

The Soviet Women's Struggle: A Comparative Study

By Julie Hempson

Introduction

An old Russian proverb states, "women can do everything; men can do the rest."¹ In the case of the Soviet Union, this statement is unquestionably true. Francine du Plessix Gray even insists, "Soviet women's remarkable self-assurance (if not their superiority complex) leads to an often derisive view of men which might make the most committed American feminist uncomfortable."² Soviet women's strength and physical prowess has been almost unmatched in any other country. The security and dominance of their gender has led many historians to question the differences in Soviet women's character. This issue is not something that has been greatly researched because Soviet Communists believed that studying the differences between men and women will degrade women's equality; however, as more westerners notice these inherent differences in the personality traits of Soviet women, more research has been conducted. Despite their hard work and strength of character, these women have been discriminated against throughout the Soviet Union era, leading to a contradiction in the ideology of Soviet Communist policies. Communist philosophy and the Soviet Constitution dictate equality and egalitarianism for all people within the party. Despite the policy of many Communist Soviet leaders that encouraged equality and emancipation of women from their housework and husbands, the reality proved that women have been discriminated against socially, politically, and economically for over sixty years of Communist rule.

Lenin and the beginning of the USSR

Subsequent to the Russian Civil War, when the Bolsheviks conquered the Mensheviks and other political opponents, Vladimir Lenin gained power over the new Communist Soviet

¹ Gray, Francine du Plessix. *Soviet Women: Walking the Tightrope*. (New York: Doubleday, 1989), 47.

² Gray, 47.

Union. He implemented a New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1921 to help the country's transition from a Tsarist Russia to a Communist state. Lenin allowed for a mixed socialist and capitalist economy to help the country recuperate from the destruction that occurred during World War I and the Civil War. Under this liberalized NEP, Lenin sought to grant increased rights to Soviet women. Wendy Goldman accurately describes the new ideas concerning women's roles, "women would enter the world of waged work on an equal footing with men. The state would cease to interfere in the union of the sexes, marriage would become superfluous and the family itself would eventually 'wither away'."³

The part of the NEP plan geared towards women first intended to emancipate wives from their husbands, liberate them from their duties in the home, and utilize their capabilities in the labor force. Lenin believed, "you all know that even when women have full rights, they still remain factually downtrodden because all the housework is left to them. In most cases, housework is the most unproductive, the most barbarous, and the most arduous work a woman can do."⁴ Lenin wanted to encourage women to join the workforce and leave the child-rearing and family upbringing to the state. The Bolsheviks became one of the first regimes in history to adopt an objective to grant women civil rights and liberties.⁵

Many programs and laws were instituted into Soviet society to accomplish the goal of women's liberation. The Family Code was released in 1918. Part of this new decree attempted to replace marriage as a national act instead of a religious one, substituting the relationship as a civil union over an individual religious tradition. Under this code, civil unions or "de facto marriages" offered the same rights of married couples to people who chose not to formally wed.⁶

³ Goldman, Wendy Z. "Working Class Women and the 'Withering Away of the Family.'" *Russia in the Era of NEP*. (Indiana: University Press, 1991) 126.

⁴ Schuster, Alice. "Women's Role in the Soviet Union: Ideology and Reality." *Russian Review*. Vol. 30, No. 3, (Jul., 1971): 267.

⁵ Gray, 32.

⁶ Goldman. "Withering Away of the Family." 216.

This code also tried to prevent men's domination over women. "Marriage did not create community of property between spouses: neither the husband nor the wife had any claim on the property of the other". As the introduction to the code explained, "the woman's economic rights and her private possessions are carefully protected against any operation of bourgeois and feudal discrimination and usurpations."⁷ This decree attempted to dispel the previous bourgeois idea that marriage entrusted a woman to her husband as property (an idea that Karl Marx touched upon in his writings). The Family Code wanted to ensure that women could continue their previous autonomy and identity from their husbands, while still being officially married to him.

The state wanted to change the customs of divorce as well. The Communists believed that if the process of divorce was easier, women would have more control over the termination of a problematic relationship. The new divorce laws attempted to grant women greater control and power over their marriage. Under the Tsarist regime, women belonged to their husbands almost as if they were property, and the church controlled any divorce proceedings. If a woman was unhappy or subjected to an abusive husband, there were little options for her to escape her situation. Lenin wanted to grant women the power to effortlessly end their unpleasant marriages. This seemingly reasonable and logical idea backfired significantly on the female Soviet population. Divorce became extremely, almost comically simplified.

According to Jane Evans, "The Communist Party had perceived Divorce Reform as being necessary to guarantee women social independence, yet in the 1920's women repeatedly maintained that men had derived the most benefit from this." Divorce reform ended up creating another avenue for men to objectify and exploit women.⁸ To officially divorce a spouse, a

⁷ Ibid, 127.

⁸ Evans, Janet. "The Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the Women's Question: The Case of the 1936 Decree 'In Defense of Mother and Child.'" *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 16, No. 4, (Oct., 1981): 758.

man or woman could simply fill out a form and send their spouse a postcard announcing their separation.⁹ Men saw the opportunity for commitment-free marriages, and began abusing the system by marrying and divorcing numerous Soviet women. According to Goldman, “In Moscow there was almost 1 divorce for every 2 marriages!”¹⁰ The increased rate of these divorces led to a number of devastating effects on women.

A member of the Communist Party and editor of two newspapers, Ivan Stepanov, comments on the effects of the new family code, “we thought we could create institutions through which the development of harmonious, beautiful, and communist forms of marriage would be possible... but... women remained chained to the ruined family hearth, and men, whistling gaily, walk out leaving women with the children.”¹¹ Many men during the NEP era simply divorced their wives and left their spouses burdened with a number of children to care for. Thousands of single mothers and children were left impoverished without husbands to help support their families. Because men married frequently, and had a number of children with different wives, it was difficult for Soviet women to obtain sufficient child support. Even if women were granted some monetary assistance through the Soviet court system, there was no promise that their ex-husbands would pay the amount that they owed, if anything at all.¹²

Soviet women felt used and betrayed. They blamed men, not the Communist Party, for their terrible situations. One soviet woman expressed, “...to marry, to bear children, to be enslaved by the kitchen, and then to be thrown aside by your husband—this is very painful for women. This is why I am against easy divorce.”¹³ What began as a plan to emancipate women from their husbands,

⁹ Goldman. “Withering Away of the Family.” 130.

¹⁰ *ibid*

¹¹ Goldman, Wendy Z. *Women, the State, and Revolution: Soviet Family Policy and Social Life, 1917-1936*. (Cambridge: University Press, 1993) 217.

¹² Goldman. “Withering Away of the Family.” 135

¹³ *ibid*, 136.

became a more degrading and blatant exploitation of women by men in the Soviet Union.

Subject to practically hopeless circumstances, many women turned to the cities to obtain jobs in factories to survive. The mass immigration to cities by impoverished women and their fatherless families caused severe unemployment in urban areas. In the 1930's, Sheila Fitzpatrick accounts for nearly ten million women joining the job market for the first time.¹⁴ This intense competition, combined with the increasing numbers of men who had returned to work after their service in the Civil War, made it very challenging for Soviet women to attain work. This unemployment dilemma for women can be portrayed through the statistic: "The Petrograd Bureau of Labor announced in 1922 that 67 percent of the 27,000 registered unemployed in the city were women."¹⁵

Those women who were fortunate enough to find jobs in the cities were paid significantly less than males and were denied managerial positions.¹⁶ This reality of unequal salary based on gender greatly contradicted Communist ideals. To resolve this inconsistency, Bolsheviks attempted to pass legislation ensuring equal pay for females; however, women were then constantly laid off because they were viewed as more expensive to employ than men. According to Francine du Plessix Gray, truly equal employment for women was never an ideology of the Communist Party. It was simply a combination of factors such as shortages in labor, economic growth, and male population shortages that forced the employment of women.¹⁷

Single women also struggled to secure an occupation because they were never released from the responsibilities in the home and child rearing. As previously mentioned, Lenin viewed women working in the home as a "barbarous" occupation, and

¹⁴ Fitzpatrick, Sheila. "Family Problems," *Everyday Stalinism*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) 139.

¹⁵ Goldman. "Withering Away of the Family." 131.

¹⁶ Hesli, Vicki L., Miller, Arthur H. "The Gender Base of Institutional Support in Lithuania, Ukraine, and Russia." *Europe-Asia Studies* 45, no. 3 (1993) 505.

¹⁷ Gray, 33

that women's duty was to help the revolution by moving into the workforce; however, if women did find work in the cities, their homes and children suffered because, as single parents, they were not being paid enough to enjoy the freedoms of divorce.¹⁸ The women who entered the cities had no skills, insurance, child support, or daycare facilities to aid them in their struggle.¹⁹ Women obtained menial low-paying labor jobs in factories, leaving their children unsupervised. Wendy Goldman cites, "By 1922 there were an estimated 7.5 million starving and dying children in Russia."²⁰ Many children would wander the streets in gangs stealing, begging, and pick pocketing to stay alive. Some adolescent females became prostitutes in order to survive.

The NEP actually attempted to resolve some of the social and economic chaos that it had created with programs to care for these prostitutes. An article by Frances L. Bernstein describes how many prostitutes were "saved" from the streets and given jobs in factories and workshops to help them start a new life. These were called labor clinics. Prostitutes with sexually-transmitted diseases and infections were treated by doctors and received food and shelter until they were able to leave. These clinics became so overcrowded that they could not care for healthy impoverished women or even disease-free prostitutes. The goal of these shelters was to transform diseased prostitutes into healthy, able workers. In the early 1930's the clinics began to shut down. The attitudes and programs towards helping the needy were changed when Stalin came to power. "Indeed, the fate of the labor clinics reflects a much broader shift away from voluntary methods and approaches pursued in the 1920's for addressing the country's problems to the coercive measures such as industrialization and collectivization adopted in the 1930's".²¹ The NEP era believed reform was possible; however, this attitude would change under Stalin's rule.

¹⁸ Goldman, 139

¹⁹ *ibid*, 132

²⁰ *ibid*, 59

²¹ Bernstein, Frances, L. "Prostitutes and Proletarians: The Soviet Labor Clinic as Revolutionary Laboratory." In Husband, William B., ed. *Modern Russia*. (Delaware: SR Books, 2000) 127.

The NEP's liberalism toward women's issues is also illustrated through the legalization of abortion. In November 1920, abortion was allowed only by doctors in hospitals.²² Lenin's NEP strove to grant women more rights and control over their reproductive rights. Abortion was deemed a woman's decision and choice over her body. "With the decree, the Soviet Union became the first country in the world to give women a legal, cost-free opportunity to terminate pregnancy."

Because methods of contraception were relatively unknown in the Soviet Union, abortions skyrocketed as the primary method of birth control. According to Wendy Goldman, there were 102,709 abortions in the USSR in 1926.²³ The majority of these abortions took place in cities, where hospitals and doctors were prominent; however, most peasant women did not have access to this option in the countryside, and were forced to give birth to many unwanted children. The inequality of opportunity for women in different areas of the Soviet Union once again illustrates the inconsistency of women's rights in the NEP era.

Despite their active role in both the October and February revolutions, women were unable to even change their dismal situation through representation in the political sphere. Lenin, who emphatically believed that women should be equal to men, set up a Women's Section in the Central Committee in the Soviet Government so that the female gender would have some representation in 1918.²⁴ According to Barbara Holland, "In the early years of the revolution, it was recognized that women's political and social consciousness would be facilitated with the support of other women. A women's department in the Party, the Zhenotdel, was set up for this purpose..."²⁵

Although the committee was able to accomplish many feminist goals such as informing Soviet women of the newly

²² Evans, Janet. "The Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the Women's Question: The Case of the 1936 Decree 'In Defense of Mother and Child.'" *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 16, No. 4, (Oct., 1981):758.

²³ Goldman, 256-259

²⁴ Schuster, 266

²⁵ Holland, Barbara. *Soviet Sisterhood*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985) 212.

obtained rights, improving female literacy, and encouraging women's involvement in politics, women were still segregated and unable to participate in major sections of the government.²⁶ "From the very beginning the Bolsheviks regarded 'feminism'—the idea of separate women's organizations designed to advance women's interests—with hostility and mistrust."²⁷ Male Soviet leaders, operating under engrained stereotypical notions of femininity, felt uncomfortable and prejudiced against an organization devoted primarily to women. These men segregated and discriminated the women who strove to create change within the USSR through the Zhenotdel.

This prejudice against women in politics prompted male Soviet leaders to begin disbanding any women's organizations within the government before they attacked the Zhenotdel. According to Richard Stites, "An interesting, though not particularly illuminating, prelude to the 1930 liquidation of Zhenotdel, was the abolition, in 1926, of the International Women's Secretariat."²⁸ The abolition of the Women's Secretariat caused a significant decrease in the power of the Zhenotdel. Once the Zhenotdel lost power, male leaders in Soviet government proclaimed that the organization was "...'inefficient' under the new conditions of the reconstruction period..."²⁹

This systematic elimination of women's organizations in the Soviet government was justified in the notion that the Zhenotdel, "...achieved much, but was disbanded by 1930 on the official grounds that it was no longer needed, that women were now equal to men."³⁰ Men were able to exclude women from politics based on the hypocritical statement that under

²⁶ Lapidus, Gail Warshofsky. *Women, Work, and Family in the Soviet Union*. (New York: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 1982) 63-65v.

²⁷ Goldman, Wendy Z. "Industrial Politics, Peasant Rebellion and the Death of the Proletarian Women's Movement in the USSR." *Slavic Review* 55, no. 1 (Spring 1996): 46

²⁸ Stites, Richard. *The Women's Liberation Movement in Russia: Feminism, Nihilism, and Bolshevism 1860-1930*. (New Jersey; Princeton University Press, 1978) 343.

²⁹ Goldman, "Industrial Politics." 71

³⁰ Holland, Barbara. *Soviet Sisterhood*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985) 212.

Communism, women had already achieved equality to men. This assumed egalitarianism proved to be false. Women were still unable to reach the status of a man socially, economically, or politically in the NEP era, despite Lenin's attempts and intensions to create equality.

Aleksandra Kollontai, the Soviet Union's most famous feminist, was the first woman appointed to the head of the Zhenotdel committee and the first woman ambassador in history. Although she did not consider herself as a feminist, rather a "... Marxist revolutionary who sought freedom for women as part of the freeing of all humankind from the control of capitalism."³¹ Kollontai dedicated her life to liberating women from their reliance and attachment to men. She strove to pass legislation for simplified divorce and legalized abortion, and attempted to construct free child care facilities.

Kollontai believed in liberal ideals for her country as well as her personal life. According to Gray, "Kollontai believed that contemporary women must cease to have any emotional attachment on men, that changing sexual partners should be no more important than 'drinking a glass of water.'"³² These liberal sexual values of free love caused conservative male Communist leaders to feel uncomfortable with Kollontai's political influence and message to other Soviet women. They threatened to execute her on the grounds of "bourgeois feminist deviationism," until Lenin interfered with their plans. Members of the government ordered that Kollontai choose between either leaving the party or discontinuing the publication of her ideas and beliefs. A dedicated Communist, Kollontai chose to remain a party member. To appease the insecure male officials, Lenin appointed Aleksandra Kollontai as the first female Minister of Foreign Affairs to prevent her from expressing her views in Soviet society.³³

Kollontai's biography illustrates that although women were slightly involved in the political sphere; they were still

³¹ Clements, Barbara Evans. *Bolshevik Feminism: The Life of Aleksandra Kollontai*. (Indiana: University Press, 1979) ix.

³² Gray, 94

³³ Gray, 94

challenged and prevented from obtaining high positions of influence. Although Kollontai was not permitted to acquire a prominent position to share her beliefs with the greater population of Soviet women, her legacy inspired Soviet women to publish the first feminist book describing critical issues such as gynecology, the lack and quality of child care services, marriage, and other problems that related solely to women. This book was called the *Almanac: Woman and Russia*. Kollontai's life and legacy both illustrate the liberalized policies under Lenin and the determination of Soviet women during this time period.

Vladimir Lenin passed away in 1924 from a massive stroke, and after a brief power struggle with Leon Trotsky, Joseph Stalin gained control of the Soviet Communist Party for the next three decades. Along with his First Five-Year Plan of attempted rapid collectivization and Second Five-Year Plan of rapid industrialization, Stalin decided to reverse the increased liberalization for women and social chaos that ensued during the NEP era.

Stalin Takes Control

Stalin's policy regarding women in the 1930's proved to be a complete transformation from the previous decades. Wendy Goldman exemplified this transformation when she wrote: "Over the next five years, as the Party embarked on a massive effort to industrialize the country and collectivize agriculture, this slogan came to define policy in every area of life. The Party daily exhorted the people to speed up production, increase the harvest, and reconstruct agriculture."³⁴ Stalin's new policy to rapidly industrialize and increase agricultural output overshadowed many social reforms that the NEP helped to create. His policies towards women proved to be increasingly conservative in comparison to the liberal era prior to his rule.

Legislation was passed banning abortion, the process of divorce was made increasingly difficult and expensive, government aid was distributed to struggling single mothers, negligent fathers were penalized and imprisoned, and the

³⁴ Goldman, Wendy Z. "Industrial Politics." 46

authority of parents over their children was reinstated.³⁵ A monetary cost was implemented to men who decided to divorce their spouses, and that amount would increase after every succeeding divorce. Instead of a postcard notifying a spouse that they had been divorced, both parties were required to be present at their filing for divorce.³⁶

These new stipulations had partially been caused by the extremely vocal complaints of Russia's aggressive women. The soviet government would often issue responses to the grievances that they received in letters from needy women, and many punishments were enacted on irresponsible men. One woman complained, "as soon as [my husband] realizes that I have found him, he quits his job and moves to another place. Two years have passed in this way, and he has given me nothing for bringing up the child, his son Boris."³⁷ Response to all letters of this nature was not given, but often the government would locate women's missing spouses, and force their men to pay sufficient child support. This alimony accounted for at least a quarter of the parent's salary not in custody of the child, and repercussions of harsh punishment were established for those who did not pay their share.³⁸

Consistent with Stalin's conservative policies on marriage, divorce, child support and punishment, abortions were outlawed. Abortions were only allowed under the circumstance that the mother's life was in jeopardy. Women and health care professionals were greatly discouraged from utilizing this option to end unwanted pregnancies. According to Janet Evans, doctors would be sentenced to two years in prison and fined three hundred rubles if they continued to perform unnecessary abortions. "The women's journals tended to impose a rather simplistic portrayal of abortion, possibly to frighten their readerships against the practice, should they not be convinced by arguments which emphasize the necessity for and ability of

³⁵ Fitzpatrick, 142

³⁶ Evans, 758

³⁷ Fitzpatrick, 144

³⁸ Evan, 758

women to have as many children as possible."³⁹ Women's right to choose was once again severely curtailed. Through these new policies, Stalin strove to shed the liberal views of the NEP era and encourage a more traditional family structure.

"Perhaps the greatest alteration in policy which did occur in the mid-1930's was the increased emphasis on the virtues of motherhood..."⁴⁰ The new Stalinist era placed a great deal of emphasis on the stereotypical woman's role as the homemaker. Articles were published glorifying women in the home with a number of children to care for.⁴¹ "Not only was she encouraged to work outside the home and participate in her Trade Union or some sort of social work, she also had to assume the bulk of the household chores and care for the children."⁴² Women were expected to take on the double role of a working mother. Soviet men had nothing to do with the chores of the house, and most refused to help their over-exerted spouses. Again, women were exploited only for the completion of their stereotypical duties in the home and the contribution of sheer numbers for manual labor workers.

Women were expected to participate in achieving the objectives of the Communist Party by working to further Stalin's economic goals. The former concern for women's problems had been replaced with Stalin's rapid installments of the two Five-Year Plans.⁴³ Under these plans, women were pushed into the workforce under hard manual laboring occupations. They were still unable to obtain any management positions, and were forced to work in the lowest paid, most physically-demanding occupations that the Soviet Union had to offer. These jobs included back-breaking work in oil fields and mines, also including working as welders, construction workers, stokers, porters and street cleaners.⁴⁴ According to Alice Schuster, in 1944,

³⁹ *ibid*, 762

⁴⁰ *ibid*, 761

⁴¹ *ibid*, 763

⁴² Evans, 766

⁴³ Holland, 39

⁴⁴ Schuster, 263

women accounted for thirty to forty percent of the workers in oil fields.

Not only were women a majority in menial jobs, they were the majority of the Soviet Union's entire labor force. With the onset of World War II, an exorbitant amount of working men were sent to war as soldiers. Women had to compensate for the loss of men in the workforce, while still only obtaining low-paying, unskilled, tedious work. Post World War II in 1959 found that women outnumbered men by twenty million due to the substantial male casualties.⁴⁵

Despite the majority of women in unskilled labor, many pushed through to more established occupations. Women were prominent in fields including medicine and education. Even in more professional occupations, discrimination was undoubtedly present. Schuster cites that women accounted for seventy percent of elementary school teachers, but only fifteen percent in any administrative positions in education. "Obviously, the old attitude of male superiority persists as men obtain more training and acquire better positions."⁴⁶ The argument used to justify this statement was that women would be unable to handle positions of higher authority because they were responsible for the upkeep of their households. This reasoning creates a frustrating circle of hypocrisy in that it contradicts the Soviet Communist Constitution, which attempted to emancipate women from house work in the first place.

These blatant discriminations against Soviet women were justified under the notion that women had already achieved the equality that they were promised. Soviet men assumed that the "women question" was solved; women had been emancipated, and were complete equals with men. This idea was presumed because socialism had been firmly established, and in theory, women were included in this utopian egalitarian society.⁴⁷ Clearly, this gender equality was far from the reality in Soviet society.

⁴⁵ *ibid*

⁴⁶ Schuster, 265

⁴⁷ Holland, 25-39

Because the Soviet men believed that women had reached equality under Communist rule, women's presence in government was no longer necessary. "It is apparent that Soviet rulers favor these policies, starting with Stalin, who wanted women to work hard to fulfill his plans, but did not appoint them to high political office."⁴⁸ As was mentioned previously, Stalin disbanded the women's department in the Central Committee, Zhenotdel, because it was viewed as pointless. Women were believed to have achieved emancipation and equality under the law, and their representation in the government was not welcome.

The supposed equality of women under Communist rule was not recognized under the most brutal and life-threatening situations. During the reign of Joseph Stalin, thousands of Soviet citizens were brutally murdered and imprisoned in a mass political cleansing of the Communist Party called the purges. Stalin, a paranoid and suspicious ruler, decided to purge all "enemies of the party", or anyone in opposition to his regime. People of all ages, ethnicities, and backgrounds were subject to imprisonment and deportation for any variety of reasons. Any member of the Communist Party, who had previously supported or associated with Leon Trotsky or denounced Stalin in any way, was shipped off to Gulag.

The Gulag was a "...vast network of labor camps that were once scattered across the length and breadth of the Soviet Union... the word GULAG is an acronym, meaning *Glavone Upravlenie Lagerei*, or Main Camp Administration."⁴⁹ These were labor prison camps where most political enemies or criminals were sent. They were located all over the Soviet Union, most found in the tundra regions. Stalin used this free prison labor to fund his unrealistic expectations in the Five-Year Plan. Millions of Soviet women suffered and died from starvation, disease, and exhaustion.

Anna Akimovna Dubova recalled her experience with the purges when she remembers, "You'd come home, and they'd say, Yesterday they took away Uncle Lasha. You'd go to work, and

⁴⁸ Schuster, 266

⁴⁹ Applebaum, Anne. *Gulag*. (New York: Anchor Books, 2003) xv.

they'd say, Yesterday they took away Voronov... And I in my naiveté thought that all of these people deserved to be in prison."⁵⁰ Many Soviet citizens did not understand the horrors and extreme cruelty that both men and women experienced in the labor camps that Stalin had created.

Although women and men were reduced to the same harsh conditions and brutal physical punishments, women were still exploited in their journey through the gulag labor camps. Women were consistently raped and abused in the Gulag, and many turned to prostitution in order to obtain what they needed to survive. One man, Lev Razgon, offered a young girl some extra food from his lunch, "The girl finished eating... then she lifted her dress, pulled off her pants and, holding them in her hand, turned her unsmiling face in my direction. 'Laying down or what?' she asked. At first not understanding, and then scared by my response, she said in self-justification... 'People don't feed me without it...'"⁵¹ This scene illustrates the brutal lives women endured during their time in the Gulag. Many weren't fed unless they had sex with men who provided them with food. This degradation and abuse illustrates that even in the worst of conditions women were discriminated against.

Stalin died of a stroke in 1953, and Khrushchev obtained control over the Party. In the years following Stalin's death, and subsequent to World War II, the United States and the Soviet Union entered into a Cold War of intense competition for the ultimate title of the world's "superpower." Under the leadership of Khrushchev, this era was focused on out-producing the United States economically, militarily, and scientifically.

USSR under Khrushchev

Khrushchev's campaign to increase consumption was concentrating on advertising directed at women stressing the necessity of buying Soviet goods. This idea was based on the

⁵⁰ Engel, Barbara Alpern, and Posadskaya-Vanderbeck, Anastasia, ed. *A Revolution of Their Own: Voices*

of Women in Soviet History. Westview Press: A Member of the Perseus Book Group, 1998; 34

⁵¹ Applebaum, 314

stereotypical belief that women were the consumers of the family and men were the workers and “breadwinners.” According to Susan E. Reid, “despite the party’s commitment to sexual equality, a number of studies have shown that it or its agents maintained stereotypical notions of gender difference, assuming women to be most heavily imbricated in mundane matters of *byt* and to have a lower level of political consciousness and rationality.”⁵² This statement illustrates a reversal in the previous direction of the 1920’s of women’s liberation from the home, and conveys the idea that men still harbored sexist and stereotypical views of women in their society.

Critical western reports on the masculine traits of Soviet women also encouraged the USSR’s government to push a more stereotypical feminine gender role. A western reporter, John Gunther, mocked Soviet women in 1958 when he wrote: “Clothes have no shape; but then neither have most Russian women,” he expressed that their fashion had improved, but retorted, “but they are still revolting. Their positive shabby manginess, as well as cheap quality and lack of colour, is beyond description.”⁵³ This report degrading and judging Russian women only put more undue pressure on Soviet society to conform to western stereotypes and to ignore their own personal belief system of a completely egalitarian society. Pressure from the media was placed on women to remain feminine and attractive, while simultaneously help continue Soviet production in their laborious and physically demanding and discriminatory jobs.

“The Kitchen Debates” of 1959 serve as another primary example of the government’s altered view of women during the Cold War era. An exhibition in Moscow brought U.S. President Richard Nixon to Russia to compare the appliances and technology of the Soviet Union’s kitchen with the United State’s kitchen. This debate was meant to prove that the USSR was just as progressive as the U.S. in their consumer’s technology, and that the communist system of government could provide the same

⁵² Reid, Susan E. “Cold War in the Kitchen: Gender and the De-Stalinization of Consumer Taste in the Soviet Union Under Khrushchev.” *Slavic Review* 61, no.2 (Summer, 2002): 220.

⁵³ *ibid*, 230

needs to its citizens that a capitalist economy could. While this debate was meant to be symbolic of the Soviet economy, it simultaneously illustrated the Soviet attitude towards women. Reid quotes Darra Goldstein as explaining the implications of the debates when she states, "How could Khrushchev be a major player in the world if he could not even provide his country's women with their own kitchens?"⁵⁴ This statement demonstrates the contradiction in their history once again, in that Soviet society still agreed with the stereotypical belief that women's place was in the kitchen.

Views on women's rights had not drastically changed during the Khrushchev era. "...since the early 1960s, the Soviet leadership has been confronted by a perhaps insolvable dilemma: it needs woman as both producer and reproducer."⁵⁵ The conflict between viewing women as a vital aspect of the labor force, as well as viewing women as the child bearer and consumer for the home continued in the decades to follow. Because they were still expected to secure a job and care for their family and home, most Soviet women did not have the energy to strive for better positions in the workforce.⁵⁶ This gender obligation that had been forced upon Soviet women discouraged many adolescent females from pursuing their dreams in a male-dominated career.

Although Soviet women displayed characteristics that proved them to be passionate leaders and pioneers, many Soviet women during the Khrushchev era had been discouraged from acting out politically. They were encouraged to obey their gender roles and taught that it was unattractive and unfeminine to become so involved in traditional male-dominated careers or politics. Francine du Plessix Gray interviewed a Moscow philosopher who touched on this point when she expressed, "The girls absorb this female energy and are more active on every level throughout their school years. But as they reach adolescence they tend to consciously slow down, curb themselves; they think an

⁵⁴ Reid, 223

⁵⁵ Gray, 33

⁵⁶ Gray, 36

overly active woman is less appealing...⁵⁷ These new pressures on women to conform to their gender stereotypes were preventing women from reaching their full potential in Soviet society.

Even when women did strive for better occupations, they were consistently denied jobs in higher positions, and the majority continued to work physically demanding and low-paying occupations. Almost half of women in the Soviet Union were functioning in unskilled and labor-intensive work. "They comprise, for instance, 98 percent of the nation's janitors and street cleaners, 90 percent of conveyor belt operators, one third of railroad workers, over two thirds of highway construction crews and of warehouse workers."⁵⁸ This intense physical labor can have serious and harmful effects on a woman's reproductive system.

The inequity of opportunity that prevents women from ever reaching senior positions is based on prejudices about female employees. These prejudices convey a message that women's innate lack of a resourceful and creative natures are said to make them less desirable for managerial positions.⁵⁹

Because women had been discouraged to enter politics, there was a severe lack of women's representation under Khrushchev's rule as well. Olga Lipovskaya is quoted as stating, "Politics always struck me and my women friends as something deeply unethical, as dirty work... We've always sensed that personal goals were more important."⁶⁰ Again, the pressure of society on women to remain in their feminine roles continues to dissuade women from participating in different fields.

Brezhnev in Command

Fortunately, by the 1960's L.I. Brezhnev took control of the Party, and an increased number of literary sources began acknowledging the predicament of the double burden that women endured. "Although the 'women question' was declared 'solved'

⁵⁷ Gray, 45

⁵⁸ *ibid*, 34

⁵⁹ Lapidus, Gail Warshofsky. *Women in Soviet Society*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978) 195.

⁶⁰ Gray, 36

by Stalin, it was later described as 'unsolved' by Brezhnev.⁶¹ Although not much was accomplished to change women's situations, the issue was still recognized by more Soviet citizens. Brezhnev addressed his situation on women during Twenty-fifth CPSU Congress when he stated: "The Party considers its duty to be to shown constant concern for women and to improve her position as a participant in the labor process, as a mother, counselor of children, and housewife."⁶²

Under Brezhnev's rule, women's councils also became more prominent. Women became increasingly involved on committees in the government's legislative branches and began participating in trade unions as well.⁶³ These committees were able to make advances in improving working conditions for women. A committee of Labor and Wages accepted a "List of Industries, Trades, and Jobs with Arduous or Harmful Working Conditions, at which female employment is prohibited."⁶⁴ Women began to receive other benefits such as helping women find less health-hazardous occupations, providing women in training compensation while in between jobs, and increasing the opportunity for women to receive social security benefits, pensions, and raises.⁶⁵ Despite these measures to improve women's current situation, they were still not able to increase female occupations in the upper management positions.

Under Brezhnev's rule, small advances had been made in women's situations. Following Brezhnev, Mikhail Gorbachev came to power in 1985 as General Secretary of the Communist Party. Gorbachev noticed that the Soviet Union was failing and potentially collapsing, and made one final attempt to liberalize and remedy the problems within the USSR. Two of his most famous programs include a policy of *glasnost*, or openness, and *perestroika*, or rebuilding.

⁶¹ Hesli and Miller, 506

⁶² Lapidus, *Women, Work, and the Family*, 4.

⁶³ Lapidus, *Women, Work, and the Family*, 6.

⁶⁴ *ibid*, 10

⁶⁵ *ibid*

Gorbachev and the end of the USSR

Under glasnost, Gorbachev strove to emulate the United States' freedom of speech, and to allow open criticism of the Soviet government – something that was not tolerated in almost all eras under Communist control. Women were hoping to voice their opinions and achieve new advancements in political matters under the new policy of *glasnost*; however, “during the Gorbachev era, women experienced a decline in political power (reduced representation in the party and government) and a decline in economic power (as competition for scarce resources became more intense in a stagnant economy).”⁶⁶ Once again, women’s voices were suppressed under the rule of Communist leadership, when they were promised equal rights.

Perestroika also did little to aid the advancement of women’s issues. According to Hesli, “*Perestroika* did not serve to improve the lot of women any more than it served to improve the lot of other social groups.”⁶⁷ Neither policy helped women gain the influence and power that they deserved in the Soviet system.

Under Gorbachev, women also struggled with the same career choice limitations that they had in the past. Women became the majority in occupations such as health care, social security, public catering, trade, culture, and education. Most of these occupations do not require a high level of schooling, and while women are generally more educated than men in the Soviet Union, they were being denied the opportunity to reach their full potential.⁶⁸ This discrimination proves that even in the 1980’s the Soviet Union was still blatantly hiring men for the more desired positions even though their female counterparts were substantially more qualified.

This employment discrimination was even apparent in more skilled occupations. Under Gorbachev’s rule, statistics showed that eighty percent of school teachers were female, but only a third of them were principals. Most of these positions were in primary education, and professors of higher education were

⁶⁶ Hesli and Miller, 508

⁶⁷ *ibid*

⁶⁸ *ibid*, 509.

dominated by males.⁶⁹ Women comprised seventy-seven percent of Soviet doctors, but men dominated hospital administrative positions by fifty-two percent.⁷⁰ The majority of Soviet women continued to be employed in unskilled positions. In most agricultural businesses, women occupied ninety percent of the labor-intensive jobs, while only twenty percent were involved in any type of administrative work. These statistics illustrate that not two decades ago women were still denied high-powered positions in many skilled and unskilled fields.

Not only were women deprived of managerial positions, when they could obtain a decent occupation, they were paid significantly less for the same amount of work. Between the years 1979-89, women only earned two-thirds of the average male income.⁷¹ The lower the wages, the less power the women had in society.

Under Gorbachev's leadership, women only comprised twenty percent of membership in the Communist Party. Power in Soviet politics and government, once again, was entirely male-dominated. The justification for this great percentage gap was dominated by the conservative attitude that women could not dedicate the time and energy that was needed to succeed in high positions of the Party because they had the distraction of their families to care for.⁷² Although Gorbachev's wife, Raisa, was highly educated and professionally independent, the majority of Soviet women were still operating under the same discriminatory conditions that had been present throughout the entire Communist rule of the Soviet Union. Once again, the theory of Communism contradicts the reality of gender discrimination in Soviet society.

Conclusion

Through a century of hardships, discrimination, and death, Soviet women are undeniably some of the toughest in the world. No matter the leader, the legislation, or the promises

⁶⁹ Schuster, 264

⁷⁰ Gray, 34

⁷¹ *ibid*

⁷² Schuster, 265

made, women in the Soviet Union were still tied to the stereotypical gender roles that bound them to housework and the double burden of furthering the revolution by working outside of the home in intense labor positions, thus stifling their potential. Despite the declaration in the Soviet Constitution and under the theory of Communism for the complete equality of all Soviet citizens, women were continually discriminated against for over seventy years of Communist rule. The persistence, physical and emotional strength, and determination of Soviet women can not be stressed enough, and is basically unmatched in any other society in the world.

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