

Transcript
Dead Ladies Show Podcast Episode 31
Alexandra Kollontai

(Dead Ladies Show Music - 'Little Lily Swing' by Tri-Tachyon)

SUSAN STONE: Welcome to the Dead Ladies Show Podcast, I'm Susan Stone.

The Dead Ladies Show celebrates women — both overlooked and iconic — who achieved amazing things against all odds while they were alive. And we do it through women's history storytelling on stage — here in Berlin and beyond.

It's March, and that means everyone else is catching up to us. That is to say, it's Women's History Month. And today, the day we're sending out the show to you, is International Women's Day. In some cities, like Berlin, there will be marches and demonstrations. In other places, concerts and tours, or workshops — even YouTube watch parties and champagne brunches, which the founders of the day would probably find a little alarming.

Here on the podcast, it's time for the story of a woman you likely may never have heard of, with ties to this particular day.

Our lady of the hour, or half-hour, is Alexandra Kollontai. She was there in 1910, when Luise Zietz and Clara Zetkin proposed the idea of an International Women's Day at the Second International Conference of Socialist Women in Copenhagen. Along with some other great Dead Ladies, like Rosa Luxemburg, Alexandra Kollontai and the other more than 100 representatives from 17 countries voted in favor of a day honoring working women, to promote equal rights and inspire action. It was time for change — after all, most weren't able to vote at all at home.

In pre-revolutionary Russia, Alexandra's home, aristocratic women's lives were expected to revolve around domesticity and family responsibilities. Sound familiar? And there wasn't much they had access to beyond that, certainly not higher education. Alexandra Kollontai saw that as a legacy of the past. She wanted to change things, and she did — for herself, for the sake of love, and for many other women from different walks of life. Here's Dead Ladies Show co-founder Katy Derbyshire with her story.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: So Alexandra Kollontai, she was born in 1872. And to start off, I'm going to surprise you with a little clip. You won't be surprised anymore. It's from the film *Comrade X*, starring the wonderful Hedy Lamarr and Clark Gable. The film was made in 1940 by Americans and is set in Moscow, and it shows you what Americans thought the Soviet Union was like. And here they are at the registry office.

COMRADE X FILM CLIP:

CLARK GABLE (AS MCKINLEY B. THOMPSON): You don't feel nervous?

HEDY LAMARR (AS THEODORE): What about?

CLARK GABLE (AS MCKINLEY B. THOMPSON): Marrying a stranger.

HEDY LAMARR (AS THEODORE): This is nothing new to me. I married strangers before.

CLARK GABLE (AS MCKINLEY B. THOMPSON): Uh, how many?

HEDY LAMARR (AS THEODORE): Only two.

CLARK GABLE (AS MCKINLEY B. THOMPSON): I don't want to seem inquisitive. But what did you do with them?

HEDY LAMARR (AS THEODORE): Oh, I sent back the postal cards.

CLARK GABLE (AS MCKINLEY B. THOMPSON): Oh, playing post office.

HEDY LAMARR (AS THEODORE): You do not understand, comrade. When you get married, you're given a postal card. When you send the postal card back, marriage is over.

CLARK GABLE (AS MCKINLEY B. THOMPSON): You don't have to give any reason.

HEDY LAMARR (AS THEODORE): No, it's all on the postal card. My first husband I met at the Moscow athletics exhibition. We share the same horizontal bar. But Bastakoff said he was wrong for me.

CLARK GABLE (AS MCKINLEY B. THOMPSON): His somersaults were no good.

HEDY LAMARR (AS THEODORE): They were fine. But he was too animal, no ideals.

CLARK GABLE (AS MCKINLEY B. THOMPSON): I suppose number two was all right.

HEDY LAMARR (AS THEODORE): To the contrary! When he took his shirt off, I realized I made a dangerous mistake.

CLARK GABLE (AS MCKINLEY B. THOMPSON): Rickets?

HEDY LAMARR (AS THEODORE): No, he had a portrait of the Tsar tattooed on his chest.

CLARK GABLE (AS MCKINLEY B. THOMPSON): That's tough.

HEDY LAMARR (AS THEODORE): Yes, I felt bad. But he's at the Lubyanka prison now so everything turned out all right. (SPEAKS RUSSIAN) We are being married now, comrade.

HEDY LAMARR (AS THEODORE): Excuse me, please. What is your name?

CLARK GABLE (AS MCKINLEY B. THOMPSON): Oh, McKinley B. Thompson Here it is on the passport.

CLERK: Oh, *Amerikanyets!*

CLARK GABLE (AS MCKINLEY B. THOMPSON): Si, Señor!

(AUDIENCE LAUGHS)

KATY DERBYSHIRE: There we are! And it was actually Alexandra Kollontai, who laid the groundwork for the new Soviet Union's marriage laws. I'm going to show you my favorite photo of her, taken in 1920 at the Congress of Peoples of the East in Baku, and here she is surrounded by women from all over the Soviet Union, looking kind of a little bit sharp, I would say was the word. So in fact, from 1918 on the Soviet Union established civil marriages, rather than church marriages. They did have easy no-grounds divorces, although you did have to do more than send back a postcard. And the couple could take either the woman's or the man's name. Women could now work, obtain an education, exchange property without their husbands consent, which in West Germany they couldn't do until 1977. (AUDIENCE BOOS)

And Kollontai had worked hard to promote women's rights and activism first as a Menshevik then as a more radical Bolshevik, and finally as just a plain old communist. She was a member of the Bolshevik Central Committee in 1917, and pushed for the Russian Revolution. She made sure that women's concerns were heard by the men she fought alongside.

But in fact, her life began quite differently. Here is looking very, very sweet as a child. Lovely little ribbon in her hair. And as you can guess, a child who had a photo taken in the 1870s came from a minor aristocratic family — in St. Petersburg. Scandalously, her mother had divorced her first husband, and Alexandra grew up with her older half-sisters. She was kept at home, to kind of keep her out of trouble her parents expected her to get into at school, but she was still voraciously curious. And she learned her first progressive ideas from her English nanny and her governess. At 18, she fell in love with her cousin Vladimir, Vladimir Kollontai. Her parents were against it, but they married anyway, three years later. And they had a little son, Mikhail in 1894, who was called Micha. By this point, Alexandra was already reading a lot of Marxist literature, and she was teaching at workers evening classes.

She had a pivotal experience in 1896, right here at the Kreenholm textiles factory in Narva, which is now in Estonia, where she went with her husband who was an engineer. He was working on improvements to the factory. Kollontai was shocked by the conditions. The so-called improvements that had been made are really negligible, work was still incredibly unhealthy and exhausting. The workers were only allowed off the island on Sundays, and they lived in dorms. Kollontai went into one, and I'm going to read you a little extract from her autobiography, which translates as "*I Have Lived Many Lives*," but it's not available in English so I just translated this myself.

"On the floor between the bunks, small children played, lay sleeping, or fought, and cried, looked after by a six year old girl. I noticed the boy — who might have been the same age as my son — not moving on the ground. As I bent down to him, I was horrified to find he was dead. The tiny corpse lay among the playing children. When I asked what it meant, the six-year-old nanny answered calmly, 'It does sometimes happen to them that they die during the day. Auntie will come at six and take him away.'"

That really was the moment that changed her life. She began running errands for the Marxist party. She was organizing strike funds, and distributing leaflets. She eventually left her husband and son to go to Zurich and study Marxist economics; women couldn't study in Russia. That was the end of their marriage, but they kind of co-parented. From then on, little Micha would live with her when she was around, and with his dad when she wasn't. She wrote articles and books, about — especially about workers in Finland. Her grandfather had come from a Finnish serf family, and he built up a timber business. She agitated at strikes, she traveled and met other socialists around Europe. One of my favorite things she did, was she would go to liberal feminist meetings, and heckle. (AUDIENCE LAUGHS)

What was happening was that rich women were recruiting their maids. So their servants, to help them campaign for votes for women, but in fact only for women who owned property, not for the maids themselves. Which I don't know is really weirdly reminiscent of, of a lot of people who call themselves feminists these days. (AUDIENCE LAUGHS AT PICTURE OF IVANKA TRUMP) Anyway, Kollontai gradually became more confident as a speaker and a writer. She was aiming to recruit women workers to the Socialist Movement, and she started calling for armed uprising. That didn't escape the attention of the Czarist police, and then an arrest warrant was issued for her in 1908. She had to leave Russia and came to Berlin, where she hung out of course with Rosa Luxemburg, Clara Zetkin, and the whole gang and helped to establish International Women's Day at the Second Congress of Socialist Women in 1910 in Copenhagen. She traveled as a speaker around huge amounts of small German towns, where she was surprised by all the beer that German socialists drank at their meetings. She went to France, Belgium, Sweden, Britain, Switzerland and twice to America.

At the start of World War I, she was suddenly an enemy alien in Germany, so she and Micha escaped to Scandinavia, where she stayed until the beginning of 1917 when the first part of the revolution happened. Now, I'm not going to explain the Russian Revolution. Sorry, it's really complex. But what you need to know is, that working women and soldiers' wives played a key role. And this picture here shows women protesting on the 8th of March, International Women's Day. The banners say, "Feed the Children of the Defenders of the Motherland" and "Increase Payments to the Soldiers' Families — =Defenders of Freedom and World Peace." So Kollontai rushed back to what was then called Petrograd, and received a warm welcome and began calling for more revolution against the Provisional Government. She was elected to the city Soviet, and to the Bolshevik Central Committee, which was when she first proposed a Women's Bureau in the party, which met with a lot of resistance because surely, the revolution would automatically solve all of women's problems.

The Bolsheviks took power in November, which we call the October Revolution, because they had a different calendar to us. And that was followed by years of civil war. Kollontai was elected Kommissar of Social Welfare and you can see her here in her office drinking tea with some of her clients, if you like. She her job was to look after orphans, war veterans, old people, lepers, the blind, basically the weakest in society. But she had to battle sabotage from the old guard, and she eventually resigned. "We were hungry," she said. "We rarely succeeded in getting a night's sleep. There were so many difficulties and dangers, but we all worked passionately. But we were in a hurry to build the new Soviet life, and felt that everything we did today was desperately needed tomorrow, however rough and ready."

She committed the Bolsheviks to providing free child care, and supporting mothers with paid maternity leave — something not all countries have now. She knew that the State could only improve the laws but the women would actually have to fight for their own equality. That marriage law I talked about was the first law to be passed after the revolution, and Kollontai wrote to her son, "A big part of my energies, ideas, and struggles and the example of my life have gone into this victory." Homosexuality was decriminalized shortly afterwards. And Kollontai was

later a founding member of Magnus Hirschfeld's World League for Sexual Reform, which campaigned for greater openness around sex and policymaking — not too terribly successfully. And Kollontai was one of the first to marry in fact, under this new law, a comrade who was 11 years younger than her, but their papers were promptly lost in the system. So that didn't count very much.

Next job was at the women's department, which was called *Zhenotdel*. Pardon my Russian. Does anybody here actually speak Russian? No? Oh, thank goodness. Um, so the party finally came around to the idea of separate representation to help women, but Kollontai was already making enemies in high places. So she wasn't put in charge, but she did coordinate work with peasant women. The organization's aim was to support and represent women to uphold the principles of sexual equality, and to get women involved in political work. Kollontai wrote speeches and articles, she organized conferences, and she gave advice. She did become the director in 1920, and started working on women's sexual health and helping sex workers to get an education and move on to other work. She proposed successfully that factories set up childcare and canteens to lessen the load on women, which was another personal victory for her. The Women's Department sent its staff out to the Eastern Republics. They were teaching literacy, setting up childcare, and showing films, of course about the benefits of Soviet life.

Around this time, Kollontai was refining her ideas about love and sexuality in the new society, and she was publishing articles, including in this magazine, *Rabotnitsa*, which means 'the woman worker'. They all had really great titles. My favorite is "Make Way for Winged Eros -- A Letter to Working Youth." (AUDIENCE LAUGHS) Right? From 1923. But there's also the really marvelous "Autobiography of a Sexually Emancipated Communist Woman," (AUDIENCE LAUGHS) which really says it all, from 1926. Kollontai considered the nuclear family an oppressive relic, and sexuality a natural human instinct. She aimed for what she called 'comradely solidarity', for equality in relationships, and sensitivity in both men and women. After a lot of brief and non-committal sexual relationships during the Civil War, which she referred to as "wingless Eros," she called for changes: "Are we not liberating love from the fetters of bourgeois morality only to enslave it again?" she wrote. "Yes, my young friend, you are right." She believed the proletariat would find new ways of loving. "Men and women will strive to express their love not only in kisses and embraces, but in joint creativity and activity. The task of proletarian ideology is not to drive Eros from social life, but to rearm him according to the new social formation." I find it super inspiring. Stalin did not. (AUDIENCE LAUGHS)

Kollontai had joined a group called the Workers Opposition which criticized the government from the left, and she fell into disgrace. So in 1922, Stalin was named General Secretary and posted Kollontai Oslo as part of a trade delegation, essentially to get rid of her. She was then appointed Ambassador to Norway after the country recognized the Soviet Union officially in 1924, which made her the second female Ambassador ever. The Soviet Union actually got rid of the first one (AUDIENCE LAUGHS) because she was Armenian. Anyway, but she was very, very successful, but quite unconventional. She would eat with her entire staff around a large table every evening, she kept an open house for socialists and anti-fascists.

And she had close local friends which is kind of frowned upon in diplomatic circles apparently, and especially close woman friends.

She was posted to Mexico, where, guess who she hung out with? There's no photo, but it was Frida Kahlo and her husband. And you can see her here on the telephone looking very efficient, and also kind of stylish. She never lost that sense of style, even though on the way back to Russia to join the revolution, her trunk went missing. So she only had one dress for the whole of the Russian Revolution. (AUDIENCE LAUGHS) And people, people really, it was easy to pick on her, because she was writing about winged Eros and she read novels and it was all completely out there. And people would say, "Oh, she wears a different dress every time," and she was — she really only had one. She just had style.

Yes, anyway, Mexico wasn't terribly good for her health. So she resigned, and from 1929 and throughout World War II, she was ambassador to Sweden, where she negotiated peace with Finland in 1944, only a year after being semi-paralyzed by a stroke. Tragically, sadly, horrifically, Stalin reversed many of the changes she'd introduced, and cared about. His purges killed many of her friends in Russia, and two of her ex-partners. Here on the left, Alexandra Shlyapnikov, and on the other side is Pablo Dybenko, her second husband, the one where papers went missing? I think we can say she liked mustaches. (AUDIENCE LAUGHS) Do you remember the first husband? He also had one — he had a full beard. Anyway. Her son Micha though, survived, here he is looking quite loving, earlier on during her exile, probably taken in Norway. Maybe mustaches were just the fashion, I don't know.

She died aged 80, of a heart attack, a year before Stalin died, almost to the day. She was the only member of the Bolshevik Central Committee, which led the October Revolution, who wasn't killed in the purges, apart from Stalin, of course. You can see here in old age with, I can count five medals, or there may be some kind of pineapple application, I don't know. (AUDIENCE LAUGHS) Still looking super impressive. Although her health suffered a lot she was looked after by one of her former secretaries, who was very good friend her. Obviously we're talking about the Soviet Union, so she did have her own stamp, but not until 1972, as you can see up the top there.

Alexander Kollontai was a hugely determined woman who went her own way, and fought for what she believed in. She rarely did what was expected of her. She went against her parents, her partners, the police, and if necessary the party. And sometimes, I like to think merely surviving Stalin is an act of resistance. Reading Cathy Porter's bio here on the left, I really got the sense that she cared deeply about people. And she had many good friends who cared about her. Every time she leaves a place in the book, her friends hold a goodbye party for her. She loved deeply and unconventionally — I haven't gone into that, because there's just too much. But she found that love got in the way of her work, because of the man's expectations of her. They wanted her to be a little wife, and she wasn't going to.

And yet, she never gave up on her principle of winged Eros. It's kind of crazy to read her writing about progress in socialism, and at the same time, love and Eros and partnership and solidarity — it's gorgeous. Also if you read German, I really

recommend this tiny little book. It looks huge, and I forgot to bring it on stage but it's about this big. A tiny weeny print, which is the kind of non-edited, so it's the uncut version of *Autobiography of Sexually Emancipated Communist* and also includes *Sexual Relations and the Class Struggle*. It has a killer intro by Barbara Kirchner. I'm just going to close with Barbara Kirchner's, closing line on what we can learn from Kollontai: "If you love someone, kiss them, or think of something else you both enjoy. But whatever you do, never leave that person — the person you love alone in the wrong society." (AUDIENCE SAYS OOH) Great, huh? Thank you! (AUDIENCE APPLAUDS)

SUSAN STONE: Katy Derbyshire on Alexandra Kollontai from the stage in ACUD. Thanks to our friends there for their help, including Hyui Ines Rmi, our sound engineer. We could use *your* help. As you may know, we're working on providing accurate transcripts for our show, which costs extra time and money — women's work again. You can support us at patreon.com/deadladiesshowpodcast, and get some goodies back, from Dead Ladies Show stickers to exclusive audio from our book club, to hand-selected books from our contributors, and about our Dead Ladies. And thank you so much to everyone who has already become a patron. Your love is almost as good as your money — I imagine Alexandra Kollontai would say it is even better. And we could use some of it. That means reviews of the show on iTunes or Stitcher or Podchaser, as it helps others find the show. And also following us on social media @deadladiesshow if you can, and sharing us with your friends or your enemies if they need some informing about Dead Ladies.

That kicky music you're hearing is *Little Lily Swing* by Tri-Tachyon, which you can find on our website, deadladiesshow.com, where they will also be some great images of Alexandra Kollontai and her revolutionary friends. My revolutionary friends are Florian Duijsens and Katy Derbyshire, who founded the Dead Ladies Show back in 2015, to honor women, forgotten and famous. This podcast is created, produced and edited by me. Thanks for listening. I'm Susan Stone.

(Dead Ladies Show Music - *Little Lily Swing* by Tri-Tachyon)

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