Between Exploitation and Empowerment: Soviet Women Negotiate Stalinism

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The Soviet Union was distinct from other mass dictatorships in the interwar period in that early Soviet family policy was the most liberal the world had ever seen. In the 1920s, the Soviet state squarely attacked patriarchal familial relations and destabilized marriage and the family. Soviet feminist thinkers such as Aleksandra Kollontai argued that ‘the family is ceasing to be necessary either to its members or to the nation as a whole’, and the Soviet government enacted progressive legislation that allowed abortion, made divorce easy and broadened the definition of marriage to recognize ‘unregistered’ unions. This remarkably progressive attitude towards women’s equality did not last however. Some scholars trace the Soviet impulse to control sexuality back to the early Soviet period and suggest that the liberatory impact of Soviet policies was always limited by the leadership’s puritanical views of sexuality and their understanding of gender roles as strictly circumscribed by biology. Other analysts suggest that the key turning point away from feminism was the 1930 closure of the Zhenotdel or Women’s Department of the Communist Party. Still others posit that women’s liberation was never a part of the Soviet program. Sarah Ashwin argues that ‘the policy of the Bolshevik state was never directed at the liberation of women from men, it was directed at breaking the subordination of women to the patriarchal family in order to “free” both women and men to serve the communist cause.’

Despite their disagreements on the degree of continuity and the timing of the changes, all scholars acknowledge that under Stalin, the state became simultaneously more authoritarian and more patriarchal. In 1936, abortion was criminalized and divorce laws were tightened;
women were encouraged to become mothers, and received special premiums for large families.4 In the midst of World War II (1944) family laws became even more restrictive and pro-natalist policies even more extreme. While some view Stalinist policy towards women in the 1930s in terms of ‘retreat’ from earlier feminist aims because of lack of social support from the population, others view it in terms of a deepening of the authoritarianism already extant in the 1920s.5 A third group of scholars suggests that Stalin’s so-called ‘great retreat’ to patriarchy was contradictory and partial. They demonstrate that women’s equality remained a central tenet of Soviet ideology and public representations of women throughout the Stalin era. Women were indeed encouraged to become mothers, but they were also encouraged to move into previously all-male spheres, to become tractor drivers, industrial workers, aviators, athletes, sharpshooters and defenders of the country.6 Women were never enjoined to stay at home and housewives were systematically mobilized for community service outside of the home.

Analysts of women’s agency in the Stalin period can be divided into those who frame their arguments as ‘glass half empty’ or ‘glass half full’. Both sides of the debate recognize that Stalinist ideology about women and the realities that women faced diverged sharply from one another. Yet they interpret this divergence in significantly different ways and disagree about the extent to which Soviet discourse could effect change. Those seeing the ‘glass half empty’ interpret Soviet ideology as a façade that hid the systematic exploitation of women. Often emphasizing social and economic history, these scholars see the Soviet discourse of women’s liberation as powerless to change the realities of exploitation. They argue that the unprecedented commitment to women’s personal freedom of the early Soviet period had disappeared, and rather than as ‘liberation’, women’s diverse social roles could be viewed merely as an expansion of ‘the spheres in which women could be exploited.’7 The industrial achievements of the First Five Year Plan were carried out on the backs of urban women who streamed into factories in order to ensure the economic survival of their families. Despite women’s crucial economic roles and their entrance into a variety of new fields, notions of women’s inferiority persisted. Many parts of the new socialist economy were gender-segregated by design with women being channelled into lower paying and less prestigious work.8 In state planning, heavy industry took priority over services (such as nurseries, laundries and restaurants) that would have eased the domestic burdens of working mothers, leaving women responsible for both production and reproduction.