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An unlikely friendship? Isabel de Palencia and Alexandra Kollontay

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Abstract:

This article explores Isabela de Palencia's narrative of the extraordinary friendship between Alexandra Kollontay and herself, highlighting the intersections of their lives as chronicled in Palencia's autobiographical works *I Must Have Liberty* (1940) and her biography of Kollontay (1947). Their bond illustrates how two women, despite differing backgrounds, emerged as social reformers, feminists, and agents of change in their respective countries. It underscores how the shared experience of exile transcended ideological and cultural divides, fostering networks that eased the burdens of displacement. Notably, their relationship significantly influenced Kollontay's diplomatic endeavors for the Spanish Republic at the League of Nations and in Sweden. While these similarities may have been emphasized or shaped by Palencia's perspective, they also reflect genuine intersections in the lives of two remarkable women navigating the challenges of their times.

These two literary accounts reveal how the two women navigated their roles as pioneering diplomats and offer alternative perspectives on the conflicts shaping their lives, diverging from mainstream historical narratives. Ultimately, the article advocates for a shift in focus from national to transnational perspectives, emphasizing the interconnectedness of historical experiences.

Keywords: Isabel de Palencia (Oyarzábal Smith, Oyarzábal de Palencia) and Alexandra Kollontay (Kollontai), feminist diplomacy, entangled, transnational and comparative exile, transnational feminist history, Spanish Republican and Russian exile



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An unlikely friendship? Isabel de Palencia and Alexandra Kollontay

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The biography of Alexandra Kollontay by Isabel de Palencia¹, titled *Alexandra Kollontay: Ambassador from Russia* (1947), raises intriguing questions about the motivations and connections behind this work. At first glance, it seems improbable that a Spanish upper-class woman would write about Kollontay –a symbol of fear for the German civic women's movement and a figure associated with communism's challenge to traditional family values and capitalism. This initial reaction stems from the pervasive "Red Scare" sentiments that had gripped Germany and other nations long before the Cold War, starting with the Russian Revolution of 1905 and intensifying after 1917. Kollontay, as a vocal proponent of women's liberation and socialist family reforms, became a focal point of conservative anxieties. When Palencia's biography of Kollontay appeared in 1947, it emerged in a highly polarized world where Cold War tensions made sympathetic portrayals of Soviet politics controversial. Yet, despite these challenges, Palencia chose to write about Kollontay, signaling an unusual bond between the two women. What lay at the heart of this unlikely friendship, bridging their distinct cultural, political, and personal contexts?

Isabel de Palencia was a multifaceted figure –writer, journalist, actress, translator, and diplomat– who remains underexplored in studies of Spanish exile. Her works, such as *Smouldering Freedom* (1945) and *I Must Have Liberty* (1940), provided early counter-narratives to Francoist history and shed light on the Spanish Civil War from a Republican perspective significantly shaping how English-speaking audiences understood the conflict. Yet her contributions, particularly as a diplomat and an exile in Sweden and later Mexico, remain underappreciated, overshadowed by a focus on male intellectuals and cultural elites in exile studies.

Palencia's exile can be traced to 1936 when, although still hopeful of returning to Spain, she began her diplomatic work abroad as an ambassador in Sweden. By 1939, she and her family had relocated to Mexico, marking a more definitive phase of her exile. During this period, she turned to writing and advocacy, addressing themes of liberty, justice, and the plight of exiled Spaniards.

¹ I am using here the names for the two women Isabel de Palencia chose in her books, for herself and for Alexandra Kollontay. In literature you find several different spellings or even names, but I follow the ones chosen by de Palencia herself.

Her connection with Kollontay, a Soviet diplomat and feminist icon, likely grew from shared experiences as women navigating international politics in male-dominated spheres. Both were committed to social and feminist reform and recognized the transformative power of transnational alliances. Kollontay's ideals, though controversial, resonated with Palencia's progressive outlook, making their friendship a testament to the ability to bridge ideological and cultural divides in pursuit of shared goals. This relationship invites deeper exploration of how exile, diplomacy, and shared struggles can foster unexpected solidarities, challenging dominant historical narratives. By examining their friendship, we gain a richer understanding of the interconnectedness of women's activism and the ways it transcended borders, even during the most polarized times.

The biographical legacy of Isabel de Palencia and Alexandra Kollontay presents an intriguing contrast. While Kollontay has been extensively documented,² Palencia's contributions have received relatively less attention.³ Her biography of Kollontay, based on the latter's memoirs, is one of the earliest accounts of the Soviet diplomat's life. This dynamic highlights not only the differing levels of historical recognition afforded to the two women but also the complexities of how transnational connections and exile narratives are documented.

Kollontay, a member of the first Soviet Cabinet and the first Minister of Social Welfare, was a pioneering figure in the fight for women's equality. Her commitment to altering class and power relations from the ground up often placed her at odds with the centralized approaches of Lenin and Stalin. This ideological divergence contributed to her diplomatic assignments in Norway and Sweden, described by Cathy Porter as an "exile in diplomat's Europe" (Porter 1980, chapter 17). These postings distanced her from domestic Soviet politics but allowed her to continue advocating for change within the constraints of her roles.

While history has become more transnational in recent decades, and global history has reached a zenith, the study of exile history remains constrained by a "national" lens, often focusing on distinct ethnic or cultural groups rather than the broader, interconnected nature of exile movements. Exile in the 1930s, especially within Europe, was not only about distinct groups but also about shared struggles and collective experiences. Refugees frequently built common networks, created organizations, and developed spaces for integration and solidarity that transcended national identities. However, exile studies have yet to fully embrace this

² For example: Carrère d'Encausse (2023); Evans Clements (1979); Farnsworth (1980); Porter (1980); Schejnis (1984); Volk (2022); Wiesner (2022).

³ Eiroa San Francisco (2014); Mena Pablos (2015); Quiles Faz (2013); Paz Torres (2010).

transnational perspective, often limiting their scope to intellectual and literary figures while neglecting the broader social dimensions of exile communities.⁴

The intertwined lives of Kollontay and Palencia offer a compelling case for broadening the scope of exile studies. Their shared experiences –shaped by displacement, diplomacy, and advocacy– challenge traditional historical narratives and invite us to reconsider the ways in which exile movements are studied. By focusing on the transnational and interdisciplinary aspects of exile, we can better understand how these movements fostered innovation, adaptation, and resistance, not just for prominent intellectuals and cultural elites but for all those navigating lives across borders to which topic this issue of *iMex* is dedicated.

This article situates its analysis within the context of the Spanish Republican exile, drawing almost exclusively on Isabel de Palencia's two pivotal works: her autobiography (*I Must Have Liberty*, 1940) and her biography of Alexandra Kollontay (*Alexandra Kollontay: Ambassador from Russia*, 1947). The reason for concentrating on these two works is that they are the only sources giving evidence on this friendship in the languages available to me. The friendship between Kollontay and Palencia is an understudied aspect of both women's lives, despite its historical and symbolic significance.⁵ Neither their biographers nor the editors of Kollontay's diplomatic letters have given this relationship due attention.⁶ Kollontay herself might have mentioned Palencia in her extensive memoirs in Russian, but these are due to language availabilities not available to me. To contrast the evidence given by Palencia with sources by Kollontay was thus not possible.

These texts are both personal testimonies and historical documents, reflecting not only the lives of Palencia and Kollontay but also the broader historical trajectories of the Spanish and Soviet Republics. The interplay of autobiography, biography, and political commentary in these works blurs conventional genre boundaries, making them rich sources for understanding the past and the identities shaped within it.

Traditionally, literature has been viewed as a historical source more by literary scholars than historians, who often hesitate to include fiction in their work.⁷ However, autobiographies and biographies –such as Palencia's works– are more easily accepted by historians because they are rooted in personal and historical realities.⁸ Palencia's writings serve as both self-testimony and an account of her close friend Kollontay, capturing the narratives of two extraordinary women

⁴ Reimann (2020); Santos Sánchez / Nickel (2022).

⁵ Bados Ciria (2011).

⁶ Deutsch (2003).

⁷ MacDonald Taylor (1938); Panikkar (2012).

⁸ Dausien (1996); Schulze (1996).

while simultaneously reflecting on the broader socio-political contexts of Spain and the Soviet Union.

However, Palencia's writings transcend conventional autobiography and biography, revealing her dual agenda: narrating the personal histories of herself and Kollontay while highlighting the parallels between the Spanish and Soviet Republics. By portraying the plight of the poor and oppressed in both countries in similar terms, Palencia constructs a comparative narrative that underscores shared struggles. She subtly intertwines her story with Kollontay's, identifying common threads such as their shared commitment to social reform and their gendered perspective on suffering and political engagement.

One particularly telling moment occurs in *I Must Have Liberty*, where Palencia states: "She knew I was not a communist, but there were many other ties to bind us together without that one. First and foremost, the suffering of Spain, which she, being a woman, felt as I did" (Palencia 1940: 326). This brief acknowledgment hints at the emotional and ideological foundations of their friendship, though Palencia stops short of fully articulating the dynamics of their bond—a task this article seeks to undertake.

Critics may fault Palencia for over-identifying with Kollontay and lacking the "objective neutrality" expected of historians. However, as Palencia was neither a historian nor attempting to produce a purely objective account, such criticisms miss the point. Her works are valuable precisely because they illuminate how she constructed the lives of these two women and their respective nations. Palencia's deeply personal lens offers insights into how narratives of identity, exile, and political commitment are crafted.

This analysis does not aim to evaluate the historical accuracy of Palencia's portrayals but rather to explore how her texts construct the intertwined lives of Kollontay and herself. It acknowledges the inherent subjectivity in all historical writing, arguing that even the most rigorous histories are shaped by the author's perspective and agenda. Palencia's works are thus viewed not as objective accounts but as deliberate and meaningful narratives that offer valuable insights into the lived experiences and perceptions of two women navigating the complex political landscapes of their time.

1. Turning rebels: family and youth

1.1. Names and Origins

1.1.1. Kollontay's childhood and upbringing

The apparent parallels between the lives of Alexandra Kollontay and Isabel de Palencia stem partly from how de Palencia narrates their stories, emphasizing shared experiences and traits. However, beyond her narrative framing, there are also tangible similarities between the two women's lives.

Both women were named after queens, a detail that subtly underscores their noble beginnings and the cultural significance of their families. Their upper-class origins were further marked by their family dynamics, shaped by mixed marriages.

Alexandra Kollontay was the daughter of Alexandra Alexandrovna Masalina, a Finnish woman whose second marriage to Kollontay's father defied conventional norms of the time. This union, already unusual, attracted significant public attention. Her mother brought with her the inheritance of a family estate in Finland, which she managed personally –a striking example of a woman asserting agency in a traditionally male-dominated sphere.

At that time, it was unusual occurrence in Saint Petersburg for the wife of a high-ranking officer to take up a business. Mother was much criticized for doing so, but she did not take the slightest notice and after some time the farm turned out to be a success (Palencia 1947: 13).

Alexandra Kollontay's upbringing, as narrated by Isabel de Palencia, reveals the complex interplay of familial influence, social constraints, and political awareness that shaped her revolutionary path. Kollontay herself attributed much of her early moral and practical education to her mother, Alexandra Alexandrovna Masalina, whom she described as the "conscience of the family". Masalina's commitment to working the land and her pragmatic view of its demands set an example of responsibility and diligence that left a lasting impression on Kollontay.

Her father, Mikhail Alekseyevich Domontovitch, was a Russian general of Ukrainian descent who occupied a unique ideological position. While serving the Tsar, he held liberal tendencies that were paradoxically in tension with his role in an autocratic system. His participation in drafting the First Bulgarian Constitution –a bold and progressive endeavor– provided young Alexandra with an early glimpse of political engagement and its risks. Family conversations about the constitution, often laced with the underlying fear of potential consequences for her father, planted seeds of political curiosity and awareness in the young Kollontay. As Palencia notes, little Alexandra would often eavesdrop on these discussions,

acutely aware of the danger inherent in such liberal aspirations under the Tsarist regime (Palencia 1947: 15).

Kollontay's early education reflected her family's aristocratic status. She was educated at home, a practice typical for girls of her social class. Yet, this mode of learning could not contain her intellectual curiosity. At sixteen, she expressed a strong desire to attend university – a request her parents denied, adhering to societal expectations of the time. This frustration with the limitations imposed on her education and ambitions likely contributed to her burgeoning sense of rebellion and the revolutionary consciousness that would later define her life.

Palencia captured Kollontay's transformation into a deeply aware and committed individual, shaped by her upbringing but ultimately challenging the very structures that had confined her. As Palencia writes, Kollontay became a "conscious human," molded by the tension between her family's status and the inequities she observed, and driven by a profound sense of justice to reshape the world around her.

There are beings possessed of the quality of discrimination to a higher degree than most others; some that are able to distinguish among the myriads of sounds with which we are surrounded, special notes of anguish that, to sensitive ears, are like trumpet blasts, irresistible calls they would not dream of disregarding (Palencia 1947: 4).

1.1.2. Palencia's Early Years

Isabel de Palencia, similarly, was born into an upper-class family with a lineage that reflected a blend of cultural influences. Her upbringing and education also positioned her to challenge societal norms, particularly regarding gender roles and women's rights. Her upbringing mirrored the privileges and complexities of an upper-class background, similar to Alexandra Kollontay's early life. Palencia was born into a wealthy and influential family, with her father, Juan Oyarzábal Bucelli, owning a successful export business and hailing from a prestigious, long-established family in Málaga, Spain. This social and economic status provided her with access to education and opportunities that were rare for women of her time.

Her mother, Anne Guthrie Smith, brought a Scottish heritage into the family, reflecting the multicultural influences that shaped Palencia's identity. This marriage between a Spanish businessman and a Scottish woman added a layer of cultural diversity to Palencia's upbringing, likely exposing her to broader perspectives and ideas from an early age. But as in the case of Kollontay, the mother also meant the example of an emancipated woman, as she described.

An element of most disturbing influence had entered into the sacred Oyarzábal circle in the person of my mother, who was Scottish and a Protestant, and had married my father at the age of seventeen, he being twenty years older... Mother was an orphan and accustomed to do very much as she pleased, and this must have been an additional charm for my father

who was perhaps tired of the usual submission of Spanish girls of his class (Palencia 1940: 1, 2).

Her mother as Kollontay's had a life of her own, mother and daughters could go out unescorted, Anne Oyarzábal Guthrie smoked, danced, and challenged all Malaga ideas of good behavior for women. Mixed marriages were unheard of in the upper circles of Spain, "but for a Spaniard to marry a Protestant then was little short of social suicide" (Palencia 1940: 3).

1.2. Revels in the making: the political awakening

Palencia called the first chapter of her autobiography "A Little Rebel". And the very first sentence of her biography was about the disapproval of the Malaga society towards the kids of the mixed marriage.

This impression of mine soon worked out into a conviction that Malaga Society which a capital S was afraid that the new generation of the Oyarzábal family ... was going to. Work havoc with a long-established good reputation for strict and faithful observance of the Malaga proprieties (Palencia 1940: 1).

As Palencia herself described, her childhood bore the hallmarks of a "spoilt" upper-class existence, characterized by comfort and privilege. However, this environment did not deter her from recognizing the inequalities and injustices around her. Instead, it formed a backdrop against which she developed a strong sense of social responsibility, much like Kollontay.

Both Isabel de Palencia and Alexandra Kollontay shared a deep critique of the societies and countries in which they were raised, reflecting their acute awareness of social inequalities and injustices. Palencia's portrayal of pre-revolutionary Russia in her writings about Kollontay reveals her critical perspective on the oligarchic and deeply stratified Russian society. She underscores the stark disparities between the lives of the wealthy elite and the suffering of the poor, drawing implicit parallels to the conditions in Spain before the establishment of the Second Republic.

"A wealthy, cultured, pleasure-loving minority ruled all Russia and dominated the huge groups of population that were given no choice but to submit to orders" (Palencia 1947: 4).

Nothing ever changed —why should it not have been believed that all was well and would be well forever when thousands or rather millions of ignorant, poorly clad peasants, often whipped to action, were born and labored and died on the great properties of *the few*; and were succeeded by new generations that kept on doing as others before them had done for no other reason than the conviction that to feed and enrich the minority was their lot? Why should it not have been believed? Bearded popes and alms-imploring friars kept on offering comfort to the millions of toilers who could be kept quiet with words while church after church sent out peals of bells, laden with promises for a happier future to the overburdened who looked up at them in query (Palencia 1947: 5).

Palencia described Spain similar to Russia:

I discovered that small party politics, and the interjection of the church and the army into public life, had kept the country in an abject state of poverty and ignorance. Over fifty-two per cent of the population was illiterate. The wages, especially for workers of the land, were disgracefully low. There was no limit to working hours, and living conditions even in the capital were a disgrace. Child mortality in Spain was among the highest in the countries of Europe, and as for an outside policy, it did not exist (Palencia 1940: 82).

In her depiction, Russia's oligarchy of rich landowners and industrialists is portrayed as being profoundly disconnected from the harsh realities faced by the majority of the population. This critique resonates with the socio-political climate of Spain before 1931, where economic disparities, entrenched class divisions, and the dominance of the aristocracy similarly defined society.

Palencia's writings suggest that she viewed the two nations' pre-revolutionary conditions as rooted in similar systemic issues –rigid class hierarchies, concentration of wealth and power, and the exploitation of the working class. By likening Spain to Russia, Palencia underscored the universality of the struggles faced by oppressed populations and the interconnectedness of revolutionary movements. This comparative perspective not only deepened her understanding of Kollontay's commitment to social change but also reinforced her own resolve to fight for equality and justice in Spain and beyond.

For both women, their critical views were not mere observations but motivations for action. Kollontay's dissatisfaction with the Tsarist regime propelled her into revolutionary politics, while Palencia's disillusionment with pre-Republican Spain inspired her efforts to support the Spanish Republic and resist Franco's regime. Their ability to connect the social injustices of their respective countries to broader, systemic issues demonstrates their transnational perspective and their commitment to fostering change.

1.3. Advocacy for Women and Disenfranchised

Both Alexandra Kollontay and Isabel de Palencia emerged as tireless advocates for gender equality and the rights of marginalized communities, albeit from distinct ideological foundations. Kollontay's feminism was deeply entwined with her Marxist beliefs and her role within the Soviet government, viewing the emancipation of women as an integral part of the broader class struggle. Palencia, on the other hand, approached gender and social issues from a humanitarian perspective, emphasizing the transformative power of individual action and reform. Despite these differences, their shared commitment to challenging traditional gender roles and advocating for the rights of women created a profound common ground between them.

1.3.1. Palencia's Encounters with Feminism

Palencia's exposure to feminist ideas began during her time in Scotland and England, where she encountered Frances Murray and her daughters, active supporters of the suffrage movement. While initially sceptical, Palencia's experiences abroad planted seeds of discontent with the restrictive social norms in Spain. Upon her return to Málaga, she felt suffocated by the "lack of freedom and the constant gossip" (Palencia 1940: 63). Her decision to carve out her own path was a bold move in the conservative society of early 20th-century Spain, especially when she expressed her desire to work and live independently.

Her father's opposition to her ambitions highlights the societal expectations placed on women of her class and era. However, after his death, Palencia was finally able to pursue her interests. She became an actress, married Ceferino Palencia, and began using her voice and platform to advocate for women's rights. She co-founded and wrote for *La Dama y La Vida Ilustrada*, a women's magazine, and contributed to international and national newspapers, addressing issues of gender inequality, theater, and Spanish society. In 1923, as president of the *Consejo Supremo Feminista*, Palencia led a delegation to Spain's dictator Miguel Primo de Rivera, advocating for women's suffrage. Although this effort resulted in limited municipal voting rights, these advances were curtailed by the suppression of constitutional freedoms. Undeterred, Palencia continued to champion women's rights, co-founding and participating in influential organizations such as the Lyceum-Club, the National Council of Spanish Women, and the Spanish branch of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. She worked alongside prominent feminists like Clara Campoamor, Margarita Nelken, and Victoria Kent, helping to lay the groundwork for the eventual enfranchisement of Spanish women.⁹

Like Kollontay, Palencia recognized the centrality of family structures in perpetuating gender inequalities. While Kollontay viewed the transformation of family dynamics as essential to the socialist project, Palencia focused on reforming familial roles to enhance women's autonomy and protect children's rights. Her writings and activism often highlighted the legal and social reforms necessary to empower women within the family unit, a theme that resonated with her broader humanitarian vision (Palencia 1940: 130).

1.3.2. Kollontay's Early Years and Feminist-Marxist Synergy

Kollontay's feminist awakening occurred alongside her involvement in Marxist politics. The roots of her feminist ideas also came from England:

⁹ See: Aguilera Sastre (2011); Blasco Lisa / Magallón Portolés (2020); Fagoaga (1985); Kirkpatrick (2003); Mangini (2001, 2006).

The radical groups in Russia felt the striking contrast between such democratic countries as England and the stronghold of reaction in Europe: Tsarist Russia and the Balkans. For the radical youth of Russia, England remained the promised land of freedom. Freedom of speech, freedom of thought, freedom of the press, freedom of political association, all the ideals that filled young hearts with longing and made them hope for revolution. England had strong, independent women like Mary Wollstonecraft and Florence Nightingale. We looked up to them with admiration, hoping that the day would come when we too would be able to open a door to new activities for women, and our names would be known for great social deeds. We admired John Stuart Mill for defending women's rights and read popular books on Darwin's theory (Palencia 1947: 29).

Her dissatisfaction with her family's expectations and her early marriage paralleled her growing commitment to revolutionary ideas. Leaving her husband and son to pursue reading economics at the university in Zurich was an act of defiance against traditional familial roles, one that set the tone for her later activism.

During the split between Bolsheviks and Mensheviks, Kollontay initially sided with the Mensheviks, emphasizing the necessity of addressing women's issues within the broader socialist struggle. Her works, including *The Foundations of the Woman Question* and *Society and Motherhood*, laid the groundwork for Soviet legislation on motherhood and child welfare. Palencia, despite her ideological differences, recognized Kollontay's monumental contributions to protecting children and women, comparing her work to that of Grace Abbott in the United States (Palencia 1947: 56). This ability to transcend political divides and acknowledge shared values was a hallmark of Palencia's perspective.

Kollontay's role in the Soviet government was in fact groundbreaking. As People's Commissar for Social Welfare, she championed progressive family laws, including the introduction of civil marriage, simplified divorce processes, and equitable child support. These reforms were revolutionary, particularly in their emphasis on gender equality within the family. However, as Palencia noted, they were often misinterpreted outside Russia as attempts to undermine family structures, fueling anti-communist propaganda. "It is a well-known fact that one of the bogey ideas most used by anti-communists against the U.S.S.R. and perhaps the one that has been most ably handled in such campaigns is the libel of the undermining of family ties. This has been reported to have been one of the principal objectives of the Communist Party" (Palencia 1947: 129).

Through the Zhenotdel (Women's Department), Kollontay worked tirelessly to improve women's education, labor rights, and access to social services (Kollontai 1982: 458-467). Her advocacy for communal kitchens and collective childcare aimed to liberate women from domestic burdens, enabling them to participate fully in the workforce and public life. While these ideas were innovative, they faced resistance both within and outside the Soviet Union.

Kollontay's independent thinking and criticism of party bureaucracy made her a controversial figure within the Communist Party. Her opposition to the Brest-Litovsk Treaty and later critiques of Stalinist policies led to her political marginalization. As an ambassador to Norway, Sweden, and Mexico, Kollontay's career shifted from direct involvement in domestic policy to diplomacy, effectively sidelining her influence in the SU in general and on the "woman question". By 1927, under Stalin's leadership, many of her feminist initiatives were abandoned.¹⁰

Palencia noted Kollontay's silence during Stalin's purges, even when her own fiancé fell victim. Her silence, coupled with her later support for eugenic ideas, contributed to her complex and controversial legacy. Yet, her contributions to women's rights and social reforms remain unparalleled.

1.3.3. Shared Vision and Diverging Paths

Both women transcended their upper-class origins to challenge societal norms, advocating for structural change and the empowerment of women. Their respective paths –one grounded in revolutionary socialism, the other in reformist humanitarianism– illustrate the diverse strategies employed by feminists to advance gender equality.

Kollontay's advocacy for communal solutions to domestic labor and Palencia's emphasis on the rights of women reflect their shared belief in the transformative potential of gender equality. Their ability to think beyond ideological divides, as evidenced by Palencia's recognition of feminist achievements across political systems, underscores the universality of their commitment to social justice.

Ultimately, both women's lives exemplify the complexities of advocating for gender equality in the context of broader political and social upheavals. Their legacies, though shaped by different ideologies and circumstances, converge in their enduring impact on the fight for women's rights and social reform.

2. Geneva: Women's cause on international level

The meeting between Isabel de Palencia and Alexandra Kollontay at the League of Nations in Geneva marked the convergence of two remarkable lives dedicated to the promotion of

¹⁰ Brodsky Farnsworth (1976); Goldman (1993); Fitzpatrick / Slezkine (2000); Schmidt-Šakić (2017); Williams (1986).

women's rights and humanitarian causes. Both women were deeply committed to their respective missions, and Geneva became the setting where their paths first crossed.

Geneva, as Palencia described it, was a meeting place for women with active minds, interested in international affairs or exiled for their political views. "It is not surprising, therefore, that it should have been in Geneva that I first met Alexandra Mikhailovna Kollontay", wrote Palencia.

It was during those first participations of mine in both great international meetings that Alexandra Kollontay, who had been charged with the same missions for her own country, and I came across each other and sowed the seeds of our future friendship. Of course I knew her by reputation, had followed her work closely, read her books, and was well informed as to her brilliant and effective campaigns for women's rights, both in the national and international fields, but it was not until I met her personally that I was able to appreciate to the full all her fine qualities (Palencia 1947: 192-193).

The two women not only met during official sessions but also at informal gatherings of women delegates, where they coordinated efforts on issues affecting women and children. Leaders of international women's organizations often attended these meetings, creating an environment that fostered collaboration and understanding. It was in these settings that Palencia and Kollontay became better acquainted and developed a mutual appreciation for each other's work.

2.1. Palencia's role at the League of Nations and the International Labour Organization

Palencia's early engagement with international feminist organizations, such as the International Suffrage Alliance and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, positioned her as a key figure in international advocacy. Her fluency in English and prior experience made her an obvious choice to represent the Spanish Republic in international forums.

Since 1931 Palencia was part of Spain's delegation to the League of Nations and the International Labour Organization (ILO) and became a trailblazer as the first woman authorized to act as a minister plenipotentiary in this global body. Her appointment symbolized not only the progressive stance of the Second Republic but also the increasing recognition of women as capable and essential participants in international diplomacy. Her participation in different ILO committees and her defense of women and children in international labor policy reinforced Spain's dedication to progressive labor rights under the Republic. Her work, particularly with the League of Nations and the ILO, showcased her dedication to advancing women's rights, labor protections, and humanitarian causes on a global stage.¹¹

¹¹ Febo (2009); Paz Torres (2019); Röwekamp (2024).

2.2. Kollontay's Diplomatic Contributions at the League of Nations

Unlike Palencia, Aleksandra Kollontay's international work is less thoroughly explored in historical research. Her contributions to diplomacy as a Soviet representative were significant, particularly within the context of the League of Nations, where she represented the Soviet Union.

The League of Nations and the Communist International, both established in the spring of 1919, were initially rivals until the Soviet Union joined the League in 1934 in an effort to seek allies against the rising threat of Hitler's Third Reich. Alexandra Kollontay, representing the Soviet Union, was tasked with promoting both women's rights and Russian interests. She served on the Legal Committee and the Social and Humanitarian Committee, contributing significantly to their work. Among her involvements was addressing the issue of the opium trade, but her primary focus was as a member of the First Committee on the Status of Women.

In 1935, Kollontay strongly advocated for the new draft on women's nationality to uphold the principle of equal rights for women in matters of nationality. She emphasized that the draft reaffirmed the principle of equality of nationality and urged that the League adopt this principle in its ongoing work, suggesting that Russian law serve as a model for equal rights for women.¹² At the 1936 Assembly, she further pushed for women's equality to be considered at the next Assembly.

In 1937, Kollontay became a member of the First Committee on the Status of Women, established after the Assembly approved a plan to study women's legal status. This marked the first formal recognition by the League that women's equal rights were integral to human rights.¹³ Kollontay expressed her hopes, stating, "the work of the Committee of Experts would be merely a first step towards the ultimate realization of the principle of equality of status, leading to a further step, such as an international convention or other appropriate means".¹⁴ Her efforts were instrumental in advancing discussions on women's rights within the League of Nations.

2.3. Shared Advocacy for Women's Rights

Geneva served as a pivotal hub for international diplomacy and advocacy during the interwar period. For women like Palencia and Kollontay, it provided a platform to engage with global issues, particularly those affecting women and children. Both women used these transnational platforms to promote their respective political and social causes, further linking their lives in a

¹² Sixteenth Ordinary Session of the Assembly, First Committee, 19th of September 1935, Nationality of Women, Committees - 1st Committee: Procès-verbaux [minutes], texts, LoN R5235/15/19848/1978.

¹³ Miller (2006); Röwekamp (2023).

¹⁴ LoN, Communiqué No. 8283, September 25, 1937.

global context. Despite their different ideological backgrounds, both women found common ground in their shared commitment to improving the status of women and addressing social injustices. While Palencia represented the Spanish Republic and worked tirelessly for women's rights and humanitarian issues, Kollontay, as a Soviet delegate, focused on advancing gender equality and promoting Soviet interests in the League of Nations. Both women saw the importance of transcending ideological divides to pursue their shared goals.

Their encounter in Geneva reflected the possibility of collaboration and mutual respect between women from different political systems, united by their dedication to advancing the rights of women and addressing global issues. Their friendship, forged in Geneva, symbolizes a shared vision of a more equitable world, even amid the tumultuous political landscape of the 1930s. While their individual legacies are distinct, their encounter represents a moment of unity and mutual inspiration, illustrating the power of international women's cooperation in the pursuit of justice and equality.

3. The Spanish Civil War and Kollontay's Support

Their friendship was based on another common bond yet: Kollontay's engagement for the Spanish Republic. While many European democracies showed indifference to Spain's plight, Kollontay's solidarity stood out.

As to the kindness of Alexandra's heart I received proof at all times, but especially so after the outbreak of our war, when the Spanish delegation in Geneva had to face the indifference –real or apparent– of the great European democracies whose signatures affixed to the Covenant should have guaranteed Spain's independence and freedom against the invading totalitarian régimes that had already subjected Abyssinia and China to the loss of their territory and their liberty (Palencia 1947: 199).

Palencia succeeded in weaving the plight of Spain into Kollontay's biography, highlighting the problematic decisions of British policy toward both Spain and Russia. Page after page, she draws parallels between the world's failure to aid Spain and its misunderstanding of Russia. Despite Kollontay's support for Spain, the Spanish cause had little to do with her personal story. An example of how Palencia narrates the parallel histories of the two nations is in her discussion of foreign recognition:

The régime in Soviet Russia, although it has outlived twenty-seven years of constant foreign opposition and demonstrated its stability to the full –would anyone in the face of Russia's magnificent contribution against Nazism in the present war be capable of denying it?– has not yet been granted recognition by about twenty democratic governments, although Franco and the Falange anti-democratic party, satellites of Hitler and Mussolini, were granted recognition by every country except Mexico and Russia, even before the Spanish people's struggle for their legal constitutional republic and government was over.

The Spanish people are still fighting for these rights, in the mountains of Asturias, Leon, Toledo, and Huelva, and will continue the struggle until Spain is free (Palencia 1947: 170).

It was not only Palencia who saw these parallels, Kollontay did, too:

It is a terrible struggle. How terrible I need not tell you. My dear and very great friend, how I long for the day when your beautiful country will be free. We are fighting for your same cause, and the forces of good are sure to be victorious. When I read of the way Leningrad is defending itself, I think of Madrid (Palencia 1947: 280).

The two women bonded not solely over the women's cause but also, at least in part, through their shared concern for Spain. Kollontay's friendship with Palencia influenced her to champion the Spanish cause, which became one of her primary concerns at the League of Nations, as noted by her biographer Barbara Evans Clements.¹⁵ Palencia wrote:

Often at those meetings in Geneva, after the Spanish invasion by German and Italian troops, Alexandra spoke out in favor of the Spanish Republic, and the convincing strength of her words helped to show the truth to many who had not understood (Palencia 1947: 201).

In autumn 1936, Kollontay wrote to a friend: "We work and work, but what are the results? No practical results on all the big questions: Spain, the revision of treaties, disarmament. 'Passivity' is the leading mood here" (Letter to Ada Nilsson, 4.10.1936, cit. up Evans Clements 1979: 252).

Also in the League, Kollontay consistently expressed her concern for Spain, even after Palencia stopped attending League meetings after 1936. For example, during the session on the bombing of civilian non-combatants in 1938, as German and Italian planes bombed Spanish cities, the Spanish government requested that the protection of civilians from aerial bombardment, as outlined in the Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907 and reaffirmed in the Versailles Peace Treaties, be included on the agenda. On September 28, 1937,¹⁶ the Assembly expressed deep sorrow for the loss of civilian lives in Spain and China, and the Council adopted a similar resolution.¹⁷ Spanish representative Pablo de Azcárate gave a speech on the horrors in Spain, stressing that while any help might come too late for Spain, future conflicts could benefit from League action.¹⁸ A similar appeal was made by Vi-Kyuin Wellington Koo from China.¹⁹ Both representatives called for commissions of inquiry, new laws, and restrictions on arms and petrol supplies to aggressor nations and convening a conference to draw up a convention. At a meeting on September 28, 1938, Kollontay supported the discussion on protection from aerial

¹⁵ Evans Clements (1979: 252).

¹⁶ League of Nations, official journal, special supplement No. 168, p. 34.

¹⁷ League of Nations, Official Journal, May-June 1937, 334.

¹⁸ Azcárate (1945). He like Palencia wrote one of the early books on Spain's history, Azcárate (1957).

¹⁹ V.K. Wellington Koo papers, 1906-1992, bulk 1931-1966, Columbia University Archives; Oral History Archives at Columbia, Digital Library Collection, Reminiscences of Vi Kyuin Wellington Koo 1975, No. 13848474.

bombardment in wartime, advocating for clearly defined and universally applicable measures to prevent any nation from exploiting loopholes.²⁰

Kollontay worked closely with the Mexican diplomat Palma Guillén, Swedish feminist Kerstin Hesselgren, and others on the drafting committee. Guillén, later married to Spanish Republican diplomat Luis Nicolau D'Olwer, became another of Palencia's friends, her life through her marriage also shaped by the Spanish struggle.²¹ Guillén and Kollontay also collaborated in the Sixth Commission and Subcommittees on Refugees, Child Welfare, and the Trafficking of Women and Children, where Guillén served as rapporteur at the suggestion of Spanish lawyer and Republican Matilde Huici, seconded by Kollontay.

4. A "budding feminist diplomacy": Sweden as a common "exile" space

4.1. A first hub of feminist diplomacy

Kollontay, Palencia, and Guillén were among the pioneering women appointed by their governments to serve as ministers in the Nordic countries, a phenomenon Palencia described as "the budding feminine diplomacy" (Palencia 1947: 213). Kollontay herself had no doubts about women's capabilities as diplomats, considering it "absurd that anyone should have even the slightest doubt as to the ability of women to fill such posts in the service of their country" (Palencia 1947: 208). She even argued that women might surpass men in diplomacy due to their flexibility, understanding, intuition, tact, and discretion. However, both Kollontay and Palencia encountered strong prejudices against women in diplomatic service, which posed significant challenges. Palencia noted that "a great deal more is thus expected of her than of a man" (Palencia 1947: 210).

Part of this burden came from the dual expectations placed on women to manage both professional responsibilities and traditionally feminine tasks, such as organizing events, arranging flowers, and planning menus. Additionally, public appearances were particularly demanding for women. "A woman's wardrobe is much more complicated, and a woman diplomat has to be very careful just because she is constantly before the public eye" (Palencia 1947: 211). When Kollontay was presented as the first woman at court, the Chief of Protocol was baffled, as no rules of etiquette existed for such a scenario. Kollontay's suggestion to wear a hat unsettled him, as he was unprepared for the situation.

²⁰ Ibid., LoN R4211/7A/36395/30988, 34.

²¹ Huck (1999).

The United States had also appointed women diplomats during this period, such as Ruth Owen Rhode and Florence Jaffray Harriman, who represented their country as ambassadors in Denmark and Sweden.²²

4.2. Strengthening of the friendship through the ongoing support for the Spanish Republic

Kollontay's and Palencia's friendship deepened in 1936 when Palencia was sent to Sweden as an ambassador.²³ The first flowers Palencia received were from Kollontay. "From that moment onward she never failed to make me feel that I had a friend near me at all times" (Palencia 1947: 202). Kollontay offered advice on court etiquette and celebrated Palencia's "wonderful impression" at her presentation (Palencia 1947: 202). The two women communicated daily, either by phone or in person, and Palencia described Kollontay as "almost as though she had become a member of our family" (Palencia 1947: 203).

The Russian embassy staff and employees of the Soviet Legation, under Kollontay's leadership, voluntarily donated part of their salaries to aid the women and children of Spain (Palencia 1947: 204). Toward the end of 1936, Kollontay began organizing fundraising concerts and parties to support Spanish Republican fighters.²⁴

Palencia reflected on Kollontay's unwavering support during Spain's darkest hours:

And so, day by day, as the waters of defeat closed in upon us and we held up our hands as though searching for the log of wood that the drowning man expects to be saved by, Alexandra's friendship grew stronger and stronger. She often made me feel that, although dark reaction had temporarily shut out the light of democracy in Spain, beacons were ahead (Palencia 1947: 207).

When Spain's defeat became inevitable, Kollontay took it upon herself to approach the Swedish government, asking them to care for the Palencia family and offer them asylum –a request Sweden granted. However, it was also Kollontay who persuaded the Palencias to consider moving to Mexico, a country she admired from her tenure as ambassador.

Palencia described the decision process in her memoirs:

I had hesitated between a land of exile where we might find nothing that could remind us of the beloved and now inaccessible country of our birth, or one where there would be much to keep Spain –were it necessary– constantly in our thoughts. To tell the truth, I personally shrank from the suffering, the additional suffering, that any similarity might impose. Alexandra did not agree. 'You will speak your own language, and witness scenes that will be a constant reminder,' she said, as an answer to my objections. 'I don't need to

²² Calkin (1978); Nash (2020).

²³ Eirora San Francisco (2014: 193-258); Rodrigo (1998); Paz Torres (2008: 321-341).

²⁴ Porter (1980: 455).

be reminded.' 'There will be moments when you will feel almost as though you were in your own country, and Mexico is beautiful' (Palencia 1947: 265).

Kollontay also emphasized that Mexico would offer a community of thousands of displaced Spaniards, to whom many other nations had refused refuge, ensuring that Palencia would not feel isolated. Upon arriving in Mexico, Palencia immediately realized the wisdom of Kollontay's advice.²⁵

The first moments were of course very difficult. No one who has not been an exile or, worse still, a refugee, can have an adequate idea of what it means. The first strange impression is to find oneself adrift in the world, with only one's clothes packed in a box or in a couple of suitcases, that is, if one has been lucky enough to have even them (Palencia 1940: 465).

Despite the hardships, Mexico felt like a second home.

To make things even more homelike we found we could not walk along the principal streets of Mexico without coming up against Spaniards from Madrid, from Barcelona and Valencia: our close friends, and many of our dearest (Palencia 1940: 466).

Even in exile, Kollontay and Palencia remained in close contact, sharing not only personal reflections but also the parallel histories of their countries.

Kollontay, who had been forced to navigate the difficult task of convincing Finland to abandon its neutrality while serving as a diplomat for the Soviet Union –particularly as it attacked her mother's homeland– found her work increasingly difficult. The League of Nations expelled the Soviet Union for its aggression, but none of the Western states came to Finland's aid. Sweden, however, secretly provided arms and support, straining Swedish-Soviet relations. Kollontay warned Sweden that by doing so, it risked compromising its own neutrality. Her efforts were seen as instrumental in pushing Sweden toward a more peaceful stance. Later, it was also through Kollontay's influence that Finland was able to negotiate peace with the Soviet Union.

However, her suffering was far from over. Norway was occupied by German forces, Germany launched an attack on Russia, and Finland and Russia fought another three-year war. Throughout this tumultuous period, Kollontay led secret peace negotiations and fought tirelessly to keep Sweden out of the conflict. In 1945, after brokering peace between Finland and the Soviet Union, and after enduring a serious illness, she was recalled to Moscow, where she spent her final years working on her memoirs. Sweden and Norway even nominated her for the Nobel Peace Prize for her diplomatic efforts.

In 1945, Kollontay was called back to Russia, where she spent the last years of her life writing. In June 1946, she wrote to Palencia about the biography that was being written about

²⁵ Nieva de la Paz (2017).

her: "I am certainly very happy that my biography has been written by you. ... We shall certainly find an occasion to see one another. My old and strong friendship is always with you and your dear family. I embrace you all" (Palencia 1947: 285).

The unwavering mutual support between Kollontay and Palencia during such challenging times gave both women strength and solidarity, making their lives and work more bearable as they faced overwhelming adversity.

Conclusions

While at first, I thought of the friendship between these two women as unlikely, as I delved deeper into their life stories, I came to understand that their bond was far from improbable.

The two women shared numerous commonalities, which, while possibly emphasized or shaped by Palencia's perspective, also genuinely reflected the intersections in their lives. Both women grew up in conservative upper-class circles with liberal fathers and strong, unconventional mothers who encouraged their development beyond societal expectations. Witnessing their mothers' independence, they aspired to the same freedom. Their shared curiosity and determination to expand beyond the roles prescribed to them by society planted the seeds of future feminism.

Moreover, both came from mixed marriages, fostering a broader worldview and a less insular sense of nationalism. From an early age, they were fluent in multiple languages, rooted in two distinct cultures, and adept at navigating international spaces. This required a dedication to learning and adaptability uncommon for women of their social standing at the time. Both were acutely aware of social injustices, discrimination, and inequality and were motivated to effect change. These qualities positioned them as trailblazers long before they reached adulthood.

As adults, both women pursued unconventional careers, becoming champions of women's rights in their respective countries and on the international stage. They were attuned to the glaring inequalities in their societies, particularly regarding social welfare and legal protections for the underprivileged and disenfranchised. As two of the first women diplomats, they spent significant time together in Sweden, a country that neither called home. In a kind of exile, far from their own countries, they found solace and solidarity in one another.

Their shared support for the Spanish Republic further strengthened their friendship, despite their different ideological affiliations –Kollontay as a communist and Palencia as a socialist. Their connection demonstrates that their bond transcended mere personal affinity and developed into a partnership for broader causes.

This case study highlights more than just the story of a friendship. Like Palencia's writings, it provides insights into the intertwined histories of Spain and Russia. In the case of Spain, these insights have become part of widely accepted historical interpretation. Regarding Russia, they may eventually contribute to a reevaluation of events leading up to the Second World War and a renegotiation of the responsibilities surrounding it.

Moreover, their friendship exemplifies the necessity of transcending national frameworks when analyzing European and global conflicts or studying exile. Kollontay and Palencia's bond reflects the broader network of feminist diplomacy that emerged in the Nordic countries during the interwar period, demonstrating how exile and transnational movements can foster shared experiences, solidarity, and mutual influence.

Ultimately, their friendship offers a rich perspective on how personal connections can bridge ideological and national divides. It underscores how exile and broader transnational contexts create opportunities for understanding, collaboration, and resilience. This is the broader lesson that exile studies can offer –if we are willing to look beyond national boundaries to uncover shared human experiences.

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