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DOI: 10.35539/LTNC.2025.0060.09

Young Minni Kurs-Olesk: the Formation of a New Woman behind the Scenes in 1905

Minni Kursa-Oleska jaunībā: "Jaunās sievietes" rašanās 1905. gada aizkulisēs

Keywords:
Baltic provinces,
Estonia,
women's rights,
social democrats,
1905 Revolution,
William Thomas Stead

Atslēgvārdi:
Baltijas provinces,
Igaunija,
sieviešu tiesības,
sociāldemokrāti,
1905. gada revolūcija,
Viljams Tomass Steds

Summary Minni Kurs-Olesk (1879–1940) was one of the founders of the Estonian women's movement, as well as of social democracy and social welfare. She played a part in the politics of the newly formed Republic of Estonia, having been elected as a representative of the Estonian Social Democratic Labour Party to both the Constituent Assembly and the commission responsible for drafting the Estonian constitution. In 1905 the young Minni Kurs returned from London, where she had seized the opportunity to study at institutions such as the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). As a social democrat, she became actively involved in the revolutionary events unfolding in the Baltic provinces of imperial Russia. This article examines materials from a police dossier about her which are now held in the Latvian State Historical Archives. The archived correspondence between the offices of the Prime Minister of the Russian Empire and the Provisional Governor-General of the Baltic Governorates contains a note from the renowned London journalist, William Thomas Stead. (Upon hearing from mutual acquaintances in London that Minni Kurs-Olesk had been arrested and sentenced to corporal punishment, Stead wrote to protest her treatment.) Examples from the memoirs and correspondence of her contemporaries illustrate the restrictions that prevented women from fulfilling their dreams in the Russian Empire.

Kopsavilkums Minni Kursa-Oleska (1879–1940) Igaunijā bija gan viena no sieviešu kustības dibinātājām, gan arī sociāldemokrātijas un sociālās labklājības sistēmas aizsācēja. Kursai-Oleskai bija liela loma jaundibinātās Igaunijas Republikas politikā, jo viņa kā Igaunijas Sociāldemokrātiskās Darba partijas pārstāve bija ievēlēta gan Satversmes sapulcē, gan arī komisijā, kas bija atbildīga par Igaunijas konstitūcijas izstrādāšanu. 1905. gadā Kursa-Oleska atgriezās no Londonas, kur bija izmantojusi iespēju studēt tādās mācību iestādēs kā Londonas Ekonomikas un politikas zinātņu augstskola. Kā sociāldemokrāte viņa aktīvi iesaistījās revolucionārajos notikumos, kas risinājās cariskās Krievijas Baltijas provincēs. Šajā rakstā analizēti materiāli no policijas dosjē par Kursu-Olesku, kuri šobrīd glabājas Latvijas Valsts vēstures arhīvā. Tur atrodamā sarakste starp Krievijas impērijas premjerministru un Baltijas guberņu pagaidu ģenerālgubernatoru citstarp ietver slavenā Londonas žurnālista Viljama Tomasa Steda rakstītu vēstuli. (Dzirdējis no kopīgiem Londonas paziņām, ka Kursa-Oleska esot apcietināta un viņai piespriests miesassods, viņš izteica protestu pret šādu rīcību.) Savukārt Kursas-Oleskas memuāri un korespondence liecina par ierobežojumiem, ar kādiem saskārās sieviešu centieni Krievijas impērijā.

In 1888, amidst the debates on women's rights that had been ongoing throughout that decade, the editor Lilli Suburg[1] published an essay entitled "*Emancipirt!*" ('Emancipated!')[2] in her magazine *Linda*. In the essay, she explains the meaning of the word in its title, emphasizing the aspects of belonging to someone without free will and being "freed from slavery" (Suburg 1888). From there she moves on to men's power over women: this power, as she stresses, is based on women's lack of education which keeps them in the dark. Therefore, Suburg encourages Estonian women to take every opportunity to learn and to sharpen their minds, as men and women are equal in their intellectual abilities. Her essay takes a programme-like approach to the concept of a new type of woman that emerged at the end of the 19th century (Undla-Põldmäe 1981: 286; Annuk 2012: 73–76). In the magazine *Linda*, Suburg also discusses the legal status of (peasant) women (Suburg 1889: 224–226), and opposes the argument that women who write publicly (we can elaborate: who engage in intellectual debate) allegedly lose their femininity (Suburg 1887: 2). In her essay on emancipation, Suburg highlights the advantages that Finnish women then had over their Estonian contemporaries, citing their proficiency in foreign languages and their extensive network of contacts which even reach as far as America (Suburg 1888).

Lilli Suburg is regarded as the first Estonian feminist (Annuk 2021: 46): the first Estonian girls' school was founded by her, as was the first women's magazine *Linda* (established in 1887 and subsequently edited by her as well). Suburg also expressed her ideas through fiction, including the short story *Liina* (1877) which explores gendered nationalism (Annuk 2021). Fiction about women's rights, however, was not solely her domain. At the end of the 19th century Eduard Vilde, the founder of Estonian socio-critical realism, also emerged as a persistent advocate of feminist ideas and became one of the most steadfast defenders of women's freedom and dignity in his works (Lindsalu 2006: 296).[3] For example, in his novella *Astla vastu* (Against the Sting, 1898), which is considered the first European novel in Estonian literature, Vilde highlights the inequality faced by women, as well as other issues, in a rural province of Tsarist Russia (*Estlit.ee* 2025). Vilde's interest in women's emancipation was

1 Lilli Suburg (1841–1923), Estonian writer, journalist and educator.

2 The author informs that the German word *emancipirt* (= *emanzipiert* in modern German spelling) is a borrowing from the Latin word *emancipare*. Throughout the essay, she only uses the term as a quotation and does not provide an Estonian translation.

3 Eduard Vilde (1865–1933), a classic of Estonian literature.

awakened during his stay in Berlin during 1890–1892, when he was introduced to socio-democratic ideology and read August Bebel (Lindsalu 2006: 297).

As regards the term 'New Woman', it originated in France in the 1830s. It was first introduced by the writer George Sand (Amantine-Lucile-Aurore Dudevant), gained currency in Russia during the 1850s in the debate over Nikolai Chernyshevsky's controversial novel *Chto delat?* (What Is to Be Done?, 1863), and subsequently was used in 1894 in the public debate between the Irish writer Sarah Grand (Frances Elizabeth Bellenden Clarke) and the English writer Ouida (Maria Louise Ramé) to describe feminist, educated, and legally and economically independent women (see also Kirss 2006: 76–78; Kirss 2015; Ross 2023: 775). As a "precursor to the modern Western female professional" (Das 2023: 464), this "woman suddenly appears on the scene of man's activities, as a sort of new creation, and demands a share in the struggles, the responsibilities and the honours of the world, in which, until now, she had been a cipher" (Tusan 1998: 169). As a character in fiction – such as Nora in Henrik Ibsen's play *Et dukkehjem* (A Doll's House, 1879) – the protagonist reflected not only her own aspirations but also society's reaction to them. In the real world, the New Women were trying to effect change in society, particularly with regard to women's rights (see Buzwell 2025).

Drawing on the life of Minni Kurs-Olesk, I will discuss what it meant to be a New Woman in the Baltic provinces at the beginning of the 20th century. I will consider the invisible barriers they had to break through, and how often they encountered "an impenetrable crystal vault" (*une voûte de cristal impenetrable*) (Sand 1988: 59–60).[4] My article is additionally based on archival research that I published last year, aiming to clarify Kurs-Olesk's biographical details and her studies abroad (Talivee 2024).

Minni Kurs-Olesk and her contemporaries have already been referred to as New Women in various studies (Hinrikus 1997; Kirss 2004, 2006, 2011). She is a fine illustration of this phenomenon, being one of the founders of the Estonian women's rights movement, social democracy, and social welfare. She played a role in the politics of the newly formed Republic of Estonia, having been elected as a representative of the Estonian Social Democratic Labour Party to the Constituent Assembly and the commission responsible for drafting the Estonian constitution (Viljamaa; Hillermaa 2020). Kurs-Olesk also promoted vocational training opportunities, alongside trade union work. She additionally became involved in child protection, organizing care for orphans, infants and young mothers, as well as for domestic workers, the blind, the war wounded, etc. (Kurs-Olesk, 1939). Kurs-Olesk participated in women's organizations both in Estonia and internationally. The first female students in Tartu

4 *"J'étais une femme; car tout à coup mes ailes se sont engourdies, l'éther s'est fermé sur ma tête, comme une voûte de cristal impénétrable, et je suis tombé, tombé [..]"* (Sand 1988: 59–60).

recalled the moral support they received from Kurs-Olesk and the generous invitations to the Olesks' home, including the opportunity to use their extensive library (Mirka-Linnus 1939: 10–13). Kurs-Olesk tried to find practical solutions for making women's lives easier and improving their working conditions. At the same time, she wanted to encourage them to strive for the same goals as men, which was far from self-evident for women at that time – for example, she encouraged them to enter politics (Kurs-Olesk 1924). She also wrote about these issues in newspapers.

Minni Kurs-Olesk's contribution to society has been discussed in connection with her jubilee birthdays (e. g., Jansen 1929; A. T-nn 1929; *Väsimatult ühiskonda…* 1939), and the Estonian Association of University Women compiled a book of tribute essays to Minni Kurs-Olesk for her 60th birthday in 1939, with contributions from several authors. This book gives a detailed account of her work in state and local government, social work, the women's movement, women's vocational training, and journalism (Kurs-Olesk 1939). Kurs-Olesk has also been portrayed in a book on the history of Estonian women's movement published by the Estonian community in exile after World War II (Mäelo 1957), while in the Soviet Union she was not considered worthy of research. However, in independent Estonia literary scholars once again brought her legacy to light: Sirje Olesk was the first to re-examine Minni Kurs-Olesk (Olesk 1993), and Peeter Olesk has published several accounts about his grandmother (e.g. Olesk 2006; 2010). Tiina Kirss has published and commented on Minni Kurs-Olesk's correspondence with her partner Lui Olesk (Kirss 2019 and 2020).[5] The legacy of Kurs-Olesk was also discussed in Piret Karro's study *150 Years of Estonian Feminism* (Karro 2022) and in an exhibition based on it (2023–2024).[6]

A note from William Thomas Stead

At the beginning of the 20th century, Tartu (then officially called Yuryev in Russian and Dorpat in German) was certainly one of the hotbeds of New Women in Estonia. On the eve of the 1905 Revolution, dissatisfaction with the Tsarist government was growing. Young people of both sexes were gathering in groups and secret circles, which led to a turbulent year full of turmoil. By the spring of 1906, 27-year-old Minni Kurs-Olesk had crossed so many borders that her name appears in a police dossier now kept in the Latvian State Historical Archives.

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5 This correspondence is archived in the Estonian Cultural History Archives of the Estonian Literary Museum.

6 Piret Karro is a researcher and curator whose academic background lies in semiotics and gender studies.

The file contains correspondence between the Office of the Prime Minister Count Sergei Witte of the Russian Empire, and the Office of the Provisional Governor-General of the Baltic Guberniyas, Vasily Sollogub.[7] On 9 March 1906, Sollogub had received a secret request to inform Witte urgently about the fate of a young woman: the Prime Minister wanted to know whether Mina[8] Olesk (maiden name Kurs) had been arrested and sentenced to corporal punishment.[9] The reason for the investigation was revealed in a letter dated 14 March from a lady-in-waiting at the court, State Lady (*Stats-Dama*) Yelizaveta Narishkina[10], which contained a copy of an English-language note requesting further information:

> Minny Olesk, nee Kurs, is a young and beautiful Russian girl who recently spent a year or two in London and Paris, perfecting her education. On her return to Russia married a lawyer named Olesk. She is a Social Democrat and addressed a workmen's meeting during the disorders in the Baltic provinces. For this offence she was arrested, and sentenced at Dorpat to 300 strokes with a birch rod. As she was enceinte, the infliction of the flogging was postponed until after childbirth. My friends who knew her well in London declare that she is a refined and sensitive girl to whom the prospect of degradin torture awaiting her after confinement means death. After sentence she was removed to a prison some little distance from Dorpat where in close confinement away from her husband she awaits maternity and its sequel. Inquiry into the case asked for and if the facts are as stated a remission of the sentence as inhuman.
>
> W. T. Stead[11]

Narishkina mentioned her intention to take Stead's appeal to the Tsar if the circumstances were as stated. The inquiry at the highest level demanded urgent

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7 Count Sergei (Sergius) Witte (1849–1915) became the first Chairman of the Council of Ministers in 1905 and served as the first Prime Minister of the Russian Empire after successfully negotiating favourable terms for Russia at the end of the Russo-Japanese War. Vasily Sollogub (1848–1917) was appointed Provisional Governor-General of Livonia, Estonia and Courland in 1905, and resided in the restless Riga. Sollogub survived a bomb attack in Riga in autumn 1906.

8 Minni Kurs-Olesk was born Minna Caroline Marie Kurs. 'Mina' is the Russian spelling of 'Minna'. In her correspondence from England and the documents used there, she used the form 'Minny', and in the tribute album, her name appears as Vilhelmine-Marie-Karoline Kurs. This version was used quite widely afterwards.

9 LVVA, 6989.2.23, p. 1. From Director of the Police Department of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Empire, Zubovski, to the Office of the Provisional Governor-General of the Baltic States, 9 March 1906.

10 Yelizaveta Narishkina (Žiži Naryškina, *née* Kurakina, 1838–1928). Personal connections probably played a role: Kirill Naryshkin, the son of the high-ranking court lady, was the husband of Count Witte's stepdaughter Vera.

11 LVVA.6989.2.23, p. 8. From William Thomas Stead to Yelizaveta Narishkina.

action. Telegrams and reports signed by the Provisional Governor, various officers, and the Chief of Police went back and forth, and by 16 March 1906 it was clear that the person in question was not on the list of persons taken into custody by the police or punitive expedition squads. Fortunately, only two guesses in Stead's note proved to be true. Firstly, there was a prisoner named Olesk – it was the aforementioned lawyer Lui Olesk, who had been arrested for defending his client.[12] Secondly, Minni Kurs-Olesk was indeed pregnant at the time – the first daughter of the Olesk family, Olga Desideria, was born a month later on 16 April 1906.

The author of the note that sparked the correspondence was the journalist William Thomas Stead (1849–1912), one of the pioneers of British investigative journalism. Stead began his career in North-East England, but his passionate coverage of Bulgarian atrocities earned him a job in London in 1880 at the influential *Pall Mall Gazette* (Prévost 2013). In 1885 Stead had published one of the most controversial series of articles in Victorian society, "The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon" (Stead 1885): a journalistic experiment that exposed a market of child prostitution in London where girls in their early teens were bought from impoverished or alcoholic parents for wealthy clients.[13] A long-time campaigner for women's rights, Stead was also a friend of the Pankhurst family[14] who supported suffrage. When Emmeline Pankhurst became leader of the Women's Social and Political Union in 1903 – the organization through which the suffragettes campaigned militantly for women's right to vote –, Stead was also one of the first to support their activities, including speaking on behalf of imprisoned suffragettes (Davies 2019: 60).

Stead was also intrigued by the Russian Empire (Prévost 2013) and had met both Tsar Alexander III and Tsar Nicholas II.[15] Otherwise critical of Russia, Stead was dazzled by the new emperor's peace plans – as he, too, was a proponent of world peace (Ashton 2004). In September 1905, Stead travelled to Russia hoping to

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12 Lui Olesk's arrest was brief, since prominent social figures in Estonia (such as the newspaper editor Jaan Tõnisson) stood up for him.

13 The backlash that followed the detailed reporting of the experiment forced Parliament to raise the age of sexual consent from the current 13 to 16 (1885 Criminal Law Amendment Act). Stead also contributed to another important change in the law: the journalist died on the *Titanic* in 1912, and the obituaries published in the press helped to give final impetus to England's first law against sex trafficking that same year (Attwood 2021).

14 GBR/0014/STED 1/59. Correspondence with Richard Marsden Pankhurst and Christabel Pankhurst.

15 Stead published a book *Truth about Russia* (1888) about his first visit to Russia. His first interview with Nicholas II took place in Livadia Palace in Crimea in 1898.

persuade the Tsar of the validity of the rebels' demands, and Nicholas II, who generally avoided the press, made a favourable impression on him in a private meeting at Peterhof where Stead also met the Empress Alexandra. The 17 October Manifesto may have appeared to Stead even as a vindication of his aspirations (see Ashton 2004).

The news of Minni Kurs's possible arrest and imminent flogging, which reached Stead through their mutual friends in London, may have had an intriguing resonance: as the suffragettes had just begun their militant campaign, the actions of the young Baltic revolutionary seemed very similar to theirs and happened within the same timeframe. Minni Kurs spoke at the meetings through the autumn of 1905, and the first arrest of British suffragettes took place on 13 October 1905, when Christabel Pankhurst[16] and Annie Kenney[17] attempted to question a parliamentary candidate at a political meeting in Manchester about his support for women's suffrage, and resisted the police who escorted them out of the meeting (see *Missive from a militant*, 2018). The physical interference (Pankhurst had either punched or spat at the policeman) and the choice of imprisonment rather than bail is generally regarded as the beginning of the suffragettes' radical public protest. The subsequent jailing of Pankhurst and Kenney in Strangeways prison made news around the world, spreading their message "Votes for Women".

A girl with a wicker trunk[18]

The correspondence compiled in the file suggests that Kurs should have been punished for her behaviour, even though she was not arrested. The deputy governor's office describes in its reply how "during the street riots in Yuryev, shortly after the publication of the Manifesto on 17 October 1905, Mina Kurs /or Olesk/ appeared at the open window of her house dressed in red and carrying a red flag. It is said that a Cossack passing through the streets pointed his rifle at her for a moment, and Mina Kurs immediately hid".[19] The author of the

16 Dame Christabel Harriette Pankhurst (1880–1958), a suffragist leader, was a lawyer educated at the University of Manchester but barred from practicing because she was a woman.

17 Annie Kenney (1879–1953), a former Manchester cotton mill worker, was a trade unionist who joined the suffragettes in 1904. She became one of the leaders of the Women's Social and Political Union.

18 In a letter, Minni Kurs mentions a travel basket that could hold all her belongings. (EKM EKLA, f 185, m 27: 20, p. 13/39, Minny to Lui, London, 4 April 1903).

19 LVVA.6989.2.23, p. 15. Translated from Russian by the author of this article.

report attributes cowardice to her hiding, rather than condemns the targeting of a woman with a gun.[20] The report also tells how Mina Kurs, after returning from abroad, began to promote all kinds of freedoms (including free love) among schoolgirls in Tartu, citing her own partnership with Lui Olesk as an example.[21]

A little introduction is needed for this young woman's relationship with the city of Tartu and the restless young revolutionaries. Minni Kurs grew up in Tartu as the only child of a single mother Liina Kurs who ran a sewing workshop. Her father, a tailor named Johann Ludvig Kurs, had left the family for good, and her sister died as an infant (Olesk 2006: 286; Minni Kurs-Olesk 1939: 7). She was (probably) educated at Alfred Grass's girls' school (Minni Kurs-Olesk 1939: 7) and the city of Tartu allowed her to take an examination to become a governess in 1895 (possibly in Riga).[22] She won a scholarship to study at the German Women's Teachers' Seminary, from which she graduated in 1898 (Minni Kurs-Olesk 1939: 7).[23] Although German was spoken at her family home, she learned Estonian from her grandmother and relatives in the countryside. Her social circle in Tartu included students of Estonian origin. In 1897, Minni Kurs met law student Amandus Louis (Lui) Bernhard Olesk (born Norrmann, 1876–1932)[24] who was an illegitimate son of a widow, raised by his uncle.[25] Lui Olesk graduated from *Imperatorskij Jur'evskij Universitet* (now University of Tartu) in 1902 and, alongside beginning a career in law, became active in journalism. Since 1899, the two young people began an intense but intermittent correspondence; in the spring of 1903, they switched from German to Estonian at Lui's request. The need to exchange letters arose from Minni's work and study abroad. Why did the young woman leave Tartu in the first place? Like many of her contemporaries, she "wanted to see the

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20 The report reflects the atmosphere of the autumn of the 1905 revolution in Tartu. Red was the colour of the flags welcoming, among other things, the October Manifesto which promised to guarantee civil liberties (e.g. freedom of speech, press and assembly), to establish a broad franchise, and to create a legislative body (the Duma). However, martial law was declared in Livonia on 22 November, extended to Tallinn and Harju County in December, and the tsarist government began to restore order by force.

21 LVVA.6989.2.23, p. 15, V. Sollogub to Y. Narishkina, 18 March 1906.

22 EKM EKLA, f 185, m 30: 1, p. 1. Documents of Minni Kurs-Olesk, 14 October 1895 – 25 August 1922.

23 *Lehrerinnenseminar zu Dorpat*.

24 EKM EKLA, f 185, m 29: 4, p. 1/1. Louis Olesk to Teures Fräulein (in German 'Dear Miss') Kurs, 25 June 1899.

25 RA, EAA.3148.1.46, p. 25/88. (Parish register.)

big world" (Olesk 2006: 286), but there may also have been other circumstances at play, and then one thing led to another.

First of all, a woman could not study at university in the Russian Empire. Only Finland was in a more exceptional situation in the Russian Empire, as women had been allowed to study at the University of Helsinki under special conditions since the 1870s.[26] An Estonian from Tartu, Hella Murrik-Wuolijoki who would later become a renowned Finnish writer, was admitted to the University of Helsinki in 1904. In Tartu, the first women interested in higher education were allowed to listen to lectures at the university from the autumn of 1905 – as the university administration took advantage of the chaotic situation in the political life of the Empire – but until 1915 they were not taken in as full-time students and were not allowed to sit exams.

Secondly, to employ a female teacher at school in the provinces of Livonia and Estonia was, although not prohibited, not an established custom (see also Kirss 2020: 129–131). All of this offers an explanation for why Minni Kurs, aged only 20, left for Bessarabia in 1899. Till 1901, she worked as a teacher of Russian and arithmetic at an Evangelical Lutheran school in Kishinev (now Chișinău, Moldova).[27] Later, Kurs-Olesk recalled that her interest in the causes of social inequality had already begun at the girls' school in Tartu. However, it was in Kishinev that she became acquainted with revolutionary youth – the Jewish socialists. Next, she became a teacher of conversational German in the family of the Reverend Johan Wilhelm Wartiainen in Paimio near Turku in Finland. Her worldview seems to have broadened in Finland and must have given her the impetus to travel abroad for further study: she has mentioned Wartiainen's admiration for N. F. S. Grundtvig, the promoter of a public education and founder of folk high schools (Kurs-Olesk 1938: 75–76). She also remembered meeting the members of the Finnish women's movement, including its leaders Alli Trygg-Helenius and Aino Malmberg (Minni Kurs-Olesk 1939: 8). Either of the latter could have served as her role model. The trips to England and the USA in the capacity of a representative of the Finnish Women's Association are often cited as important turning points in Trygg-Helenius' activities (Ilola 2025). As a leader of the temperance movement, she paid particular attention to helping the socially disadvantaged. The English teacher Malmberg, an ardent supporter of Finnish

26 In 1905, Helene Taar provided an overview of women's suffrage and educational opportunities in a publication by the *Noor Eesti* (Young Estonia) movement (Taar, 1905). She argued that English women had the most organized women's rights movement in Europe, whereas Finnish women were given the opportunity to study. She also asked why young Estonian women willing to study abroad could not easily find support, despite cases of fundraising for male students.

27 EKM EKLA, f 185, m 30: 1, p. 3. The documents of Minni Kurs-Olesk.

independence, also visited London several times since 1895 (Krohn; Pares 1933: 202–204; Pohls 2022).[28]

It was probably the contacts that Minni Kurs had made in Finland that led her to study in England. She left Tartu in autumn 1902 and most likely first stayed at the home of Ludvig Enqvist, who was the chaplain for Finnish seamen in London at the time (*Kirkkomaa.fi* 2025; *SKS Henkilöhistoria* 2025). At the end of December that year, the Estonian newspaper *Postimees* (The Postman) anonymously published Kurs's first newspaper article written as a New Year's greeting. This was quite a Suburg-like call upon the Estonian women to educate themselves and to acquire skills for supporting themselves, citing the example of female sanitary inspectors in London (*Eesti õdedele…* 1902).

The institutions that Minni Kurs chose for self-improvement in London illustrate her need for cheaper education, her desire to learn and to acquire a profession that would ensure independence and broaden her world view. One letter mentions her studies on the edge of Battersea Park.[29] This might have been the Battersea Polytechnic Institute, founded in 1891 under the City of London Parochial Charities Act (1883) scheme to establish Polytechnic Institutes throughout London (*Exploring the Battersea Polytechnic Archive* 2025). In August and September 1903, Minni Kurs learned to make butter, soft cheese, and Stilton, Derby and Cheddar cheeses at the Midland Agricultural and Dairy College.[30]

For financial reasons, Minni Kurs expressed a wish to move to Toynbee Hall for the summer of 1903.[31] This institution was established to help and educate low-income citizens. Named in honour of the British economist and social reformer Arnold Toynbee, the charity was founded in 1884 in the East End of London. The buildings were designed to resemble university buildings, and Oxford and Cambridge students were invited to live and work there as volunteers. It also offered free legal aid, which was often used by Russian and Polish immigrants, among others. Following Toynbee Hall's example, the idea of establishing such charitable institutions spread to other parts of the world in the following decades, especially to the United States. Tiina Kirss has mentioned an ideological parallel between Minni Kurs and

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28 Aino Malmberg became a political refugee in London in 1909, remaining there until Finland gained independence.

29 EKM EKLA, f 185, m 27: 20, p. 9/25, Minny to Lui, London, 23 March 1903.

30 EKM EKLA, f 185, m 30: 1, p. 5–6. The documents of Minni Kurs-Olesk.

31 EKM EKLA, f 185, m 27: 20, p. 12/37, Minny to Lui, London, 26 March 1903.

Jane Addams, the American feminist and pioneer of social work with the poor (Kirss 2020: 130). Addams was one of those who spread the idea of institutions like Toynbee Hall in North America.[32]

These free educational opportunities and institutions in London are associated with the Fabian Society, founded in England in 1884. The Fabians were the leaders of the workers' education movement and held moderately socialist views about social justice and welfare, rational economic planning, and a tolerant and active democracy. They held one of their first lecture evenings at Toynbee Hall. Along with the Social Democratic Federation and the trade unions, the Fabian Society was also involved in the birth of the Labour Party. Wishing to improve society by studying the causes of poverty and inequality, socialist Fabians such as Beatrice and Sidney Webb, Graham Wallas and George Bernard Shaw founded the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) at the University of London in 1895. In 1900, the LSE joined the University of London, becoming the first to offer degrees in the social sciences. In the Michaelmas term of 1903, the name of "Miss Minny Kurs, teacher" appeared in the student register of the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE).[33] She was undoubtedly one of those students who needed such educational facilities for economic reasons, and who also shared the worldview of her benefactors. According to correspondence, Kurs was not only a student, but also worked as a nanny and private tutor.

The daughters of revolution

In the spring of 1903 in London, Minni Kurs defined herself as a revolutionary, socialist, trade unionist, positivist, and a fighter for the rights of women[34], but as a socialist above all. In addition, her correspondence with Lui discusses the relationship between nationalism and social democracy. She became a member of the Social Democratic Federation in London and indeed must have been closely associated with the Federation and its activities. The names of several trade unionists and Fabians appear in her letters, including James Keir Hardie, Benjamin Tillet and James Ramsay MacDonald, as well as the Belgian socialist Emile Vandervelde. She also mentions visiting factories and learning about the living conditions of English workers, the activities of trade unions, as well as public libraries and various educational institutions. In 1904, she even attended

32 Toynbee Hall 1884-1951. A/TOY/21/15.

33 LSE Institutional Archives, LSE/UNREGISTERED/19/16, p. 110.

34 EKM EKLA, f 185, m 27: 20, p. 10/30, Minny to Lui, London, 24 March 1903.

the 6th Congress of the 2nd Socialist International in Amsterdam which decided to support women's suffrage alongside the class struggle of the proletariat, the eight-hour workday, and world peace (see Kent, Pearson 1904). In his letters, Lui Olesk repeatedly asked Minni to refrain from excessive and risky political activity, which could have had an aftermath if she returned to her homeland and tried to find work as a schoolteacher.

It is fascinating to follow how Minni Kurs becomes interested in women's rights. Her background was characterized by domestic hardships, primarily due to her upbringing as the child of a single mother who had experienced a dysfunctional relationship. In her first article, Kurs discussed careers for which women are better suited because of their unique abilities, as viewed from a position of social feminism. In this, Minni Kurs again reiterated the Lilli Suburg-like principle that "a woman must learn" and added to it the hope that women in her home country would soon be given more opportunities to study. In an interview in 1939, Kurs-Olesk has also mentioned meeting Emmeline Pankhurst and trade union leader and suffragist Margaret Bondfield while living in London (Minni Kurs-Olesk 1939: 76). By then, Pankhurst had been supporting suffrage for decades, although the radical Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) had only been founded in 1903 and was not yet dominating the scene.

Back in Tartu, Kurs-Olesk in 1905 became one of the first women who cut their long hair short. As if to clarify the conceptual framework of equality feminists, a slightly younger contemporary of hers, Lilli Ibrus[35], later recalled that they had just learned that "we women could be just as independent and intelligent as men" and that "a broad field of work emerged alongside the revolutionary goals – developing women's self-awareness and independence"[36], and the quest for women's rights also meant a change in appearance: "It meant first and foremost to be like a man, even in appearance. A girl of that time could not imagine any other emancipation. Everything visibly feminine was discarded, hair was cut short, and clothes were chosen to be as monotonous as possible." (Ibrus-Köstner 1932: 53–54) Minni Kurs's hairstyle soon became a source of irritation for the writer Aino Kallas:

> As a matter of fact, she [Minni Kurs] did not impress me at all. I can be attracted to a refined woman, but never by a boyish performance. How she ruins her face with that ugly hairdo! Short, wild, curly hair framing that big, proud face, almost carved out of stone! (Kallas 1954: 295)

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35 Lilli Ibrus-Köstner (later Liina Varus, 1885–1949) wrote about women's rights during 1904–1905 in the social democratic newspaper *Uudised* (The News).

36 This and the following quotes have been translated from Estonian by the author of this article.

Figure 1. Minni Kurs after returning from London (1904 or early 1905). Writer Karl August Hindrey recalled her wide-brimmed English hat as a symbol of female emancipation. Estonian Literary Museum, EKM EKLA, A-149: 3.

1. att. Minni Kursa pēc atgriešanās no Londonas (1904. gadā vai 1905. gada sākumā). Rakstnieks Karls Augusts Hindrejs atcerējās viņas angļu platmali kā sieviešu emancipācijas simbolu. Igaunijas Literatūras muzejs, EKM EKLA, A-149: 3.

The young women were politically just as active as their male comrades. Memoirs of a friend of Ibrus, Alma Ani, show how her support for the Social Democrats included organizing, attending and speaking at meetings, as well as printing leaflets and proclamations.[37] Ani lost her brother to the 1905 revolution: he was shot; her foster brother received 50 lashes with a cane, and her fiancé narrowly escaped arrest and death. Ani went to St Petersburg and came back with explosives hidden under her dress. (In this case, women's clothing gave her an advantage.) She had to hide, was arrested several times and escaped to Finland, where she had to stay for 5 years (Ast-Ani 1932: 37–51). Writing to newspapers and organizing meetings also included writing and speaking about women's rights, or rather the lack thereof (Ibrus 1932: 54, 56). The young women also aspired to further their education as Minni Kurs had done before. Ibrus then went to Moscow to take courses at an institute of economics, while Alma Ostra went to St Petersburg to study at courses of

37 Alma Ast-Ani (1884–1958) was a dermatologist, gynaecologist and urologist.

philosophy.[38] It was Alma Ast-Ani who in 1924 — by then in the independent Republic of Estonia — graduated from the University of Tartu, having studied medicine.[39]

In the police file of 1906, Kurs-Olesk is mentioned as a promoter of free love. In 1905, several young women from the girls' gymnasium in Tartu, and Linda Jürmann, a close friend of the writer Eduard Vilde, were publicly accused in the newspaper *Postimees* of having immoral relations with revolutionaries (Ibrus 1932: 57). *Postimees* devoted a seven-part series to this subject, in which it also condemned long-term relationships that were not approved by the Church (*Postimees* 1905; Aru 2008: 142). Minni Kurs and Lui Olesk seem to have given a very personal answer to this topic: after the second part of this series had appeared in February 1905, Olesk and Kurs decided to live together in a common-law marriage (Olesk 1932: 88). Although such a decision was considered immoral at the time and was later interpreted as a protest against the only form of marriage accepted at the time – a church wedding (as civil marriage did not exist in the Russian Empire) –, such a union also represented the protection of women's rights at the time. The Baltic Private Law Code of 1864 placed a married woman under the personal and financial guardianship of her husband, on an equal footing with children and the mentally ill. Instead, the lawyer Lui Olesk and Minni Kurs, who considered themselves married, probably established their rights by a legal contract on 1 February 1905 and informed their friends of their marriage with a card.[40] It was also a very personal decision: something in her parents' brief relationship had filled Minni Kurs with a fear of any kind of dependence. In their correspondence, as Lui makes plans for their future together, Minni expresses her fear of being legally subordinated to someone else,

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38 Alma Ostra-Oinas (1886–1960) was arrested in 1905 for her involvement in an illegal printing press, and was sent to Siberia, Tobolsk Governorate. She escaped imprisonment in 1906 and attended the Russian Social Democratic Party Congress in London in 1907.

39 All three of them, Ast-Ani, Ibrus-Köstner and Ostra-Oinas, married their comrades-in-arms. Karl Ast was imprisoned in Riga from 1907 to 1910, later becoming a writer and politician. Nikolai Köstner studied in Moscow and went on to become a politician, economist, diplomat and academic. Aleksander Oinas was a long-serving politician and member of the Estonian Parliament (*Riigikogu*), serving three times as a government minister. However, the biographies of both Ibrus and Ostra contain interesting episodes: they were fictitiously married to other revolutionaries before joining their lives with their life partners. Ibrus married Ferdinand Kull (imprisoned 1907–1910) to shorten his prison sentence, and Ostra married Jaan Anvelt to get rid of her maiden name which was associated with prohibited activities. This hints at the attitude of the young women revolutionaries of 1905 towards the institution of marriage, as well as the trust they had in their comrades (in contrast to Minni Kurs-Olesk).

40 EKM EKLA, f 185, m 30: 5, p. 22–25, Lui Olesk. Minni Kurs-Olesk. Varia.

Figure 2. Political prisoners released from Riga prison in October 1905. Front row: Alma (Ast-)Ani and Olga Liebert. Middle row: Emīlija Kalniņa (Kurševica), Karl Ast(-Rumor) and Karl Türna. Lilli Ibrus-Köstner is in the middle of the back row. Estonian Literary Museum, EKM EKLA, A-57:21.
See more about Emīlija Kalniņa (Kurševica): https://www.womage.lv/personas/emilija-kursevica

2. att. Politieslodzītie, kas tika atbrīvoti no Rīgas cietuma 1905. gada oktobrī. Pirmajā rindā: Alma (Asta-) Ani un Olga Līberte. Vidējā rindā: Emīlija Kalniņa (Kurševica), Karls Asts(-Rumors) un Karls Tirna. Pēdējās rindas vidū: Lilli Ibrusa-Kestnere. Igaunijas Literatūras muzejs, EKM EKLA, A-57:21.
Par Emīliju Kalniņu (Kurševicu) vairāk skat.: https://www.womage.lv/personas/emilija-kursevica

and he understands her arguments. Lui Olesk and Minni Kurs-Olesk had four daughters without the blessing of the church. They grew up to support their parents' principles (see Talivee 2024: 66–67). Similarly to the Olesk family, Eduard Vilde and Linda Jürmann announced their civil marriage in the autumn of 1905 in the newspaper *Uudised* (The News), dating the event (namely, the day of signing a legal contract that established the rights of their future children) with 9 September.[41]

In a letter to Lui in 1903, Minni may have been referring to Henrik Ibsen's play *Doll's House* when she explains her reasons for staying in London to study after her mother's sudden death: "I must be completely free from living like a doll, which I hate with all my heart – I want to be worthy of my mother".[42] Although spared in 1906,

41 Linda Jürmann (1880–1966) defied public opinion in another respect, too. Eduard Vilde was already married and unable to get a divorce. The couple became political refugees in Europe and the United States from 1905 to 1917.

42 EKM EKLA, f 185, m 27: 20, p. 8/23, Minny to Lui, London, 22 March 1903.

the young family was affected by the aftermath of the 1905 revolution between 1908 and 1910, when Lui was sentenced to resettlement in Vologda, a political exile destination. Minni stayed in Tartu and visited her partner twice. She also began to use her English skills in order to earn a living and has left her mark on the history of Estonian translation. She was one of the first Estonians to translate English literature from the original language (Lehtsalu 1960: 682).[43] Minni Kurs-Olesk translated works by Thomas Hardy, George Bernard Shaw, Oscar Wilde, John Galsworthy and Rabindranath Tagore, among others. She also translated from German.

What could it mean to be arrested and convicted for participation in the 1905 Revolution events for a woman? Ani and Ibrus both recall the Riga prison in the autumn of 1905: the cells were tidy, and the head of the women's section was intelligent and kind. Notably, the sister of Pauls Kalniņš, the future Speaker of the Saeima and the Acting President of Latvia, was held in a neighbouring cell (Ani 1932: 45). However, Ibrus was captured again in Moscow or St Petersburg in 1909 and taken to Tartu in a prisoners' railcar, and she recalls how "[t]he journey was extremely nasty. I was the only woman in a wagon full of men, most of them soldiers" (Ibrus 1932: 59).[44] The first issue of the newspaper *Vaba Sõna* (The Free Word)[45] edited by Lui Olesk from January 1906 reflects, among other things, on the deeds of the court-martial in the aftermath of the revolution: shootings, hangings, burning of farms, imprisonment, and floggings (including of women). A young schoolteacher Helmi Einberg[46], arrested in 1906, was taken to Puurmani Manor and, at her insistence, was placed with the lady of the manor separately from the men. She recalls: "[The manor mistress] cried all night and offered to help me if I was to be beaten: she said she would then agree to shoot me" (Põld 1932: 128). Firearms and other weapons, too, were no strangers to the young women. Ibrus and Ostra often carried pistols; Põld had a knife with her. Marta Lepp received two bullet wounds while taking part in the 16 October protest meeting in Tallinn. After her arrest, Lepp's path crossed in Moscow prison with that of the socialist

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43 The other two were Aleksander Ferdinand Tombach-Kaljuvald, who was the first person to translate William Shakespeare's works into Estonian, and A. H. Tammsaare, who would become a classic author himself.

44 Ibrus borrowed a wig to cover her short hair and played the role of a pathetic naive girl at the trial in Riga. She thus managed to avoid a conviction.

45 The censor shut down the radical socialist newspaper that "fiercly attacked everything" after its trial issue in January 1906. LVVA.6989.2.23, p. 15, V. Sollogub to Y. Narishkina, 18 March 1906.

46 Helmi Põld (born Einberg, 1882–1969), educator, was also active in temperance movement.

revolutionary terrorist Maria Spiridonova who had endured brutal torture and rape (Lepp 1922: 100).[47]

Conclusion The struggle for women's rights is one of the important keywords that characterize the beginning of the 20th century. The first wave of feminism dates to the late 19th century, when the context of urban industrialism and liberal, socialist politics made it possible to look for ways of opening up more opportunities for women. The biographies, memoirs, and correspondence of women in the Baltic provinces of the time shed light on the restrictions that prevented women from fulfilling their dreams in the Russian Empire. The Baltic countries were, in a sense, also part of the German Empire by virtue of its German nobility. Here, political freedoms were new for both women and men, but women also had to circumvent or challenge several other boundaries. The debate about women's rights had begun in Estonia in the 1880s and was then addressed by Lilli Suburg, the editor of the first Estonian women's magazine *Linda*, who was also the first to outline the concept of the so-called New Woman here. Two decades on, the biography of a young social democrat Minni Kurs provides a glimpse into the life of a New Woman in the Baltic provinces in 1906. The lives of Minni Kurs and her contemporaries demonstrate their boldness, innovation, steadfastness, purposefulness, tenacity and creativity. Receiving an education, enjoying relationships based on equality with their partners, and pursuing professions and careers were things they aspired to. They wanted to change the law and make their voice heard. It is also worth looking at how their views became intertwined with nationalism further on.

Almost all their wishes met with obstacles. For a New Woman in Tsarist Livonia to achieve professional and personal development, it was necessary to study and often work abroad in order to acquire a specialization that would guarantee independence. Expressing opinions and performing actions that might not have met the Tsarist government's censorship requirements could get punished with what an English journalist called inhumane punishments. Thus, these women had to be on their guard against both the police and marriage. Nevertheless, they continued to search for themselves both internally and externally, and found opportunities to learn and share their knowledge with others. When conditions changed even slightly, the New Women set about implementing their intentions and working for the benefit

47 Marta Sophia Lepp (later Maarda Utuste, pen-name Sophia Vardi, 1883–1940), later a writer and religious leader. Tsarist troops fired at the peaceful crowd in Newmarket (now a square behind the Estonia theatre building), killing at least 95 people. Lepp was arrested and sent to Tobolsk, Siberia. She repeatedly escaped from detention.

of those who needed it more than they did. Sometimes they received crucial support even from distant friends. (A note written by the London journalist William Thomas Stead is one example of this.) These women also had the support of their partners, as was the case with Eduard Vilde and Lui Olesk. Tiina Kirss has described the development of Minni Kurs-Olesk and Lui Olesk's relationship into a genuine and intense intellectual partnership as "a path to free thought and equality" (Kirss 2020).

As a New Woman of the 20th century, Minni Kurs-Olesk and her contemporaries undoubtedly merit thorough biographical research, both in the context of 1905 and in a much broader sense. Just as the 1905 revolution laid the foundations for the establishment of the Republic of Estonia, the actions of some young women in the whirlwind of the uprising paved the way for women's movements and, more broadly, for women's participation in politics – as well as some other areas, such as social welfare.

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