By any standards, Alexandra Kollontai was an extraordinary person.

She was the only woman member of the highest body of the Russian Bolshevik Party in the crucial year of 1917. She was appointed Minister for Social Welfare in the first socialist government. As such, she became the first woman executive in any government. She inspired and developed far-sighted legislation in areas affecting women and, after she resigned her Ministry because of differences with the majority of her comrades, her work in women's affairs was reflected in the Communist Internationale.

She was an outstanding publicist and public speaker, a revolutionary organiser and writer. Several of her pamphlets were produced in millions of copies. Most of them, as well as her stories and novels, were the subjects of controversy. She was proficient in at least seven languages. She became the world's first woman ambassador.

Not least among her claims to fame was a personal life which defied convention and gave rise to much talk, scandalised or admiring, depending on the point of view.

There has recently been a revival of interest in Kollontai. I believe it can be attributed principally to the modern women's movement. She asked many of the questions we are asking — the fact that we are still seeking some of the answers suggests the difficult terrain she chose and enhances her relevance for us.

After leaving her second husband, Pavel Dybenko, she commented publicly that he had regarded her as a wife and not as an individual, that she was not what he needed because “I am a person before I am a woman”. In my view, there is no single statement which better sums up a key ingredient of Kollontai's life and theoretical work.

Many of her ideas are those that are discussed today in the modern women's movement. Sometimes she writes in what seems to be unnecessarily coy language but she was writing sixty, even seventy years ago before we had invented such words as 'sexism'. She sought to solve the dilemmas of women within the framework of marxism. While she openly chided her male comrades for their lack of appreciation of and concern for the specifics of women's oppression, she had little patience for women who refused to face the realities of class divisions in society. She was quite scathing of those feminists who put forward solutions for all women which did not take account of the actual economic and social conditions which do affect women differently.

Because marxism had only an inadequate view or no view at all on questions she considered of fundamental importance, she set out to develop that view for marxism. Hence she wrote about love, about morality, about jealousy, about women living alone, about problems of the family, about being a mother, about women at work, about prostitution, alimony and so on. She
addressed herself to real problems at every level. Her weakness was that in practical politics she often sought maximum solutions and thus could not always point to the next practical step. Like many visionaries before and since she could describe the ultimate solution but could not always answer satisfactorily the questions being immediately posed.

In some circles she is best known for her not inconsiderable achievements as a diplomat. This is especially so in Scandinavia where she lived and worked, with brief interruptions, from 1922 until 1945. In others she is identified with the ‘workers’ opposition’ movement of 1921. Her pamphlet was revived in English during the early 1960s, when interest in industrial democracy was rekindled. That movement against bureaucracy and for the independence of the trade unions pointed up many problems which faced the Soviet Union, and will perhaps face every revolution. The solutions offered by the workers’ opposition were, however, an odd mixture of commonsense and naivety, a combination of democracy and authoritarianism. Given the realities of the time, and they were hard realities in 1921, the debate was reasonably fair and open and much of what the opposition said was noted and incorporated in the bolsheviks’ program. That was an achievement even though the gains were soon whittled away and distorted under Stalin.

Alix Holt (1), who is responsible for a recent book which provides a large selection of Kollontai’s writings in English translation, claims that Kollontai is best remembered in the Soviet Union “as the proponent of the ‘glass of water theory’, the theory that sex should be as easy and uncomplicated as drinking a glass of water”. Certainly, Kollontai’s ideas on morality were a source of considerable debate in the early years of the Russian revolution. Later, and even to a degree at the time, they were subjected to distortion and ridicule. Anti-socialists were already busy showing that nothing was sacred under the dreaded bolshevism. A woman who believed in freedom for both sexes, who polemised against traditional concepts of family and who encouraged women to work and fight for their rights was an obvious subject for their ridicule. But it wasn’t only the anti-socialists. Within the Soviet Union, after the turbulent years of war, revolution and civil war, many yearned for stability and order, which means, among other things, a regulated family life where men and women occupy defined traditional roles. Her political opponents were not above using her controversial views on one matter to help defeat her in debates on other matters. It is still a familiar situation for most women in politics.

Kollontai may be remembered for her glass of water, but she is best known in the Soviet Union as a diplomat. Her diplomatic career is the subject of various books and articles and a film about that part of her life.

She is also known for a specific support she gave to Lenin. When Lenin returned to Russia in early 1917 he presented ten theses to his comrades on what should be done. Known now as the ‘April Theses’, they proposed immediate preparation for the socialist revolution. The bolshevik leaders said quite bluntly that it was far too early to consider revolution. As there was a meeting of the mensheviks in progress on a different floor of the same building, it was agreed that Lenin should present his views to a joint meeting. Only one person in that entire audience spoke up in support of Lenin’s views. Krupskaya, Lenin’s widow, writes in her Memories of Lenin (2) of the ‘fervent’ speech Kollontai made that day. As in other circumstances, Kollontai favoured the ultimate rather than the compromise. In this case, she and Lenin were right. What better way to remember her?

Still others recall Kollontai as a great survivor, implying that she compromised herself to survive. It is true that she lived out her life until 1952, dying in Moscow a few weeks short of her 80th birthday. It is also true that most of her famous comrades, friends and lovers died in front of Stalin’s firing squads, or disappeared in forced labour camps or were sent into exile. There are many speculations as to why she survived, some petty, some malicious, and most not convincing.

What are the sources of our knowledge of Kollontai?

For those who read Russian, there are several fine collections of Kollontai’s work
and now, thanks to Alix Holt, there is a broad-ranging selection in English but we could have been introduced to Kollontai in Australia through her own words as far back as in 1920 or 1921.

At that time Kollontai’s work *The Family and the Communist State*, written in 1919, was published in Melbourne under the title *Communism and the Family*. It was one of the very few writings of the Russian revolution published here, an indication of Kollontai’s place in the bolshevik leadership at the time and some recognition of the importance given to the topic by early communists. Incidentally, that pamphlet was reissued here in January 1971 by the Communist Party of Australia, some time before other publishers in the English language had recognised her relevance to the modern women’s movement.

A large unpublished source is a collection of her papers which was placed in the University of Gottenborg, Western Sweden, some years ago. This collection was made available from the estate of a Swedish medical practitioner and feminist, Ada Lindstrom. The circumstances of the collection seem to be these: when Kollontai was transferred from Norway to the Soviet Embassy in Sweden in 1930, she chose Ada Lindstrom as her doctor, and they became friends. The collection consists of some 300 pieces. Only 4 or 5 items — a section of a letter, several postcards and an invitation — date from before 1935. But beginning with a postcard in March 1935, there are frequent letters and cards, seemingly everything.

In the mid-1930s, when Kollontai went to Moscow for her annual consultation with the Foreign Office, she thought that something might happen to her, a quite reasonable assumption in the time of the purges. It seems that, as a precaution, she left behind in Stockholm in the care of Ada Lindstrom, a collection of her private papers and some of Pavel Dybenko (the man of peasant origin, 17 years her junior, whom she had married in her middle age shortly after the revolution). She said that these were the papers she would use when, eventually, she published her autobiography. Fortunately she escaped the purges. (Dybenko was not so lucky; he was shot in 1938.) Unfortunately or students of Kollontai, she took these papers with her when she retired to Moscow in 1945. According to her letters to Ada Lindstrom, she worked on her memoirs after 1945, revised them and prepared them for publication in 1948. She expected they would be published in America and France, as well as in the Soviet Union that year. In one letter she promised to send a copy to Ada, in others she asks Ada to send her reviews from the foreign press. But the book never appeared. She also refers to documents she had prepared but did not want published for some years.

Further evidence of the missing material has been given by a woman who was Kollontai’s secretary-companion for many years. This woman, a Swedish national, returned to Moscow with her and continued to live there after Kollontai’s death. A Swedish historian, Agneta Pleijel (2A), obtained an interview with her in the early 1970s. She wrote an article stating that the companion, Emy, confirmed what the letters say, namely, that Kollontai had worked for several years on her autobiography and had expected it would be published and that she had also prepared several collections of
documents for publication. She had specified that some should not be published before the 1950s and others should not be published until 1972.

Interestingly enough, her American diaries of 1915-1916 were published in the Soviet Union in 1962 and in 1970 and a body of work appeared about her, by several Soviet historians in the 60s and 70s. Some of these drew on previously unpublished sources.

In the absence of her definitive biography, we must look elsewhere. At least we should not confine ourselves to her short piece, written in 1926 and revised by her but as yet unpublished in the Soviet Union. This is the piece called Autobiography of a Sexually Emancipated Woman. It was published in English in 1972, together with her own revisions which some take as an illustration of how prepared she was to compromise herself for Stalin. We will return to this theory and to the significance of the year 1926 in Kollontai's life.

We can follow Kollontai too through the eyes of Louise Bryant whose book of reportage called Six Red Months in Russia (3) was published in 1919. She devotes a chapter to two women, both Ministers of Social Welfare. The first was Panina, a Minister in the Kerensky Government, the second was Kollontai. Bryant tells what I believe to be a quite revealing story. She was present one day when a group of elderly people came to visit Kollontai in her office. They were a delegation from an old people's home. Kollontai explained to Bryant that the old people now had the right to run their institution themselves, to elect their own officers and choose their own menus. Bryant, knowing full well the near-starvation rations then operating in the aftermath of the revolution and the war, expressed considerable doubt that the old people could make a meaningful choice of their menu. Kollontai burst out laughing and then said: "Surely you can understand that there is a great deal of moral satisfaction in deciding whether you want thick cabbage soup or thin cabbage soup". On the basis of this and other examples, Bryant concluded that a secret of Kollontai's undoubted success as Minister of Social Welfare was that she allowed other people to take their own decisions. There are many other examples to illustrate that style. She was committed to self-management and saw that as crucial for workers generally and women specifically.

There are many other contemporary references and some recent pieces on Kollontai. Here I will mention only three.

There is Isabel de Palencia's book written in 1947. Palencia was the representative of Republican Spain in Sweden. Her gossipy book barely qualifies as politics. Alix Holt calls it 'trivia'. Kollontai refers to it in several letters to Ada Lindstrom as 'amusing'.

There is Empire of Fear (5) by those famous Soviet defectors, V. and E. Petrov. They were not known for their accuracy in the Royal Commission held in this country after their defection in 1954. I cannot say if their description of life in the Soviet Embassy in Sweden is accurate: they do claim that some of Kollontai's personal writings were taken by the KGB, and that may be so, but they also claim that her child was fathered by her second husband, Pavel Dybenko. Since the child was born around 1896 when Dybenko was all of 6 years old, I find that hard to believe.

And there is Michael Body's work (6) published in an anti-communist journal in France in 1952. Body was a French socialist who worked with Kollontai in Norway in the 1920s. Some of his conclusions are suspect but some are collaborated from other sources.

What, then, do we know of Kollontai?

She was born Alexandra Mikhailovna Domontovich on April 1st, 1872 into a family of the old Russian nobility, the only child of her mother's second marriage. In her own words she was the youngest, most spoiled and most coddled member of the family and she claims to have had an early awareness of the conditions of peasant children with whom she played. She also had a Finnish grandfather, which perhaps explains her lifelong interest in the problems of the Finnish nation, and more generally, the problems of national minorities. She did not go to school but studied at home under a
tutor. As luck would have it, her tutor was connected to Russian revolutionary circles.

In 1893, at the age of 21, she clashed with her parents over an intended marriage of convenience and insisted on her right to marry her cousin, Volodya Kollontai.

The marriage lasted only a few years, during which time her son was born. She wrote in 1926: “Although I personally raised my child with great care, great passion, motherhood was never the kernel of my existence”. She claimed that when she left him she still loved her husband but felt she was in a ‘cage’. Her sympathies and interests were with social questions. It all sounds very familiar, but to situate her reactions in their time it could be noted that Engels’ basic work, The Origin of the Family, had been published for the first time in the year when Kollontai turned 12.

Although she read and studied widely, she says that a turning point in her life came when she visited a textile factory and saw the conditions of work of the 12,000 employees, men and women. In the years after leaving her husband, she studied in Europe, travelled, taught, attended conferences and congresses, met names from the history books — Karl Marx’s daughter Laura, Rosa Luxemburg, Plekanov, among others.

By 1905 she had become an energetic orator for the revolution. She dates her concern for women’s liberation to this time, saying that she became conscious of ‘how meager’ was the interest shown by the workers’ movement in the fate of women. Since she was convinced that women’s liberation could take place only as a result of a new social order, she fought so that the workers’ movement would make women’s liberation one of its aims. She didn’t obtain much support but the first working women’s club was formed in St. Petersburg in 1907.

Soon after, to escape imprisonment, she went into exile. She records how she was accused by male comrades of feminism and of giving too much time to women. That’s familiar, too. In her case, it was hardly just. In the same period, she was very active on behalf of Finland and in developing a theoretical position on the rights of national minorities.

From 1908 until 1917 she lived abroad, mainly in Germany, where she worked as a member of the German social democratic party. She travelled to London to join the suffrage campaign, to Italy to lecture, to Sweden and Denmark on speaking tours, and all the time she was plugging away at the woman question. Her appeals for support were made to the working class parties and against what she called bourgeois feminism.

By 1914 the mensheviks, with whom Kollontai then identified, and the bolsheviks had recognised the importance of women to the extent that they established magazines for working women, celebrated March 8 and raised matters concerning women workers in the trade unions. Kollontai, from exile, was called on to help.

She had strong connections with the textile workers’ union and had become something of an expert on maternity welfare. She studied the then 14 countries which had forms of maternity assistance, specifically praising Australia for its legislation which gave a lump sum payment to all mothers. That lump sum payment is now also history. Later she was to use these studies to draft the first Soviet insurance laws. In Paris in 1911 she organised a housewives’ strike and thereafter placed growing emphasis on the
secondary mode of production in society, housework.

She tells us frankly that despite all the travel, excitement and activity she still found time for personal relationships but she was annoyed by the fact that love affairs consume so much energy, that men try to mould women into willing sounding boards for their egos. She also regrets that, as a woman, she had no space, no welcoming hearth to return to as male comrades usually do. She writes scathingly of double standards, mentioning specifically that men are not judged by whom they marry but women are, particularly if he is less educated, younger and handsome. During some of this time her son was cared for by friends, at other times he lived with her.

At outbreak of war she and her son were arrested in Germany. Later she went to Sweden and served a term in prison there. From Norway in 1915 she contacted Lenin in Switzerland. They continued an exchange of letters and ideas until Lenin's death. She was totally opposed to the war, and shocked at the response of the majority of German social democrats who became enthusiastic supporters of the war. Finding that Lenin took an internationalist position in opposition to the war, she joined the bolsheviks.

She undertook a lengthy speaking tour of the United States and was back in Norway only a short time before the czar was overthrown. She notes that in the war years, women’s liberation took a secondary position. She felt that was justified, that the greatest efforts had to be made in stopping the war and that no real advance could be made by anyone while it continued.

Back in Russia she found she could join her two concerns. In May, the bolsheviks began a weekly publication entitled The Women Workers and Kollontai’s first article dealt with the high cost of living resulting from the war. In the same month she participated in a strike of laundry workers. She tried during this time to get her party to agree to form organisations of women, but failed. She settled instead on organising a conference of women workers. In the July days of 1917 she was in Sweden. Hearing of the arrest of her comrades she insisted on returning herself, although later she admitted this was impetuous. She too was arrested and held for 6 weeks. In this time she became a member of the Central Committee of the Bolshevik Party, elected at the 6th Party Congress.

There is considerable evidence that her elevation to the leadership had more to do with her Finnish connections, her concern for and detailed knowledge of the Finnish people than the fact that she was a woman. Nevertheless, within weeks she was Minister for Social Welfare, where she considered her greatest achievement was the formation of homes for maternity and infant care.

Life was a struggle. A model ‘Pre-natal Care Palace’ and a model day nursery she had established were burnt down in suspicious circumstances. Free maternity care was portrayed by reaction as nationalisation of women. Responsible too for the war wounded, she took over a monastery as a hospital. Her party criticised her for this confrontation with the church while the church organised a demonstration against her. But she achieved much and some of it lasting. Legislation was passed on maternity leave, child care, abortion and related areas. However, in a short time, she was at odds with the leaders of the bolsheviks.

Of the differences which developed in the party at that time, she wrote in 1926: "Now began a dark time of my life which I cannot treat of here since the events are still too fresh in my mind. But the day will also come when I will give an account of them." (7) It seems likely that such an account was written in her unpublished autobiography.

Be that as it may, she felt it necessary to resign from the Ministry. After a short time in the field, the untimely death of Inessa Armand (8) caused her to return to Moscow to head the Central Women’s Department. The first post-revolution Women’s Congress had taken place in November 1918. Then and more particularly when she worked in the Women’s Department, she was involved in forming people’s kitchens, day-care centres, drawing women into the educational system and countless other tasks which together, she felt, would lay the basis for women’s liberation.

At the start of the civil war she had been in the field where she engaged in propaganda...
work with the troops but more and more it was work among women which had her attention. During the time she headed the Women’s Department, abortion was legalised, a women’s newspaper founded, and two world conferences of communist women were held.

Her books and articles on morality were only one of the many controversies she was involved in. According to her own words she accepted the position in the Soviet legation in Norway in 1922 because she assumed it would be a mere formality and she would have time to write and think. She did write a little. Perhaps her most controversial pieces were *The Winged Eros* (9) in which she advises young people on attitudes to love, and her three short novels, recently reissued in English under the title *Love of Worker Bees* (10). But diplomatic life, as she found it, was no formality. In 1923 she was appointed head of the mission and by 1924 was ambassador. She became a skilled negotiator in matters of trade as in other areas of diplomatic life. In 1926 she was appointed to Mexico, but stayed only a short time because the climate adversely affected her health.

According to Michael Body, in 1926 when she wrote the short autobiography previously mentioned, she had planned to retire and write. He says she wanted to write about what had gone wrong with the revolution. It is certainly true that in several letters to different people around this time she said she would leave the diplomatic service and ‘be free’. But if, in the early part of 1926, that had been her plan, she changed it. Again, according to Body, she agreed to stay on in the diplomatic service and write for history. 1926 was the year of the attempt to develop a united opposition to Stalin. Perhaps she thought it would succeed.

More likely Alix Holt is right. She believes that Kollontai had wanted to re-enter active politics in 1926 after several years as a diplomat, but found that political life had changed considerably in her absence. The debates in the Party had all but ceased. If she had been unsuccessful in putting forward concrete plans to assist women in the period of the NEP (11) — and this is clearly her weakness — what could she do in the situation of 1926? It must be added that while Lenin and Trotsky had not endorsed many of her views, they had encouraged debate and they had been supportive of the rights of women. Now one was dead and the other isolated.

In 1926 she did enter the party political debates briefly on the laws concerning marriage, with particular reference to alimony. She made telling points with considerable humour but there is a certain unreality about her proposals. She knew that the Soviet Union was then much too poor to afford a comprehensive social security system but she balked at the idea that the property of a marriage or a common law relationship (then recognised as valid for the
first time) be divided when that marriage is dissolved and that men be made responsible for the upkeep of their children. She looked at the question through the eyes of the poor workers and peasants. Poor workers had little or no property anyway, a peasant couldn’t really divide a single cow. She was also realistic enough to recognise that many people have more than one relationship in a lifetime. The cow might have to be divided not once but twice. She proposed instead a tax — to guarantee the upkeep of the children of the poor, together with a system of contracts to replace marriage registration for all those who had property and income which could be divided. In a sense, hers was a class comment on alimony and a comment free of hypocrisy. For example, she used the occasion to raise again the need for satisfactory birth control. But she found, as others have found since, that there is no point in having elaborate plans, no matter how just and logical, which answer questions which no-one is asking or which society has no means to solve.

After 1926 her diplomatic life continued but her party political life ceased.

In 1927 she was in Norway. In 1930 she was transferred to Sweden where she remained till her retirement in 1945. Her main achievement, in this period, was the negotiation of the Finnish–Soviet peace in 1940: Lenin’s far-sightedness had paid off. Finland needed a sympathetic negotiator on the Soviet side at that time. She received several decorations and awards from the Soviet, Finnish and Swedish governments. She lived quietly in her Moscow flat, writing and putting her papers in order. She died of a heart attack one day after International Women’s Day in 1952.

Alix Holt gives particular emphasis to another aspect of the period after 1926: she published almost nothing. Indeed, from 1923, when she first retired from active politics, there is nothing recorded at all until 1926 when she again, temporarily entered into debate. Thereafter, until her death there are no more than 15 pieces, covering a period of 25 years. Most of these are non-controversial reportage — about life in Mexico, reminiscences about Lenin and various famous women and stories from her own life. You can find nothing in print where she praises Stalin and this is especially surprising because everyone, Lenin’s widow Krupskaya included, had to sing his praises sometime.

In 1927 her novel, A Great Love, was published. It appeared in English in 1929. There are a few theories about this. Robert McNeal (12) in his biography of Krupskaya, Bride of the Revolution, draws on what Michael Body claims Kollontai had told him of a relationship which had existed between Lenin and Inessa Armand. Both McNeal and Body and some others consider that Kollontai’s A Great Love is a thinly disguised account of that relationship. And McNeal goes further, he claims that the novel was written and published in 1927 as part of Stalin’s campaign to destroy the authority of Krupskaya and, through her, the opposition.

It is true that there are similarities between the content of the book and what is thought to have happened between Armand, Lenin and Krupskaya but the similarities are such that they could more or less be accounted for by the fact that in many affairs there are an older woman — the wife — who is hurt, and a younger woman — the mistress — who isn’t very happy either.

If we are to believe that Kollontai wrote this novel vindictively, we have to believe that she had lost all sympathy with the opposition in the Bolshevik Party, yet everything else points to the fact that she gave less support to stalinism than most. We would also have to believe that she would sacrifice a women friend for a male political opponent. If she did that, it is entirely out of character. It seems more likely that she wrote the novel to carry on her theme that women need to be independent but those of her generation, even the most emancipated, the ‘single women’ as she calls them, continue to seek close personal ties with a man and are usually disappointed. She said over and over in articles, stories and novels that women need to learn to make personal life a part of existence, as men do, and not their whole existence — even temporarily. In an essay on a variety of ‘single women’ as portrayed in literature, she tries to define her new woman, she says:

This new woman brings with her something alien, that at times repels us because of its newness as a breed, so to
speak. We peer at it closely, looking for familiar, agreeable traits of which our mothers and grandmothers were the bearers. But the type who stands before us has broken with the past and harbors within herself a whole world of new feelings, experiences, and demands. Doubt rises in us, we are almost disappointed. Where is the engaging submissiveness and softness of yore?....Before us stands woman as personality....with her own individuality, who asserts herself—in short, the woman who has broken the rusted fetters of her sex.

Her 1927 novel is about such a woman. A Great Love could have been based on any number of women; certainly Armand had left her husband and sought a political life of her own. And Armand, like Kollontai, believed in living her life on her own terms but it is drawing a long bow to claim that A Great Love was written as a key part in Stalin's struggle for hegemony.

If Kollontai had consciously aided Stalin in 1927, there is no explanation why she did not aid him later, especially in the mid-1930s. Alix Holt is correct to draw attention to the fact that her main writing ended in 1923. This followed her failure to make progress with her policies for women in the NEP period and her subsequent retirement from party politics. It preceded the rigidifying of stalinism as a system. By maintaining a situation where she wrote nothing in later years, she avoided praising Stalin. Even in her many private letters to Ada Lindstrom, she seldom mentions Soviet politics and never mentions Stalin. Sometimes she mentions she is "happy for her country"; in April 1948 she is "happy about the treaties" (a further reference to Soviet-Scandinavian relations), at the end of 1947 she wrote that "the monetary reform is a brilliant act" and not much more. On the other hand, those same letters have quite a few references to everyday life and some unflattering things to say about the inefficiency of the Soviet postal service. Alix Holt comments on Kollontai's silence as follows:

In view of the fact that she had long considered work among women to be the main area of her political activity, the silence was particularly striking. In the last twenty-five years of her life she appears to have only made two public statements on the position of contemporary Soviet woman. The first occasion was in 1935, when as a member of the Soviet delegation to the League of Nations she spoke in the legal commission on questions of the legal and economic position of women. Kollontai kept to the facts as much as possible, emphasising the impressive legal equalities that Soviet women had won; Pravda considered only one short extract to be worth quoting.

On the second occasion, in her article "Soviet Woman: Citizenship with Equal Rights" which appeared in (the journal) Soviet Woman in the autumn of 1948, she limits herself to a survey of legal benefits, with another long diversion into history. Her only moving bow is the congratulations which she offers the government on having created the conditions for women to be able to 'fulfil her natural duty....to be a mother, the educator of her children and the mistress of her home".

I would add that anyone familiar with Kollontai's views, her commitment to women's liberation and her use of irony in many of her earlier speeches might have harboured doubts that a tribute couched in such terms was intended as praise.

No one can say with certainty why Kollontai stayed on in the diplomatic service of a country whose leadership was to destroy so many of its early revolutionary gains, particularly the gains made for women, and was to condemn to death or imprisonment many of her closest comrades. It seems most likely that she felt some contribution was better than none — and her diplomatic contribution was both positive and considerable. It is also clear from her letters to Ada Lindstrom that she understood the fascist danger quite early. Since she had a burning hatred of war she must have wanted to contribute to avoiding a new war.

As to why she escaped the purges — the most likely reasons are the obvious ones: that she lived abroad and that she had ceased to be a controversial figure. Her silence may have irritated Stalin but at least she did not give him any new ammunition to use against her.

What then can one say of her contribution? She developed for marxism a whole body of ideas. She is a pathfinder who shows that the
institution of the family, attitudes to love and personal responses and concepts of morality are not fixed and immutable but socially conditioned and economically based. She understood, if somewhat inadequately, that there is no simple equation between one's consciousness and one's social situation, rather that one must struggle for consciousness. Her article, “Sexual Relations and the Class Struggle” (13), is an excellent example of an attempt to grapple with the way consciousness is moulded. While she is, in my view, over-optimistic on the potential of the working class to develop new forms of personal relations, she states the problems in all their complexity and points to some solutions and she is quite clear that we cannot wait until there is a new society to change ideology, rather, “a social group works out its ideology, and consequently its sexual morality, in the process of its struggle”.

Of course she dreamed. In one article she imagines a situation in 1970. The article is called “Soon” (14). It was written in 1922. Sadly, much of what she predicts is far from being achieved anywhere but the vision of the future is important anyway, even if it will come later and not soon.

And there are gaps in her theory — which also includes a certain idealisation of motherhood. But I think if she had done nothing else but write one speech, which she gave to a women’s meeting in 1921, she would be worthy of a place in any collected works of socialists and feminists. It is entitled “On prostitution and ways of fighting it” (15). Without oversimplifying, it’s worth noting her all-sided treatment of the question, that she understood that prostitution, as an institution, is akin to the institution of marriage, that both flourish because women are conditioned by centuries of education to expect material favours from men in return for sexual favours. She sought to change the situation where women are deprived, or refuse, or are prevented from engaging in socially useful work (16). She hated everything which acted against equality, solidarity and comradeship. In her view a man who buys the favours of a woman inside or outside of marriage — and the verb is buy — cannot see a woman as a comrade or as a person with equal rights. I think that is profoundly truthful.

And finally she was committed to the abolition of domestic labour. She well understood the significance of domestic labour in the economy and the sexual division of labour as the source of women’s oppression. She tried to convince the bolsheviks that it was necessary to devote resources to solving this question. The consequences of her failure in this respect represent a warning to us all. She did not invent the slogan, “There can be no socialism without women’s liberation and no women’s liberation without socialism” but that, I believe, is her essential message.

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(3) Six Red Months in Russia, Louise Bryant, George H. Doran Company, New York.
(6) “Alexandra Kollontai” in Preuves, April, 1952.
(8) She died of cholera in September, 1920.
(9) “Make Way for the Winged Eros”, article in Molodaya quaridia, No. 3, 1923.
(11) The New Economic Policy, which followed ‘War Communism’. It was considered a step back by Kollontai (and others).
(13) Appears in Alix Holt’s translations.
(14) Appears in Alix Holt’s translations.
(15) Appears in Alix Holt’s translations.