Appendix A: Briefing Document

The First All-Women's Russian Congress: Setting the Scene

This gathering took place in 1908 three years after the first major revolution against the Tsar. At this point Tsar Nicholas II has agreed to the creation of the Duma (legislature), but much remains uncertain and in a state of change. Revolutionary energy is everywhere.

“Thousands of small electric lamps illuminated the spacious Alexander Hall (Aleksandrovskii zal) in the St. Petersburg City Hall on the night of December 10, 1908. A substantial crowd had gathered by eight o’clock, filling the hall to overflowing. The City Hall had been the scene of many other meetings and conferences, but this was the first time that the participants, numbering more than a thousand, were almost entirely female. They had gathered to attend the First All-Russian Women’s Congress (Pervyi Vserossiiskii zhenskii s”ezd), held from December 10 through 16.” (Ruthchild, 102)

The congress brought together activists from many different communities. Although they all shared the goal of social change, many had differing ideas about the causes of injustice in Russian society and the best way to address them. Activist Alexandra Kollantai opened her speech at the Congress by saying:

“‘The woman question’ - say the feminists - is a question of ‘rights and justice.’ ‘The women question’ - answer the women workers - is a question of a crust of bread. Thus began Kollontai’s speech at the Women’s Congress.” (Ibid., 103)

What do you think Kollontai means by this? What is her view about the priorities of feminists? What is her view about the priorities of the women workers?
More descriptions of the Congress:

“Solidarity was a key theme [of the congress], sounded often during the weeklong meeting. And this solidarity was to be with both sexes. The organizers took pains to invite supportive men.” (Ibid., 104)

“One group, peasant women, the majority of Russia’s female population, was noticeably absent in the congress registrants. Many factors kept peasant women away, including the difficulties of travel, family responsibilities, lack of money... Does this mean the peasant women weren’t interested? Representatives of the Trudovik/ Peasant Party reported that some peasant women were sufficiently engaged and literate enough that they went from hut to hut to read reports of the Women’s Congress sessions to each other... One midwife wrote, ‘I sit in my hut, await more births, and think of the Women’s Congress.’” (ibid, 107-8)

“The worker’s group at the Women’s Congress was relatively small, but their impact was large. Opponents of congress attendance, generally Bolshevik men, gave the usual argument that such a gathering would enable the bourgeoisie with a golden opportunity to split the working class. Supporters stressed the agitational possibilities of the Women’s Congress... Their arguments carried the day; the textile workers voted in favor of sending delegates to the assembly.” (Ibid, 108)

What does this tell us about who is at the congress? What are their goals? What are sources of disagreement between them? Could the decisions made at the Congress be truly representational of Russian women when a large subsection of the shareholders were not present?