A Russian women's demonstration in 1917. (Sovfoto)

Women and Communal Strikes in the Crisis of 1917–1922

Temma Kaplan

Women in the working classes in rapidly growing cities confronted both the age-old problems related to caring for their families and new hardships associated with industrialization. Even when they did not participate in wage labor, as Laura Frader demonstrates, women provided support for their families. Temma Kaplan's essay continues the narrative of women's struggles and relates them to mass strikes in the twentieth century. In times of crisis, women's special responsibilities to their communities and families gave them a different set of needs and a unique vantage point from which to evaluate the situation. Economic depression, often exacerbated by wartime deprivation, induced women in poor urban areas to demonstrate for food, governmental reform, and justice. Unlike the radical women described by Richard Stites and Charles Sowerwine, these women had little prior direct political involvement, but acted out of what Kaplan calls "female consciousness." Having fulfilled their obligations as mothers, wives, and family members, desperate women felt a sense of entitlement to demand the minimum subsistence necessary to continue to carry out their roles. In settings as diverse as St. Petersburg, Milan, Málaga, and Veracruz, women from the working classes acted in crisis, defending their traditional rights and advocating a vision of a just social order.

During World War I and its aftermath, poor women throughout the world often engaged in communal strikes. *Communal strikes* were insurrections in which the women of a neighborhood began by demanding food, fuel, or moderately priced housing until they succeeded in rousing massive support from the men of their class. Together they forced their governments to take action. If men and women in most cultures and historical periods have learned from childhood that women have a special duty to maintain the lives of their families and friends, women have often presumed that they have the right to get food and provide housing even when shortages make those tasks nearly impossible—the situation that existed around World War I. I have called the awareness by which such women and certain male authorities recognized the prerogatives of poor women "female consciousness."[1]

Political participation by poor women during World War I was limited to communal strikes and to some involvement in campaigns for the right to vote in countries like Great Britain.[2] Women had the right to vote only in Norway and Finland until the Provisional Government in Russia, formed as a result of the February Revolution, granted female suffrage in 1917. Since few working women entered trade unions in Europe until after the war, the modern communal strike was the principal form of female political activity in the era of World War I, and the effective militancy women displayed in this era requires explanation.

THE NATURE OF FEMALE CONSCIOUSNESS IN THE URBAN WORKING CLASS

Working-class women had informal ties that they activated in times of crisis. When these women demonstrated against bakers, landlords, coal merchants, or others who the women believed were speculating on the price of necessities, they followed familiar social paths and allied with women they saw every day. Despite the apparent spontaneity of the kinds of mass movements in which poorer women engaged during World War I, there was a pattern to their activities that followed the grids of everyday life. These women were neighbors, who cared for each other's children, and were familiar with one another because they went to the same churches and markets. Elite and middle-class women, of course, had also been socialized to believe that women had certain obligations and privileges; however, they seldom created the dense web of relationships with neighbors that poor women did at the public markets, in wash houses, or at the fountains (before the introduction of running water).

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The working-class women who participated in the movements discussed here lived in cities in which irregularities in food supplies and housing were exacerbated by repeated revolutions and wars. The cities where the actions took place combined two special qualities that were prerequisites for communal strikes: neighborhoods stood close to workplaces; and government officials were visible enough that the women themselves could make contact with the state without venturing too far from the safety of their own neighborhoods. When their workplaces were near their homes, those women who worked for wages found their principal allies in other women of their class, with whom they shared responsibilities for preserving their communities. In cities where residence and work were nearby and authorities were known by face and thus thought to be personally accountable, the working-class women's area of operation was the marketplace and surrounding neighborhood streets rather than the factory floor. Under these conditions, women acted in concert with neighbors against governors rather than with fellow workers against employers.

By the seventeenth century, every government in Europe knew that unless the government purchased grain to feed the poor in the cities, the threat of shortages would lead to protests. In the late eighteenth centuries, however, authorities preferred to allow prices of bread to fluctuate according to market values. When costs rose and the poor began to suffer, the governments repressed the populace rather than placating them with subsidized bread prices. When men and women rose up to demand subsidies, they claimed a right to a fair share of food according to a "moral economy."[3]

Although demands for necessities often resulted in massacres, authorities sometimes reacted more sympathetically to women than to men. When crowds consisted only of women or of men dressed as women (as in the Rebecca Riots in mid-nineteenth-century Wales or in the Maria of the Fountain movement in Portugal), the participants assumed that women had privileges beyond those guaranteed by law.[4] Such crowds often spoke of community rather than of individual rights. The female consciousness of these men and women empowered them to claim special benefits that balanced women's special duties as wives, mothers, and preservers of their societies with rights to act against authorities in the name of the greater good of the community.

Before the late nineteenth century, collective action in pursuit of subsistence issues was cyclical. Periodic shortages led to periodic uprisings. In the mid-nineteenth century, men of the popular classes found a way to break the cycle through sustained political effort in the form of unions and parties, which focussed on working conditions and political rights rather than on the family and neighborhood. These men formulated strategies that would enable them to plan for future economic and political redistribution of resources. But in the course of changing emphasis, they lost track of

many of the daily subsistence issues with which working-class women were most concerned.[5]

In 1864, with the establishment of the First International Workingman's Association, a loose confederation of largely male unions, socialist clubs, newspapers, and cooperative societies in Europe and America, the male struggle for radical adjustments in society assumed new organizational form.[6] Strategies for long-term changes in economics and politics replaced so-called utopian ideas about the possibilities of perfecting human beings, families, and whole communities. Despite concern about female and child labor among men in the First International, few women themselves affiliated with the organization.

Communal strikes, beginning in the latter third of the nineteenth century, differed from earlier insurrections insofar as they occurred where unions and working-class political parties already existed; this difference moved the principal arena of male politics from the community to the workplace or the state. But even those women who worked outside the home continued to organize collectively in their neighborhoods. While socialist men focussed their attention after the turn of the century on transforming society, working class women became the principal guardians of existing communities.

Communal strikes seldom began with political demands. Instead, they almost invariably were cries of protest by women against conditions that made it impossible for them to protect life. The dislocations of World War I left working-class women to defend their communities while many working-class men died as soldiers or fought as socialists and anarchists to transform political and economic systems. When working-class women took collective action, they were aroused about more immediate issues—social concerns of everyday life such as food, fuel, and shelter. These women never created permanent associations based on female consciousness in the way that their male allies developed revolutionary organizations based on the principles of anarchism and socialism; nevertheless, female consciousness contributed to a continued sense of community in twentieth-century Europe.

WOMEN'S ACTIVITIES IN LAUNCHING THE FEBRUARY 1917 REVOLUTION IN RUSSIA

World War I disrupted food supplies and cut into fuel provisions everywhere in Europe. The year between February 1917 and January 1918 witnessed urban rebellions caused by food and fuel shortages. Typical were those in Petrograd, Russia; Turin, Italy; and Malaga, Spain. The rapid urbanization that characterized European cities from the late nineteenth century on culminated during World War I epoch in high rents, housing shortages, and diminished fuel supplies. The same cycles of war and revolution that overtook Europe also swept Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

In February 1917, after three years of war during which over two million Russian soldiers died, the Russian government failed to supply food and fuel to its civilian population. Because of this failure, women in Petrograd launched a communal strike that in its final stages culminated in the overthrow of the Tsarist autocracy, against which there had been revolutionary activities for decades. In 1905, militant action had resulted in a massacre following which the government was forced to establish a parliament, known as the Duma; however, this body was actually powerless. The upheaval that began with a communal strike in 1917, however, removed the Tsar and resulted in the creation of a Provisional Government, which was meant to lay the foundations of a liberal political system in Russia. The Provisional Government was unstable, and was toppled by the Bolsheviks in October of 1917. Acting in advance of the unionized working class, women precipitated the fall of the Tsar in February 1917 with demands for bread. They thus initiated a revolutionary process that led to the Bolshevik Revolution.

Hunger was epidemic in early 1917—just as hardships due to unemployment had been in 1905—and the St. Petersburg population remembered what had happened then. On Bloody Sunday, January 6, 1905, a crowd carrying icons and led by an Orthodox Priest, Father Gapon, gathered in the plaza in front of the Tsar's Winter Palace in St. Petersburg to petition for relief. The Tsar's soldiers mowed them down, killing 1,000 and wounding countless others; among the victims were numerous women and children.[7]

Between the 1905 Russian Revolution and the end of the first year of World War I in 1915, rents more than doubled in Petrograd, (the name that replaced St. Petersburg from 1914 to 1924, when the city was renamed Leningrad.) 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 3 kopeks in 1913 to 18 kopeks in 1916. Even soap, necessary to maintain clean clothes and human dignity, rose 245 percent in 1917 Petrograd.[8] The failure of governments to ration scarce resources and the widespread belief that speculators benefited from the misery of the poor challenged the ability of states throughout Europe to govern.

Merchants speculated in grain, fuel, and meat prices, while factories from Russia to Spain dismissed workers for lack of fuel to run the plants. Male and female wage earners who faced layoffs often went on strike. Between January and February 1917, more than half a million Russian workers, mostly in Petrograd, left their jobs, and households suffered from poverty and scarcity.

The police reported at the beginning of 1917 that Petrograd was a powderkeg.

> It is believed that the slightest disturbance, on the smallest pretext, will lead to uncontrollable riots with thousands of victims. In fact, the conditions for such an explosion already exist. The economic conditions of the masses, in spite of large raises in wages, is near the point of distress. . . . Even if wages are doubled, the cost of living has trebled. The impossibility of obtaining goods, the loss of time spent queueing up in front of stores, the increasing mortality rate because of poor housing conditions, the cold and dampness resulting from lack of coal . . . —all these conditions have created such a situation that the mass of industrial workers is ready to break out in the most savage of hunger riots.[9]

The report neglected to note that all the conditions presumed to lead to an uprising fell into that sphere where the needs and obligations of all women gave them special rights to be outraged.

Most of the female 55 percent of the labor force of Petrograd in 1917 worked in unskilled positions, especially in the textile industries. After eleven- or twelve-hour shifts, the women returned home to wash, mend, take care of children, and get food. They joined their mothers, sisters, and daughters on the bread lines. A contemporary wrote in the Bolshevik women's newspaper that women had to ask themselves:

> And with what will you feed them when goods grow continually dearer and the earnings are so small? . . . Exhausted, sick from unhealthy, endless mill work, knowing no peace at home, from morning to night, day in and day out, month after month, the worker mother drudges and knows only need, only worry and grief. Her life passes in gloom, without light. . . .[10]

Russian women used the occasion of International Woman's Day (March 8 in the West but February 23 on the Julian calendar, observed in Russia) to call a meeting for "Bread and Peace," which provoked a communal strike. International Women's Day began as a means to unite the working-class community around a set of common goals, including the recognition of women's rights corresponding to their traditional obligation to feed their loved ones. From the inauguration of International Women's Day in the United States in 1909, Western Europe in 1911, and Russia in 1913, the day had become an opportunity to celebrate female consciousness and to assert women's rights to defend the working-class community.[11]

On International Women's Day, February 23, 1917, women of the militant Vyborg District, the most incendiary part of Petrograd, organized a strike in the textile mills. They convinced even those women who had earlier preferred not to go on strike to join them, and together they marched to the breadlines. Only then, after the women had gathered their forces in the streets and asserted their control over the crowd, did the insurrection spread to the huge machine shops whose male workers gave the district its well-deserved reputation for radicalism. Outside the shops, women shouted, "Down with war and high prices! Down with starvation! Bread for Workers! Bread!" Singing revolutionary songs, the women ransacked bakeries and grocery shops, while the men went to the other local factories and demanded of male workers that they support the struggle for bread that the women were already leading. Together, men and women marched down the sumptuous street known as the Bolshoi Prospekt, where members of the nobility, merchants, and government officials had their homes. Along the same street stood the academies, sections of the university, a high school, and a women's adult education center. The women already knew that the students, experienced agitators, would give them support. The Vyborg District's proximity to the centers of power, connected as it was by a bridge across the Neva River to the Winter Palace, the Admiralty, and Army Headquarters, had made women of Vyborg believe that they were unusually knowledgeable about the politics of the Russian state. The women's sense that their governors were people with whom they had a relationship meant that they held the government—not just the merchants—responsible for high costs and shortages.

The patterns of mobilization repeated themselves in other major working-class neighborhoods, such as those on Vasilevsky Island and in the Petrograd District. The poorest working-class women on Vasilevsky Island had the experience of mingling with lower-middle-class women of the artisan class. Because both groups of women shopped in the same markets, they knew each other by face and could call upon each other in times of scarcity. The Petrograd District consisted of seven islands, with the working-class neighborhoods on the west and northeast shores. Over 2,000 women worked producing medical supplies there and countless others worked in three large textile mills.[12] After working all day, these women stood together in bread lines in the hopes of securing food for their families. Through these shared experiences the working-class women of these districts intensified their female consciousness in the struggle to save their communities.

Throughout Petrograd, in the days succeeding International Women's Day, women took action. They marched from the working-class suburbs to the Tauride Gardens in front of the Duma, symbolic center of political power in the Russian state, where the workers from the metallurgical factories joined them. From neighborhoods on the other side of the Neva from the Duma, women marched to the jails, particularly the Peter Paul Fortress, to liberate their male relatives, many of whom were political prisoners because of their membership in unions or socialist groups. And many other women looted food shops. Through their neighborhood networks, women knew good from bad retailers, so women's activities in attacking known speculators in their neighborhoods amounted to a form of direct democratic distribution of scarce resources.

All political parties in Petrograd opposed the decision to launch a strike on International Women's Day, because they all knew that the working class

was not prepared to carry out a full revolution at that time; party leaders were afraid that precipitous action might result in slaughter or massive arrests.[13] The majority of working-class women, on the other hand, did not belong to the unions and political groups, although the men in their families did. Whereas the men had increasingly been drawn to the organized Left, where leaders formulated economic and political strategy, the women continued to focus their attention on immediate, local needs, the strongest of which was the desperate need for food. The women attempted to provide for their families and neighbors without any thought for women's suffrage or rights for women to participate as men's equals in any future government. And when men joined them, they did so as joint participants in a working-class community that the women helped shape according to the dictates of female consciousness.

The February Revolution took place in two stages. First there was a communal strike, which women organized and in which their demands for food and peace were central. Then there was the revolutionary phase, in which male-dominated unions and political parties took over and transformed the protest into a full-scale revolution. By the third day of citywide strikes, the demand for bread had been almost abandoned in favor of overtly revolutionary slogans.

Officials estimated that 87,000 workers walked off the job on International Women's Day and that the number of demonstrators grew to 200,000 and then to over 300,000 on February 24 and 25. The numbers may have been far larger since the statistics do not account for the women on bread lines who swelled the ranks of activists. As so often happens, mobilization provided the opportunity for political education. Initial calls for peace and bread grew more specific and the crowd extended its call to include demands for the eight-hour day, a Constituent Assembly, and a Republic.

Crowds, including large numbers of women, had taken over Nevsky Prospekt in downtown Petrograd. On February 25, two days after the insurrection began, the Tsar telegraphed General S. S. Khabalov of the Petrograd Military District, ordering him to shoot, if necessary, in order to end the women's rebellion. Khabalov summarized the problems authorities throughout the world faced when confronted with women's consumer demands. He, like they, understood that women as mothers had certain prerogatives in extreme situations where food was scarce. As Khabalov later wrote:

> This telegram, how could I say it, to be frank and sincere, was for me like a sledge-hammer blow. "To stop as of tomorrow." How? What was I going to do? How "stop"? When they asked for bread, we gave bread, and that was the end of it. But when the flags are inscribed "down with the autocracy" it's no longer a question of bread. But what then? The Tsar had ordered—we had to shoot.[14]

On February 26, the police, who had until then been incapable of action, fired into the crowds now under male leadership gathered at the Prospekt. In retaliation, people began to set fire to police stations. By Monday, February 27, almost the entire working class had gone out into the streets, where they tried to convince the soldiers to hold their fire and come over to their side.

Once the masses which included women confronted the state, the major questions were whether the troops themselves had lost faith in the legitimacy of the government. By February 1917, the massive losses that the Germans had inflicted on the Russian army had discredited the Tsar even with the soldiers. The desperate women of the working-class no longer appeared to be making political demands; what they asked seemed only reasonable. Poor women of Petrograd beseeched soldiers to lay down arms and come over to their side in the name of the higher social good represented by women acting for the whole society. The Tsar ordered Cossacks to attack the female crowds, and they approached. According to Aleksei Tarasov-Rodionov, a Tsarist officer who was an eyewitness:

> The only sound that could be heard was the resonant ring of the approaching hoofs. Then a girl walked out from the crowd. She wore a dark padded jacket and huge shoes with galoshes. A simple knitted shawl of the same color as the Cossacks' coat was bound tightly over her head. She crossed over toward the Cossacks, walking swiftly and lightly. She was quite close to the Cossack officer. A thousand eyes followed her and a thousand hearts were numb. Suddenly, she threw away some wrapping paper—and held out a bouquet of fresh red roses to the officer. The officer was young. His epaulettes flashed gayly. His saber, polished like a mirror, was firmly held in a strong hand—but suddenly the blade wavered helplessly and dangled, flashing but harmless, from the supple white-gloved wrist. The officer leaned over and took the nosegay. A mad riotous shout went up—such a shout as I had never heard and never expect to hear again. It was a wild bellow of uproarious joy.[15]

This mythical account, based on folk stories about maidens and gallant officers, tied the past to the future in which the army support for the Bolshevik Revolution in October constituted a crucial element in the victory. In February 1917, there was scarcely a morsel of bread in Petrograd; there certainly were no red roses. But the story indicates the importance that chroniclers inadvertently attributed to female consciousness—in this case, in recognizing that women can act safely where men would get shot down, especially when the issues concern survival. In fact, from the first day, troops had mutinied all over Petrograd—because they would not shoot at the women and because they themselves had become revolutionaries.

Women, acting according to female consciousness, contributed to the overthrow of the Tsar by February 27. Their demands, made in the name of the community rather than for a class, party, or union, won support from male workers and led to an army mutiny against the Tsar. The weak liberal

government that ruled for eight months fell during the October 1917 Revolution, during which the Bolshevik Party was able to lead the working class in the creation of the Soviet Union, the first socialist state.

AUGUST 1917, TURIN, ITALY

Italy, like Russia in 1917, displayed characteristics associated with many Third World countries today. Cycles of war and revolution and the irregularities of food supplies for the cities presented constant threats to the working-class community. Italy had been unified as a constitutional monarchy only in 1861, and, even by 1917, regional allegiances still prevailed over a sense of citizenship in a single nation. People in the southern provinces, including Sicily and Sardinia, felt no tie to people in the north; the people of the different regions even spoke different languages. The technologically backward, often absentee landowners of the south derived their income from grain production, but they could compete for Italian markets only if their crops were subsidized. In order to keep the nation together, the Italian state protected grain, thus insuring the incomes of southern landowners. This policy also assured that the cost of bread, the staple of working-class diets, would remain high. To an unusual degree, the price of bread was a constant irritant, capable of provoking ordinary women to take action to preserve their families' livelihoods.[16]

Turin, along the Po River in the foothills of the Alps, resembled other Italian cities with their dispersed houses and red tile roofs despite the concentration of heavy industry. Like Petrograd, Turin housed its country's metallurgical industry. In 1919 and 1920 metalworkers, including auto workers at the Fiat plant, seized the factories of Turin and organized factory councils modeled on the democratic workers' organizations called *soviets* that had emerged in Revolutionary Russian factories. Many observers thought that a revolutionary epoch had begun in Italy. But the sit-ins and the creation of factory councils in Turin were in fact the culmination of a longer revolutionary tradition. The successful confrontations with the government at the workplace had been preceded by years of grass roots political activity and organization by working-class women and men.

Women contributed to the growth of a revolutionary tradition in Italy before 1920. On May Day 1898 in Milan, an uprising over the cost of food engaged countless women.[17] In Genoa in 1900, all the dockers and other workers put down their tools, and women of the community joined them in the public squares, where they confronted police. Similar strikes followed in Turin and Florence in 1902 and in Rome in 1903. In all these strikes, it was common to place women in the front lines in the hope that police and soldiers would recognize their right to fight for bread to feed their children.

World War I exacerbated the antagonism between the Italian government and the working class. By January 1917, in the industrial cities of northern Italy, the price of flour had risen 88 percent, wine 144 percent, and potatoes 131 percent over 1910 prices.[18] In the period from 1915 to 1917, the Italian draft drew men away from Milan and Turin, the only major industrial cities in the country. The people who remained in the factories suffered from loss of rights because the government had militarized labor. Attempted strikes were tantamount to insurrection and could result in executions. For those women who found work in factories, ten- or twelve-hour shifts were followed by four and five hours in bread lines. At the Pirelli rubber plant in Turin, women constituted half of the 3,000 new workers hired between November 1914 and March 1916.[19] Their mothers and sisters who did not work outside their homes suffered along with female wage laborers from shortages and inflation. Since male and female workers labored in sex-segregated units, and since labor organizing was illegal during the war, the women who became industrial laborers were not involved in economic strikes at the workplace. However, prompted by female consciousness, they continued to act in concert with other women from their residential neighborhoods. Although women were unlikely to rebel on the factory floor, they were capable of mobilizing in pursuit of cheap food by turning their own streets into arenas for struggle.

At the beginning of March 1917, just after International Women's Day was celebrated in secret in many belligerent countries, a socialist women's collective in Turin hung posters on the walls of working class neighborhoods. The posters asked:

> 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.[20]

As shortages grew worse in August 1917, crowds of women occupied public spaces and demonstrated at the town hall, calling for an end to the war and for improved food supplies.[21] Once again, as in Petrograd, the proximity of the working-class neighborhoods to administrative centers made possible a communal strike in pursuit of demands consistent with female consciousness. Although the mayor agreed to do what he could, it was not enough. The bakers in Turin were reluctant to use all their stores of flour for the daily preparation of common bread. As early as April 1917, local authorities had suggested rationing 250 grams of flour a day for each person in the urban areas, but it was difficult to get grain from the peasants to feed the troops, let alone the people in the cities. For that, local officials needed the help of the national government. Between August 9 and 11, preparation of bread in Turin proceeded irregularly; on August 9, twenty-

seven bakeries had shut down in working-class neighborhoods like San Donato, and many women found that the short supplies had gone. There is some evidence that the national authorities manipulated shortages to discredit the city officials, who belonged to an opposing party. From the perspective of the working-class women, however, who and what caused the shortages made no difference. What mattered to them was the necessity to feed their own families.

The big crisis came on Tuesday, August 21, when more than eighty bakeries closed with signs saying "Out of Bread." Women gathered together and, with their children, marched beyond their working-class neighborhoods to protest in the plaza in front of the city hall. They were desperate and furious. It angered them that bakers had sufficient flour to bake the expensive sweet rolls (with raisins) that only the rich could afford to buy, while working-class women could not get bread for themselves or their families.

By the morning of August 22, the demonstrations over short supplies of flour caused the local government to order more from neighboring provinces. Outraged and hungry crowds, led by working-class women, vandalized trolleys. Local officials telegraphed the Minister of Interior to send emergency supplies or face an uprising in the city. On the same day, 2,000 male railroad employees followed the women's lead and went out, proclaiming that they would not work if they had no food to eat. The government took the threat of labor unrest seriously, and attempted to appease the suffering working class, by rushing flour to the city by the morning of August 23. But flour came too late; the powerful metalworkers union, including the Fiat workers, joined the women in protest against the outrageous shortages and walked off the job—back into their communities. The mobilization of the women had provoked the men to act.

What emerged was a communal strike, in which the locus of political and economic action became the streets of the working-class neighborhoods. The women made their work providing meals a matter of collective action, and, on August 23, when the women had received inadequate responses to their demands, they began to construct barricades in the southern working-class districts of San Paolo and Nizza and in the northern Milan district. The men soon joined them in the neighborhood, rather than sitting-in at the factories as they would do in 1919 and 1920.

By the evening of August 22, with barricades up throughout the working class sections of town, the police and army attacked. Despite entreaties, they did not, as in Russia in February 1917, come over to the popular side. Thirty-seven people were hospitalized and over 200 landed in jail, but the fighting went on in the Nizza, San Paolo, and Milan districts. Women and men in Nizza threw handmade bombs at the attackers, wounding several. By August 27, 1,500 had been arrested. The majority of male workers returned to the job on Monday, August 27, but the women remained away from their factory jobs because bread had become scarce again, especially in the working-class areas.

The women who protested were at first preoccupied with the availability of food; however, they also demanded an end to the war and the return of the troops so that married women would not have to work in the factories. By the time the uprising had ended on August 28, it had changed from a bread riot into a coordinated effort of the masses to end the war. Many of the survivors were jailed on charges of spreading discord and pacifism.[22] The war continued, but the communal strike established a lasting feeling of resistance in Turin. Although it is only mentioned in passing in most histories of the Italian Left, the communal strike of 1917, which women initiated, made a vital contribution to the development of revolutionary consciousness in Italy.

WOMEN'S COLLECTIVE ACTION IN SPAIN

Even nonbelligerent countries such as Spain experienced war-related shortages that contributed to the eruption of communal strikes. Spain too had experienced waves of wars and revolutions; it had even been a republic for about one year from 1873 to 1874. Spain was a constitutional monarchy ruled by strong prime ministers. Despite universal male suffrage, the poor had no say in elections. The elections were fixed by the large landowners of the south, including the areas surrounding Malaga. As in Italy, the government tried to placate these absentee landlords, who refused to invest in the mechanized reapers that made the grain from the United States, Canada, and Australia cheaper, despite shipping costs, than any wheat, oats, barley, or rye produced in Europe. Again, as in Italy, Spanish government tariffs, made to keep out cheap foreign grain and to enrich the Spanish landowners, pushed bread prices high, thus contributing to constant unrest in the urban working classes.

Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, communal strikes had occurred throughout Spain's southern region of Andalusia. In each case, people seized their own city, established a democratic government, and defended it until the inefficient state managed to move the army in to put down the urban insurrection. From 1868 to 1923, a long struggle to establish democratic rights for workers in industry and agriculture had engaged working-class women.

Since the late nineteenth century, Malaga had been a center of anarchism, a movement by which people tried to achieve direct democratic control of their city and region.[23] A socialist theory that opposed all political bureaucracies and states, anarchism had grown well in the soil of Malaga Province, which also produced grapes for raisins and wine. A more powerful government, with larger garrisons of troops distributed throughout the countryside, might have prevented anarchism from flourishing in Andalusia. But given

the weakness and impoverishment of the Spanish state, whose army was overloaded with officers and whose soldiers could not always be paid, anarchism became a sustained revolutionary tradition of popular democracy, which persisted until the Spanish Civil War of 1936–1939.

Malaga was a Mediterranean harbor city, heavily dependent on the British wine market. This dependence made Malaga's citizens sometimes painfully aware of the shifting economic changes World War I had brought. Despite propaganda from both the Allies and the Triple Alliance, Spain remained outside the actual fighting in World War I. Since there was no conscription, the local population of Malaga did not suffer from the draft. Nor was economic need linked to a peace movement. There were general food shortages, however because of the markets for food abroad, to supply the troops of belligerent countries. Because food was moved out of Malaga for sale on international markets, bread was scarce and prices high. Women in Malaga, far from the fighting, suffered from the fact that belligerents would pay high prices for even such humble food as the anchovy, their main protein source. And although these women had little understanding of the political and economic forces that caused the suffering, female consciousness roused them to action.

Among the working class whose neighborhoods were near the harbor and close to the government offices, rumors began to circulate about increased exports of fish. On the evening of January 14, 1918, women of Malaga decided to take matters into their own hands. They marched through the streets denouncing speculators and hoarders. They went to the fancy residences and resort hotels and called out the maids and the laundresses to join them in their women's cause of regulating food supplies. Then they moved to the station and auctioned huge boxes of fish to one another at thirty cents a kilo for fresh anchovies. They took sacks of potatoes off the trains scheduled to take the food to markets that could command higher prices than the women in Malaga could spend. Then they marched to the regional governor's offices and demanded that he reduce the prices of potatoes, fish, and olive oil. He promised to do this the next day, but the women were sceptical, and they moved from his offices to the storehouses for fish in order to prevent merchants from moving them to the railroad and shipping them out during the night.[24]

At 1:00 P.M. on the afternoon of January 15, hundreds of women gathered on the Alameda, the main street of the city. They marched to official centers, which they found shut against them. They drove off the children and the men who hoped to join them, yelling, "Only the women!" presumably because their female consciousness led them to believe that officials would not hurt them for fulfilling their obligations as mothers to feed their children. By 3:30 P.M., hundreds more women had increased the original crowd. The Civil Guard dispersed those who had occupied the central administrative districts on Larios Street, Granada Street, and at the Plaza of the Constitution, near the port. Later the women, representing all classes, returned and reassembled in even larger numbers. What had begun with poor women trying to protect the city's food so that there would be enough for their families turned into a movement to uphold the rights of all women to intervene in government affairs when authorities failed to assure women's ability to provide for their households. As the women moved toward the governor's office to remind him of his promises, they encountered the Civil Guard, who attempted—without success this time—to turn them back. Josefa Caparros died of gunshot wounds during the demonstrations, and the women made a cortege for her, treating her death as a murder and an attack on all women.

The Spanish troops shot at the women when they were ordered to do so. In Spain as in Italy, the government made special efforts to rotate soldiers outside their regions, to reduce the possibility that the soldiers would actually know the workers or women whom they might confront. In Italy, it was customary to use soldiers from the South, who scarcely understood the northern dialect, against movements in Turin. The Spanish government successfully did the same. When women shouted to the soldiers, "We are your wives! We are your sisters! We are your daughters!" their appeals were ineffective because of the regional differences of dress and dialect.

In the record cold winter of 1917–1918, food riots occurred in Spain from Barcelona to Alicante and from Valencia to Valladolid. Thousands of women marched to demand control of food and fuel produced in their area, to prevent food from escaping to markets where merchants could reap huge profits.[25] Despite widespread women's rebellions throughout Spain in January and February 1918 and the concommitant imposition of martial law, the government was never in danger of falling.

In Madrid, Catalonia, and the Basque country, socialists and anarchists had organized general strikes in the summer of 1917. At the same time Spanish soldiers had formed committees to demand higher pay, and congressional delegates from the Spanish Congress (the Cortes) had demanded the creation of a new constitution. Five months before the women's strikes, then, socialists and anarchists urged male workers to lay down their tools and stop working; however, the socialists and anarchists were not demanding immediate relief in the form of food or fuel as the women, acting according to female consciousness, did in the winter of 1918.

Following the women's communal struggles in January 1918, there were other insurrections in Spain. In March 1919, for example, communications and transport workers in Barcelona mobilized; many male workers were ready to overthrow the government, although their labor leaders thought they were not powerful enough to win.[26] Women did not join the mobilization in 1919, and journalists even commented that women were scarcely seen in the streets except hurrying home from market. Since there were no special shortages that would provoke those with female conscious-

ness to view their communities and families as threatened, the women carried on their domestic life. As they had in summer 1917, the unions failed to link economic issues to the broader social concerns that had galvanized working class women in Malaga, Barcelona, and elsewhere. At no time had the communal strikes in which working class women engaged been linked in strategy to other socialist or anarchist plans of action. The gallant struggles of the women of Malaga, Barcelona, Valladolid, and Valencia remain largely invisible to this day.

CRISIS OVER RENTS IN VERACRUZ, MEXICO

Mexico, whose fortunes have been tied to European events since the dawn of the modern period, experienced a number of communal strikes that were, like those in Europe, led by working-class women. One such communal strike occurred when women tried to contribute to the quality of life in Veracruz, Mexico, in July 1922.[27]

Against the background of the Mexican Revolution (which went on in different phases from 1910 to 1927), the cost of living had escalated in Veracruz. Shipping in this commercial capital of the Mexican Republic had drawn many new workers to the city since the Revolution had disrupted rural life and had driven men and women from the countryside. This migration had provided numerous customers for greedy landlords, who drove the rents sky high. Rentals went from ten to thirty pesetas a month as inflation rampaged. As long as the working class found work, they paid the unreasonably high rents, but after the shipping boom caused by World War I subsided, unemployment spread and many could not pay the inflated rents.

The ensuing evictions disrupted personal ties among neighbors and robbed people of what little security they had in the new city. There was widespread misery and increased political activity by the Left. These conditions, combined with the proximity of working-class neighborhoods to the harbor and the government centers, made a communal strike a strong possibility.

In January 1922, 3,000 men and women came together at an open-air meeting to discuss the housing crisis. A group of women and Heron Proal, a utopian socialist tailor with anarchist ideas, emerged as the leaders of the Revolutionary Tenants' Union. They called a rent strike, which, by March 3, had engaged 80 percent of the population, including a large percentage of widows, wives of sailors, and wage-earning women. Mass meetings at which people performed plays about their political situation served to educate the masses and enhance their sense of solidarity. The rent strikers demanded immediate rollbacks in rent. They also called for recognition of the Tenants' Union, which would play a role in determining fair rents and leases.

Among the most active people on the organizing committees that combed the working-class neighborhoods drumming up support were the women, who, everyone agreed, became the lifeblood of the Veracruz strike.[28] When authorities threatened violence, the rent strikers called an illegal public meeting at Francisco Ferrer Park—named for the Spanish anarchist executed in Barcelona in 1909—on July 5, 1922.

As the clock on the Women's Hospital struck 8:00 P.M., Proal (the only man involved in the leadership of the struggle) appeared, surrounded by a group of women dressed in red. Fighting broke out as the police and army attacked, beating everyone they could reach. Forty women shouted, "Viva la Revolucion Social!" ("Long live the Social Revolution!"), as 2,000 of the crowd echoed their cry. Like their Russian sisters, but with less success, they tried to win the soldiers by calling "Viva el hermano soldado!" ("Long live our soldier brothers!").

As the soldiers raised their rifles, the women led the crowd to confront them. A woman named Simona Aguirre ran ahead with her red flag and approached Colonel Lopez Manzano's car. Soldiers blocked her way. One knocked her down and pulled her flag from her hands, and the crowd surged forward to defend her. The soldiers fired into the crowd, killing and wounding a few people and arresting all the union leaders they could find.

For months after the strike women led the community in periodic demonstrations. Dockers and sailors sporadically went out on strike in 1922 and 1923. Veracruz was one of the centers of union militancy and left wing activity in Mexico. Many male dockworkers of Veracruz belonged to anarchist, socialist, or communist parties. The city was a radical hotbed, but as in European countries, the female textile workers, who constituted a large proportion of all the industrial workers, were not enrolled in trade unions.

Demonstrators came from all the political groups. Marchers, dressed in red, included men as well as women and children. Women's batallions generally carried red flags, behind which men carried signs with portraits of Lenin, Trotsky, Marx, and Bakunin. Tough men, bringing up the rear, had prepared themselves to defend the peaceful paraders. Unlike the women of Malaga, the women of Veracruz permitted men to join their political demonstrations, and thus risked additional attacks from police and soldiers, who viewed men as more threatening than women, even though none of the demonstrators was armed.

By 1923, women and men in Veracruz had won a rent ceiling that limited rent increases to 6 percent a year and the right to a year's lease at a fixed price. A law was passed establishing rent boards of tenants and landlords that ruled on health standards, but women did not ask for or gain any place on the boards.[29] Members of the Tenants' Union, who saw in the victory for rent control an opportunity to participate in the government, excluded the women who had won the victory. Inspired only by female consciousness, the women activists made no attempt to assure themselves

the right to sit on the governing boards that would regulate their housing. The exclusion of these women deprived the leftist parties, and the city as a whole, of the benefits of their skills, developed in a major grass roots movement.

CONTRADICTORY IMAGES OF WORKING WOMEN

In Petrograd, Turin, Malaga, and Veracruz, the experience of working-class women dramatically demonstrated the contradictions between the idealized images of women as self-sacrificing nurturers that most societies held and the reality of poor women's lives. Under normal circumstances, women of the popular classes never challenged the state, never called for a new political order, and never attacked authorities. The women's obsession was survival, not political or economic change. When periods of extreme scarcity drove women to expose their bodies to bullets in order to win resources necessary for their family's survival, however, these women made it clear that something was very wrong.

Socialist and anarchist ideas permeated the neighborhoods where men and women engaged in communal strikes during the era of the World War I, but it was their female consciousness that actually provoked the women to act. Without the concept of female consciousness, the political implications for women of the communal strikes that occurred during and after the World War I disappear, as they have from most histories of the period. Women who accepted the roles their societies defined for them—women who wanted to be good wives, mothers, sisters, and daughters—sometimes had to confront police or armies because of their need to provide for their loved ones. Working-class men normally overlooked the centrality of women's everyday struggle for community survival to anarchist or socialist goals. Improvements in labor conditions, political arrangements, or the conduct of war—these were the issues around which the men organized during the period. It was only when women engaged in collective action to secure food, fuel, or moderate rents, that the men recognized the relevance of women's efforts to their own goals. Understanding the role of female consciousness in the communal strikes of the era helps reveal how working-class women and men overcame different priorities to unite in social movements in the first decades of the twentieth century.

NOTES

1. Temma Kaplan, "Female Consciousness and Collective Action: The Barcelona Case, 1910–1918," *Signs*, 7, No.3 (1982), 545–66.
2. The major study of a national women's suffrage movement that provides comprehensive material on the participation of working-class women is Jill Liddington and Jill Norris, *One Hand Tied Behind Us: The Rise of the Women's Suffrage Movement* (London: Virago, 1978).
3. Olwen Hufton, "Women in Revolution, 1789–1796," *Past and Present*, 53 (1971), 90–108; E. P. Thompson, "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century," *Past and Present*, 50 (1971), 76–136.
4. George Rude, " 'Captain Swing' and 'Rebecca's Daughters' " in *The Crowd in History, 1730–1848* (New York: John Wiley, 1964), pp. 149–163; Joyce Riegelhaupt, "Maria das Fontes," Unpublished paper delivered for the Women's Studies Series, Princeton University (Spring 1981).
5. A discussion of how integral women's issues were to the Left before the advent of "scientific socialism" appears in Barbara Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem: Socialism and Feminism in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Pantheon, 1983).
6. A brief overview of the history of the three Internationals appears in *The Revolutionary Internationals, 1864–1943*, ed. Milorad M. Drakovitch (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1966).
7. Laura Engelstein, *Moscow, 1905: Working-Class Organization and Political Conflict.* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1982), p. 64. The 1905 Revolution provoked Rosa Luxemburg to write *The Mass Strike, the Political Party, and the Trade Unions*, trans. Patrick Lavin, 1st ed. 1906 (New York: Harper and Row, 1971).
8. Dale Ross, "The Role of the Women of Petrograd in War, Revolution, and Counter-Revolution, 1914–1921," Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University, 1973), pp. 23, 28; *Encarecimiento de la vida durante la guerra. Precios de las subsisténcias en España y en el extranjero, 1914–1918* (Madrid: Instituto de Reformas Sociales. Secciones la y 3a técnico-administrativas, 1918), p. 49.
9. Cited in Marc Ferro, *The Russian Revolution of February 1917*, trans. J. L. Richards (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1972), p. 32.
10. Cited in David Mandel, *The Petrograd Workers and the Fall of the Old Regime. From the February Revolution to the July Days, 1917.* Centre for Russian and East European Studies of the University of Birmingham, (London: Macmillan, 1983), pp. 25–26.
11. Temma Kaplan, "Commentary on the Socialist Origins of International Women's Day," *Feminist Studies* 11 (Spring 1985), 163–172.
12. Mandel, *The Petrograd Workers*, pp. 48–59.
13. Ferro, *The Russian Revolution*, pp. 38–39.
14. Quoted in Ferro, *The Russian Revolution*, p. 38.
15. Aleksei Tarasov-Rodionov, *February 1917*, (New York: Covici-Friede, 1931), pp. 46–47. Another discussion of the Cossack's reluctance to attack the demonstrators can be found in Tsuyoshi Hasegawa, *The February Revolution: Petrograd, 1917* (Seattle: The University of Washington Press, 1981), p. 225.