

REBECCA KATZ THOR AND PETRA BAUER
AND ALL IS YET TO BE DONE:
IMAGES FROM A JOURNEY



“...in furthering their ideas, the feminists had to discuss methods of organisation – the most forbidden topic of all.”

Kollontai, 1920

In the spring of 1920, a group of socialist women from Sweden set out on a journey to the newly founded communist Russia.

When our dear Anna-Stina on a day in April, calm and cool as usual, came to tell us that we were to go to Russia to visit an international women's conference, we didn't believe our ears. To go to Russia, which had been our wish for years – no, it couldn't be possible!

They write a travelogue for the magazine *Red Voices*, dated 16 May 1920, Vardö. They describe their journey and their meetings throughout Sweden and Norway. Yet, their text also allows us to see something of what they saw, to see through their understanding. These excerpts might give us a sense of their situation.

After matters that needed several days, we were finally ready to depart. On May 4th, we thus said goodbye to Stockholm and installed ourselves on the northbound train.

Finally, on Wednesday at noon we arrive in Narvik. The city gives a dull impression. Its significance probably stems from its role as a shipping port for Swedish ore. Because of the coal shortage, several boat transportations are cancelled and we have to remain in the city for a few days. We immediately head for Forward, the city's socialist newspaper.

For them, the revolutionary country in the East serves as an inspiration for what could be done at home. It is a year after the law on universal suffrage has been passed in Sweden and a year before it will be implemented. A time of transformation, a time when everything seems possible, and yet little has been achieved.

We also have the opportunity to talk to [the] editor's wife, comrade Olsén, and we use this chance to get some news about the women's movement. There are two women's clubs here, with a total number of around seventy members. The Norwegian women's modus operandi are completely different from ours; they mostly strive to make money through handiwork, in order to buy shares in the party organs and the cooperative movement.

A collectivity is formed in each instance, in each town and village, and also reaches beyond the specificity of each group into the greater collective of the movement.

However, Olsén's field of work extends far beyond the women's movement. On May Day this year she mana-

ged to found, in addition to a women's club, a joint organisation between the fishermen's and the industrial workers' communities in Honningsvaag. This is the first break with the old belief that fishermen don't have anything in common with the other workers.

By acknowledging elements that usually remain invisible, such as the role of meetings, cooking and handicraft, one might offer a counter narrative. Thus, what is crucial here is to ask what kind of potential politics these gatherings produce. Then, as well as now, political organising is easily perceived within given norms and frameworks, hence the meeting and the lecture remain two common forms. Yet political organising also takes place elsewhere and by different means. Maybe these activities act as a cover up, but they can also be an actual means to act politically in a way that is defined by a specific situation.

Early Sunday morning, we embark upon the passage from Narvik and we get to see the Norwegian archipelago in brilliant sunshine. But despite the fact that it is already May, there is snow and more snow everywhere. Here and there we see small pieces of arable land, always very well utilised.

When we arrive in Tromsø, we are welcomed by our jaunty comrade Gitta Jönsson, who we know from the Scandinavian Workers' Congress and the women's movement in Stockholm. We spend some particularly pleasant hours in her home, while waiting for the boat's departure.

The women's club in Tromsö has some eighty members, and celebrates its ten-year anniversary on May 12th. Comrade Jönsson has been the chair of the club all these years. Her work as an agitator is well known, and we hope that she will have many more years of struggle in our ranks.

Our interest in history is not a question of historicising; rather, it is a quest to find what in the historical might help us create an alternative future. Hence, by shifting focus from the main sites of political action, more hidden struggles might appear. Such structures are not necessarily perceived of as political. They might want to avoid that word, but they are a place in which politics happens through conversations, education, and companionship. Literally as well as symbolically, all is not as it first appears: not for them and not for us.

On a mountain peak we see a building that we assume to be a tourist hotel or something similar. But to our great surprise we are told that it is the summer home of the youth league.

What we want to highlight is forms of resistance which are often overlooked that continually challenge and reshape communities. For instance, what is considered a political act? Which forms of resistance count? Can a sewing-club be a site for politics to take place?

After a fourteen-hour long journey on the Arctic Ocean, with three hours of full storm, we arrive at Vardö on May 11th at two o'clock in the morning.

In Vardö, the women's club have around forty members, but here, just as in Narvik, they mostly hold so-called sewing circles instead of organising socialist study groups.

In the last paragraph they express their hope to write another text, but it remains unwritten, and no written trace of their stay in Russia remains. What does remain are photographs. All images were kept in the private archive of the famous agitator Kata Dahlström. Throughout the first two decades of the twenty-first century she travelled around Sweden promoting women's issues in a socialist political realm. Most likely it is she who stands behind the camera. She frames the images, conceptually and concretely, through her representational and perspectival choices.

Tomorrow we continue the journey to Murmansk, and from there we hope to send another letter to Red Voices about the conditions in Northern Russia.

- 1 Alexandra Kollontai, 'Towards a History of the Working Women's Movement in Russia,' in *Selected Writings*, translated with an introduction and commentaries by Alix Holt (London: Allison & Busby, 1977), p. 49.

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