Bastille Day, because that was the most revolutionary date on the European calendar until the Russian Revolution. Socialists chose that date to meet in Paris in 1889 to organize the Second International Working Man's Association, an assembly of socialist parties, trade unions, and political clubs. Often, as with the commemoration of the Paris Commune on any day between March 18 and March 28, the date of the holiday varied. Ultimately, it was the solidification of a sense of community rather than the date that really mattered.¹

The first International Woman's Day (singular) was held on February 23, 1909, in the United States. Like May Day, the history of which it resembles, Woman's Day started as a means by which to unite the popular community around a set of common goals. Both holidays originally took place on Sundays so that people would not miss a day of work. Both holidays became fixed on specific dates because historical events overtook demonstrators.²

In a curious development, an apocryphal story surfaced in French Communist circles in the 1950s. Allegedly a brutally repressed New York strike of female textile workers on March 8, 1857, had led to a rally in commemoration of its fiftieth anniversary in 1907. Neither event seems to have taken place, but many Europeans think March 8, 1907, inaugurated International

Woman's Day. Some French feminists view this myth as a chapter in a long-standing conflict between feminists and communists over whether women have rights beyond those they hold as workers.³

The real history of International Woman's Day cannot be separated from the political life of Clara Zetkin. She attended the 1889 Bastille Day Paris meeting that created the Second International. At that time, the assembled leftists agreed on a May Day demonstration calling for the eight-hour day and limitations on female and child labor, the plank Zetkin promoted. As the editor between 1890 and 1915 of the German Social Democratic party's women's newspaper *Gleichheit*, she promoted the interests of working-class women. Although Zetkin was a virulent opponent of feminists inside and outside her party, she tried to familiarize socialists with the conditions of female workers. After the war she became a Communist and brought International Woman's Day with her into the Third International in 1922.⁴ From this time on, International Women's Day (it seems to have become plural after 1945) became a Communist holiday. Since the late sixties, feminists have revitalized the celebration and have infused it with new meaning.

Many socialist women in Europe and America strengthened their commitment to internationalism in the years before World War One. On August 17, 1907—just before the meeting of the Second International in Stuttgart, Germany—women associated with socialism met together. Under the leadership of Clara Zetkin and Louise Zietz, these socialist women pledged to fight for equality in every aspect of life, and discussed demonstrating to publicize their goals.⁵

In both the United States and Europe, socialists had taken a backseat to suffragists in fighting for the vote because they viewed women's political rights as subordinate to the economic advancement of the male working class. Throughout the world, leftists had associated women's votes with conservatives, and the Americans were no exception. Nevertheless, women in the Second International finally won the support of their comrades for the suffrage campaign before the First World War. In 1908, the Socialist party of the United States appointed the Women's National Committee to Campaign for the Suffrage, and asked them to organize demonstrations. Eager to get started, Branch Number 3 of the New York City Social Democratic Women's Society held a mass

meeting on woman suffrage on March 8, 1908.⁶

The American Socialists declared the last Sunday in February as National Woman's Day. In New York on February 23, 1909, the principal meeting was at the Murray Hill Lyceum at Thirty-fourth and Third Avenue. Two thousand people heard Leonora O'Reilly and others explain the principles of equal rights and demand votes for women. At the Brooklyn Labor Lyceum meeting, there was a recitation of "The God of Gold," followed by rousing singing. Charlotte Perkins Gilman addressed the congregation of the Parkside Church in Brooklyn along with the secretary of the Christian Socialist Fellowship. "It is true that a woman's duty is centered in her home and motherhood," Gilman said, but "home should mean the whole country and not be confined to three or four rooms or a city or a state."⁷

The New York rally the following year was on February 27, 1910, and opened with a Carnegie Hall meeting. The audience sang the Marseillaise before Rose Schneiderman, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and Metta I. Stern explained how the German socialist women had led the way at Stuttgart in 1907 by calling for women's economic equality and then for the vote.⁸

The American socialists began International Woman's Day with a National Woman's Day in 1909, while the Europeans followed in 1911. A similar pattern had developed with May Day, which the Knights of Labor had introduced in 1886, but which the Europeans did not adopt until 1890. At the International Socialist Women's Meeting that preceded the general meeting of the Second International in Copenhagen in August 1910, Luise Zietz suggested holding an International Woman's Day the following year, and Clara Zetkin seconded the request, but they never specified a date.⁹

On March 18, 1911, on the fortieth anniversary of the Paris Commune, the first International Woman's Day was held in Europe to publicize the need for women's rights and the suffrage. However, the Americans continued to rally on the last Sunday in February.

In a rare show of solidarity, socialist women in Boston proposed to the suffragists that they march together to local government hearings on suffrage on February 23, 1911. The women organized an outdoor rally and a meeting at Ford Hall. After gathering at Park Square, they reached the hearing room only to find that it

was too small to hold all of them. With all the women dressed in white, inspired by the British suffragists, they carried their different banners depending upon their political beliefs, but the socialists outnumbered the suffragists. The journalist for the *Women's Journal* (the official organ of the National American Woman's Suffrage Association) was afraid that "the socialist women seem to be the only ones earnest enough to parade for the cause."¹⁰

In New York, the meeting for International Woman's Day in 1911 was held on February 25 on a Saturday night at Carnegie Hall. The keynote speech by Bertha Fraser praised women's inability to fight as a positive quality for citizenship. "Another argument against women is that they cannot be soldiers. And what is more, when they get the ballot, they will use it to make war impossible."¹¹

In Vienna, in the first European celebration of International Women's Day on March 18, 1911, women marched around the Ringstrasse, carrying banners including red flags commemorating the martyrs of the Paris Commune. The women stopped in front of the flower market in that civic center and demonstrated in favor of female suffrage. Throughout the Austro-Hungarian Empire, there were 300 women's demonstrations. On that day in 1911, the Socialist delegates to the Austrian parliament openly championed women's equality and the suffrage for the first time,¹² thereby giving up in word if not deed, long-standing socialist opposition to women's votes. But just as some socialist men were beginning to support votes for women, the war ended all possibility for social reform for five years.

During the first winter and spring of World War I in 1915, women began to take action. They proclaimed their rights as wives and mothers or as housekeepers in public as well as private realms to intercede where the usual political leaders seemed incompetent. International Woman's Day provided such an opportunity. In New York, there were many International Woman's Day celebrations, such as the one in the Bronx where the 1907 Barnard graduate and adjunct professor of economics Juliet Stuart Poyntz spoke.¹³ Socialist Marian Craig Wentworth wrote a play in which the women went on strike against childbirth until they were admitted to the councils of war. A picture in the *New York Call* showed a mother and child against a wartorn background. The

caption asked whether women would vote for this if they had the vote.¹⁴

In Berne, Switzerland, Clara Zetkin gathered socialist women from neutral and warring countries to demonstrate against the war. For protesters from belligerent nations, this meant treason against their countries and their parties. The women who marched on March 7, 1915, did not support their countries East or West. They called for the "reconstitution of the Second International," which had collapsed under the weight of nationalism in 1914, but they did not demand a new, Third International, as the Russian Bolshevik exiles in Switzerland wanted them to do. The Bolsheviks organized another meeting for that in early September 1915 at Zimmerwald, not far from Berne, where the embryo of the Third International was formed.¹⁵

The socialist women of Berne carried back a manifesto they distributed clandestinely in their countries. It was addressed "To the women of the proletariat," and asked, "Where are your husbands? Where are your sons?" It declared that the "workers have nothing to gain from the war. They have everything to lose, everything, everything that is dear to them." It exhorted women to take action to win peace.

When the French socialist Louise Saumoneau returned from two months in jail in November 1915 after her arrest for distributing the manifesto in France, she discovered that her favorite nephew, a leftist, had been killed in the war. She always responded to grief with action, and she wrote her tract as a way of mourning. It cried out that "sixteen months ago, we the mothers, the wives, the sisters of those who left. . . despite our grief, kept the hope that the being who was so dear to us would return able-bodied. Not one of us could admit that the young robust man she took to the station would not come back again. Since then, Alas! how many women (are) in mourning. . . ."¹⁶

The war went on despite all the efforts of women, but so did the socialist celebration of International Woman's Day. Socialist women in New York applauded the Anti-High Price League, which forced municipal officials to establish price controls on Kosher butchers. They commemorated International Woman's Day at the end of February by calling for support for women's rights to feed their families.

The war caused far worse shortages among the belligerents in

Europe. In Italy, the price of flour had risen 88 percent, wine 144 percent, and potatoes 131 percent over 1910 prices by January 1917.¹⁷ On International Woman's Day, February 23, 1917, female socialists in Turin, Italy, hung posters addressed to women throughout the working-class neighborhoods. The posters said, "Hasn't there been enough torment from this war? Now the food necessary for our children has begun to disappear. It is time for us to act in the name of suffering humanity. Our cry is 'Down with arms!' We are part of the same family. We want peace. We must show that women can protect those who depend on them."¹⁸

The most dramatic celebration of International Woman's Day was in 1917 in Russia. Led by feminist Alexandra Kollontai, Russian women had begun celebrating the day American-style, marching the last Sunday in February in 1913. Central to their protest in 1917 were complaints over deteriorating living conditions. Rents had more than doubled in St. Petersburg, renamed Petrograd, between 1905 and 1915. Food prices, particularly the cost of flour and bread, rose between 80 and 120 percent in most European cities. The price per pound of rye bread, the staple of working-class diets in Petrograd, rose from three kopeks in 1913 to eighteen kopeks in 1916. Even soap rose 245 percent in 1917 Petrograd.¹⁹ Merchants speculated in grain, fuel, and meat, while factories closed for lack of energy to run the plants. Female and male wage earners who faced layoffs often went on strike. Between January and February 1917, more than half a million Russian workers, mostly in Petrograd, went out.

Taking the occasion of International Woman's Day (March 8th in the West, but February 23d on the Gregorian calendar), women led a demonstration from the factories and the breadlines. Metallurgical workers, mostly men, joined them despite the fact that the Bolsheviks regarded the women's mobilization as precipitous.

On February 25, two days after the women's insurrection had begun on International Woman's Day, the czar ordered General Khabalov of the Petrograd Military District to shoot if necessary in order to crush the women's revolution. Khabalov summarized the problems authorities feel when confronted with women's consumer demands. He explained that when they said, "Give us bread!" we could give them bread and that was the end of it. But when they said, "Down with the autocracy!" we could no longer appease them with bread.²⁰ Thus began the February revolution in

Russia. By March 12 (Gregorian February 27), Czar Nicholas II had been forced to abdicate. The provisional government formed to rule until the election of a constituent assembly became the first government of a major power to grant women the right to vote.²¹

The events of 1917 in Russia set the date for the celebration of International Woman's Day elsewhere in Europe beginning the following year. Toward the end of the war, on March 8, 1918, the Austrian women celebrated International Woman's Day. Three thousand women, despite the ban on demonstrating, marched in small groups, along the Ringstrasse past the parliament and the Palace of Justice. There were also demonstrations elsewhere in the empire. As Adelheid Popp, leader of Austrian socialist women, explained, the women attempted as wives and mothers to show their disgust for the war and their demand for peace.²²

With Clara Zetkin's help, Lenin established International Women's Day as a Communist holiday in 1922, when the Chinese Communists started to celebrate it. In Spain, following the victory of the Popular Front slate in the February 1936 elections, La Pasionaria, one of the leaders of the Spanish Communist party, led thousands of women to demonstrate in Madrid on International Woman's Day, March 8, to demand protection of the republic against the growing fascist threat.

After the Second World War, International Woman's Day remained a communist holiday until around 1967. According to one story, it was revived in the United States by a women's group at the University of Illinois, Chicago Circle, which included daughters of American Communists who remembered having heard of the holiday. Since then, it has become the occasion for a new sense of female consciousness and a new sense of feminist internationalism.

NOTES

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1. For a discussion of holidays on the Left, see Temma Kaplan, "Civic Rituals and Patterns of Resistance in Barcelona, 1890-1930," in *The Power of the Past: Essays for Eric Hobsbawm*, ed. Pat Thane, Geoffrey Crossic, and Roderick Floud (Cambridge: 1984), 173-93.

2. Michelle Perrot, "The First of May 1890 in France: The Birth of a Working-Class Ritual," in Thane, Crossic, and Floud, *Power of the Past*, 143-71.

3. Liliane Kandel and Françoise Picq, "Le Mythe des origines à propos de la journée internationale des femmes," *La Revue d'En Face*, no. 12 (Fall 1982): 67-80.

4. Karen Honeycutt, "Clara Zetkin: A Left-Wing Socialist and Feminist in Wilhelminian Germany" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1975); Renate Pore, *A Conflict of Interest: Women in German Social Democracy, 1919-1933* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1981); and Jean H. Quataert, *Reluctant Feminists in German Social Democracy, 1885-1917* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979).

5. *Bericht der 1. Internationalen Frauenkonferenz Stuttgart*, 17 Aug. 1907, Stuttgart, 1907, cited in Quataert, 249.

6. Mentioned in "New York City," *Socialist Woman*, March 1908, included with a personal letter from Renée Côté, 16 Feb. 1984. It was omitted by mistake from her book edited with Sylvie Dupont, *La Journée internationale des femmes ou les vrais faits et les vraies dates des mystérieuses origines de 8 mars jusqu'ici embrouillées, truquées, oubliées: la clef des énigmes la vérité historique* (Montreal: 1984).

7. "The Suffragists and Socialists Demand Votes for Women," *Call*, 1 Mar. 1909, 1.

8. "A.B.C. A Day of Anticipation," *Call*, 27 Feb. 1910, Magazine, 13.

9. Adelheid Popp, *Der Weg zur Höhe: Die Sozialdemokratische Frauenbewegung Osterreichs* (Vienna: 1930), 99.

10. *Women's Journal*, 56.

11. "Socialists Argue Strongly in Favor of Women's Suffrage," *Call*, 26 Feb. 1911, Magazine, 1-2.

12. Popp, 100.

13. "Great Socialist Meetings will Mark Woman's Day Tomorrow," *Call*, 27 Feb. 1915, 1.

14. *Ibid.*

15. Charles Sowerwine, *Sisters or Citizens? Women and Socialism in France since 1876* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 151.

16. *Ibid.*, 148, 152.

17. *Encarecimiento de la vida durante la Guerra: Precios de la subsistencia en España y en el extranjero, 1914-1918* (Madrid, 1918), 49.

18. Paolo Spriano, *Socialismo e classe operaia a Torino dal 1892 al 1913* (Turin, 1958), 393. For other examples of political movements in which women claim rights to act in the name of their community, see Temma Kaplan, "Female Consciousness and Collective Action: The Case of Barcelona, 1910-1918," *Signs* 7 (Spring 1982): 545-66.

19. Dale Ross, "The Role of the Women in Petrograd in War, Revolution, and Counter-Revolution, 1914-1921" (Ph.D. diss., Rutgers University, 1973), 28.

20. *Ibid.*, 32.

21. Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal, "Love on the Tractor: Women in the Russian Revolution and after," in *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*, ed. Renate Bridenthal and Claudia Koonz (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977), 370-99, 377.

22. Popp, 100.