

Hotbed for the ‘New Woman’. Elaborations on Minni Kurs-Olesk’s London Years

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The young Estonian social democrat Minni Kurs continued her education at educational institutions in Great Britain from 1902 to 1904. This article analyses her activity and social circle during her years of study in London based on archival sources.

Minni Kurs-Olesk (1879–1940) was one of the founders of the Estonian women’s rights movement, the social democratic movement, and social welfare. After the establishment of the independent Republic of Estonia, she was a member of Estonia’s Constituent Assembly and of the commission for working out Estonia’s constitution as a representative of the Estonian Social Democratic Workers’ Party. Kurs-Olesk was also active in trade union activity and in fostering opportunities for vocational education. She was active in women’s organisations in Estonia and at the international level. She also worked as a journalist. Additionally, she has left her mark in the history of Estonian translation.

In London, Minni Kurs joined the Social Democratic Federation and supplemented her education primarily at educational institutions associated with the activity of the Fabian Society, which offered young people with lower incomes the chance to gain an education. In the autumn semester of 1903, she was registered as a university student at the London School of Economics and Political Science. She also supplemented her education in non-formal adult education, trade union activity, and opportunities for women’s employment. Before returning to Livonia, she visited the 6th Congress of the 2nd Socialist International in Amsterdam. Minni Kurs arrived in Tartu on the eve of the year of revolution, 1905. She continued to be politically active and soon attracted the attention of the tsarist state’s police.

News of the imprisonment of Minni Kurs-Olesk reached Britain in 1906. Fortunately, that report proved to be erroneous. Reaction to that news shows that she had to have developed acquaintances with circles in London that stood for women’s rights. The report of her possible imprisonment and the corporal punishment that awaited her prompted the British journalist William Thomas Stead to vouch for Minni Kurs-Olesk.

Stead supported women's rights activists, including the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) led by Emmeline Pankhurst, an organisation of radical suffragettes founded in 1903. A letter from the well-known journalist reached Sergei Witte, Prime Minister of the Russian Empire, by way of the tsarist court. Witte demanded immediate information on the report from the office of the provisional Governor General of the Baltic guberniyas.

In addition to introducing the London years of Minni Kurs, the article elaborates on numerous details in her biographical data. As a New Woman of the 20th century, Minni Kurs-Olesk doubtless merits thorough biographical research.