**Women, nationalism and the Russian right, 1905-17**

*Abstract*: This essay examines the activity of women in the Russian organized right between 1905 and 1917. It is particularly concerned with the scale of the female membership of the right-wing movement, and their connection to philanthropic and political roles. It examines the backgrounds of the women who joined the movement, the type of the activities that they became involved in, and where these women’s clubs fitted into the social mission of the Russian right in the early twentieth century. It then considers the role of women in charity activities and what this can tell us about female agency in the right-wing movement. A final aim is to assess whether these organizations mirrored more radical characteristics emerging elsewhere in the right-wing movement, or whether they were mostly building on established trends in women’s civic group formation.

*Keywords*: right-wing movements, nationalism, conservatism, women, charity, anti-Semitism, imperial Russia.

‘The Circles of Russian Women of the Khar’kov Union of Russian People list the following aims of our organization…the improvement of the material and living conditions of the lives of members of the Union’ [‘Кружок Руск. Женщ. при Х. С. Р. Н. Ставит своею целью содействовать, по возможности, улучшению материальных и нравственных условий жизни членов Союза’] [КРЖ, с. 3]. This statement, from a pamphlet published in 1907 listing the rules and regulations from one of dozens of women’s clubs in the Russian Empire, shows a novel element of right-wing mobilization after 1905 – the appearance of women’s groups during what activists considered to be the new ‘time of troubles’ [‘смутное время’].[[1]](#footnote-1) Though relatively few in number, female activists were deeply involved in the Russian right and played a key role in leaders’ desires to increase its social reach. This essay shall investigate the gendered role of women within the movement, and what their involvement in the Russian right tells us about its evolution from 1905-17.

‘The right’ has often proved difficult to define, in Russia and elsewhere. Here, the right refers to national (or major) groups, many of which appeared during or just after the Russian Revolution of 1905. The most significant groups, in terms of membership and influence, were: the Russian Assembly; the Union of Russian People; the Union of Russian Men; the Russian Monarchist Party and the Union of the Arkhangel Mikhail. [Rawson, p. 21-72]. Also under review are smaller groups nominally linked to these associations that adhered to the same principles and collaborated with them. [Гросул, с. 120-141].[[2]](#footnote-2) Sergei Uvarov’s formula of ‘Official Nationality’ (1832), and the three central principles of Russian nationalism, Russian Orthodox religion and Russian autocracy, served to connect these groups. After 1905, rightists tended to seek a mass membership basis and became engaged in national politics. Traditional principles of Official Nationality became infused with a right-wing politics that distinguished this new right from older conservative groups. The resulting anger whipped up by activists was directed against a multitude of enemies, including but not limited to landowners, capitalists, freemasons, non-Russian nationalities and Jews; in this, the Russian right mirrored a populist right-wing politics emerging across contemporary Europe, spurred on by rapid industrialization and the growing influence of non-native cultures [Rogger and Weber; Rosenthal and Rodic]. Occasionally this vehemence was manifested in outbreaks of violence, emblematic of a new right-wing radicalism.

Historians in the Soviet Union wrote little on what were described as the ‘black hundreds’ (*chernosotentsy*) [Аврех]. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, historians have written much more on right-wing parties, asking a range of questions of the movement [Rawson; Степанов, 2005; Кирьянов, 2001; Витухновская-Кауппала]. The topic now occupies an important place in the historiography of the late Russian Empire, with several recent works published on the subject [Лукьянов; Vydra; Gilbert]. Some of these analyses examine problems of party formation, whilst others look closely at the social base of the right and who joined the movement [Кирьянов, 2001]. Thanks to extensive recent research, there is also now much documentary material available on the right [Кирьянов, 1998]. Welcome attention has been given to the workers, students and peasants who joined the parties, illustrating diverse social foundations. In spite of such advances there is little on women’s involvement, and on the gender question the literature is almost silent [Омельянчук, с. 134-136, 211-213; Gilbert, p. 177-179]. Conversely, whilst the presence of women in far-right groups in modern European history has often been remarked upon, it has not, until now, been applied to study of the pre-revolutionary Russian right [Hainsworth, Passmore]. This article will contribute to the growing literature by examining female involvement in the Russian radical right.

In spite of Russia’s patriarchal system, women were deeply involved in cultural, social and political life in the late Russian Empire and formed the majority of the population. Populist right-wing groups that sought as wide a social base as possible would, therefore, look to recruit women to their cause in order to most effectively realize their aim of mass membership. But, going beyond the numbers, the chief concern here is to understand how the female role was defined within the right, whether it was considered to be social, philanthropic or political, and by whom. Furthermore, women’s groups were an important part of the right-wing presence nationally, which can prompt us to ask questions about other sections of the right-wing movement. Were they, like much of the right, radical groups, or more conservatively inclined organizations? Did the women involved seek out non-traditional roles, or was their presence one constructed by male leaders of national groups?

The roots of the women’s groups, as for nearly all groups in the right, can be found in the forces unleashed during the 1905 revolution. At the start of the year the organized right was a very small presence. Clubs such as the Russian Assembly, founded in 1901 in St. Petersburg, could count on only a few dozen committed activists and a small propaganda operation, with dozens of journals and pamphlets in circulation at any one time [Кирьянов*,* 2003]. April 1905 saw the formation of the Russian Monarchist Party (RMP) in Moscow, led by Vladimir Gringmut, but this was also small in scale with no more than several hundred committed members [Rawson, p. 34-45.]. This changed fundamentally in the latter months of 1905, following intense revolutionary activity throughout the year. Workers’ strikes and peasant uprisings across the entire empire forced Russia’s rulers into a series of unprecedented concessions. The October Manifesto saw a range of changes, including: the convocation of a legislative parliament (State Duma) for the first time in Russia’s history; laws of religious toleration; freedom of expression for non-Russian minorities, and the lifting of the ban on political group formation [Ascher, 1988, 1992].

This led to the mobilization of conservative opinion, due to an idea that Russia was under threat, and, particularly, that autocratic traditions had been compromised. Russian conservatism was a broad church, encompassing figures like the moderate pro-parliament Sergei Witte and the reactionary Minister of the Interior (1902-04) Vyacheslav von Pleve; its diversification in the wake of the revolution also saw the formation of political groups on the far right that claimed to be defending Russian traditions. The largest of these was the Union of Russian People (URP), founded in St. Petersburg in 1905 by the physician Aleksandr Dubrovin; other major groups included the Union of Russian Men (URM), and, later, the Union of the Arkhangel Mikhail (UAM, formed in 1908). The spread of the right was thereafter rapid: activists across the empire signed up thousands to the movement which at one stage numbered as many as 400,000 members, with over 350,000 joining the URP and the remainder other large parties plus a myriad of smaller groups [Степанов, 2005, c. 180; Кирьянов*,* 1997, 8, c. 99-100]. This is a vast presence when one considers contemporary trends in political mobilization: the Constitutional Democratic (Kadet) party, Russia’s largest classic liberal (pro-parliament, pro-property) party, at its peak boasted around 120,000 members [Kotkin, p. 98].

The right in Russia reflected a new politics for Russia and indeed much of Europe: anti-capitalist, anti-liberal and anti-Semitic, built on mass agitation and social activism as much as a parliamentary presence [Gilbert, p. 7-9; Кирьянов, 1998, Т. 1, с. 335]. For illustration of this point, one may consider the stance of major groups like the URP towards important issues like the land question. The URP wanted to take land away from the nobility and hand it to the peasantry, thus calling for radical redistribution of wealth and power towards the masses [Gilbert, p. 57-62; Омельянчук, с. 402-404; Кирьянов, 1998, Т. 1, с. 194]. The stance towards such questions illustrates seismic differences opening up between groups on the right of Russian politics.

Between the end of 1905 and late in 1906, right-wing groups began to form more rapidly. Workers and peasants were considered the most urgent recruitment priorities: in its manifesto for elections to the First State Duma (established in 1906), the URP demanded signing up these groups to create a movement representing all of Russian society [Шелохаев*,* с. 441; Кирьянов, 1998, Т. 1, с. 160-163, 230-232]. However, it is important to note that the URP was always open to women: both sexes were allowed to join, though they had to be native Russians [Иванович, с. 119]. Moreover, women would prove to be an important part of a more comprehensive and diverse strategy of right-wing group formation.

From 1907-09 we can see sustained attempts by right-wing movements to attract women, with groups appearing in different parts of the empire. Some of these were established independently from the major right-wing organizations, with others nominally linked to major national groups like the URP. Development occurred in both Moscow and St. Petersburg, and, like the right at large, also in largely non-Russian areas: clubs included the Circles of Russian Women in Khar’kov; the Circles of Russian Women in Vilna; the Voronezh Union of Russian Women; the Russian Women’s Study Circles in Moscow, and the Union of Russian Women in St. Petersburg. Mostly they appeared in urban areas where optimum conditions for group formation, such as the necessary social space for organizing and required density of population, were already present, and where the right had established a foothold in terms of popular support – true of groups in Moscow, St. Petersburg and Vilna. Sources from the women’s groups illustrate their desire to speak for different estates in Russia, and their desire to co-opt the Orthodox, Russian poor in particular, speaking of a desire to unite all estates of Russian women [ОВК, 1909, с. 12].[[3]](#footnote-3) The initiative for this came primarily from the bottom up, with no strong correlation between the sex of those setting up the groups and those who formed the majority of the membership. Despite having a largely female membership the Circles of Russian Women in Vilna was established by male activists [ОВК, 1909, с. 10]. In contrast, women who later became leaders set up the Circles of Russian Students in Moscow [MT, 1909, 5, с. 54].

According to official statistics hundreds of activists joined these groups during the next few years. Some of these were young people, in particular university students: in Moscow, 42 students joined the Russian Women’s Study Circles during 1907 under the guidance of their leader A. G. Chutaevskaia [MT, 1909, 5, с. 54]. The Circles of Russian Women in Vilna was a particularly active society by national standards: from 3 January 1908 until 3 January 1909 there were 354 requests to join, and there were, in the same period, 158 women and 28 men registered as full members. 11 people (seven per cent of the total) were described as being from the intelligentsia [ОВК, 1909, с. 10]. Under the guidance of E. I. Klimovich by 1 January 1911 the group consisted of 72 members, 49 activists associated with the movement and 23 assistant members: this had grown to 219 in all by 1 January 1912. These were drawn from a cross-section of society, including women from higher social estates and those with professional roles such as teachers and doctors [ОВК, 1909, с. 3]. Students and schools were a particular area of interest: the Khar’kov-based society of Russian Women had 77 students studying at a school it had opened during 1912 [ОХО, с. 13]. Men could also join and were present at some gatherings: the Vilna group spoke of meetings attended by ‘many Russian ladies and a few men’ [‘многия местныя русския дамы и некоторые мужчины’] [ОВК, 1909, с. 2].

The women’s right-wing groups drew in different social estates, from nobility to ordinary townspeople. In addition to setting up such groups, women could also take important roles within the leadership structure. Elena Poluboiarinova (1864-1919), the secretary of the URP after 1907, was also the editor of the group’s newspaper *Russkoe znamia* between 1909 and 1912, and played a central role as the paper developed into the URP’s main propaganda tool. When the URP split towards the end of 1908, Poluboiarinova accompanied Dubrovin in founding a new organization from the remnants of the old one, thus showing their close working relationship [Степанов, Иванов*,* c. 403-404].[[4]](#footnote-4) Lidiia Kologrivova (?-1915), a leading activist, was a member of the Russian Monarchist Assembly, one of its chief poets, and the daughter of Count Aleksandr Ivanovich Ukhtomskii who participated in the war against Napoleon in 1812 [Степанов, Иванов, с. 255-256]. Many who joined were of significant social standing, with women from the nobility like Kologrivova leading the clubs. These significant figures were, however, exceptions rather than the rule: most women were instead involved in the philanthropic and social work that the majority of activists considered to be at the heart of their mission. This included social elites, but was primarily made up of relatively well-off professionals: the Voronezh-based Union of Russian Women, whilst suggesting that it was performing a social role by opening up this opportunity ‘to poor women’ [бедным женщинам], was mostly run by women drawn from professional occupations, or members of the nobility [ГАРФ, Ф. 117, Оп. 1, Д. 53, Л. 34].

The example of the St. Petersburg-based Union of Russian Women, which had links to the Archaeological Institute in Vitebsk, can further illustrate this point. The preoccupations of this group reflected the interests of the well-off women who led the council. The group was a club with an elite composition that sought to appeal to the social elites as well as to wider society – the Union listed its interests as ethnographic, historical, artistic and national. As ever, charity work was a major aim, and, like the Voronezh group, it claimed that it was close to the tsar and to the imperial family: in 1913, members enthusiastically supported the Romanov tercentenary, and Mariia Fedorovna, wife of Alexander III, was a patron of the association [СРЖ, 1912, с. 6]. Women were though active at all levels of the right: a small number became leaders of groups and organizers within major parties, and a larger number were activists at the forefront of what the movement considered to be its social mission.

The mostly male leadership of the Academist unions, right-wing student groups, was keen to recruit female students. V. Zh. Kursov, an activist from theRussian Assembly, established Russian Women’s Study Circles in Moscow during 1907, with additional support from Vladimir Gringmut who visited the club on several occasions before his death in October 1907 to offer support [MT, 1909, 5, с. 47; MT, 1912, 10, с. 20-23]. The main council of the group consisted of: E. E. Vostorgova; Sofia Aleksandrovna Golitsina; Liubova Dmitrievna Gringmut’; Lidia Aleksandrovna Kologrivova; Nadezhda Aleksandrovna Murovtseva; and E. A. Bogolenova. Like the men’s sections of the organizations the aim of these groups was to banish politics from the Russian university, and preserve ‘school only for science’ [‘школа только для науки’] [MT, 1909, 5, с. 49]. The groups appeared to have primarily cultural aims, with the establishment of study circles, libraries and clubs for the preservation of free thought in a time of ruinous strikes and disorder across Russian universities [MT, 1909, 5, с. 50]. They called for a defence of faith, tsar and fatherland and, in a phrase common to the propaganda of the student right, the liberation of the Russian university so that it could once again become for science. ‘There must be no strikes, and there cannot be in the temple of free science’ [‘Никакой забастовки нет, да и быть не может в храме свободной науки’]. [MT 1909, 5, с. 50]. They formed a small percentage of the Academist movement, with no more than a few hundred members nationwide, but their links to the national clubs and other branches of the student right show influence and, furthermore, they were prepared to work with other groups from the right. They were closely aligned to existing student groups – the Russian Women’s Study Circles in Moscow listed similar concerns to the male branches of the student movement. These groups were small in scale, with around 30 to 50 members active in Moscow during 1908 [ГАРФ, Ф. 117, Оп. 1, Д. 184, Л. 2].

Having assessed the numbers, it makes sense to consider why Russian rightists were so eager to recruit women. First, their clubs were seen as useful in support of the larger national associations. Taking the example of the Circles of Russian Women of the Khar’kov Union of Russian People, the rules and regulations of the association established in 1907 clearly show the group was designed to support the local branch of the URP, which had been active since the end of 1906 with around 3,900 members [Кирьянов, 1997, 6, с. 107]. There were strong parallels between the guiding principles of national clubs and recently established women’s groups. In addition to providing ‘material and moral support’ [‘материальных и нравственных условий’] to the major club, this group asked that members needed ‘to emulate’ [‘совернователям’] members of the Khar’kov branch of the URP in both attitudes and behavior [КРЖ, с. 3-4]. The guiding ideology of the women’s group was identical to the main branch of the URP, espousing the three central principles of Orthodoxy, autocracy and nationality, supporting resurgent Russian nationalism and the defence of the Orthodox subjects of the empire. But whilst closely resembling the Khar’kov URP in this sense, the group sought to play down any radicalism, stating that it was a peaceful and democratic club which represented a broad cross-section of society. [КРЖ, с. 3-4]. One should not underplay the complexity of this: there was, as in the right more widely, a resurgent nationalism clearly on display, emphasized by the desire to restore a Russia, one and indivisible. The Circles of Russian Women established in Vilna during 1909 added that the groups were designed to raise the ‘national consciousness’ [‘национального самосознания'] of members [ОВК, 1909, с. 2].

Women’s clubs performed unique functions, which could be used to support national clubs and groups. The women’s role was one originally envisaged by the male-dominated right, but became widespread within the clubs. Most central was an idea that women were caring and should provide aid and help to the needy. Significant campaigns for the Vilna group included running dining halls for the under nourished, and opening poor houses for out-of-work Russians [ОВК, 1909, с. 8-10]. Other activities included making clothes and textiles; the club also performed a social role by opening up such opportunities ‘to poor women’ [‘бедным женщинам’], who did not run the societies but were often involved in charitable endeavours. The initiative for this came, at least initially, from male-dominated nationalist clubs. One should stress that right-wingers had been involved in charity work before women’s associations were even established: the UAM in particular had previously been committed to charity work and encouraged activist involvement in it [Кирьянов, 1998, Т. 1, с. 546]. However, other typical activities in the male-dominated movement involved political debates and campaigns against political enemies. In contrast, the women’s groups had a narrower and more specific focus on social activism. Gender inclusivity certainly did not mean gender equality, though activist publications show that members were generally content to follow such ideas.

Philanthropy was a central area of interest for women’s clubs, and the most sustained area of female involvement was charity work. These principles were then adopted by the women organizing the groups – the Union of Russian Women in Khar’kov stated that in order to support the URP’s work in the local area ‘circles will be granted the right to organize schools, hospitals, orphanages, poor houses and similar institutions, as resolved by the general council of the Union of Russian People’ [‘Кружку предоставляется право устраивать школы, больницы, приюты, дома трудолюбия и тому подобныя учреждения, разрешаемыя общим Собранием Союза Р. Н.’] [КРЖ, с. 3]. The aim of such work was twofold. First, it created a proscribed role for women within the movement, in doing so demonstrating that the right’s broad social appeal would include women. Second, helping local populations would bring increased credibility to right-wing groups due to their involvement in community work. Social activism was a way of demonstrating that the movement was, as activists had claimed, ‘above politics’: through involvement in virtuous practices, the movement could claim it was not fundamentally destructive, but beneficial for much of the population, thus tying into right-wing claims that they were helping Russian people.

Their work therefore tied into the right’s populist appeal: women’s clubs were keen to stress that they were on the side of the nation’s poor following the revolutionary crisis, and that they were at the forefront of helping poor, Orthodox Russians. The Circles of Russian Women established in Vilna during 1909 included the following reflections:

The purposes of the group are as follows: a desire to help poor, Orthodox Russians and Lutherans, opening free cafeterias and schools, provisions for supporting unemployed workers and providing housing for the homeless, constructing refuges for them, providing the necessary assistance for helping Russian Orthodox pilgrims and generally offering all kinds of material assistance to the poor, sick and others [ОВК, 1909, с. 3].

Целью кружка поставить: оказание помощи бедным русским православным и лютеранам, открытие безплатных столовых и школ, оказание всеми путями помощи безработным и неимущим мест, устройство дневных приютов, оказание необходмой помощи русским православым паломникам и вообще оказание всякого рода материальной помощи неимущим, больным и проч. [ОВК, 1909, с. 3].

Proclamations shown that female members should lead groups providing material support, comfort and aid for those in distress as a result of revolution and war. Hence the Union of Russian Women in Voronezh listed a similar set of activities to the above pamphlets – another activity was making clothes and textiles [ГАРФ, Ф. 117, Оп. 1, Д. 53, Л. 34].

Throughout 1907 and afterwards in Vilna, the Circles of Russian Women provided material support for the poor in the region, operating out of their main base at the Snipishkoi Church of Michael the Archangel. On 2 March 1908 a Sunday school was opened within the church, which hosted dozens of members’ meetings during the year and distributed religious texts. This school was free, and aimed at those from Vilna and the surrounding region; according to the organizers, it had the aim of instilling a Russian, Orthodox religious consciousness in attendees. A flavor of this can be found in the group’s propaganda, which stated, ‘now every Russian school in our region is not only a place for dispensing light and warmth, but has a missionary role’. [‘Теперь всякая русская школа в нашем крае не только очаг, разливающий кругом себя свет и теплоту, но вместе и миссионерский пункт’] [ОВК, 1909, с. 9-10].

This supposedly apolitical activity was demonstrated in other ways. Support for children and families was another area of interest. In the same church a dining hall was established by one of the leaders of the Circles of Russian Women, N. Dobrianskii. Throughout 1908 this fed dozens of poor children: as stated in the literature, it had a mission to feed the ‘poor children’ of the ‘labouring masses’ [‘чернорабочим трудом'] [ОВК, 1909, с. 4-5]. It also distributed gifts and food at Easter and Christmas, and provided warm clothing for children [ОВК, 1909, с. 6]. Group organizers considered making shirts, shoes and warm clothes for poor children to be a vital social role, and members’ patriotic duty. In addition, the club made clothing and staffed a cafeteria for poor children. This church became a hub of activity for the right in Vilna, with these activities lasting between 1910 and 1912. Led by their chair E. I. Klimovich, a day care centre for poor children called Manger was established in 1910, which cared for 30 children between the ages of two and twelve during that year. Whilst this new enterprise emerged, the group continued its previous activities of manufacturing clothes and distributing food [ОВК, 1913, с. 5]. Like other groups, the Union of Russian Women in St. Petersburg was imbued with a sense of patriotism: one aim was providing ‘help to injured heroes’ [‘помощи раненым героям’] by providing them with financial and material support, like making warm clothes [СРЖ, 1912, с. 6]. Becoming more deeply integrated in local communities was a way of demonstrating the virtuous nature of these clubs, and put their nationalist and populist ideas into practice. Supporting families – themselves hierarchical – was a natural corollary to the female role in these groups.

The Union of Russian Women in Voronezh, led by Mariia Nikolaevna Ditrikh, undertook a variety of activities, including participation in artistic exhibitions, painting and charity work. Ditrikh, one of the right’s most reputed activists, had a family connection to the movement: her father, Nikolai Ditrikh, was on the council of the UAM. Her involvement went beyond activism and charity: she was also a member of the Russian Assembly, and was chair of the council of the Union of Russian Women. The prestige of this organization was greatly increased as it developed under the patronage of the tsaritsa [Степанов, Иванов, с. 170]. The first annual meeting of this group, held during 1908, passed a resolution that it would open a group for making Russian national costumes. This had the dual role of creating styles of Russian national dress, therefore contributing to what members saw as patriotic awareness, and providing work opportunities for poor women. A report from the chair of the Union M. Bernova, vice-chair N. Popova and secretary E. Prokhorova declared that between 1908 and 1911 the group had an important role in providing economic assistance for poor families. The Union was widely involved in charitable works in Voronezh, undertaking activities including baking bread and distributing salt, sausages, tea and eggs for poor families at Easter; another venture was to open a day care centre for children in poverty called Manger [ГАРФ, Ф. 117, Оп. 1, Д. 53, Л. 34].[[5]](#footnote-5) All in all, it appears the women in these clubs appear to have been satisfied with their main roles: there is no evidence from these sources that women sought out different roles or to challenge the designation of what their place in the right-wing movement consisted of by moving towards more political roles.

For the main right-wing movement, such initiatives were evidence of the virtuous aspects of the right. Leaders of the national groups like Aleksandr Dubrovin and Vladimir Purishkevich, leader of the UAM, considered women to be an important part of the right, and important evidence of the supposedly apolitical aspects of the movement. Activists like Lidiia Kologrivova, Elena Poluboiarinova, Mariia Ditrikh and Mariia Nikolaevna were offered financial support. Chutaevskaia of the St. Petersburg based Union was in contact with Purishkevich, the leader of the UAM, and wrote to him requesting financial support. Purishkevich dispensed relatively small amounts of money (50-100 rubles at a time) to the group leaders; what is more, he attended and delivered lectures for the group with an aim to help them publicize their activity. Their tactics were similar to other Academist clubs, with leaders delivering speeches to audiences of activists, and seeking to convert apolitical students to their cause through propaganda [MT, 1909, 5, с. 55]. Though claiming to be involved in strike-breaking activity at Moscow University, there is no evidence that this women’s group, unlike other branches of right-wing groups, became involved in violence [ГАРФ, Ф. 117, Оп. 1, Д. 184, Л. 6-7]. The lack of involvement in violence benefitted to the right-wing movement: this was further demonstration that these groups were, as supporters claimed, peaceful and altruistic, also seen from the charity work demonstrated above.

Though backed with some enthusiasm by national clubs, it is important to note that the women organizing these groups and initiatives desired this role. Women already played an important role in civic society and charity work in the late Russian Empire. Empress Elizabeth and other aristocratic women had founded the Women’s Patriotic Society in 1812 to help those who had suffered as a result of the war against Napoleon. [Lindenmeyr, p. 13-16, 111, 123-129]. In sanctioning women’s role the right stressed its self-stated mission as defenders of the people: through charity work and, in particular, helping the poor these women’s clubs legitimized the social role of the right – they became important examples of the mobilization activities of the right, and allowed for an idea that rightists were on the side of the people during the revolutionary crisis.

The relationship with the Russian state has been a key feature of the historiography on the right [Rawson, p. 142-152; Gilbert p. 118-127]. Women’s groups generally had a cordial relationship with Russian authorities: their social commitments, like charity work, did not give the secret police much cause to view them with suspicion. Conversely, these groups wished to demonstrate that they had received official backing. The St. Petersburg-based Union of Russian Women was keen to stress that it had support from the Russian state: the group claimed that the Ministry of Internal Affairs (secret police) in the region saw no problem with its formation [СРЖ, 1912, с. 6].

The St. Petersburg Union was sponsored by the widow of Alexander III Mariia Fedorovna and had received financial support from her, though sources are not clear on how much or to what end [СРЖ, 1916, с. 5]. Elsewhere relations with the state appeared more strained, with a lack of financial assistance apparent. During 1911, the Voronezh Union of Russian Women complained about the lack of funding it received from Voronezh city council. The central council of the group, which had 60 members in all and 12 on the council, was led by M. Bernova; the vice chairwoman was Lidia Popova and its treasurer was E. Prokhorova. It stated that the total financial disbursement of the group was small (about 500 rubles), and it blamed a lack of external funding for this:

In 1910, the chairwoman M. Bernova petitioned the Voronezh City Duma, asking to issue allowances for the Crèche, or assign any kind of subsidy, which will be received from other city shelters and the poorhouse, or to rent a small room in one of the town houses. But the city, despite the apparent contributions of the existing Crèche, refused. Because of this relationship with the Voronezh council the Voronezh Union of Russian Women will once again have to run the nursery solely on their own funds and the donations of kind and sympathetic individuals. All these, of course, are so small that the only support this good cause can give is entertainment or evening festivities [ГАРФ, Ф. 117, Оп. 1, Д. 53, Л. 34].

В 1910 г. Председательница М. Бернова подавала прошение в воронежскую городскую думу, прося выдать пособие на Ясли, или назначить какую нибудь денежную субсидию, какия получают от города другие приюты и богадельни, или дать царовое помещение в одном из городских домов. Но город, несмотря на видимую пользу существующих Ясель, во всем отказал. Вследствие такого отношения города С. Р. Ж. Опять приходится содержать Ясли исключительно на свои средства и добровольныя пожертвования сочувствующих лиц. Всего этого, конечно, настолько мало, что единственной поддержкой этого благого дела является устройство каких либо увеселительных вечеров или гуляний. [ГАРФ, Ф. 117, Оп. 1, Д. 53, Л. 34].

The group had been hamstrung by a lack of support from the local council. Rightists had an uneasy relationship with the authorities after 1905, as they were often perceived as a dangerous source of extremism by secret police, and could not always rely on them for assistance. The secret police viewed the large and radical URP with suspicion due to members’ propensity for public demonstrations and even violence [Gilbert, p. 118-127]. In contrast there was no urgent need to shut down or monitor the activity of the women’s groups, which appeared harmless, but neither was the state especially enthusiastic about supporting them, with the Ministry of Finance adopting a cool rather than hostile attitude.

Women’s groups were involved in many apparently virtuous activities. However, one should not make the mistake of casting the women’s groups on the right as moderates set apart from the more abrasive and impatient radical wing of the right as typified by the URM or URP. In terms of practice the women’s groups generally seemed pacific, but their ideological leanings sometimes provided a different picture. Clubs were established specifically to help only the Orthodox, Russian poor: the rules and regulations of the Vilna group, established in 1909, claimed that the group was set up to provide charitable help for these people as there were already ‘philanthropic organizations which had benefitted Jewish and Polish groups in our society’ [‘окрепшими благотворительными организациями польского и еврейского обществ’] [ОВК, 1909, с. 2]. This was a central point of discussion, with Jews and Poles blamed for creating a climate in the country that allowed for poor, Orthodox Russians to be exploited. Other examples show a similar tendency to blame minority groups, especially Jews, for what members held was the predicament of the contemporary Russian university. For instance, one piece of propaganda put out by the Russian Women’s Study Circles, established in Moscow on 8 December 1907 by A. G. Chutaevskaia, O V. Ivanova, E. N. L’vova and O. A. Kornilova, asked ‘what must feel noble for the pure Russian girl, the drive to love science or the need to fight for life in this filthy Jewish slough?’ [‘что же должна чувствовать благородная чистая русская девушка, загнанная любовью к науке или нуждою борьбы за жизнь в этом грязном жидовском омуте?'] [MT, 1912, 10, с. 21]. Anti-Semitic appeals exemplified a view typical within right-wing circles that Jews were dominating cultural and political life in the late Russian Empire; outlandish ideas, such as the well-established anti-Semitic canard that there was a Jewish conspiracy to control the press, appeared in their propaganda from time to time.

Russia’s involvement in the First World War (1914-17) gave renewed impetus for women’s groups due to the range of patriotic duties that they could fulfill during a time of international conflict. The Union of Russian Women in St. Petersburg, sponsored by Mariia Fedorovna and led by Mariia Ditrikh, continued its previous activities and also became involved in hospital work during the war. Members descended to the Shidlovskii factory in the city centre where a temporary hospital had been constructed with the aim of ‘helping our heroes of war’ [‘помощь нашим героям-воинам'] who had been wounded during the great conflict. Like other civic society groups that appeared or were active after 1914, the association claimed that it was doing its patriotic duty: the group’s leader spoke of supporting the war effort by supplying hospital workers. The council led by A. A. Kuskova provided medical aid, like medicine and bandages; another service was supplying tea, sugar and cigarettes to servicemen. According to Ditrikh, providing a number of hospital workers to the Shidlovskii factory was a necessity given the enormity of the conflict. Backed by Aleksandra Feodorovna, the organization took to its wartime work with renewed confidence, believing it was fulfilling a patriotic mission needed more than ever during wartime [СРЖ, 1916, с. 4].

As research on other countries has demonstrated, women have been incorporated into the worldview and infrastructure of right-wing, populist movements. The position of women in fascist groups in the twentieth-century, and indeed women in the populist far right today, has drawn much attention [e.g., Passmore, p. 1-10]. There is, however, less scholarly literature on women in the far right in the period before 1914. The vast majority of right-wing and nationalist groups in this age sought to assert an aggressively masculine identity, and the leading thinkers and activists of groups across Europe were nearly all men [Rogger and Weber; Rosenthal and Rodic]. However female activists were starting to appear on the nationalist right on a small scale during this period, with Russian clubs provided one series of examples of this. Examples from elsewhere include Sibylle-Gabrielle Marie-Antoinette de Riquetti de Mirabeau, who published a large number of works in late nineteenth-century France under a masculine pseudonym ‘Gyp’ [Silverman].

Women’s groups in Russia did not offer much assessment of the issues of the day engaging feminists across Europe, like suffrage or equal rights. Indeed, such clubs show strikingly traditional ideas of the female role, even by contemporary standards, with involvement generally restricted to implicitly feminized activities like charity work and nursing. This can be contrasted with the radical activities of (some) male activists on the right: street violence, mass agitation and assassinations. Whilst able to co-opt women into the movement, clubs ultimately served to underscore their marginalization, in one sense, by separating them from major political issues of the day.

Even so, the creation of these groups tied into a wider right-wing mission to reshape society, based on the active pursuit of communitarian values of mutuality, solidarity and kinship. On occasion prominent female figures rose to become more than foot soldiers in the movement, and bore some influence in terms of ideology and practical activities; they were, however, outliers, going against the prevailing trend which saw women participate in charitable endeavours. Political and social questions were relegated to a secondary role in the women’s movement, but the social work that was carried out supported and reinforced the wider strategy of the right-wing movement – to show rightists were on the side of the people. Thus, many within the movement, far outside of the women’s clubs, valued the contribution of these members. Whilst one must not lose sight of the violent and destructive activities of the radical right and their ultra-nationalist ideas and policy positions, the appearance of these clubs also shown that the right’s social role was becoming increasingly multi-faceted in this period. Most usefully for the right, women’s clubs demonstrated that their attempts to include both sexes and create a wider social movement bore some reward. Rightists did not want gender equality, but sought to reach across gender and estate divides to promote a vision of social unity for Russian people, an aim that was to an extent achieved.

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1. This referred to the second ‘time of troubles’ following the first which was between Ivan IV’s death in 1598 and the installation of the Romanov dynasty in 1613. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Sergei Uvarov was Minister of Education from 1834 to 1849, and a leading figure in the development of conservative doctrine under Nicholas I. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Estates refer to the social structure of the Russian Empire as outlined in Freeze’s seminal article on the subject: nobility, clergy, townspeople and peasantry. [Freeze, p. 11-36]. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Poluboiarinova, unlike many of her male colleagues, appeared to stay loyal to Dubrovin during the later splits within the major right-wing groups. She accompanied him in his formation of the ‘Dubrovinist’ wing of the URP during 1912. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Rightist women’s groups mirrored the role of women in civic society and charitable associations elsewhere in the late imperial period [Lindenmeyr, p. 123-129]. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)