Class and gender have sat uneasily in recent historical scholarship. The certainties of much Marxist history in the 1970s that class was the primary or even exclusive agency of historical change began to be challenged somewhere in the mid-1980s, particularly in the North American academy, as instanced by the publication of Joan Scott’s “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis” in the *American Historical Review*, 1986. In more recent times, as poststructuralism and postmodernism have surged to the fore in Western historiography, class has seemingly been eclipsed by gender as an explanatory category, along with Marxism and the socialist project as a whole.

In fact, Marxists were among the first to attempt to theorise relations between class and gender, notably Friedrich Engels in *The Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884). As early as 1899 Nadezhda
Krupskaya, wife of Bolshevik leader Vladimir Lenin, published a pamphlet on *The Woman Worker*, which, as the title suggests, examined the role of women as workers, wives and mothers (29). But the relations between gender and class were not just internal to Bolshevik theory. They were soon to become reality in Tsarist Russia. The Bolshevik revolution of 1917 began on International Women’s Day in February when the women of Petrograd, demanding bread, took to the streets, triggering the downfall of the autocracy. Gender and class were inextricably intertwined in the subsequent course of the revolution and the initial building of Soviet socialism. The question was how would the Bolsheviks see the relationship between these two factors?

Elizabeth Wood sets out to tell us by examining Bolshevik thinking and practice during the first tumultuous decade of the revolution, 1918 to 1927. A brief introduction to the “genealogy of the woman question” leads into Bolshevik debates and policies on women through civil war, war communism, the New Economic Policy (NEP) and the onset of Stalinism. The “baba” and the “comrade” are emblematic of what Wood sees as the two poles of communist party policy towards women. The baba represented traditional Russian peasant disdain for women—nagging, emotional, small-minded—who could at best redeem themselves as housekeepers and mothers. For the Bolsheviks, the baba was synonymous with female backwardness and passivity, “behaviors and attitudes” which acted as a “brake” (Lenin) on the revolutionary proletariat and were regarded as antithetical to those required of the revolutionary “comrade” in building the new socialist order (16–7, 38).

Up until 1917 the Bolsheviks had largely followed West European Marxist orthodoxy on women: liberation would follow in the train of “revolution and the dictatorship of the proletariat” (2). Within weeks of the outbreak of revolution, however, leading Bolshevik women such as Aleksandra Kollontai were advocating the establishment of a “special party apparatus” to harness the energy of women for revolution as an antidote to the so-called baba syndrome and limited demands for equal female rights (36). Civil war, which followed hard on the heels of the Bolshevik seizure of power, added urgency to the need to mobilise women behind the nascent Soviet state and its Red Army. Mobilisation of women entailed, in Wood’s words, their “transformation” from “backward, ignorant, immobile creatures into enlightened active fighters” (48). Proposals for women to undertake obligatory military training and even go to the front were rejected. Though some women took up arms, in the main “traditional gender roles” prevailed in the Red Army (59). Likewise, in the new socialist order, women were deemed to be the “sharp eyes and tender hearts of the revolution” (67).

The primary instrument for drawing women into this new order was *Zhenotdel*, the Central Women’s Section of the communist party, which finally came into being in September 1919. “Work among women was now included on the national agenda at the highest level of the party” (75). But from its inception *Zhenotdel* and its sister sections were faced with a funda-
mental problem: how to define their relationship with both party and women. Konkordiia Samoilova, a leading Zhenotdel organiser until her death in 1921, resisted any manifestations of suffragette “separatizm” (75). The task was to draw women into the party. Kollontai, however, gave more emphasis to the “independent-creative” activity of the party’s women’s sections. In essence, Bolshevik policy hovered between the Scylla of “sameness” and the Charybdis of “difference” in relation to women and men (78). Nevertheless, in 1920–21, with the civil war won, Zhenotdel turned its attention to women’s issues such as abortion and prostitution. In November 1920 the Soviet republic became the first government in Europe to legalise abortion.

Victory, however, saw a retreat from the draconian austerity of War Communism in favour of a hybrid market-state economy, NEP, introduced in 1921. Many of the social rights that women had gained in the first flush of the revolution were under threat from concessions to the market. The result was the breaking of what Wood conceptualises as an implicit “social contract” between women and the party-state (45, 169). Economic retreat and a reassessment of party leadership prerogatives induced a “crisis” in Zhenotdel, which was threatened with “liquidation” into party agitation sections (132). The women’s sections were to be liquidated, but not until 1930 when Stalin was at the helm, by which time, allegedly, the “woman question” had been “solved” (213).

Wood’s well-written account of the rise and fall of the communist party women’s sections, which is at the heart of her story, makes excellent use of the unprecedented access which historians now have to archival materials, with the demise of the Soviet Union. This is intellectual history “from above.” She enriches our knowledge of the debates among leading Bolshevik women and men, and occasionally among rank and file activists, concerning the place of women in the revolution. She casts a critical eye too over the gendered discourse of the baba employed by even the most “feminist” Soviet revolutionaries.

In doing so, however, Wood elevates discourse over the realities of the traditional place of working and peasant women, suggesting that the Bolshevik revolution was about mythical rather than “real women” (13). Likewise, she has a tendency to project contemporary assumptions, and not just feminist ones, onto Bolshevik concerns. The priority they gave to class over gender (2) she attributes to the alleged inherent “economic determinism” of Marxism (27–8) rather than to the fact that the revolution of 1917 was driven first and foremost by class rather than any other social divisions, such as gender or nation. Wood is suspicious of the motives and methods of the Bolshevik party and Soviet state, which she sees as denying the right of women to self-determination. In essence, she judges the revolution by its failure to live up to her preconceived ideals in relation to women, overlooking the brutal material constraints imposed on the revolution by the impoverished circumstances in which it was born.
Nevertheless, *The Baba and the Comrade* is an important scholarly contribution to our knowledge of the Bolshevik revolution, as it wrestled with the relations between class and gender in the first, fledgling, socialist state.

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