



Title: Voices of the New Soviet Woman: Gender, Emancipation and Agency in Letters to the Soviet State, 1924-1941

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# Abstract

The focus of the thesis is the agency of women in communication with the Soviet authorities from 1924 until 1941. Its primary goal is to deduce from the language and content of their letters how women fashioned their public identities in dialogue with the utopian ideal of the 'New Soviet Woman' in the 1920s and 1930s. These 'public letters' are primarily drawn from the caches of letters sent from citizens to Soviet officials, organs and publications, which were read, catalogued, and archived, but never published at the time. In these letters, women often adopted and reproduced 'Bolshevik language', carefully crafting their roles as workers, peasants, revolutionaries, Soviet mothers and daughters in an ongoing process of negotiation with Soviet power. They crafted these narratives creatively, infusing them with their own perspectives and experiences.

Although the October Revolution ostensibly 'emancipated' women from the oppression they suffered under tsarism, they remained objects of suspicion for Soviet policymakers and theorists, not least because of their reproductive capacities and traditional roles in the home. While older generations of women presented a 'risk' to the regime's success because of their experiences before the Revolution, younger women were no less threatening, due to their involvement in child-bearing and child-raising. Women of all generations were expected to 'work on themselves' and to strive to meet the ideological expectations of the New Soviet Women. Old and young were able to mitigate the risks of their generational identities by prudently reproducing the Bolshevik script, even as they advanced their own agendas and needs.

Exploring themes of emotions, rights and relationships, the thesis argues that women created space for themselves and their lives within the ideological framework of the Soviet project. Though the exercise of this agency was at times in conflict with state discourse or policy, it should not be confused with dissent, but understood as means of engagement with the Soviet utopian project on their own terms.

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On a personal note I'd like to dedicate the thesis, if I may, to my late grandparents Vincent Brady and Joan Parker. The thesis is also dedicated to the remarkable bravery and perseverance of generations of Irish women in their ongoing fight for bodily autonomy.

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## Key Figures, Glossary, and Abbreviations.

<i>baba/babka</i>	old peasant women. Derivative of <i>babushka</i> , (grandmother)– usually pejorative
<i>byt'</i>	daily life, existence
d.	<i>delo</i> , an archival file (pl./g. <i>dela</i> )
f.	<i>fond</i> , an archival 'fund', or collection
GARF	State Archive of the Russian Federation
Kalinin, Mikhail Ivanovich	Chairman of the Central Executive Committee of the All-Russian Congress of Soviets
Komsomol	Communist Union of Young People
<i>Krasniy bibliotekar'</i>	Red Librarian, trade magazine for library workers
<i>krest'ianin</i>	peasant (male)
<i>krest'ianka</i>	peasant (female)
<i>Krest'ianka</i>	a women's journal aimed at the peasantry
Krupskaia, Nadezhda Konstantinovna	Deputy Minister of Education, 1929-1939
<i>kolkhoz</i>	collective farm
<i>Krokodil</i>	a satirical magazine published in the Soviet Union from 1922
l.	<i>list</i> , a particular page from a <i>dela</i> .
<i>likbez</i>	<i>likvidatsiia bezgramotnosti</i> , and abbreviation of the campaign for the 'liquidation of illiteracy'
Little Octobrists	a youth organisation for children between 7 and 9 years of age
Lunacharskii, Anatoly Vasilievich	People's Commissar for Education, 1917-1929
Molotov, Viacheslav Mikhailovich	Chairman of the Council of People's Commissars, 1930-1941



NEP	New Economic Policy
NKVD	People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (later: Ministry of Internal Affairs)
<i>oblast'</i>	region
op.	<i>opis'</i> , the 'inventory' of <i>dela</i> on a particular subject within a <i>fond</i>
Pioneers	a youth organisation for children between 9 and 15 years of age
<i>Pravda</i>	A daily newspaper and the official newspaper of the Communist Party
<i>profsoiuz</i>	trade union
<i>raion</i>	district
<i>rabotnik</i>	worker (male)
<i>rabotnitsa</i>	worker (female)
<i>Rabotnitsa</i>	a women's journal aimed at working women.
RGAE	Russian State Archive of the Economy
RGASPI	Russian State Archive of Social and Political History
RSFSR	Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic
<i>sovnarkom</i>	Council of People's Commissars, responsible for the general administration of state affairs
Vyshinskiii, Andrei Ianuarievich	Procurator General of the RSFSR, 1931-1934, subsequently of the USSR, 1935-1939
<i>Zhenotdel</i>	Women's department of the Secretariat of the Central Committee of the All-Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks)

## Note on Transliteration

Russian words have been transliterated according to the Library of Congress scheme and, unless personal names, are italicised in the text. The exceptions to this are the common terms: Soviet; Moscow; Joseph Stalin; and the name Asya, which would otherwise appear as 'Asia'.

# Introduction

Safronov knew that Socialism was a matter of science and so he spoke logically and scientifically, giving his words two meanings so as to firm them up – one fundamental and one reserve, the same as with any other material<sup>1</sup>

Andrei Platonov, *The Foundation Pit*

The period of socialist construction that followed the Russian Revolutions of 1917 demanded huge upheavals to the personal and social lives of its citizens, with the aim of forging the new Soviet person from the pre-Revolutionary subject. The reconstruction of the 'Russian' mind, body and soul permeated early Soviet discourse and everyday life, demanding youthful energy, joyful Revolutionary zeal, and conscious self-mastery. Religion, and in particular Orthodoxy, had long constituted a cornerstone both of the institutions of the Russian Empire, and of Russian and Eastern European communities, and was marked by its respect for custom and continuity. The future was now supreme, and all efforts were directed to the construction of socialism, and subsequently communism, erasing all traces of the pre-Revolutionary past in Soviet citizens, including Orthodox faith. This relentless forward march was encapsulated by Stalin in 1935 with his now infamous statement that 'life has become better, life has become merrier', with which he declared that socialism had been achieved. Soviet discourse anticipated the achievement of communism in the imminent future, where the robust and enthusiastic new Soviet citizen would have been forged and set in steel.

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<sup>1</sup> A Platonov, *The Foundation Pit*, (c. 1930), trans. Robert Chandler, (London, 1996), p. 32.

However, a more complex identity belonged to the newly 'emancipated' and re-forged Soviet woman. In the wake of the Revolution she was, at least nominally, granted entitlement to education, wage and labour equality, and reproductive and sexual autonomy, all of which would allegedly alleviate her suffering, rescuing her from the domestic slavery endured under capitalism. The 'bourgeois' institution of marriage, and the private nuclear family which had emerged during the evolution of capitalism, would wither away, to be replaced by 'free love' and socialised childcare. Though the Bolsheviks argued that 'feminism' was a bourgeois threat to the needs of working class women, ideas of gender equality were presented as a goal of socialist economic transformation particularly by female party members – most notably Aleksandra Kollontai – who were now ironically known as 'Bolshevik feminists'.<sup>2</sup>

But, the identity of the New Soviet Woman came with certain caveats, contradictions, and retractions. Soviet discourse on gender equality presumed the youth and heterosexuality of Soviet citizens, and stopped short of completely ideologically rehabilitating 'womanhood', instead still holding men as the standard to reach. Though early Marxist and Marxist Leninist theorists, such as August Bebel, had criticised religious institutions, and the Catholic church in particular for associating woman with 'the flesh', public discourse conflated gender with heterosexuality, and sex with maternity.<sup>3</sup> This had the effect of either erasing or vilifying 'older' women, who were already institutionally under-represented as a social group. The older woman was

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<sup>2</sup> R.G. Ruthchild, *Equality and Revolution: Women's Rights in the Russian Empire, 1905-1917*, (Pittsburgh, 2010), p. 8.

<sup>3</sup> A. Bebel, *Women in the Past, Present and Future*, (London, 1915), p. 55. In Bebel's critique of the attitude of the Catholic Church to women, his attention was focused upon the flaws inadequacies of the Church's domination of the institutions of heterosexual marriage decrying that 'however apparent it may be that there is not the smallest compatibility between the two, either in age or in mental or physical constitution – the bride may be twenty and the bridegroom seventy, or *vice versa*, the bride may be young, handsome, full of life and spirits, the bridegroom old, decrepid (sic), morose, - all of this is of no consequence to the Representative of Church and State'.

presented as *baba* or *babka* – a term denoting an old peasant woman, with pejorative associations (particularly in the form *babka*). Women of childbearing age were cast as either sexualised ‘problems’ for men, or essentially passive ‘helpers’, by theorists, propagandists and policymakers.<sup>4</sup>

These anxieties were also ‘enshrined’ within scientific discourse. As Eric Naiman has noted in *Sex in Public*, the anatomo-historical scientist Anton Vital’evich Nemilov’s *The Biological Tragedy of Woman*, published in several editions between 1925 and 1930, encapsulated the gendered anxieties about women in adulthood and beyond that formed much of Soviet discourse of the time. Nemilov suggested that ‘[t]he tragedy of a woman’s biological calling lies in the fact that unconsciously [or against her will – *nevol’no*] and completely, so to speak, ‘in the dark’, she joins chains of hereditary particles and thus fatally stretches from the past to the future.’<sup>5</sup> In other words, her access to ‘monumental time’, the eternal cycles of reproduction occupied by (biological) women, placed her at odds with the linear, forward march of socialist construction, seen to constitute the masculine ‘norm’.<sup>6</sup> In this vein, maternity was constructed both as an essential social function, and a chain binding women to the past. This posed a particular problem to the new Soviet state, concerned with the linear forward motion of historical time, through which it was presumed the Revolution would resolve the exploitation of capitalist society. In *From Darkness to Light*, Igal Halfin demonstrates the eschatological

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<sup>4</sup> J. Waterlow, ‘*Babushka*, Harlot, Helper, Joker: Women and Gender in 1930s Political Humour’, in M. Ilić (ed.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Women and Gender in Twentieth-Century Russia and the Soviet Union*, (Basingstoke, 2017), p. 135. A fuller explanation of these tropes, and their implications, is found in the following selection of works: F.L. Bernstein, *The Dictatorship of Sex: Lifestyle Advice for the Soviet Masses*, (DeKalb, 2011); E. Waters, ‘Victim or Villain? Prostitution in post-Revolutionary Russia’, in L. Edmondson (ed.), *Women and Society in Russia and the Soviet Union*, (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 160-177.

<sup>5</sup> A.V. Nemoliv, *Biologicheskaiia tragediia zhenshchiny*, (Leningrad, 1925), p. 102

<sup>6</sup> J. Kristeva, ‘Women’s Time’, *Signs*, 71:1 (Fall, 1981), pp. 13-35. Kristeva’s account of the ‘monumental time’ of women locates the individual woman in a ‘cyclical’ women’s time, characterised by the reproductive cycle. For a fuller discussion of the ‘eternal feminine’ in the early Soviet context, please see ch. 5 of Naiman’s *Sex in Public*, as well as Hannah Proctor’s ‘Women on the Edge of Time: Representations of Revolutionary Motherhood in the NEP-era Soviet Union’, *Studies in the Maternal*, 7:1, (January 2015), pp. 1-20.

potential of Marxist and early Soviet discourse, arguing that Marxist thought outlined ‘a prescribed temporal motion of the proletariat from the ‘darkness’ of capitalism toward salvation in a classless society.’<sup>7</sup> The ‘monumental time’ of women arguably constituted a plane totally separate from their revolutionary masculine counterparts, to whom they were linked as a sexual distraction, a threat to the ‘bright light’ of Communist revolution, yet biologically necessary for its survival.<sup>8</sup> The ‘problem’ of women doomed the movement for gender equality to demise, as it distinguished the New Soviet Woman irreconcilably from her masculine counterpart, as a constant source of anxiety to be controlled and supervised.

The intention of this thesis is to argue that women in the 1920s and 1930s skilfully received and reproduced the complex and often conflicting ideology on womanhood, to construct and present their own lives in ways acceptable within the authoritarian constraints of the period. In doing so, the letters they sent to officials, policymakers, and organs of the press will be examined in order to identify the intersections between individual and public identity. Before moving on to a discussion of the practicalities of this source base, it is first necessary to examine Bolshevik thought and policy as it related to women in the 1920s and 1930s.

## **Bolshevik Thinking on the Woman Question**

Attention to the ‘woman question’ (*zhenskii vopros*), which was concerned with the position of women in Russian society, was not limited to the Bolsheviks, nor even to the

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<sup>7</sup> I. Halfin, *From Darkness To Light: Class, Consciousness, and Soviet Salvation*, (Pittsburgh, 2000), p. 1.

<sup>8</sup> The phrase ‘bright light of Communist revolution is adapted from Halfin, who refers on p. 2 of *From Darkness to Light* to Marxist portrayals of the ‘bright light of Communism’.

nineteenth century, though radicals of all stripes had championed some form of sexual equality since the 1860s.<sup>9</sup> Nonetheless, following the October Revolution the Bolshevik government became the first government in history to self-consciously endeavour to emancipate women, leading to the decline and stigmatisation of the pre-Revolutionary feminist movement.<sup>10</sup> However, even from the outset, the Bolsheviks did not necessarily share a consistent line on gender, nor did they fully address the question of 'biological difference' between men and women, preferring to foreground the issue of class. Lenin, the Bolshevik party's acknowledged leader, like his ideological predecessor Engels, maintained that the subjugation of women to 'domestic slavery' was the first instance of class oppression, and that 'the chief thing [was] to get women to take part in socially productive labour, to liberate them from 'domestic slavery...'.<sup>11</sup> Lenin acknowledged that working women were indeed necessary for the success of any socialist revolution. He maintained that '[one] cannot draw the masses into politics without drawing women into politics as well. For the female half of the human race is doubly oppressed under capitalism.'<sup>12</sup> Though rooted in discussions of class oppression, Lenin's rigid delineation between the two 'halves' of the human race indicates the concept of underlying biological difference between the sexes, suggesting a tension in Bolshevik thought between notions of equality and biological difference.

However, despite an underlying unease about the principle of sexual inequality, the majority of Lenin's musings on the 'woman question', much like those of Marx and

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<sup>9</sup> L. Edmondson, 'Equality and Difference in Women's History: Where Does Russia Fit In?', in R. Marsh, (ed.), *Women in Russia and Ukraine*, (Cambridge, 1996), p. 103. The argument that the 'woman question' had been firmly on the agenda since the seventeenth century is offered in: G.A. Tishkin, *Zhenskii vopros v Rossii v 50-60gg XIX*, (Leningrad, 1984).

<sup>10</sup> B.A. Engel, 'Women in Russia and the Soviet Union', *SIGNS*, 12:4, (Summer, 1987), pp. 781-7.

<sup>11</sup> V.I. Lenin, 'International Working Women's Day', in *On the Emancipation of Women*, p. 82. The theoretical roots of this argument are found in F. Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, (Chicago, 1902).

<sup>12</sup> Lenin, 'International Working Women's Day', p. 85.

Engels kept the subject of class a priority over sex divisions, which were considered to be symptomatic of class oppression, and could hypothetically be resolved by 'raising' women to the status of men. Even his 1913 article 'The Working Class and Neo-Malthusianism', which concerned an issue of great importance to working women who bore the brunt of unwanted and unaffordable pregnancies, Lenin assumed his audience to be male, stating that '[t]hings are harder for our generation than they were for our fathers', and consistently addressing the worker as 'he'.<sup>13</sup> Despite cursory acknowledgement of the need for comprehensive change in social attitudes and customs in order to end women's oppression, and his statement that 'the struggle will be a long one, and it demands a radical reconstruction both of social technique and of morals', Lenin failed to expand upon the problem of social inequality between the sexes.<sup>14</sup> Although a number of contemporary thinkers within the party outlined possibilities for the reconstruction of social technique and morals, the Party leadership failed to meaningfully engage with this line of thought. The issue of sexual difference was moved firmly from the agenda until after 1917, to avoid distraction from the perceived central issue of class, and the struggle against tsarist autocracy.<sup>15</sup> The ambiguity of Leninist thought on the 'woman question' is also visible in Lenin's correspondence with his fellow Bolshevik Revolutionary, Inessa Armand. Lukewarm about Armand's creation in 1914 of the women's magazine *Rabotnitsa*, Lenin explicitly stated his concern that class solidarity would be splintered by 'bourgeois' feminist demands:

Why is the approach to this problem inadequate and un-Marxist? Because... the main social problem is presented as... an appendage to the sex problem. The important point recedes

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<sup>13</sup> V.I. Lenin, 'The Working Class and neo-Malthusianism', in *On the Emancipation of Women*, p. 31, pp. 30-33.

<sup>14</sup> Lenin, 'International Working Women's Day', p. 82.

<sup>15</sup> Edmondson, 'Equality and Difference in Women's History', p. 103.



into the background. Thus not only is this question obscured, but also thought, and the class-consciousness of working women in general, is dulled.<sup>16</sup>

Although Armand's letters, to which these extracts form the response, remain unpublished, and are missing from archives, Lenin's responses indicate her position. From her letters, it is clear that she made important contributions to Marxist-Leninist thought and policy on gender, not least as the first director of the *Zhenotdel*, the 'women's department' of the Party apparatus. Although she, too, failed to critically examine the implications of the rigidly determinist assertions already discussed, she nonetheless emphasised that women were responsible for the improvement of their own lot, and that their equality must be an active pursuit of women. She also substituted the word 'emancipation' with 'liberation', implying action rather than a passive condition.<sup>17</sup> In this respect, Armand, 'learned to question, to contradict, and if necessary to defy [Lenin].'<sup>18</sup> It is clear that despite her dynamism, the practical effectiveness of Armand's relatively radical stance was largely stifled. Lenin's influence as an individual, the singular party political culture he inculcated, and the suppression of dissidence, stifled the possibility for what we might now consider a 'feminist' leadership to emerge, which might have encouraged female agency in the Soviet Union to flourish.<sup>19</sup>

However, Armand's exchanges with Lenin provide evidence of a vibrant discourse amongst women within Bolshevik circles on the 'woman question'. On the one hand we

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<sup>16</sup> C. Zetkin, 'My Recollections of Lenin', in *On the Emancipation of Women*, (Moscow, 1977), p.103. An overview of the publication of *Rabotnitsa* and its circulation is available in D.L. Meeks' 'A Soviet Women's Magazine', *Soviet Studies*, 4:1, (1952), pp. 32-47, and N. Tolstikova, 'Rabotnitsa: The Paradoxical Success of a Soviet Women's Magazine', *Journalism History*, 30:3, (Fall, 2004), pp. 131-140. Meeks describes *Rabotnitsa* on p. 32 as 'a magazine for women about women'. Both articles discuss that the purpose of the publication was to promote party policy and educated readers on the aims of the country, while providing women with 'normative and idealised roles' (Tolstikova, p. 138).

<sup>17</sup> M. Buckley, *Women and Ideology in the Soviet Union*, (Hempstead, 1989), p. 45, R. Stites, 'Women's Liberation Movements in Russia, 1900-1930', *Canadian-American Slavic Studies*, 7:4, (1973), p. 460.

<sup>18</sup> Elwood, 'Lenin's Correspondence with Inessa Armand', p. 235.

<sup>19</sup> Discussion of the influence of Lenin, both as an individual and as Party leader can be found in N. Tumarkin, *Lenin Lives! The Lenin Cult in Soviet Russia*, (Cambridge, 1983).

see the conservative elements essentially hostile to women's emancipation, and on the more radical wing were figures such as Armand and Kollontai, (while Trotsky might too have been considered a contemporary 'ally', to borrow a modern-day phrase). Strictly limited by the ideological confines of Marxist-Leninist conceptions of class solidarity, there was little room for female solidarity in its own right. The oppression of women, both under domestic labour and in their personal relationships, was perceived as functions of class relations, and thus 'women's liberation' as a functional ideology was ultimately subordinated to class solidarity.

Despite an environment which discouraged attention to gender and sexual equality at the expense of class, women remained active thinkers and writers on the subject. Some of the most creative, if controversial contributions to Marxist work on sexual equality were made by Aleksandra Kollontai. Expanding upon calls from Inessa Armand and Leon Trotsky for the socialisation of domestic role, and for the liberation of women by women themselves, Kollontai surpassed her contemporaries on the subject of the double standards of sexual codes and morality. In 'Sexual Relations and the Class Struggle', she stated that '[i]n the eyes of society the personality of a man can be more easily separated from his actions in the sexual sphere. The personality of a woman is judged almost exclusively in terms of her sex life.'<sup>20</sup> However, the potential solutions to the problems of masculine derision that she indicated in her fiction are not found in her theoretical writings. Where female agency was never permitted to be an 'autonomous force' amongst the Bolshevik thinkers, Kollontai was compelled to channel its potential into artistic form in her short stories.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, Kollontai explicitly rejected the principle of a universal 'woman question', and declared that 'unity does not and cannot

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<sup>20</sup> A. Kollontai, 'A Serious Gap', *Selected Writings*, pp. 125-6, A. Kollontai, 'Sexual Relations and the Class Struggle', *Selected Writings*, p. 245.

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, Kollontai, 'Sisters', in *Selected Writings*, p. 224.

exist'<sup>22</sup>. It is true that in any society, let alone the vast Russian Empire, 'women' never constituted a homogenous entity, the ambiguity of Kollontai's statement suggested a reluctance to actively challenge sexual antagonisms within class boundaries, though she did acknowledge the issue.<sup>23</sup> While her short stories touched upon the universalism of inequality within relationships, as well as female friendship, solidarity, and gendered agency, these principles were not linked to broader practical or political issues of gender socialisation in her activities within the Party. Perhaps since she could not, Kollontai did not publicly expand upon the observations made in her fiction, including her criticism of the distinction between public and private domains. Important contributions to the theoretical liberation of women *were* therefore made by female thinkers in the early Soviet state, albeit indirectly. Moreover, though their commitment to the fundamental emancipation of women from the social practices of gender inequality was weak at best, Bolshevik leaders did pay an unprecedented amount of attention to their legal emancipation. Therefore, however shallow the rhetoric might have been, and however underdeveloped its substance, the ground broken by these assumptions had important consequences for Soviet women.

## **Making Sense of the New Soviet Woman in Policy and Practice**

Ambivalent as the commitment of its authors may have been, the body of work on gender equality built by Marxist-Leninist writers translated to a reasonably comprehensive programme of social legislation. By 1921, 'Lenin could declare that

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<sup>22</sup> A. Kollontai, 'The Social Basis of the Woman Question', in *Selected Writings*, p. 61.

<sup>23</sup> Buckley, *Women and Ideology in the Soviet Union*, p. 56.

according to the law, not a trace of sexual inequality remained'.<sup>24</sup> The Code of Laws concerning the Civil Registration of Deaths, Births and Marriages, of October 17, 1918, apparently sought to revolutionise the household. Marriage was rationalised as a secular, rather than religious institution, and articles 74-87 of the Code established the necessity of mutual consent for the validity of a marriage, as well as the abilities of wives as well as husbands, to request a divorce.<sup>25</sup> The automatic imposition of the husband's surname following marriage was ended by Article 100, and Article 104 ended the legal obligation of women to take up residence with her spouse. Abortion was legalised in 1920. Although the elimination of backstreet abortions, and the improvement of public health and hygiene was the primary motivation behind this measure, the decree did not at any point appear to question the woman's right to an abortion in principle.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, in 1919 the *Zhenotdel*, or 'women's department' of the Party was established by decree of the Central Committee. The *Zhenotdel* in the eleven years of its operation functioned as an organisational medium through which women would be able to protect their own interests.<sup>27</sup> With leaders including Inessa Armand, Konkordia Samoiloova, and Aleksandra Kollontai, the *Zhenotdel* oversaw campaigns, and meetings held by a network of delegates across the Soviet Union, often composed of quite 'ordinary' women, and assisted the delegates' meetings with endorsements, and by the publication of ancillary documents, bulletins as well as a

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<sup>24</sup> R. Pethybridge, 'Stalinism as Social Conservatism?', *European History Quarterly*, 11:4, (October, 1981), p. 465.

<sup>25</sup> 'From the Code of Laws concerning the Civil Registration of Deaths, Births and Marriages, of October 17, 1918', in R. Schlesinger, (ed.), *Changing Attitudes in Soviet Russia: Family in the USSR*, (London, 1949), pp. 34-5.

<sup>26</sup> Buckley, *Women and Ideology in the Soviet Union*, p. 37.

<sup>27</sup> Much has been written on the topic of the *Zhenotdel*. A selection of key articles would include: B. Clements, 'The Utopianism of the *Zhenotdel*', *Slavic Review*, 51:3, (1992), pp. 485-496; W. Goldman, 'Industrial Politics, Peasant Rebellion, and the Death of the Proletarian Women's Movement in the USSR', *Slavic Review*, 55:1, (1996), pp. 46-77; R. Stites, 'Zhenotdel: Bolshevism and Russian Women, 1917-1930', *Russian History*, 3:2, (1976), pp. 174-193.

range of women's journals, such as *Rabotnitsa* and *Krest'ianka*, aimed at working and peasant women respectively.<sup>28</sup>

Ultimately, since women's oppression was considered to be rooted in class, sexual equality would be achieved through their integration into the mainstream labour force. As Melanie Ilič's extensive research on Soviet labour policy and its effect upon women's labour conditions in the 1920s and 1930s has revealed, Soviet policy provided the clearest view of the apparent conflict amongst policymakers regarding 'difference' and 'equality'. Though a 1920 decree stated that women 'undertaking the same quantity and quality of work as male workers' should be paid the same wage, the 1918 Labour Code had already set out a range of protective restrictions on the use of female labour, indicating a presumed distinction between the work to be undertaken by men and women.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, the implications of the enforcement of legislation relating to equal pay defaulted upon age-old assumptions about female productivity. In response to the effect of equal pay legislation on the employment of women of childbearing age, in the early 1920s, policymakers introduced legislation that protected women against dismissal upon the grounds of pregnancy or dependent children.<sup>30</sup> The issue of menstrual leave, based upon the impact of heavy labour upon women's reproductive organs, received considerable discussion throughout the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>31</sup> Underlying this 'protective' legislative programme was an 'assumption of women's more delicate physiological constitution', which the new Bolshevik government sought to mitigate,

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<sup>28</sup> Buckley, *Women and Ideology in the Soviet Union*, p. 58.

<sup>29</sup> M. Ilič, "Equal Pay for Equal Work': Women's Wages in Soviet Russia', in M. Ilič (ed.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Women and Gender in Russia and the Soviet Union*, (Basingstoke, 2017), p. 104.

<sup>30</sup> Ilič, 'Equal Pay for Equal Work', p. 106.

<sup>31</sup> M. Ilič, 'Soviet Women Workers and Menstruation: A Research Note on Labour Protection in the 1920s and 1930s', *Europe-Asia Studies*, 46:8, (1994), pp. 1409-1415.

ending the isolation of women within the home, and drawing them as fully as possible into the workplace.<sup>32</sup>

The subsequent Marriage Law, enacted in 1926, granted registered and unregistered marriages equal rights and obligations under law. In doing so, it sought to protect women from the high levels of insecurity that had inadvertently resulted from the liberalisation of divorce during the economic uncertainty of NEP, or New Economic Policy, which ended the food requisitions of War Communism, and loosened restrictions on private enterprise.<sup>33</sup> Though NEP had been intended to lessen tensions over the requisition of produce in the countryside, revive the industrial economy and promote unity behind the Party, its interaction with the social policies of the immediate post-Revolutionary period had calamitous consequences for the newly emancipated Soviet woman. Unemployment among women rocketed, as a result of the shift to cost-accounting, and support for socialised child-rearing declined.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, though divorce was widely considered to be essential for the emancipation of women as it enabled them to maintain their autonomy in social relationships, its use in practice after 1918 often resulted in the abrupt departure of husbands – often unregistered – following signs of pregnancy. Child abandonment also increased in the period. The legislation of the mid-1920s, therefore, sought to protect women and children from the

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<sup>32</sup> M. Ilić, 'Women Workers in the Soviet Mining Industry: A Case-Study of Labour Protection', *Europe-Asia Studies*, 48:8, (1996), p. 1399.

<sup>33</sup> 'The Soviet Code on Marriage and Divorce, the Family, and Guardianship, decrees of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee, 19 November 1926' in Schlesinger, R., (ed), *Changing Attitudes in Soviet Russia*, pp. 154-169; W.G. Rosenberg, 'Introduction: NEP Russia as a 'Transitional' Society', in S. Fitzpatrick, A. Rabinowitch, R. Stites, (eds), *Russia in the Era of NEP: Explorations in Soviet Society and Culture*, (Bloomington, 1991), pp. 1-11.

<sup>34</sup> W.Z. Goldman, *Women, the State and Revolution: Soviet Family Policy and Social Life, 1917-1936*, (Cambridge, 1993), p. 73.

inadvertent effects of both NEP and the attempts to liberalise conjugal values, and prevent their further social and political isolation.<sup>35</sup>

Where illiteracy, too, had previously isolated women, particularly peasant women, *Zhenotdel* delegates' meetings arranged reading classes to facilitate political education, in an attempt to end the individual isolation of the family, and raise consciousness of socialist and workers' issues.<sup>36</sup> Thus, the outward appearance of the Soviet state throughout the 1920s was one of socialist progress and progress towards gender equality. However, it must be noted that the Bolsheviks' programme of rapid social legislation did not guarantee the same pace of social change; the legislation did not penetrate the tenets of everyday life for many years, and there remained strongholds of resistance throughout Soviet state and society against the new 'emancipated' condition of women.<sup>37</sup> The *Zhenotdel* by the late 1920s was gradually undermined, and eventually eliminated in 1930, considered no longer to be necessary.<sup>38</sup> Activism by and for women was subsumed by the Department for Agitation and Mass Campaigns, as part of which activists were expected to display party discipline and support for Stalinist economic policies.<sup>39</sup> The more creative Bolshevik 'feminists' were marginalised. Aleksandra Kollontai, for example, was transferred to the position of ambassador to Norway in

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<sup>35</sup> The impact of NEP on family life, and the implications of this for Bolshevik thought on the emancipation of women, is addressed in R.E. Johnson, 'Family Life in Moscow During NEP', in S. Fitzpatrick, A. Rabinowitch, R. Stites, (eds), *Russia in the Era of NEP: Explorations in Soviet Society and Culture*, (Bloomington, 1991), pp. 106-124; L. Kaminsky, 'No Rituals and Formalities! Free Love, Unregistered Marriage and Alimony in Early Soviet Law and Family Life', *Gender and History*, 29:3, (2017), pp. 716-731; and in most detail in chapter two of Goldman, *Women, the State and Revolution*.

<sup>36</sup> Heitlinger, *Women and State Socialism: Sex Inequality in the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia*, p. 59.

<sup>37</sup> Aspects of popular and institutional resistance against Soviet sexual equality – and the integration of women into previously masculine spaces – are covered by the following body of work: D. Koenker, 'Men against women on the shop floor in early Soviet Russia: gender and class in the socialist workplace', *American Historical Review*, 100:5, (1995), pp. 1438-1464; Goldman, 'Industrial Politics, Peasant Rebellion' and 'Babas at the Bench: Gender Conflict in Soviet Industry in the 1930s', in M. Ilič, (ed.), *Women in the Stalin Era*, (Basingstoke, 2001), pp. 69-88; Waterlow, 'Babushka, Harlot, Helper, Joker'.

<sup>38</sup> Goldman, 'Industrial Politics, Peasant Rebellion', p. 63.

<sup>39</sup> Heitlinger, *Women and State Socialism*, p. 62.

which she remained for the rest of her life.<sup>40</sup> The only 'women's organisation' that remained was the Soviet Women's Committee; however this was committed by official sanction to the struggle of women against fascism, and functioned only as an unofficial 'contact space' for discussions of gender.<sup>41</sup> With the issue of sexual equality presumed to have been solved by the 1930s, its safeguards were duly dismantled.

According to all indication, by 1936, it appeared that the 'woman question' had been put to bed, and the 1936 Constitution of the USSR, that 'Women in the USSR are accorded equal rights with men *in all spheres* of economic, state, cultural, social and political life'.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, with discussions of self-determination and gender roles kept resolutely off the political agenda, assumptions about female roles replaced their analysis.<sup>43</sup> The protective labour legislation of the 1920s – never fully implemented – was replaced with labour regulations promoting 'equality'.<sup>44</sup> Concerns about the birth rate that had emerged by 1930 led to a clear programme of pro-natalism, and abortion was prohibited once again in 1936. Disquiet about Soviet sexual morality meant that divorce was made more difficult to obtain, homosexuality was criminalised, and the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate offspring was reinstated.<sup>45</sup> Essentially, the monogamous family was rehabilitated, and the emancipation of women was declared to have been achieved; a contradiction in gender ideology that would characterise 'liberation' for generations of Soviet women. Therefore, what has come to be known as a double – or triple - burden for the new Soviet woman was consolidated: images of 'the

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<sup>40</sup> C. Sypnowich, 'Alexandra Kollontai and the Fate of Bolshevnik Feminism', *Labour – Le Travail*, 32, (1993), p. 289.

<sup>41</sup> Heitlinger, *Women and State Socialism*, p. 63.

<sup>42</sup> Konstitutsiia (osnovnoj zakon) Soiuza sovetskikh sotsialisticheskikh respublik (Moscow, 1947). Italics mine.

<sup>43</sup> Buckley, *Women and Ideology in the Soviet Union*, p. 136.

<sup>44</sup> M. Ilić, *Women Workers in the Soviet Interwar Economy: From 'Protection' to 'Equality'*, (London, 1999).

<sup>45</sup> Engel, 'Women in Russia and the Soviet Union', p. 788.



successful and problem free Soviet superwoman' proliferated, in which women were portrayed as great achievers in the home, the workplace, and the soviets.<sup>46</sup>

## Understanding the 'Great Retreat' in the 1930s

Following the publication of Nikolai Timasheff's *The Great Retreat* in 1946, this 'rehabilitation' of the family, and the crystallisation of the double burden, came to be seen in the West as a triumph of social conservatism. Timasheff's thesis was that: 'utopian revolutionaries who take power ultimately must modify their utopian policies that they may preserve power and even the opportunity to cultivate some part of their utopian garden'.<sup>47</sup> The shift in social policy in the 1930s was thus seen as a retreat from Soviet ideals in order to stabilise the regime and of particular interest for this thesis, a return to pre-Revolutionary family values. Since its publication, aspects of Timasheff's 'Great Retreat' have been debated extensively, with scholars focusing in particular on the policy contradictions entailed by the political programme, and their consequences for women in particular. By the early 1980s, Roger Pethybridge, drew on Timasheff's notion of a kind of revolutionary pragmatism which formed in the Soviet 1930s, and Pethybridge identified the return of the family unit as a means of low cost childcare at a time when all adults, including mothers, were needed in the workforce.<sup>48</sup> Perhaps more influentially, given her area of extensive expertise, Wendy Goldman's body of work on women, abortion and the family has developed Timasheff's principle of the 'cultivation

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<sup>46</sup> Buckley, *Women and Ideology in the Soviet Union*, p. 136. An explanation of the triple burden with which women in socialist societies were saddled can be found in Barbara Einhorn's 'Where Have All the Women Gone? Women and the Women's Movement in East Central Europe', *Feminist Review*, 39, (Autumn, 1991), pp. 16-36.

<sup>47</sup> N. Timasheff, *The Great Retreat: The Growth and Decline of Communism in Russia* (New York, 1946), 19.

<sup>48</sup> Pethybridge, 'Stalinism as Social Conservatism?' The assumption that women would not *want* to reject motherhood was supported even by Kollontai, despite her extensive writings on gender and sexual equality.

of the utopian garden', regarding the conservatism of policies on the family. She asserts that the right to bodily autonomy through the control of one's own fertility received little consideration by the Soviet state, forming part of the Stalinist state's increasingly 'conservative attitude'. Rather than being viewed as a women's 'right to choose', abortion was considered by the state as a necessity, rooted in poverty, and that with the eradication of poverty, women would have little reason to reject motherhood.<sup>49</sup> These studies encapsulate the conservatism inherent to Bolshevik and early Soviet thought and policy on gender and social politics.

In the last decade, these questions have once again preoccupied historians, who have offered slightly different perspectives on the matter. Lauren Kaminsky's 2011 study of family life under Stalinism highlighted that many women felt truly disadvantaged by the radical divorce and alimony policies of the 1920s. She asserts that 'Stalin-era family policy [was] the continuation of a radical revolutionary tradition... explicit in its promotion of equality', and her work is emblematic of a more recent reconsideration (or at least a more rigorous nuancing) of the Great Retreat, suggesting that social policy after 1936 marked a return to the protective legislation of the utopian 1920s, rather than to earlier tradition. She also notes that women sought to engage with the state by protesting in the language of equal rights for all women and mothers, in favour of the restoration of the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate families.<sup>50</sup> In contrast, Matthew Lenoe has argued that the 'retreat' identified by Timasheff was part of a synthesis with pre-Revolutionary culture, not a return to the utopianism that Kaminsky suggests. His characterisation of the intersection between public opinion and official

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<sup>49</sup> W.Z. Goldman, 'Women, Abortion and the State, 1917-1936', in B. Evans Clement, B. Alpern Engel, C.D. Worobec, (eds), *Russia's Women: Accommodation, Resistance, Transformation*, (Oxford, 1991), p. 244.

<sup>50</sup> L. Kaminsky, 'Utopian Visions of Family Life in the Stalin-Era Soviet Union', *Central European History*, 44, (2011), pp. 64-5.

discourse as a 'synthesis' is perhaps somewhat simplistic but his portrayal of Soviet society as consisting of diverse groups, a concept coexisting easily with many of the central tenets of many social histories of the 1930s is, overall, sound.<sup>51</sup> Taken together, these works show both that by the 1930s Soviet policymakers were forced to acknowledge not only the cost of maintaining the family policies of the 1920s and the diverse reactions of different social groups within Soviet society. Despite a clear desire among Soviet women for the protection and public legitimisation of the nuclear family, after the Revolution and Civil War, Sheila Fitzpatrick notes that 'wives' were almost an unrecognised category in the first years after the Revolution, and that housewives seemed often to be accorded a second class status, with one woman complaining that 'sometimes I thought that housewives were not even considered human.'<sup>52</sup> Against such a hostile discursive context, Fitzpatrick claims that for many housewives seeking means of connection with the Soviet state and society, the emergence in the 1930s of the wife-activist movement was 'a godsend'.<sup>53</sup>

Quite notably, Fitzpatrick argues that women actually responded to the change in attitude to the nuclear family positively, and gave varied and considered feedback to alimony laws. Her study notes in particular that the disintegration of the family seems to have been widely perceived by women as a social and moral evil, and that it was seen

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<sup>51</sup> M. Lenoe, 'In Defense of Timasheff's Great Retreat', *Kritika*, 5:4 (2004), pp. 721-730.

<sup>52</sup> Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, p. 156.

<sup>53</sup> Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, 157. Framed as part of the encouragement of women to return in some respects to nuclear family, the *obshchestvenitsa* movement (or more colloquially, the 'wives' movement) was frequently described by authorities in apolitical and patriarchal terms of stability and comfort, and constituted of 'female activists' who were married to high achieving soldiers or workers— usually engineers, managers, *Stakhanovites*. For more on this, consult the following studies: M. Buckley, 'The Untold Story of the *Obshchestvenitsa* in the 1930s', in M. Ilić (ed.), *Women in the Stalin Era* (Basingstoke, 2001), pp. 151-172; R. Balmas Neary, 'Mothering Socialist Society: The Wife-Activists' Movement and the Soviet Culture of Daily Life, 1934-41', *Russian Review*, 58:3, (July, 1999), pp. 396-412.

by women as an important institution, to be actively upheld by authorities.<sup>54</sup>Fitzpatrick cites the frequency of appeals to judges for intervention in a wide range of male delinquencies as evidence for this. Although this appears to provide convincing evidence for popular anxiety about family disintegration, Fitzpatrick's study does not address the sense of self-confidence displayed by women who in writing these appeals, acted autonomously, assuming the right to a certain standard of behaviour and respect within marriage and family life. Many of the responses documented in studies by Fitzpatrick and Goldman were first laid out by Janet Evans in the early 1980s, who argues that many letters were critical of aspects of the 1936 decree, and called for a more liberal abortion law and a stricter control of divorcees who failed to pay maintenance. The letters cited in Evans' study indicate a willingness on the part of these women to consider their political environments critically. However, Evans notes that the majority of these letters were written by students, professional women and female shock workers, those workers who achieved exceeded productivity targets. Instead, ordinary women tended to write on issues of alimony, divorce and state benefits.<sup>55</sup> Nonetheless, the fact that they wrote at all indicates that, regardless of educational level or social status, women remained able and willing to act on their own behalfs in response to issues pertinent in their lives.

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<sup>54</sup> Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, (Oxford, 1999), p. 143. The shock work movement was a method intended to raise industrial production and exceed production targets. It emerged in the latter years of NEP, and having gained social and political currency, culminated in the phenomenon of Stakhanovism, the execution of 'astonishing feats' of productivity, after 1935. Critical to the movement was the self-motivation of the worker. For more on shock workers and Stakhanovism in urban and rural contexts, see L.H. Siegelbaum, *Stakhanovism and the Politics of Productivity in the USSR, 1935-1941*, (Cambridge, 1988), M. Buckley, *Mobilising Soviet Peasants: Heroines and Heroes in Stalin's Fields*, (Oxford, 2006), and D.L. Shearer, 'The Language and Politics of Socialist Rationalisation: Productivity, Industrial Relations, and the Social Origins of Stalinism at the end of NEP', *Cahiers du Monde Russe et Soviétique*, 32:4, (October, 1991), pp. 581-608.

<sup>55</sup> J. Evans, 'The Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the Woman's Question: The Case of the 1936 Decree 'in Defence of Mother and Child'', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 16:4, (October, 1981), pp. 757-775.

In light of all this, Kaminsky's allegation that 'Stalin-era family policy [was] the continuation of a radical revolutionary tradition... explicit in [its] promotion of equality' is quite credible.<sup>56</sup> Existing studies of family politics in the 1920s and 1930s highlight the conservatism which underlay the revolution of daily life after 1917, as well as the diversity of opinion across all social groups of women, refuting a straightforward interpretation of the 'conservative retreat'. Rather, in light of the interaction between citizens and the state, Lenoë's suggestion that we re-read the Great Retreat as a reincorporation into the utopian model of slowly evolving pre-Revolutionary family arrangements seems to reconcile formerly disparate interpretations of retreat and utopianism, and provides a foundation upon which to base the study to follow.<sup>57</sup> This historiographical foundation also raises the question of the extent to which women sought the accommodation, or at least the tolerance, of their personal arrangements by the Soviet vision.

For considerations of the extent to which women accepted a convergence of public and private life as means through which to legitimise their experiences and to relate their lives to the Soviet project, Rebecca Spagnolo provides the clearest example of the blurring of public and professional, and domestic and personal life from a different angle: that of the fusion of workplace and home of the domestic worker.<sup>58</sup> Spagnolo's study traces the self-esteem of domestic workers through language and union membership, and highlights their struggle to link their expectations of respect with reality, articulated by the insistence of many live-in domestic workers on being

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<sup>56</sup> Kaminsky, 'Utopian Visions of Family Life in the Stalin-Era Soviet Union', p. 64.

<sup>57</sup> Lenoë, 'In Defense of Timasheff's Great Retreat'.

<sup>58</sup> R. Spagnolo, 'When Private Home Meets Public Workplace: Service, Space, and the Urban Domestic in 1920s Russia', C. Kaier, E. Naiman (eds), *Everyday Life in Soviet Russia: Taking the Revolution Inside*, (Indiana, 2008), pp. 230-255.

addressed with the formal *vy* (You).<sup>59</sup> The conclusions reached in Spagnolo's study invite a broader rethinking of the dichotomy of private and public space which has not yet been widely acknowledged, and she argues that the notion of workplace as home and home as workplace is yet unexamined. Spagnolo's findings provide a particularly interesting context for the convergence of public identities belonging to mother-teachers identified by Thomas Ewing, and the distinct identity that resulted.<sup>60</sup> Ewing argues that mother-teachers had their own sense of what Stalinism symbolised at the time, and what their work and families meant. He suggests that this was articulated and enacted on a daily level, permeating homes, schools and more broadly, society.<sup>61</sup> Both studies, by Ewing and Spagnolo, highlight the tensions that many women faced between professional and personal identities, which have not been fully addressed by studies of alimony or abortion laws, nor by examination of family dynamics. These convergences of professional and personal space and identity provide an intriguing lens through which to view women's voices. This thesis will argue that in their letters women actively addressed aspects of their identities and social roles which straddled 'public' and 'private' domains, to highlight the ways in which the obligations of Soviet citizenship each role involved impacted their experiences as Soviet women.

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<sup>59</sup> Spagnolo, 'When Private Home Meets Public Workplace', p. 233.

<sup>60</sup> E.T. Ewing, 'Maternity and Modernity: Soviet Women Teachers and the Contradictions of Stalinism', *Women's History Review*, 19:3, (July, 2010), pp. 451-477.

<sup>61</sup> Ewing, 'Maternity and Modernity', p. 469.

## **'So they really thought that way!'<sup>62</sup> Locating the Gendered Stalinist Self in Public Letters?**

The purpose of this thesis is not to prove the existence of the authentic 'self' under Stalin, nor to clearly identify its contours, but to trace the evolution of the intersection between early Soviet policy and women's individual lives and public identities. In any case, it would be impossible to do justice to the multitude of 'selves' represented within the cache of letters transcribed. Rather than measure the degree of the internalisation of Soviet 'norms', its purpose is to analyse its reproduction of those norms, and demonstrate the existence and exercise of agency by ordinary women under highly extraordinary circumstances, in their use of Bolshevik language to construct a public 'identity'.<sup>63</sup> Nonetheless, the methodology of the thesis implies a particular understanding of Stalinist subjectivity, and the significance of language to it, which requires some elaboration.

Broadly speaking, the historiography on 'Soviet subjectivity' is constituted by three broad approaches, all of which, as Katharina Uhl has succinctly explained, draw heavily on techniques of discursive analysis influenced primarily by Michel Foucault.<sup>64</sup> Regarding the basic principles of the 'self' in contemporary and recent historiography, Choi Chatterjee and Karen Petrone outlined several layers of the 'self' in 'Models of Selfhood and Subjectivity: the Soviet Case in Historical Perspective', which have emerged from Western historiography. First, the biological creature and its material

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<sup>62</sup> E. Naiman, 'On Soviet Subjects and the Scholars who make them', *Russian Review*, 60:3, (July, 2001), p. 308.

<sup>63</sup> The particular phrasing here is adapted from the title of Sheila Fitzpatrick's excellent monograph *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times*, (Oxford, 2000).

<sup>64</sup> K. Uhl, 'Oppressed and Brainwashed Soviet Subject' or 'Prisoners of the Soviet Self? Recent Conceptions of Soviet Subjectivity', *Bylye Gody*, 28:2, (2013), pp. 4-5, and Michel Foucault: 'The Subject and Power, in H. Dreyfus, P. Rabinow, (eds), *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, (Chicago, 1983), pp. 208-226; 'Technologies of the Self', in L.H. Martin (ed.), *Technologies of the Self*, (Amherst, 1988), pp. 16-49.

needs, followed by the self that is 'implicated in the social discourses and cultural codes of its origin'. Secondly, the 'self' that is inexorably bound by the 'cultural codes' and discourses of its parent society. Finally, 'the reflexive self is an active agent that scrutinises both itself and the world it inhabits, and thus plays a dynamic role in creating its own narrative of itself'.<sup>65</sup> The existence of this third layer of the 'self' forms the crux of academic debate on the Soviet self, and this thesis will proceed on the basis that its existence is proven by the dynamism and agency with which women negotiate with authorities in their letters.

In the Soviet context, discussions of the 'self' have proven to be somewhat more complicated. Juliane Fürst has suggested that the dynamism and agency exercised by Soviet citizens was inextricably bound by their social and political contexts. The social context within which Soviet citizens operated provided the 'environments and motivations' for identities and opinions to form. For Fürst, 'acceptance and resistance in the Stalinist world are inextricably linked by common presumptions, common language, common values, and a common habitat'.<sup>66</sup> Likewise, although both Jochen Hellbeck and Igal Halfin later revised their initial conclusions on the autonomy of Soviet individual selves, for them, language was the crucial determinant of the self of the Soviet citizen, and since it was tasked with the transmission of the official discourse, the Soviet self was essentially constructed not by the citizen, but by the ideological language with which she conceived of herself.<sup>67</sup> According to Halfin, 'there is no reason to introduce a

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<sup>65</sup> C. Chatterjee, K. Petrone, 'Models of Selfhood and Subjectivity: The Soviet Case in Historical Perspective', *Slavic Review*, 67:4, (2008), p. 967.

<sup>66</sup> J. Fürst, 'Prisoners of the Soviet Self?: Political Youth Opposition in Late Stalinism', *Europe-Asia Studies*, 54:3, (2002), pp. 353-375, quotations from p. 353.

<sup>67</sup> I. Halfin, J. Hellbeck, 'Rethinking the Stalinist Subject: Stephen Kotkin's *Magnetic Mountain* and the State of Soviet Historical Studies', *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas*, 64, (1996), pp. 456-463; J. Hellbeck, 'Fashioning the Stalinist Soul: the Diary of Stepan Podlubnyi, 1931-39', in S. Fitzpatrick, (ed.), *Stalinism: New Directions*, (London, 2000), pp. 77-91;



pre-existent, authentic subject who cynically manipulates the Bolshevik discourse'.<sup>68</sup>

The intangibility of the pre-existent authentic subject is of course, quite reasonable.

Moreover, the extent to which any individual's reception and reproduction of her dominant discourse was conducted 'cynically' is undoubtedly limited by the feelings and activities of daily life. However, the suggestion that the Soviet self was shaped entirely by the dominant discourse, and a desire to reproduce it, is problematic, since it fails to account for continuities in the processes of negotiation with authorities across discursive shifts. Halfin did concede that that the creation of the Soviet self did not preclude the possibility of alternative forms of self-identification – though these were related directly to the modes of 'self' prescribed by the dominant Soviet discourse.<sup>69</sup> Hellbeck also acknowledged in later studies that, while language remains at the core of construction of the 'self' in the early Soviet period, there did also exist some space for individual interpretation amongst Soviet subjects.<sup>70</sup>

More convincing, however, is the assertion that Soviet subjects should be treated as historical actors, rather than simply as passive characters. Anna Krylova rejects the passivity implied by the above readings of the 'Stalinist soul', and quite convincingly demonstrates instead the existence of 'a Stalinist subject that is neither lost in Stalinist culture, nor securely untouched by its ideals and demands.'<sup>71</sup> Soviet discourse therefore becomes a constituent of the social practices of individuals and groups, rather than of the individual self itself, accounting for the engagement and interaction between

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<sup>68</sup> I. Halfin, *From Darkness to Light: Class, Consciousness, and Salvation in Revolutionary Russia*, (Pittsburgh, 2000), p. 286.

<sup>69</sup> I. Halfin, 'From Darkness to Light: Student Communist Autobiography During NEP', *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas*, 45, (1997), pp. 235-6.

<sup>70</sup> J. Hellbeck, 'Speaking Out: Language of Affirmation and Dissent in Stalinist Russia', *Kritika*, 1:1, (2000), pp. 71-96.

<sup>71</sup> A. Krylova, 'Identity, Agency and the 'First Soviet Generation'', in S. Lovell (ed.), *Generations in Twentieth Century History*, (Basingstoke, 2007), p. 41.

collective pressure and individual agency, and self-regulation, as Kharkhordin explains.<sup>72</sup> Within this interpretation of the 'self' in the Stalinist period, the Soviet subject therefore plays a dynamic role in the construction of her own social identity, examining her own life and the environment she inhabits to construct a sense of 'self' acceptable under Soviet circumstances, in line with the alterations of manner and appearance involved in social practices, proposed by Erving Goffman, as the thesis will go on to argue.<sup>73</sup>

Yet, Sheila Fitzpatrick has suggested that 'the task of self-construction (or reconstruction) is very different from the task of self-exploration. Indeed, the two may be incompatible'.<sup>74</sup> That the two are very different tasks is undeniable – certainly, the task of exploring and authenticating Soviet selves is not the intention of the thesis – but their incompatibility is quite dubious. Fitzpatrick's own exploration of the 'usable' self supports this, suggesting that Soviet citizens were in fact able to consciously reproduce or reject models of Soviet identity as a survival strategy.<sup>75</sup> In her body of work more generally, Fitzpatrick has sought to demonstrate the way Soviet citizens fashioned their own identities in public, in order to acquire 'access' to different aspects of Soviet life, be they education, employment, civic belonging, or more fundamentally survival.<sup>76</sup> In an

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<sup>72</sup> O. Kharkhordin, *The Collective and Individual in Russia*, (London, 1999).

<sup>73</sup> E. Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, (London, 1990). Though Goffman also proposed a 'private' sphere of the self, in which individuals could discard the socially conditioned roles and identities, the substance of the 'authentic self' is not the focus of this study. Moreover, Halfin and Hellbeck's studies have served sufficiently to complicate this aspect of Goffman's thesis in the Soviet context.

<sup>74</sup> Fitzpatrick, *Tear off the Masks! Identity and Imposture in Twentieth-Century Russia*, (Princeton, 2005), pp. 8-9.

<sup>75</sup> Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*.

<sup>76</sup> Much of Fitzpatrick's work proceeds (directly or indirectly) on the basis of the construction by citizens of 'usable selves': 'The Two Faces of Anastasia: Narratives and Counter-Narratives of Identity in Stalinist Everyday Life', in C. Kaier, E. Naiman, (eds), *Everyday Life in Early Soviet Russia: Taking the Revolution Inside*, (Bloomington, 2006), pp. 23-34; 'The Problem of Class Identity in NEP Society', in S. Fitzpatrick, A. Rabinowitch, R. Stites, (eds), *Russia in the Era of NEP: Explorations in Soviet Society and Culture*, (Bloomington, 1991), pp. 12-33; *Tear off the Masks; Everyday Stalinism; Education and Social Mobility in the Soviet Union, 1921-1932*, (Cambridge, 1979); *Stalin's Peasants: Resistance and Survival in the Russian Village after Collectivization*, (Oxford, 1994); 'Happiness and Toska: A Study of Emotions in 1930s Russia',

article on subjectivity and Soviet scholarship, Naiman relayed his excited exclamation upon discovering a letter from a Soviet citizen: 'So they really thought that way!' – is the significance of the written word as a source for the comprehension of the Soviet experience.<sup>77</sup> By exploring the process of the construction of the reflexive self, we can feasibly identify the exercise of *agency* in the construction (or reconstruction) of the public identity of the female citizen, rather than the construction (or reconstruction) of her 'soul', so to speak. In the written word of the Soviet subject we may only be able to identify glimpses of the subjective self – but, for the purpose of this thesis, this is more than sufficient.

Indeed, one of the most compelling discoveries made in the Russian archives since the end of the Soviet Union has been the extraordinary cache of letters authored by Soviet citizens to political leaders and officials, newspapers and other such state organs. Nadezhda Mandelstam, in her memoir, *Hope Against Hope*, commented with extraordinary foresight on the richness of the mounting body of letters received by Soviet authorities:

'[T]hese mountains of letters will be a veritable treasure trove for historians: the life of our times is recorded in them more faithfully than any other writing, for they speak of all the hurts, humiliations, blows, pitfalls and traps of our existence[...]'<sup>78</sup>

Though Mandelstam characterised this type of letter – to authorities, often in pursuit of state intervention – as 'a plea for a miracle', this genre of letter writing ostensibly served a variety of functions, both for their authors and for the state that solicited them.<sup>79</sup> The Bolshevik Party, via its press organs, solicited letters from its citizens as

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*Australian Journal of Politics and History* 50:3 (2004), pp. 357-371; 'Ascribing Class: The Construction of Social Identity in Soviet Russia,' *The Journal of Modern History* 65:4 (1993), pp. 745-770.

<sup>77</sup> Naiman, 'On Soviet Subjects and the Scholars who make them', p. 308.

<sup>78</sup> N. Mandelstam, *Hope against Hope: A Memoir*, trans. M. Hayward (London, 1999), p. 93.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93.

worker and peasant correspondents, set the agenda to be discussed, chose those letters that would be published, and used this correspondence with the masses to tailor its propaganda, to gauge public opinion, further political education, and to monitor the state apparatus.<sup>80</sup> As Fitzpatrick has shown, letters written to the state fell into a number of 'genres': confessional letters expressing one's thoughts and convictions, victim letters containing a desperate plea for help, denunciations and complaints about neighbours or misbehaving local officials, 'opinions, suggestions and advice' on a wide range of matters both political and apolitical, fiercely loyal to vehemently critical. The 'balance' of individual agency and its co-option for the benefit of the state's authority contained within correspondence with authorities depended upon the ultimate aims of the exchange.

Despite the size of the source base, and its richness, letters from Soviet citizens to newspapers and to figures of authority have frequently been seen as a problematic source. Reflecting further on the vastness and complexity of citizen letters to authorities, Mandelstam warned that:

'But to go through [the letters] and sift out the tiny grains of real fact will be a Herculean labour. The trouble is, that even in these letters we observed the special style of Soviet polite parlance, speaking of our misfortunes in the language of newspaper editorials.'<sup>81</sup>

Indeed, reflecting these complexities, the literature on the value of public and private correspondences has been influenced heavily by the discussions of the Stalinist self, outlined earlier in this chapter, to explore how social identity was formed in Soviet societies, and what role state coercion played in identity formation. However, over the last two decades, a number of studies have attempted to move beyond the standard

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<sup>80</sup> M. Lenoë, 'Letter-Writing and the State: Reader Correspondence with Newspapers as a Source for Early Soviet History', *Cahiers Du Monde Russe*, 40:1, (1999), pp. 139-169.

<sup>81</sup> Mandelstam, *Hope Against Hope*, p. 93.

debate upon the utility of letters, between proponents of the 'totalitarian' model of complete social atomisation, and uncompromisingly revisionist arguments, to reach a new consensus about social identity and individual agency among women under Stalin. The first approach is to trace how Party officials and state organs used correspondence with Soviet citizens to shape their public identity, and the potential of said citizens to operate within this public identity to express their range of opinions.<sup>82</sup> In particular, attention has been paid to the role of peasant and worker correspondents, and the processing of denunciations by the peasant newspaper *Krest'ianka gazeta*, as well as to letters to newspapers as a source of information on the everyday practices of state control in the USSR.<sup>83</sup> Matthew Lenoe, in his study of reader correspondence with newspapers, characterises letters to state newspapers primarily as a constructed practice, through which the Soviet state and its agents sought – and succeeded – to shape public identity. The value of reader correspondence as a 'window on the everyday functioning of society, [and] the instruments of power' is evident insofar as the agenda for correspondence, its publication, encouragement, and to a considerable extent the language used was determined by party leaders and officials.<sup>84</sup> Lenoe sees letters as a problematic source for the study of popular opinion, maintaining that even those with subversive intent ended up propagating official ideology, by speaking the 'official' language.<sup>85</sup> This 'official' language and its role in Soviet society has been described by the aforementioned Stephen Kotkin's influential work on 'Speaking Bolshevik', to refer to the phenomenon identified in Soviet society whereby citizens learned to identify

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<sup>82</sup> Fürst, 'Prisoners of the Soviet Self?', p. 354.

<sup>83</sup> Lenoe, 'Letter-Writing and the State', pp. 140; 167.

<sup>84</sup> Lenoe, 'Letter-Writing and the State', p. 140.

<sup>85</sup> Lenoe, 'Letter-Writing and the State', p. 168.

themselves, and to speak publicly in politically acceptable language – in terms of class, labour, lauded social categories, and official class ‘enemies’.<sup>86</sup>

Kotkin’s work has been of particular significance for historians seeking to understand the ways in which Soviet citizens communicated with the state. He argues that the practice of speaking Bolshevik inculcated a new social identity, through which the state largely appropriated the basis for social solidarity, and through which citizens learnt the terms and techniques of engagement with the socialist state. Though ‘atomisation’, if not as total as some commentators have claimed, was significant, citizens were able to ‘work the system to their minimum disadvantage’ by gaining ‘literacy’ in the Bolshevik language.<sup>87</sup> Kotkin asserts that ‘this subtle mechanism of power, within the circumstances of the revolutionary crusade, accounted for the strength of Stalinism’.<sup>88</sup> In this sense, Kotkin’s work provides a valuable lens for the study of the relationship between Soviet women and official gender ideology in the early Soviet Union, accounting for the way in which engagement with the language of the regime ostensibly lent legitimacy to the evolution of Soviet policy.<sup>89</sup> Moreover, as Eric Naiman has suggested of the Soviet subject, ‘[she] was speaking herself into an already established master text, and as she empowered herself she was also incrementally empowering that text’.<sup>90</sup> It is not the concern of this study, however, to dismiss the agency of women due to its overall contribution to Soviet power, nor to suggest that their engagement with authorities formed any defined process of dissent. Rather, the study intends to illuminate the role of women as historical actors through this process of engagement with the Soviet state. I argue that they confidently negotiated their positions within the

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<sup>86</sup> S. Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilisation*, (London, 1997).

<sup>87</sup> Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain*, pp. 236-7.

<sup>88</sup> Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain*, p. 237.

<sup>89</sup> Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain*, p. 237.

<sup>90</sup> Naiman, ‘On Soviet Subjects and the Scholars who make them’, p. 311.

authoritarian state through the process of identity construction and reconstruction in their letters.

This thesis thus acknowledges the role that 'the language of the state' might have played in shaping opinions of all shades, but argues that a study of this type of public letter writing invites a fuller examination of what the practice meant for individual citizens. Newspapers and officials received letters from women that, though not explicitly anti-Soviet enough to raise the attention of the censors, were far from homogenous. A relatively 'top-down' interpretation is clearly essential to understanding the role of public letters in establishing a public identity and means of communication, but as an approach it is insufficiently reflexive and fails to allow for proper examination of public responses to and engagement with particular policies. Nor does viewing letter-writing as a solely state-led initiative allow for consideration of mutual perceptions of the 'threat levels' of different groups or interests in relation to key contemporary political concerns.

In this thesis, it is argued that the kind of atomisation assumed even by Kotkin did not permeate so deeply. Citizens, by virtue of the intangibility of their 'actual' attitudes and feelings, were 'free' to some extent to engage dynamically with the practice of letter writing. It is therefore necessary to combine these ideas about the construction of discursive boundaries with a more flexible approach. Other historians have begun this work on letter writing as a social practice, of course. In particular, studies have tended to analyse the content of letters, and the way that 'official' language is used, to gauge the popularity of certain policies, and their effects. Of particular note have been studies of family policy, primarily alimony law and the prohibition of abortion, such as those by Lauren Kaminsky, Sheila Fitzpatrick and Wendy Goldman, which have shown the ways

in which women responded either positively or negatively to different decrees and changing ideologies, using public letters as a key source base.<sup>91</sup> Such studies have examined both the background to the gender ideology disseminated, and the reception and impact of specific policies amongst women. Goldman's examination of the 1936 prohibition of abortion provides a key example of the use of letters in this way. Comparing letters to newspapers and officials with the accounts of demographers and doctors, Goldman traces the differences between official and popular reproductive discourse, and suggests a clear understanding amongst ordinary women of the relationship between reproductive control and liberation.<sup>92</sup>

Such distinctive understandings of Soviet ideas among citizens are apparent elsewhere, in studies such as Benjamin Nathans' work on rights, for example. Nathans has persuasively shown how letters in response to the 1936 Constitution used the language of rights, and an appreciation of the subtleties of the language of the Constitution to argue for their own visions of fairness, rather than the 'language of common citizenship'.<sup>93</sup> This language of rights in fact echoed ideas also found in the public discussions of the 1936 family decree, particularly surrounding the prohibition of abortion, in which women expressed not only their opposition to the decree, but the extent to which they had appropriated abortion as a right.<sup>94</sup> In their opposition, women used the official language to discuss the restrictions the decree would place on their ability to 'contribute to the new society', speaking of their desire to study and work, and develop themselves as human beings'.<sup>95</sup> That women would stress their rights as human

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<sup>91</sup> Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*; L. Kaminsky, 'Utopian Visions of Family Life in the Stalin-Era Soviet Union', *Central European History*, 44, (2011), pp. 63-91; W.Z. Goldman, *Women, the State and Revolution*.

<sup>92</sup> Goldman, 'Women, Abortion and the State, 1917-1936', p. 244.

<sup>93</sup> B. Nathans, 'Soviet Rights-Talk in the Post-Stalin Era', in S. Hoffman, (ed), *Human Rights in the Twentieth Century*, (Cambridge, 2011), p. 172.

<sup>94</sup> Goldman, 'Woman, Abortion and the State, 1917-36', p. 265.

<sup>95</sup> Goldman, 'Woman, Abortion and the State, 1917-36', p. 265.



beings also reflects some of the language evoked by Fitzpatrick's discussion of confessional letters. One letter included in her study, from a woman named Sedova, simply pleads for sympathy: 'I'm not asking [...] for Sedov to live with me, but I am a human being and I don't want to be thrown overboard and I don't want people to make fun of me'.<sup>96</sup> Tendencies such as these suggest the conscious mastery, and unconscious nuance women's experiences lent Bolshevik language in the 1920s and 1930s.

Thus, a second major approach to letters to the state, is to consider the content of letters not as a reflection of state interests alone, but as a source that allows us to access the intentions of the author, especially if we pay attention to the language used, and examine how the authors reproduce Bolshevik language in their self-presentation. As Fitzpatrick states, the activity of public letter writing 'must be taken very seriously by anyone seeking insight into the private lives of Soviet citizens, their articulation of identity as individuals, and their sense of themselves as social beings'<sup>97</sup> Crucially, Miriam Dobson's work on letters as a source reconciles the alternative approaches in the historiography, asserting that though the fact that a worker in the 1930s was able to write to the state in Bolshevik language does indicate the significance of these mechanisms in shaping the public identities of Soviet citizens, the letters themselves provide a sense of their authors' particular understanding of the 'unspoken but widely recognised limits' of public discourse, repeating standard phrases from the press and making use of 'authoritative vocabularies' to express meanings different from those intended.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> PANO, f. 3, op. 11, d. 41, ll. 172-173, cited in Fitzpatrick, 'Supplicants and Citizens', p. 83.

<sup>97</sup> Fitzpatrick, 'Supplicants and Citizens', p. 80.

<sup>98</sup> M. Dobson, 'Letters', in M. Dobson, B. Ziemann, (eds), *Reading Primary Sources: the Interpretation of texts from nineteenth and twentieth century history*, (London, 2008), pp. 57-73; M. Steinberg, *Voices of Revolution, 1917*, (New York, 2001), p. 6.

In some studies, the extent of citizens' desire and ability to subvert official language and concepts is particularly pronounced. Sarah Davies has sought to demonstrate the ways in which Soviet citizens *intentionally* perceived and deviated from these boundaries through the examination of NKVD reports, arguing that 'people moved freely between the two worlds of official culture, and... the shadow culture'.<sup>99</sup> Although Soviet citizens spoke Bolshevik, 'on occasions', according to Davies, they were able to invest the language with meanings diverging from those intended by the state. For example, officially 'hallowed' language, such as *narod*, (or 'people/nation'), would be used divisively by dissenting citizens to denote the lower classes, distinct from the state, rather than the whole people.<sup>100</sup> Moreover, as has been discussed above, citizens also made their complaints or expressed their desires by invoking 'rights' – whether those explicitly outlined in the Constitution, or others, such as the reproductive rights which, according to Goldman had been appropriated by women.<sup>101</sup> The chronological context of this study, the late 1920s and 1930s, lends the acquisition of Bolshevik language, and the genre of the public letter a greater significance. The period was unique in that it saw the embrace and utilisation of ideology by state actors. The infusion of language with ideology resulted in its transformation into something to be acquired, if at only by those citizens raised prior to the Revolution, as Eric Naiman has attested:

Ideology was transformed from a native to an acquired tongue, a language of which there were no native speakers, since its grammarians were the "vanguard" of future subjects, as yet unborn, who, untainted by the capitalist past, would eventually speak this language virtually from birth.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> S. Davies, *Popular Opinion in Stalin's Russia: Terror, Propaganda and Dissent, 1934-1941*, (Cambridge, 1997), p. 186.

<sup>100</sup> Davies, *Popular Opinion in Stalin's Russia*, p. 7.

<sup>101</sup> Goldman, 'Woman, Abortion and the State, 1917-36', p. 265.

<sup>102</sup> Naiman, 'On Soviet Subjects and the Scholars who make them', p. 315.

The novelty of Bolshevik language, therefore, becomes a signal not only of engagement with the new Soviet state, but of the author's chronological relationship to it; an indicator of identity. Not only would the use of Bolshevik language provide a sense of the author's understanding of the limits of public discourse, but their place in the value system associated with 'generation' following the Revolution. The ideological fluency with which letter-writers reproduce Bolshevik language, the epithets they use, and their chronological positioning therefore provide another sense of their self-perception, and another layer of interpretation.

Nonetheless, the wholesale embrace of public letters as a source for such persuasive interpretation also presents its own challenges. Indeed, the writing of history is rooted in the interpretation of sources, be it consciously or unconsciously. Moreover, as Naiman suggests in his defence of the approach, 'the trick is to make sure that license is put to use consciously, that it be made to work with sufficient energy and against a sufficiently complex object so as to result in that object's persuasive deformation for the scholar's readers.'<sup>103</sup> It is nevertheless imperative to acknowledge the limitations of that interpretive license. Perhaps most significant are the risks associated with actively seeking phenomena such as 'dissent', as Davies does. Additionally, one should not understate the role of 'official discourse' in providing citizens with the necessary language to relate their lives to authorities. Even while addressing the limitations of Kotkin's interpretation of the role of Bolshevik language, there are nonetheless significant conclusions raised which should be borne in mind.

Upon the above basis established for the study of public letters, it is necessary to properly clarify the nature of the 'public' correspondence, and the veracity of its opinion,

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<sup>103</sup> Naiman, 'On Soviet Subjects and the Scholars who make them', p. 312.

to be used. Significantly, Fitzpatrick notes that many 'public letters' in the 1930s in particular, were written by single authors, rather than groups of people, and as such, asserts that 'public letter writing was a form of individual, private communication with the authorities on topics both private and public', and that many letters, particularly those addressed to officials, dealt with personal matters. As such, her argument follows that in the 1930s, these letters articulated Soviet citizens' identities and perceived roles in society, and that citizens' letters 'constituted one of the few modes of public opinion that continued to function'.<sup>104</sup> The frequency of letters pertaining to personal questions, both to newspapers and party officials cited in studies by Fitzpatrick, Goldman, Evans and Davies to name but a few, lends weight to this argument. However, the role played by state institutions in soliciting correspondence from the public, and providing them with the necessary language to relate to the state, as identified above, should not be understated.

As previously discussed, Kotkin, along with Halpin and Hellbeck, note the possibility of 'half-belief' among the population. However, to suggest that this was required of people as an unconscious tactic in the early Soviet regime is perhaps to place too high a premium on the role of total immersion in Bolshevik propaganda, at the expense of a genuine ambiguity in the attitudes of many Soviet citizens to the regime.<sup>105</sup> In a discussion of the texts of lower-class Russians after the Revolution, Steinberg argues that 'ambiguity and ambivalence are no less part of the ways people define their identities than are sharp convictions and strong faith', by demonstrating the coexistence of the language of human dignity and rights with a disdain for those classed as

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<sup>104</sup> Fitzpatrick, 'Supplicants and Citizens', p. 80.

<sup>105</sup> Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain*, p. 228; Hellbeck, 'Speaking Out'; Halpin, 'From Darkness to Light'.

'others'.<sup>106</sup> Moreover, the complexity of Soviet identities should not be viewed as entirely disconnected from the Soviet Union's pre-Revolutionary history, in a European context. Svetlana Boym's work on everyday life reminds us that the concept of private life is 'hardly featured in any pre-Revolutionary dictionary', and that, as across Europe, personal identity has, historically been intertwined with a social or religious role.<sup>107</sup> Therefore that the ideal Soviet citizen was the opposite of the pre-Revolutionary 'Russian' personality in the sense of religiosity appears to be a false dichotomy: the two were remarkably similar constructs in the primacy of an anti-individualist, social role, evidence of continuity connecting the social role of subjects and citizens before and after the Revolution.<sup>108</sup> This is to some extent supported by the view apparently held by many Soviet women, of the family as an institution that should be upheld by the state, evidenced by the frequency of appeals to the state for intervention in family matters.<sup>109</sup> At this juncture, the increasing frequency with which women appealed to the state upon personal grounds prior to the Revolution acquires a greater significance.<sup>110</sup> Letters from (female) citizens to the organs of state, however distinctively written, do not therefore constitute a uniquely 'Soviet' means of communication, less still a novel method of straightforwardly whittling Soviet persons into appropriate shape. This practice, had a 'heritage', so to speak, in its evolution through petitions and appeals from subjects to authorities.<sup>111</sup> Upon this basis, we might posit that women were confident in the practice of negotiation with authorities, enabling them to pick up the practice of 'Speaking Bolshevik' with relative ease.

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<sup>106</sup> M. Steinberg, *Voices of Revolution, 1917*, (New York, 2001), p. 34.

<sup>107</sup> S. Boym, *Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia*, (London, 1994), p. 73.

<sup>108</sup> Boym, *Common Places*, pp. 75-89.

<sup>109</sup> Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, p. 143.

<sup>110</sup> B.A. Engel, *Breaking the Ties that Bound: the Politics of Marital Strife in Late Imperial Russia*, (Ithaca, 2011).

<sup>111</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick provides a useful overview of the use of petitions in Russian and Soviet history in 'Petitions and Denunciations in Russian and Soviet History', *Russian History*, 24:1/2, (1997), pp. 1-9.

Ultimately then, though clearly the solicitation of correspondence by Soviet officials did act as means of shaping public identity, and the use of Bolshevik language is a key consideration in this public correspondence, the concept of a public facet of personal identity as a purely Soviet or 'official' construct should not be exaggerated. Essentially, it must be concluded that the terms of expression used in public correspondence would be quite different to that used in personal relationships, despite whatever personal content may be expressed. If the premise that one individual might express dissent, agreement, and apathy almost concurrently is accepted, then it follows that the communication of Bolshevik language could be a two-way process, as Dobson asserts. Its variation from the language of the everyday, provides a 'sense of these letter writers' understanding of the discursive boundaries of the system in which they operated... [and] by reading between the lines, get a sense of how their own ideas and beliefs departed from the official script'.<sup>112</sup> Therefore, for the study of women's public correspondence, 'public letters' would sensibly be characterised as communication with authorities, about private or public matters, couched in 'Bolshevik' language but rarely congruent with it.

Having considered the role of 'public' letters as a source, in relation to the construction of the Soviet 'self' in the Stalin era, it is possible to draw a number of conclusions, and raise further questions. Firstly, the use of 'official' language in letter-writing is of key importance. Though Kotkin's assertions that the 'inescapable political lens of Bolshevism' became the one vehicle for the articulation of citizens' various understandings of themselves remains convincing in many ways, his account overemphasises the role of Bolshevism as a language to be learned.<sup>113</sup> Instead, it seems

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<sup>112</sup> Dobson, 'Letters', p. 65.

<sup>113</sup> Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain*, p. 222.

reasonable to accept that inherent to the phenomenon of 'Speaking Bolshevik' was both an ambiguity and flexibility in its public acceptance.<sup>114</sup> In this sense, rather than learning to 'Speak Bolshevik' in order simply to articulate their senses of self, Soviet citizens instead navigated the new public identities, learning both how to acceptably articulate their understandings of themselves, and to use this language to express a range of opinions with relative safety.<sup>115</sup> It is clear from the existing literature that citizens' letters to state organs were a valuable tool for individuals to reflect on their role in Soviet society, in Dobson's words by 'adopting the language of the regime', and by subscribing to particular 'acceptable' social identities, such as peasant, or mother.<sup>116</sup> This is broadly supported by Fitzpatrick's research which, by tracing the various genres of public letter-writing, has outlined ways in which Soviet citizens related to the state, and how their use of 'official' language might reflect certain aspects of convergence between what can be termed 'public' and 'private' identities.<sup>117</sup> Moreover, the *kinds* of issues raised by women, and the language they are couched in, indicate that women's letters to officials and to newspapers are a valuable tool for analysing how the notion of the 'Soviet woman' was understood within wider society.

## **Archival Materials and Key Considerations**

The thesis aims to reconcile the different approaches taken to letter-writings in the Soviet Union, asking how effective the authorities' attempts were in shaping the new Soviet woman and her political and social outlook, and probing in depth both the reception of this language and the independent and sometimes challenging ways

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<sup>114</sup> Davies, *Popular Opinion in Stalin's Russia*, p. 6.

<sup>115</sup> Davies, *Popular Opinion in Stalin's Russia*, p. 7.

<sup>116</sup> Dobson, 'Letters', p. 65.

<sup>117</sup> Fitzpatrick, *Tear off the Masks!*, pp. 155-182.

women came to conceive of their own identity even as they communicated with the authorities. These letters employed terms quite distinct in their ideological character to the language presumably used in personal relationships, even on occasions when the content is intensely personal. However, letters undoubtedly give us a clear sense of the way their authors understand the boundaries created by the official discourse with which they were faced. By explicitly recognising the fluency with the practice of public correspondence amongst women – their self-conscious navigation of their contemporary discourse – the thesis intends not only to reconcile the strands of methodological historiography on the Soviet self in public correspondence, but to suggest a thread of continuity between the seemingly rather distinct early Soviet period with its preceding and subsequent histories. This approach is intended to allow us to trace the ways women ‘stabilised’ (to some degree) Soviet gender policy, by adopting and, by bringing their own diverse lives to its ideology, reproducing, and yet also altering it.

Viewing letters from Soviet women to officials and editorial boards in such a way will also account for the sheer variety amongst women’s voices by foregrounding women’s participation in the evolution of early Soviet discourse, and its translation into concrete policy. Building upon the literature by Dobson, Kaminsky, Fitzpatrick et al, which provides strong evidence of real pluralism amidst very real authoritarian restrictions, the thesis seeks to ‘frame’ the agency Soviet women demonstrate in their public letters in terms of a ‘snapshot’ of a longer history. To avoid falling into traps that the study seeks to redress – of constructing a rigidly singular narrative – the source base consulted for the study is large, constituted of around 850 individual letters, from the Russian State Archive (*GARF*), the Russian State Archive of Social and Political History



(*RGASPI*), and the Russian State Archive of the Economy (*RGAE*), the latter holding, quite unexpectedly, thousands of letters from citizens to the newspaper *Krest'ianskaia gazeta*. *RGASPI* and *GARF* respectively hold letters from citizens to officials such as: Nadezhda Konstantinovna Krupskaja (Deputy Minister for Education from 1929 until 1939), Andrei Ianuarievich Vyshinskii (Procurator General of the RSFSR, subsequently of the Soviet Union from 1931 until 1939), Viacheslav Mikhailovich Molotov (Chairman of the Council of People's Commissars from 1930 until 1941, equivalent to head of the Soviet government), Olga Davydovna Kameneva (a Soviet politician who held a handful of roles between 1918 and 1928), Mikhail Ivanovich Kalinin (Chairman of the Central Executive Committee of the RSFSR until 1938, and subsequently Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet until 1946).<sup>118</sup> Correspondence with the majority of these figures is included in the study.<sup>119</sup> Letters to newspapers such as *Krest'ianskaia gazeta*, *Krest'ianka*, and *Pravda*, as well as trade publications such as *Krasnyi bibliotekar'*, *Golos sakharnika* have also been consulted. Letters were selected from the period of 1924 until 1941, for both practical and historical reasons. A larger quantity of letters is available for the years after 1923, while 1924 also marks Lenin's death. The study ends with the Soviet Union's entry into the Great Patriotic War in 1941.

Of letters to Molotov, Vyshinskii, and Kalinin, held in files titled 'Letters received in the name of comrade [e.g.] Molotov for the year 1935', those from women accounted for

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<sup>118</sup> Olga Davidovna Kameneva was a member of the board of directors of the Women's Section of the Central Committee between 1918 and 1920, involved in Famine and Foreign Relief Efforts between 1921 and 1925, and the founder and *predsedatel'* (chairman) of The All-Union Society for Cultural Ties Abroad between 1925 and approximately 1930, according (respectively) to E. Wood, *The Baba and the Comrade: Gender and Politics in Revolutionary Russia*, (Indiana, 1997), p. 81, E. Lygo, 'Promoting Soviet Culture in Britain: the History of the Society for Cultural Relations between the Peoples of the British Commonwealth and the USSR, 1924–1945', *The Modern Language Review*, 108:2, (April, 2013), p. 573, and M.D. Fox, 'From Illusory 'Society' to Intellectual 'Public': VOKS, International Travel, and Party: Intelligentsia Relations in the Interwar Period', *Contemporary European History*, 11:1, (February, 2002), p. 10.

<sup>119</sup> The exception is the small cache of letters to Kameneva. As Leon Trotsky's sister, letters written to her would require special attention and so have not been included in this study; not to mention that the letters found in this file were relatively few in number.

between 0.54% and 7% of all letters. Spikes in letters from women occurred in 1935, 1936 and 1937 – the years of the 1936 Constitution and its draft, as well as the escalation of the Great Terror. Correspondingly, these letters tended to be appeals, or comments upon the new Constitution or Decree. Indicating their volume, letters to Krupskaja from women had been archived according to their authorship by women, as reflected by the titles of the files, such as ‘Letters from women to N.K. Krupskaja about their lives, study, and work’, ‘Letters from women to N.K. Krupskaja concerning requests for material help’, and one file titled ‘Letters from women to N.K. Krupskaja on the position of women after the Revolution’. Letters to Krest’ianka were primarily from women, though a very small minority (less than a handful) appeared from men. Letters from women to *Krest’ianskaia gazeta* reflect the proportions noted in the files of correspondence with male officials, whereas women were more highly represented in the files of letters to *Krasniy bibliotekar’*, a fact which will be addressed explicitly in the thesis in chapter three, on rights and obligations.

Although the statistical distribution of these letters is interesting, the focus of the thesis is not a quantitative study of the letters available in the archives, which would have required focus on one ‘recipient’, be they an individual or newspaper editorship. Instead, the approach is similar to Sheila Fitzpatrick’s in ‘Supplicants and Citizens’, that is, an ‘approach less of a census taker than that of a botanist exploring the variety of plant life in an unfamiliar terrain.’<sup>120</sup> This approach allowed me to survey a broader range of letters – to officials, specific trade newspapers, as well as newspapers with wider circulation. In addition, it enabled me to gauge the frequency of different subjects and priorities in letters delivered to a range of recipients.

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<sup>120</sup> S. Fitzpatrick, ‘Supplicants and Citizens’, p. 81.

The representativeness of these sources also requires consideration. As established already, the analysis of these sources is not 'quantitative' but rather qualitative. The majority of letters from women (bar a few letters written in almost illegible handwriting) were reviewed. Certain characteristics and subject matters emerged as 'typical' subject matters, recurring frequently across the body of letters reviewed, and letters which were particularly clear examples were transcribed. These subject matters ultimately formed the argument, structure and organisation of the thesis overall, and once this was established, the body of transcribed letters was revisited to interrogate this hypothesis. The majority of letters were microfilm copies of originals, or originals, while some typewritten copies were included. Where letters were sent to magazine or newspaper editorships, some saw signs of editing with red pencil, though the majority were marked with the notation *arkhiv*. The unedited texts (i.e. the content beneath the red pencil) have been used for this thesis. In addition, state-solicited responses to legislation, more often collected and type-written stored separately to the editorial stocks of publications, have been reviewed. Examples of Soviet discourse itself are drawn from the rigorous research amongst the historiography on women in the early Soviet period.

As with any history of texts produced by 'ordinary' citizens in the Soviet Union limitations of language and literacy require acknowledgement. By definition, the women about whom this study is written were compelled, for whatever reason (although as Sarah Davies has pointed out, these aims were often utilitarian), to write to authorities about their lives.<sup>121</sup> As will be addressed later in the study, literacy was by no means universal in the early years of the Soviet Union, nor was the desire to engage with

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<sup>121</sup> S. Davies, 'The "Cult" of the Vozhd': Representations in Letters, 1934-1941', *Russian History*, 24: 1-2, (1997), p. 132.

authorities. Efforts have been made to include where possible the voices of women whose letters were written by a proxy, and the liquidation of illiteracy among different 'groups' of women is explicitly addressed in the body of the study. Though the women whose voices are consulted in this study possess a variety of nationalities, as befitting a federative body as vast as the Soviet Union, these letters are, for quite practical reasons, written solely in Russian. A related, but distinct, process of colonial transformation took place concurrently in the cultural 'peripheries' of the Soviet Union.<sup>122</sup> Soviet leaders had insisted that their state could not be an empire, not least since it viewed Russian peasants as backwards, patriarchal figures, and many of the measures they introduced across Central Asia were not in and of themselves colonial measures. However, as Douglas Northrop has shown, the degree to which perceptions of mutual difference between Soviet policymakers and Central Asian people shaped the particularities of Bolshevik policy in the Central Asian Republics denotes that the Soviet Union was fundamentally colonial in its approach.<sup>123</sup> Bolsheviks saw themselves as a 'transmission belt' for European cultural 'norms' such as gender equality, and social reforms, and hoped that Central Asian communities would acquire 'a lexicon of politics and cultural identity that Bolshevik rank-and-file workers could recognise.'<sup>124</sup> Though this resulted in various modes of colonial power relations across the Soviet Union, what emerged alongside this was a strong rhetoric of liberation, particularly in terms of gender. Though the policies associated with 'Bolshevik liberation' were often met with resistance or non-engagement, this rhetoric of liberation could and was employed by

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<sup>122</sup> Though non-Russian identities were frequently considered distinct, or as a colonial 'peripheral' by Soviet policymakers, as the introduction has suggested, this thesis seeks to challenge the assumption that these identities were ever really 'peripheral' to that of the New Soviet Woman. Moreover, as Northrop argues, a similar process of 'mutual reshaping' as has been identified by this thesis resulted from the ongoing encounters between Soviet authorities and, in his case study, Uzbek society: D. Northrop, *Veiled Empire: Gender and Power in Stalinist Central Asia*, (London, 2004).

<sup>123</sup> Northrop, *Veiled Empire*, pp. 21-22.

<sup>124</sup> Northrop, *Veiled Empire*, p. 23.

women from non-Russian republics in a variety of contexts. The thesis proposes that, amongst those women who wrote to authorities in Russian, or signed their names against such missives, women often found great 'utility' in their identities as 'non-Russian' Soviet women, though the opportunities they afforded may not have been as extensive as those open to Russian Soviet women.<sup>125</sup>

The sources examined also present an extraordinarily varied range of preoccupations amongst women writing to authorities. The major strands of analysis have therefore been self-selecting, based upon the underlying commonalities possessed by the diverse source material. In order to do justice to the material, these 'self-selected' themes will form the overall framework for the study, whilst still seeking to account for the diversity of backgrounds, sexualities and family lives integral to the community of writers. As a point of principle, all writers who self-present as female are included in the study, which will not attempt to formulate politicised notions of the 'veracity' of gender presentation. A full exploration of gender diversity in the Soviet Union would necessitate a separate study in order to do justice to these citizens.

Executing the methodology in this way will enrich debates about the existence of society in the Soviet Union beyond the rigidly dichotomous interpretations to which it is all too easy to defer. Ultimately, in doing so, the thesis hopes to contribute to the growing body of work intended to understand the pluralism of the women of the Soviet Union – beyond assumptions about traditional social categories of peasants, older women, religious women, and segmentation solely along national or ethnic lines – and to begin to write coherent histories drawn from multiple, and representative, narratives. In this

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<sup>125</sup> M. Kamp, *The New Woman in Uzbekistan: Islam, Modernity, and Unveiling under Communism*, (London, 2006), p.99, and 'Pilgrimage and Performance: Uzbek Women and the Imagining of Uzbekistan in the 1920s', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 34:2, (2002), p. 264.

way, the thesis seeks to emphasise the agency, intelligence and self-possession of women in the Soviet Union, suggesting that women actively sought to accommodate their 'actually existing' lives and circumstances within the ideological framework of the Soviet Union.

## **The Articulation of the 'Soviet Self' by New Soviet Women: Emerging Themes**

The first chapter of the thesis to follow will deal with the ways that generation, or generational cohort affected the way in which emancipation is understood by women. One issue that has been little addressed in the historiography thus far, despite having formed a salient 'counterpart' to the New Soviet Woman, and will serve as a 'case study' of sorts will be that of old age and the succession of 'generations' which followed the Revolution. In other words, it will examine how far the coincidence of the Revolution (and its subsequent 'efforts' at women's emancipation) with certain stages in the normative life cycle affected conceptions of what it meant to be an emancipated communist woman. Though a variety of studies, such as that by Anne Gorsuch, have dealt with the experience of Soviet gender amongst Soviet youth their diverse lives and identities, this research will address important questions about how women of different generational cohorts understood the concept of the new and emancipated Soviet woman, and in particular, the way their cohort identity differentiated their experiences from those of older or younger women.<sup>126</sup> Rooting the discussion of generation in cohort identity, and old age, in this way will define the scope of this portion of the study, and provide a point of discussion for a fuller exploration of the responses of women

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<sup>126</sup> A. E. Gorsuch, "A Woman Is Not a Man": The Culture of Gender and Generation in Soviet Russia, 1921-1928', *Slavic Review*, 55:3, (Autumn, 1996), pp. 636-660.

from older generations and different circumstances. These conclusions will also aid understanding of how generational cohort affected identity formation in this period, and will lend itself well to further discussions of other influences on women's view of emancipation in this period: family bonds, marriage, motherhood and other such personal circumstances.

In the context of the conclusions made in the first chapter on generations, the second chapter will deal with women's emotions, addressing the question of how women dealt with emotions – particularly negative emotions, which were considered unnecessary or illogical in the new Soviet society – in the context of Soviet womanhood and emancipation. Primarily, the chapter will seek to understand what women's emotional responses to different aspects of their lives can tell us about how 'emancipated' Soviet women saw themselves in the Soviet 1920s and 1930s. This forms part of a larger discussion of negative emotions, and the extent to which they were considered 'un-Soviet' within a socialist society that did not acknowledge mental illness, suicide or negative emotion as possibilities.

The third chapter addresses the question of how far women appropriated different aspects of 'emancipation' as rights. In particular, I seek to demonstrate which aspects of Soviet gender policy were received in this way, and by whom, building upon the conclusions drawn about generation in the previous chapter. This chapter complements the work already undertaken on the topic of 'rights-speak' as a phenomenon in the Soviet Union, by building an understanding of women's perceptions of 'rights', and the distinctions drawn – such as 'human', 'citizen' and 'worker/toiler'. In addition, I aim to address invocations of humanity in women's self-expression and emotional writing, identifying the origins of this feature – whether Soviet or pre-Revolutionary – and

examining how women related their humanity to the project of the new Soviet woman. Finally, the chapter will examine the question of women's responses to behaviour or events that they felt infringed upon their rights, or denied them the returns for obligations fulfilled. The understandings displayed by women of their rights against this behaviour will provide an example of the ways in which understandings of citizenship and rights affected emotional responses to such exchanges and affected personal relationships. This portion of the chapter will trace the ways in which women identify the dissonance between Soviet gender policy and 'emancipation', and male attitudes and behaviour, and how women sought to assert their rights against abusive or disrespectful behaviour. Ending the chapter with this study will set a context for the discussion in the final chapter of how these influences on Soviet life and discourse affected personal relationships.

The issue of personal relationships builds on the discussions of women's sense of 'rights' particularly against disrespect and discrimination, and their concepts of their emotional lives. The focus of this chapter is the flexibility of family and marital units, and the ease with which women accepted this fluidity. Studies have clearly and repeatedly indicated that many, particularly married, women's responses to certain aspects of family legislation were often governed by family relationships and marital partnerships. Responses to increasingly punitive alimony laws demonstrate this perhaps most visibly. That said, other studies, such as Fitzpatrick's account of the sexual mores of students, reflect a more contradictory attitude to 'traditional' heterosexual relationships, indicating the sheer variety of experiences, attitudes, and responses amongst Soviet women.<sup>127</sup> This raises the question of how women's relationships and social bonds

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<sup>127</sup> S. Fitzpatrick, 'Sex and Revolution: An Examination of Literary and Statistical Data on the Mores of Soviet Students in the 1920s', *The Journal of Modern History*, 50:2, (June, 1978), p. 252-278.



might have been affected by Soviet policy and ideology in the 1920s and 1930s, and if they were differently affected according to generation.

In the four chapters outlined above, the thesis will argue that women of all ages and backgrounds in the Soviet Union actively engaged with authorities, in letters to officials, policymakers and newspapers, to carve an acceptable ideological 'place' for their individual lives, share their concerns, and at times, express dissent. Women engaged in this process of social identity construction, or reconstruction, through the process of 'Speaking Bolshevik'. Although the specifics of their public identities were, to some extent, prescribed by the scope of discourse that dominated at any given time, women exercised a considerable amount of agency in the selection and crafting of the identities they presented, and the elements of their lives they chose to share. In doing so, they cemented their roles as historical actors in the history of the Soviet Union.

# Chapter One

## 'Grandma, they call me': Generational Cohorts, Cooperation, and Transformation in the New Soviet State

Soviet discourse was saturated with references to 'generation', and in particular to youth. As the element of the population who would grow up entirely under Soviet power, free from the effects of pre-Revolutionary influences, Anne Gorsuch has suggested that 'Soviet youth were considered one of the most vital targets in the struggle for social transformation and cultural construction.'<sup>1</sup> Early Soviet ideology constructed a system of generations which was, at least in principle, one of conflict between 'old' and 'young'. In practice, this proved impossible to maintain. Though older people – as did women – represented a link to the tsarist past, their experiences of the darkness of the 'old' society provided a valuable discursive counterpart to the bright and happy socialist childhoods of the present and future. Additionally, the marginalisation of the elderly could never be absolute: as health, social hygiene and medicine improved with the construction of socialism, Soviet citizens would live longer – with the ultimate goal of the 'abolition of death'.<sup>2</sup> Younger generations, on the other hand, were tasked with the responsibility of the active construction of socialism, and satisfactory participation in the new Soviet society. The expectations of their 'fluency' with Bolshevik practices were higher, and fewer exceptions were made for slips in their revolutionary performance. But what was *meant* by generation in the early Soviet context?

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<sup>1</sup> A. Gorsuch, 'Flappers and Foxtrotters: Soviet Youth in the "Roaring Twenties"', *The Carl Beck Papers in Russian and East European Studies*, 1102, (1994), pp. 2-3.

<sup>2</sup> S. Lovell, 'Soviet Socialism and the Construction of Old Age', *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas*, Bd. 51, H. 4, (2003), p. 567.

The 'problem' of generation has been studied both as a historical concept, and often as a sociological concept with explicit reference to 'youth' cohorts as a foundation stone. In relation to the Soviet and Russian examples, a number of fascinating studies have convincingly argued for an empirically definable 'first Soviet generation', evaluating age in relation to historical factors such as the Revolution and the civil war.<sup>3</sup> However, relatively little research exists thus far to explain generation in a way that addresses both old age and youth in an historical context. That generation implies relativity works both ways.<sup>4</sup> As Lovell notes, that older people as a 'cohort', particularly in the 1920s, were outnumbered by youths, and they were not well represented institutionally, but this does not mean that their relationship to 'youth' was necessarily fixed in the pattern of opposition that is so commonly assumed.<sup>5</sup> Instead, it would be more accurate to suggest that the relationship between generational cohorts was one characterised by cohesion, as much as conflict, not least due to the persistence of familial and community relationships throughout the period in question. Rex Wade, appraising the historiographical work on Russian generations, summarised the generational structure of Russia through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as one in which 'conflict was there, but so was co-operation, and the handing of values from one generation to another.'<sup>6</sup> I contend that women of older and younger generations were both ideologically and socially 'necessary' for the Soviet state to function: both faced particular sets of obstacles to their successful participation in Soviet life, and both

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, D. Koenker, 'Fathers Against Sons, Sons Against Fathers: The Problem of Generations in the Early Soviet Workplace', *Journal of Modern History*, 3:4, (2001), pp. 781-810; A.E. Gorsuch, *Youth in Revolutionary Russia: Enthusiasts, Bohemians, Delinquents*, (Michigan, 2000); A. Krylova, 'Identity, Agency and "The First Soviet Generation"'. S. Lovell (ed.), *Generations in Twentieth Century Europe*, (Basingstoke, 2003), pp. 101-121; M. Neumann, "Youth, It's Your Turn!": Generations and the Fate of the Russian Revolution (1917-1932)', *Journal of Social History*, 46:2, (2002), pp. 273-304.

<sup>4</sup> S. Lovell, 'Introduction', Lovell (ed.), *Generations in Twentieth Century Europe*, (Basingstoke, 2007), p. 4

<sup>5</sup> Lovell, 'Soviet Russia's Older Generations', p. 205.

<sup>6</sup> R. Wade, 'Introduction: Generations in Russian and Soviet History', *The Soviet and Post-Soviet Review*, 32:2-3, (2005), p., 135.

exercised agency as women in their navigation of the ideological contradictions inherent to their roles in public life. Ultimately, women of all ages were familiar with the discursive nuance appropriate to their generational cohort, and were able to assign their experiences with relevant social 'roles', highlighting their autonomy and securing their roles as meaningful historical actors.

## **Old Age and the New Soviet Woman**

Older people, those who grew up in the pre-Revolutionary society occupied only a marginal space in early Soviet discourse, appearing, when they appeared at all, as remnants of the tsarist past, in opposition to the untarnished Soviet youth. Formulations of the 'older' generation were peculiarly gendered in the early Soviet state. Eric Naiman and Hannah Proctor have examined the dialecticism of the position of women and their bodies in early Bolshevik discourse in relation to the communist future.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the work of the aforementioned anatomo-historical scientist, Anton Vital'evich Nemilov, in *the Biological Tragedy of Woman*, encapsulated the gendered anxieties about women in adulthood and beyond that formed much of Soviet discourse of the time:

A purely 'human' feature of the female sexual apparatus is the marked development of the organs of lust [organy sladostrastiia] [...] Even in communist society, when not only in word but in deed woman will have equal rights with man, her comrade, when there will be public cafeterias, and when the public upbringing of children will have been organised, the

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<sup>7</sup> H. Proctor, 'Women on the Edge of Time: Representations of Revolutionary Motherhood in the NEP-era Soviet Union', *Studies in the Maternal*, 7:1, (2015), pp. 1-20, Eric Naiman, *Sex in Public: the Incarnation of Early Soviet Ideology*, (Princeton, 1997), in particular chapter five: 'NEP as Female Coplaint (I): The Tragedy of Woman'.

'biological tragedy' will remain... in a woman it is precisely the menopause that marks the start of the infirmities of old age and is a terrifying herald of death<sup>8</sup>

Though ominous, this hyperbolic appraisal was an augmentation of Bolshevik anxieties about women's apparently 'monumental', cyclical time. It divorced her intrinsic corporeal traits from the 'backwardness' she had inherited from pre-Revolutionary social norms in order to assign to her responsibility for any interference she might make with the construction of socialism. This reformulation of woman as she aged cast her as an inevitable, perpetual victim of her own immutable physiology, and arguably, as one whose marginalisation from Soviet society was desirable, if unrealistic. Casting aside the obvious biological essentialism and misogynistic implications about the social risks inherent to the female body, such an approach to biology and sex suggested that once women reached menopause, their social role became ultimately obsolete.

Nemilov's account here is full of a peculiar revulsion, but its sentiments were not altogether unusual, reflecting contemporary ideological anxieties about youth and generation, about the female body, and its genealogical relation to the tsarist past as well as its undesirability and its sheer necessity to the Soviet future. As V. Yu Smirnova has shown, the female body was, in the popular press as elsewhere, a particular focus of attention as the element of womanhood 'most [visibly] susceptible to age-related changes'.<sup>9</sup> Women 'past their youth' were frequently posed not only as a threat to the health of the new Soviet society, but to the health of the new Soviet man himself. Sex education and public health posters were predominantly designed to appeal to men, inciting fears of feminine danger. The most vivid threats to men's health in the 1920s were the prostitute in the city and the *babka* in the country, both of whom represented

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<sup>8</sup> A.V. Nemoliv, *Biologicheskaiia tragediia zhenshchiny*, (Leningrad, 1925), p. 46, cited in Naiman, *Sex in Public*, and then independently sourced.

<sup>9</sup> V. Yu. Smirnova, 'Konstruirovaniye vozrasta v zhurnale 'Rabotnitsa' v sovetskoe vremia', *Zhenshchina v rossijskom obshchestve*, 1, (2016), p. 93

feminine elements of pre-Revolutionary society.<sup>10</sup> Political posters shed light on the contribution of public health to the formulation of the idealised 'New Soviet Man and Woman' and the employment of a medical-scientific discourse, which tied together biological age and generational outlook, to legitimise gender difference in the new, supposedly egalitarian, society. If public health discourse addressed women directly, it was as potential mothers. When older women were acknowledged at all, it was as a superstitious folk-healers who actively prevented socialist progress, or unwitting obstacles to socialist progress.<sup>11</sup> Raising and educating healthy Soviet citizens was a key priority for the state in its infancy. Older women, who had served as caregivers, midwives, and educators prior to the Revolution, represented a spectre from the past to be swept aside by the revolutionary work of their youthful (masculine) counterparts.

Reflecting the level of priority that young people occupied in the 1920s and 1930s, youth organisations such as the Komsomol, for those aged between fifteen and twenty-eight, the Pioneers, for those between nine and fifteen, and the Little Octobrists, for seven to nine year olds, well outlived the women's organisation the *Zhenotdel* which was formally shut down in 1930. In posters, women who appeared to be beyond the age range of the Komsomol appeared rarely.<sup>12</sup> Though by 1933 the social significance of the older generations was being reappraised to some extent, the imagery of the 1930s featured almost exclusively young women, able-bodied collective farm workers, or

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<sup>10</sup> F.L. Bernstein, 'Envisioning health in revolutionary Russia: the politics of gender in sexual-enlightenment posters of the 1920s', *Russian Review*, 57:2, (1998), pp. 191-217.

<sup>11</sup> Rose Glickman provides an overview of the construction of the older peasant woman as a spiritual healer before and after the Revolution in 'The Peasant Woman as Healer', in B. Evans Clements, B.A. Engel, C.D. Worobec, (eds), *Russia's Women: Accommodation, Resistance, Transformation*, (Oxford, 1991), pp. 148-162.

<sup>12</sup> E. Waters, 'The Female Form in Soviet Political Iconography', in B. Evans Clements, B.A. Engel, C.D. Worobec, (eds), *Russia's Women: Accommodation, Resistance, Transformation*, (Oxford, 1991), pp. 236-8.

mothers.<sup>13</sup> Older women tended to be featured in relation to younger generations – and they were often compared unfavourably, as ‘impediments’ to the smooth functioning of Soviet daily life. A cartoon in the November 1936 issue of *Krokodil* depicted a baby boy, crying having been reprimanded for tearing up his father’s copy of a ‘mandate’, whilst under the supervision of his elderly grandmother, who stares on bewildered. On the following page, a cartoon depicts an old woman sitting at the bedside of her grandson, who disdainfully corrects her understanding of bureaucratic procedure.<sup>14</sup> Though they appeared independently of their generational identity more frequently, when younger women appeared in relation to their children the emphasis was on the need for them to be ‘better’ mothers.<sup>15</sup> Though Soviet ideology had reluctantly accepted the existence of its older citizens by the mid-1930s, their relationship to the new Soviet generation was to be one of free, if not unproblematic childcare.

This rather benign view of the elderly was not necessarily typical, however, of the discourses on age in the early revolutionary period. Somewhat ironically, given his own advanced age amongst Bolshevik revolutionaries, Lenin, in a speech to the Third Komsomol Congress in 1920, stated that:

The old society was based on the principle: rob or be robbed; work for others or make others work for you; be a slave-owner or a slave. Naturally, people brought up in such a society assimilate with their mother's milk, one might say, the psychology, the habit, the concept which says: you are either a slave-owner or a slave, or else, a small owner, a petty employee, a petty official, or an intellectual -- in short, a man who is concerned only with himself, and does not care a rap for anybody else.<sup>16</sup>

In short, the influences on a person imparted by their early years were considered irreversible, highlighting the importance of ‘youth’, and the danger of those remnants of

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<sup>13</sup> *Krokodil*, 1936, No.32, pp. 7.

<sup>14</sup> *Krokodil*, 1936, No.32, pp. 7.

<sup>15</sup> *Krokodil*, 1933, No. 1, p. 12.

<sup>16</sup> V. I. Lenin, “The Tasks of the Youth Leagues” a speech delivered at the Third All-Russia Congress of the Russian Young Communist League, October 2, 1920’, in *V. I. Lenin on Youth*, (Moscow, 1967), p. 239.

the 'old society'. Notable, too, is the allegorical reference to the maternal role as a link to the past, and key to the future. Those people brought up in the old society posed a risk to the success of the Revolution, because their mothers ostensibly tied them to the pre-Revolutionary mind-set. The allegory recalls Kristeva's 'Women's Time', which claims that women's reproductive functions represent a cyclical time or eternity, rather than a future-driven linear time – that which formed the basis of the new Soviet state. In the same speech, Lenin referred to the place of the older generation in this Soviet future, in relation to youth, presenting a rather dire picture of their role in the socialist future:

It was the task of the older generation to overthrow the bourgeoisie. The main task then was to criticise the bourgeoisie, arouse hatred of the bourgeoisie among the masses, and foster class-consciousness and the ability to unite their forces... [but] The generation of people who are now at the age of fifty cannot expect to see a communist society. This generation will be gone before then. But the generation of those who are now fifteen will see a communist society, and will itself build this society<sup>17</sup>

These portions of the speech in particular are interesting, because the social value of the older generation is presented in a noticeably negative light. Though 'older' people have played a valuable role in the revolutionary process, this role is over; the bourgeois influences of their earlier years insurmountable. Soviet society, founded upon a rejection of the bourgeois past and the construction of a socialist future, viewed the builders of the bourgeois past with suspicion.

Moreover, as Smirnova has shown in her study of the construction of age in *Rabotnitsa*, that language employed in public forums such as this acted as means of the formation of social power, rather than simply an expression of it – Lenin's declarations therefore served to 'Sovietise' popular ideas about the social value, and ideological power of

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<sup>17</sup> V.I. Lenin, 'The Tasks of the Youth Leagues', p. 236.



externally defined generations.<sup>18</sup> Though the ill-defined 'older generation' were ideologically disempowered in Soviet society, they were still practically expected and compelled to contribute to the construction of socialism while they were alive. This established the necessity for the 'older generation' to reconcile itself somehow with the regime. However, though Lenin makes some reference to the general age range determining one's 'generation' (those raised before 1917), it is unclear who exactly constitute the 'older' generation.

According to the Soviet social psychologist Nikolai Rybnikov it was those aged fifty or over, due to the steep decline in labour productivity after this age.<sup>19</sup> The 1920 census had shown that there were almost twenty million people over the age of 49 (including Lenin), a significant challenge to a country that viewed its elderly as a symbol of the old regime and the cultural backwardness of its subjects.<sup>20</sup> Despite his own membership of the social category, Lenin, in his speech to the Third Komsomol Congress, evidently classed those aged fifty or above as part of an 'older generation', though there is a large gap between those who will build a communist society – aged fifteen – and those – aged fifty – who will not. In the speech as a whole, Lenin referred to 'generation' twenty-four times, frequently in the context of opposition, and images of generational conflict remained a central feature of revolutionary discourse, appearing as a social category second only to class.<sup>21</sup> Though ideologically central, concepts of 'generation' as a point of political *conflict* were relatively ambiguous, and, in the first years of the Soviet state,

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<sup>18</sup> Smirnova, 'Konstruirovaniye vozrasta v zhurnale 'Rabotnitsa' v sovetskoye vremya', p. 93.

<sup>19</sup> S. Lovell, 'Soviet Russia's Older Generations', S. Lovell (ed.), *Generations in Twentieth Century Europe*, (Basingstoke, 2007), p. 206.

<sup>20</sup> Lovell, 'Soviet Russia's Older Generations', p. 206.

<sup>21</sup> The frequency of Lenin's references to 'generation' in the speech to the Third Komsomol Congress is highlighted by Matthias Neumann in 'Youth, It's Your Turn!', p. 275. It was directly mentioned 24 times. Additionally, as discussed earlier, older generations frequently appeared in early Soviet imagery as a point of contrast to 'newer' and more Soviet generations.

one's generational cohort carried immense ideological importance for social, political and gender identities amongst the Soviet population.

Theoretically, the survival of older generations into the first decades of the New Soviet state caused Soviet thinkers quite the headache, though as Lovell points out, the Soviet state did not 'seem to trouble itself much over the living conditions of the great majority of its old people'.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, Golfo Alexopoulos' *Stalin's Outcasts: Aliens, Citizens and the Soviet State* reveals that some communities took away the civil rights of their residents, if over a certain age threshold.<sup>23</sup> In the early 1920s, elderly people were 'all but absent' in systems of social security. Pensions were only available in cases of invalidity, maiming and the loss of a breadwinner, the first of the three being the only criteria upon which an old age pension could be drawn. There was also no formal age of retirement – old age was framed by the 1918 Code on Labour Laws as a cause of invalidity, rather than a category of insurance itself.<sup>24</sup> Though legislation was introduced in 1925 to establish pensions for teachers in rural regions, eligibility was dependent upon the provision of proof of at least five years' service to Soviet education.<sup>25</sup>

Evidently, those over the age of fifty were considered to be fit to work, and certainly some will have been – a questionnaire circulated by Rybnikov to those over the age of 49 revealed that many faced their 'old age' and social disenfranchisement with stoicism or defiance. Some took up gymnastics.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, Smirnova has suggested that 'age', or 'youth' to be more specific was thus constituted in part by a set of particular characteristics, distinct from its bodily and chronological components. Perhaps most significantly, a physical ability and sense of enthusiasm to participate in the

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<sup>22</sup> Lovell, 'Soviet Socialism and the Construction of Old Age', p. 564.

<sup>23</sup> G. Alexopoulos, *Stalin's Outcasts: Aliens, Citizens and the Soviet State*, (New York, 2003), pp. 68-9.

<sup>24</sup> Lovell, 'Soviet Socialism and the Construction of Old Age', p. 572.

<sup>25</sup> Lovell, 'Soviet Russia's Older Generations', p. 207.

<sup>26</sup> Lovell, 'Soviet Russia's Older Generations', p. 206.

construction of the country in its youth were certainly integral to this definition of 'youth'.<sup>27</sup> Lovell, too, in 'Soviet Socialism and the Construction of Old Age', argues that Soviet views of older and younger generations were, in reality, more fluid than one might assume.<sup>28</sup> This ambiguity was borne out to some extent by a corresponding shift in the discursive representation of relations between old and young.

By the 1930s, the ambiguity surrounding old age was accommodated in Soviet discourse, to a degree. Lovell suggests that older people represented 'and unquestionable source of moral and cultural authority', having experienced the misery of pre-Revolutionary life, and now being able to attest to the liberty and joyousness espoused by the new state. Likewise, the older generation could more reliably narrate the 'foundation narrative of the USSR, having been politically conscious for longer than the regime had been in existence.'<sup>29</sup> Older people, by virtue of their personal histories of Revolution, could draw upon these experiences to distinguish themselves from the younger generations, excusing certain complaints or demands, as well as mistranslations in the process of 'Speaking Bolshevik'. As Rex Wade notes, the discourse that emerged in the 1930s on the 'value of the older generation sometimes translated itself into genuine benefits', both practically and symbolically.<sup>30</sup> The value of older generations were thus 'woven in' to discourse on the construction of socialism (and subsequently communism), by virtue of the eternal significance of their revolutionary work. The cover of *Krokodil's* November 1936 'special edition' in celebration of the Stalin Constitution showed a crowd headed by a youthful Soviet Man and Woman. A likeness of Lenin was featured near the front of the crowd, and on his shoulder, an

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<sup>27</sup> Smirnova, 'Konstruirovaniye vozrasta v zhurnale 'Rabotnitsa' v sovetskoe vremia', p. 94.

<sup>28</sup> Lovell, 'Soviet Socialism and the Construction of Old Age', pp. 564-585.

<sup>29</sup> Lovell, 'Soviet Socialism and the Construction of Old Age', p. 579.

<sup>30</sup> Wade, 'Introduction: Generations in Russian and Soviet History', p. 137.

ambiguously aged woman carrying a small child. The cartoon was accompanied by a rhyme, which suggests not only that the Soviet aim that death be 'abolished' would see fruition, but that the longevity of the Soviet Union itself 'undoes' the old age of its builders:

Up to one hundred years (*Let do sta rasti*)  
For us without old age (*Nam bez starosti*)  
Year on year [it] grows (*God ot goda rasti*)  
Our cheerfulness (*Nashej bodrosti*)<sup>31</sup>

Despite efforts towards the symbolic abolition of death and old age posited by discourse in the 1930s, it remained a fact that the older generation would not in actuality witness very much, if any, of the achievement of communism. Moreover, although they could theoretically bear witness to the wretchedness of the past, women were still forced to grapple with their pre-Revolutionary roles of child-rearing, and the symbolic reproduction of the modes of the *ancien régime*. Women therefore formulated their generational identity, this thesis posits, by emphasising both their revolutionary work, and the sense of transformation the Revolution had brought to their lives, in an almost eschatological sense.<sup>32</sup> Often, their lives were presented as 'beginning' with the re-birth of the Revolution. This sense of transformation allowed women to present their lives prior to the Revolution, almost as a sacrifice to the regime that made the shining future possible. Unable to live to experience (much of) the joyous socialist society under construction, their lives were transformed as a result, and their efforts towards Soviet society's consolidation remained as their 'legacy'. Lovell suggests that the 'triumphalist conclusions' of old people's lives were lent poignancy by the brevity of the time spent as

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<sup>31</sup> *Krokodil*, 1936, No. 32, p. 1.

<sup>32</sup> The eschatological rhetoric inherent to Bolshevik discourse is outlined, by both Halfin and Manchester, though it is worth noting that straightforward explanations for Bolshevism as having its 'roots' in Orthodoxy are, as Manchester suggests, flawed. L. Manchester, *Holy Fathers, Secular Sons: Clergy, Intelligentsia and the Modern Self in Revolutionary Russia*, (Illinois, 2008); I. Halfin, *From Darkness to Light*.

Soviet citizens, citing the worker and model autobiography writer Agrippina Korevanova in her 1935 *Izvestiia* piece: 'My age tells me that the time is approaching to die, but I haven't lived yet, I've just arrived in the world and want to live.'<sup>33</sup> So it is evident that, by the 1930s, which were relatively ambiguous in their approach to generation, older women's experiences were gendered. Yet the shared experiences of older women of the overhaul of the Revolution indicates the formulation of a set of shared values and techniques in relating their ageing lives to Soviet discourse.

Wade suggests in his introduction to the study of generations in the Soviet and Russian examples, that '[g]enealogical relations are obvious, but we also talk about generations as a larger and more complex phenomenon, as cohorts of people with certain characteristics or value systems'.<sup>34</sup> These value systems were not necessarily held in direct, or constant conflict, particularly in letters from older women. Melanie Ilič in *Life Stories of Soviet Women*, also notes that, though she had ascribed a generational identity to her respondents based on their dates of birth, they related their own lives to 'defining' events experienced in their lives.<sup>35</sup> Therefore, although we can deduce certain details about our letter-writers' lives based on the dates and ages they provide, it is important to acknowledge the role that self-selected 'defining events' played in women's lives in the crafting of generational identities and values. It is necessary therefore to reconcile conclusions about the genealogical, or chronological relationship between cohorts with the complex relationships of different cohorts with social or historical events and processes, such as the Revolution, or the tsarist past. In doing so, it is possible to identify how women's public letter-writing relates to formulations of female old age in

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<sup>33</sup> A. Korevanova, 'Kak ia zhila i kaki a ostalas' zhiva', *Izvestiia*, 8 March 1935, p. 4: cited by Stephen Lovell in 'Soviet Socialism and the Construction of Old Age', p. 579, and independently checked.

<sup>34</sup> Wade, 'Introduction: Generations in Russian and Soviet History', p. 127.

<sup>35</sup> M. Ilič, *Life Stories of Soviet Women: the Interwar Generation*, (London, 2013), p. 9.

the period, as well as to youth. Letters in which girls and women discussed the 'old' or 'dark' pre-Revolutionary past inherently implicate those who actively participated in this life. However, tales of pre-Revolutionary life sought to reconcile the experience to that of the Soviet present, and relate to youth as it proceeded before the Revolution as a point of comparison, or during the Revolution, as evidence of revolutionary work. In this way, the significance of social milestones to the Soviet regime effectively reinforced women's self-identity as historical actors.

Women themselves in their letters demonstrated their understanding of their generational identities as one involving both genealogical progression, and the evolution of successive shared value systems, which were not necessarily in conflict. In 1930, a woman named Arganova wrote to Nadezhda Krupskaya, the Minister for Education, and, incidentally, Lenin's widow, simply to reach out and describe her achievements. Having reached what she described as the final days of her life, she recalled her life and achievements:

Dear Nadezhda Konstantinovna!

Finally, I arranged to write a letter to You. What made me write this letter? I have reached my final days.... With a feeling of pride and deep satisfaction I note, that I did not stay aside from that which the revolution required.... I am illiterate, but you know... living among Chechens... that literacy – it is the first issue. At first they didn't believe me and didn't listen, then I arranged to take ten poor girls myself to the city of Grozny, to study. So I did each year in Spring and Winter.<sup>36</sup>

The life Arganova described involves many aspects of identity: rural location in the Caucasus, far from the centre of power; maternity, literacy and suffering. However, Arganova referred with considerable frequency to her generational identity:

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<sup>36</sup> GARF, f. 7279, op. 8, d. 15, ll. 33-34.

Each time, I remembered my dead daughter and each time I said to myself: “all these poor, unenlightened girls – my children, my daughters, and Soviet power – it possesses the power to bring the new to lives .... Now, after some years, when I again take someone to the city to learn, I hear: “Grandmother Arganova!” or: “here comes our mother!”[...] They were the ones I took to the city a few years ago, to learn[...] I am joyful and very well[...] I know that I will die, but I know the undertaking will never die. I did something useful, and that makes me feel good!<sup>37</sup>

What is striking about the letter is that, despite being authored by a woman from the Soviet Caucasus, and far from the centre of power, it was not framed in terms of region, or lifestyle, but in terms of generation and gender. By identifying herself in a social context as ‘mother’ and ‘grandmother’, referring to the ‘daughters’ she aided in their education, Arganova expressed her sense of location in the generational lineage she perceived as constituting the society in which she lived. Though our impressions are based on a single letter from (if Arganova’s doctor was correct) the end of a woman’s life, the actions and aspects of her identity that Arganova chose to relay to Krupskaja are explicitly related to her age. Her suggested commitment to revolutionary goals at that moment was undeniably remarkable, as was her explicit statement of pride that her legacy was a contribution to the construction of socialism through the facilitation of the education of young women.

Arganova’s attitude to literacy at the end of her life in 1930 emphasised her sense of emotional meaning she found in her contribution to the literacy programmes in her community, reflecting too her awareness of the ideological connotations of her generational cohort:

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<sup>37</sup> GARF, f. 7279, op. 8, d. 15, ll. 33-34.

I'm illiterate, but you know... literacy, it is the main thing.... I myself took ten girls to the city [to learn]. So I did every spring and winter. I know that I will die, but I know the undertaking will never die. I did something useful, and that makes me feel good<sup>38</sup>

Additionally, a focus on literacy sheds light on the significance of Arganova's words as they relate to her generational identity. The literacy rate among Chechens in 1917 had been recorded as less than 1 per cent, amongst both men and women.<sup>39</sup> Arganova's efforts for the girls in her community arguably held great significance for the construction of socialism. For Arganova, there was little shame in the admission of illiteracy. Having grown up prior to the Revolution, when the skill of literacy was limited in her community, it is perhaps unsurprising (at least statistically) that she was unable to read or write. Thirteen years after the Revolution, she was still functionally illiterate – albeit able to sign her name. We might assume from Arganova's ability to sign her name that she had at least engaged in some study of the alphabet, though her adoption of the epithet 'illiterate' as a self-description is nonetheless surprising. The Decree of Illiteracy of 19 December 1919 had criminalised the refusal of illiterate people to study, and of literate people to teach.<sup>40</sup> Her acceptance of the identity of an illiterate in 1930 appears then to reflect her generation cohort, as it related to the political norms of the day.

To some extent, Arganova's portrayal of her generational identity, which she explicitly related to younger women, corresponds with Lenin's remarks on the role of youth in the construction of socialism. She was proud that the younger women in her village referred to her as "Grandmother Arganova!" or cry "here comes our mother!", and referred

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<sup>38</sup> GARF, f. 7279, op. 8, d. 15, ll. 33-34.

<sup>39</sup> D. Vincent, *The Rise of Mass Literacy: Reading and Writing in Modern Europe*, (Cambridge, 2000), p. 14.

<sup>40</sup> Vincent, *The Rise of Mass Literacy*, p. 131.



explicitly to that role outlined for the 'older' generation by Lenin a decade earlier.<sup>41</sup> Arganova expressed pride in her contribution to the Soviet future: "I know that I will die, but I know the undertaking will never die. I did something useful, and that makes me feel good'. The tone of the letter in its reference to the co-existence of generational cohorts from opposite sides of the revolutionary 'fence' is remarkably harmonious. Though Arganova's membership of the older generation was crucial to her self-identity in this context, she did not position herself in opposition to, or left behind by, those young women that will live on. Central to Arganova's perception of her legacy was the transmission of the values of the Revolution to its young *women*: unable to read or write herself, Arganova was keenly aware of the importance of literacy for the young women's liberation from the remnants of the old society.

Having established the importance granted generational identity both in Soviet discourse, and women's reproduction of it, what remains to be established, however is what women *meant* when they imply complex generational identities, and what determined the generation they felt that they belonged to. In addition, how this affected the way that they understood the meaning of the 'New Soviet Woman' remains to be shown. Lovell has argued that 'Generations can have considerable coercive power once they have taken shape as distinct social constituencies or interest groups', noting that in many social histories of European societies, 'historically adjacent cohorts were profoundly divided by their experience of World War I [...] Generation provided a point of intersection for biology, society and politics, and hence a powerful agent of mobilisation'.<sup>42</sup> It is interesting then to inquire how and why social, cultural and political differences come to contribute to distinct tenets of an individual's identity,

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<sup>41</sup> V.I. Lenin, 'The Tasks of the Youth Leagues'

<sup>42</sup> Lovell, 'Introduction', pp.5-7.

beyond for example, urban or rural identity, and how it is that these 'generational identities' function across such alternative intersections.

Moreover, Arganova's explicit acknowledgement of her mortality and legacy imply a perception of generational identity determined, to some extent, by her proximity to death relative to other members of her community. Thus, as Pierre Nora has suggested, to be a member of a generation is the only way for us to feel individual while forming part of a social group, since one's experiences take on a particular social 'role' in relation to those of others.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, Arganova used biological relationships as way of thinking about social relationships in this way, emphasising an understanding of time beyond the 'horizontal' sense of the contemporaneous and their shared experiences. She located her generation in a metaphorical genealogy, adding a 'vertical' dimension, effectively presenting a picture of her sense of self *amongst* the generations, as part of a larger Soviet 'family'.<sup>44</sup>

In order to better understand *generation* as it applied to old and young women alike, it is thus necessary to determine a broader definition. 'Generation' is a construct whose meaning shifts across disciplines: gerontologists, for example, in their study of the process of ageing, frequently use the term to refer to family lineage. The focus that is most applicable to historical study, however, is that of generational cohorts within an identifiable social location, a concept, first credited to Karl Mannheim, that provides a clear foundation in which to root an underlying concept of social 'time' for the course of the study. Mannheim argues that biological and social rhythms are indispensable to one another; that we must 'nest' chronological age groups within social and historical

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<sup>43</sup> P. Nora, 'Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire', *Representations*, 26 (Spring, 1989), p. 17.

<sup>44</sup> S. Lovell, 'From Genealogy to Generation: the Birth of Cohort Thinking in Russia', *Kritika*, 9:3, (2008), p. 567.

contexts, establishing distinct cohorts. It follows that sharing a birth year, or even 'that their youth, adulthood, and old age coincide, does not in itself involve a similarity of location; what does create a similar location is that they are in a position to experience the same events and data etc., and especially that these experiences impinge upon a similarly 'stratified' consciousness.'<sup>45</sup> Mannheim sought to detect distinct generational 'entelechies', by defining generation in the terms of historical and social events, such as the Revolution or parenthood respectively, rather than in years or decades.<sup>46</sup> According to Émile Durkheim, we should therefore be focusing on social time, rather than chronological time, and rather than a prescriptive approach which defines generation by numbers of years, we are considering the social experience of aging in relation to others within a society.<sup>47</sup> Variations between cultures, and even within cultures, then, can be accounted for to some extent. Yet, whether a shared '*consciousness*' is totally necessary to define a generational cohort is debatable: differentiation within a cohort would certainly be inevitable: contemporaries do not directly share historical experience, i.e. within the same town, village or community, and thus contemporaries are simultaneously non-contemporaneous. The 'non-contemporaneity of the contemporaneous' is clearly important, but it is undoubtedly more convincing to consider this idea as a recognition of the complex dialectic between layers of lived experience, rather than as the whole answer.

David Ransel's findings, in *Village Mothers: Three Generations of Change in Russia and Tataria*, largely corroborate this significance of social time for generational identity. Using interviews with rural women about child-rearing, motherhood and family life he presents a nuanced representation of generational change across three cohorts of

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<sup>45</sup> K. Mannheim, *Diagnosis of Our Time: Wartime Essays of a Sociologist*, (London, 1943), p. 31.

<sup>46</sup> Mannheim, *Diagnosis of Our Time*, p. 46.

<sup>47</sup> E. Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, ([1912] 2001, Oxford).

women, defined by their chronological age at particular moments. Ransel maintains, for example, that those women of the 'first generation' of the study, who married and started a family before the war and had "settled into the life of private farming, the upheaval of Revolution and collectivisation was akin to disaster. These women, it follows, could be characterised by an adherence to religious norms and devotion, and pre-collectivisation community values.<sup>48</sup> According to Ransel, women of the 'second generation' were "caught in a time of profound changes in moral and social values", marrying around the time of the Great Patriotic War. Reaching maturity in an environment of all-encompassing 'Soviet values' caused their allegiances to be more arbitrary in nature, characterised not by a principled commitment to particular institutions or events, but by a strong sense of defiance, both against the lives their mothers and grandmothers endured and the constraints upon their reproductive autonomy from the state.<sup>49</sup> Ransel's third generation of women, born in the 1930s and building their families following the death of Stalin, had become to some extent 'sovietised'. Characterised by a higher degree of allegiance to the regime, these women were freer from the religious influences that had remained part of family life through its strong matrilineal backbone, articulating instead a strong sense that of moral satisfaction in a 'life properly led' against the standards of the Soviet regime.<sup>50</sup> Most salient about these conclusions, is that although each particular age cohort shared certain experiences, and it was thus possible to identify certain characteristics within women's responses, across what might be termed generational lines, responses to

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<sup>48</sup> D.L. Ransel, *Village Mothers: Three Generations of Change in Russia and Tataria*, (Indiana, 2000), p. 5.

<sup>49</sup> Ransel, *Village Mothers*, pp. 6-7

<sup>50</sup> Ransel, *Village Mothers*, p.19.

changes in reproductive and family discourse were far from uniform; and that 'each woman led a separate life with individual sorrows and achievements'.<sup>51</sup>

Thus, to more fully understand the role of agency in the process of 'Speaking Bolshevik', it is important to develop understandings of generational identity which account with greater precision for the considerable agency, self-awareness, and subjectivity possessed by women in the Soviet Union. Letters written by women to the Soviet state show that they were certainly aware of their location within a particular historical moment. A 'wife of a red army soldier' at the beginning of 1939 wrote to Nadezhda Krupskaja primarily about her gratitude to Lenin and Stalin, and the joys of Soviet life, and described herself as 'a lucky woman, that [she] was born in the Stalinist epoch, which is concerned about us, about women, whose rights were granted to us by the party and government and our dear leader I.V. Stalin.'<sup>52</sup> In fact, it would have been difficult *not* to be aware of one's historical location in the decades following the Revolution, and so such historical experiences would inevitably have formed part of one's 'cohort identity'.<sup>53</sup> But, since older generations were increasingly perceived as bearers of Soviet historical memory, with first-hand experience of the Soviet Union's foundation narrative, a note is required on the symbolism of chronological time for individuals, within this narrative.

Laura Carstensen's work on the influence of a perceived sense of 'time remaining' upon individual outlooks offers a useful lens through which to view the 'individual sorrows

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<sup>51</sup> Ransel, *Village Mothers*, pp. 236-252, p. 4. Interestingly, the women in Ransel's study, in hindsight identify their lives in relation to the Great Patriotic War, as do the women interviewed by Melanie Ilić, in *Life Stories of Soviet Women*. Of course, women writing in the interwar period, had, by definition, not encountered the Great Patriotic War, however it is of note that Lenin in his writings identified the Revolution as the defining event for Soviet citizens' senses of historical time and generational identity.

<sup>52</sup> GARF, f. 7279, op. 17, d. 36, l. 9.

<sup>53</sup> I Paperno, 'Personal Accounts of the Soviet Experience', *Kritika*, 3:4, (2002), pp. 590.

and achievements' of generational identity<sup>54</sup> Carstensen has maintained that it is the subjective sense of time remaining that has profound effects on human processes, including motivation, cognition and emotion, rather than simply chronological time.<sup>55</sup> Whether young or old, when people perceive time as finite, they attach greater importance to finding emotional meaning and satisfaction from life, investing less into expanding horizons. There is of course a correlation here between perceived future time and chronological age: frequently, as people age, time is increasingly perceived as finite.<sup>56</sup> Although as we have discussed, youth and age were partly politically constructed during the 1920s and 1930s, and were accessible through participation in certain activities, such as labour and education, always present was an awareness of the mortality of older generations, and sometimes the young.<sup>57</sup> Applying the concept of 'time remaining' helps us to understand how women of different ages present their relationship to the Soviet future. For example, the Red Army wife introduced above saw her horizons as expansive, having been born into the 'transformation' of the Stalinist epoch. Her letter focuses on the joyous potential of her life and its historical role positioning herself to face a glorious socialist future.<sup>58</sup> Arganova, on the other hand, sought to draw the meaning of the socialist future to herself in her present. She did not survive to see the completion of the construction of communism, but the progress towards this goal that she granted the girls in the village provided her with the sense of

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<sup>54</sup> L. Carstensen, 'The Influence of a Sense of Time on Human Development', *Science*, 312:5782, (2006), pp. 1913-1915. Quotation from Ransel, *Village Mothers*, p. 4.

<sup>55</sup> Socioemotional selectivity theory: when time horizons are equated through statistical manipulation, older and younger people actually behave remarkably similarly.

<sup>56</sup> Carstensen, 'The Influence of a Sense of Time on Human Development', p. 1913.

<sup>57</sup> Smirnova, 'Konstruirovaniye vozrasta v zhurnale 'Rabotnitsa' v sovetskoe vremia'.

<sup>58</sup> GARF, f. 7279, op. 17, d. 36, l. 9.

meaning and satisfaction at the end of her life: 'I did something useful, and that makes me feel good'.<sup>59</sup>

Moreover, the concept of 'time remaining' helps us to understand that portion of life post-Komsomol and pre-menopause as a generational cohort, without slipping into lazy generalisations about womanhood and maternity as inevitable social 'events' for women.<sup>60</sup> According to their social landscape, women's skills should have been acquired, and they should now be productive members of society. The social value of their time left had, by middle age essentially, 'decreased', as, potentially, have their remaining years. So, they respond to the discourse of the state in such a manner. By incorporating the concept of 'perceptions of remaining time' into our understanding of 'generational cohorts', we are also able to properly understand the role of those women without children in the generation cohort, allowing the cohort to retain its intrinsically diverse character. This leads me to believe that, by considering both the 'romantic historical' conception of generation in social and historical rather than chronological terms, in tandem with elements of Carstensen's introduction of socio-emotional selectivity theory, and perceptions of 'time left', we can reach the most convincing understanding of generation, and begin to understand why and how generational cohorts are formed, and the ways in which they act as 'communities', uniting the outlooks of otherwise very individual women. Viewing generational cohorts in this way allows us to better understand the simultaneous sub-stratification and cohesion at play, enabling us to

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<sup>59</sup> GARF, f. 7279, op. 8, d. 15, ll.33-34.

<sup>60</sup> For example, though Sarah Davies offers a useful contribution to the debate on popular opinion and women's responses to the Soviet state in 'A mother's cares?' conclusions about 'gendered concerns' such as motherhood, childcare, etc, require qualification to avoid essentialisation. S. Davies, "A mother's cares": Women Workers and Popular Opinion in Stalin's Russia, 1934-1941', in M. Ilić, *Women in the Stalin Era*, (Basingstoke, 2001), pp. 89-109.

comprehend attitudes to literacy, labour, and the Revolution, the key themes of this chapter.

The chapter, then, will demonstrate that women in public letters defined their generational cohort according to the social event of the Revolution, and their participation in its success. Although women's self-identification was affected most strongly by socio-historical time, their generational identity appeared also to have been dependent on their own perception of the time that they had to spend under Soviet power. The amalgamation of social(ist) time, and a perception of their time left remaining meant that older women – whose utility to the regime should have been limited – were able to locate themselves as 'actors' in the historical narrative, a strategy for inclusion which was ultimately incorporated into Soviet discourse. The metaphor of 'transformation' aided women of all ages in the relation of their lives to early Soviet ideology. Most commonly, this transformation was won through the acquisition of literacy, and participation in education and productive labour, as elements of a politically constructed concept of 'youthfulness'. In this way, both old and young women accommodated their lives in the new Soviet state.

### **Literacy, Education, and the Transformative Power of Revolution**

In a speech to the Second Congress of Political Education 1921, Lenin declared that "the illiterate person stands outside politics, he must first learn his ABCs. Without that there



are only rumours, gossip, fairy tales, prejudices, but not politics”.<sup>61</sup> In the decades following the Revolution, the young Soviet state undertook remarkable literacy drives, known as *likbez*, an amalgam of the words *likvidatsiia bezgramotnosti*, or ‘liquidation of illiteracy’. The formal commencement of the *likbez* campaign was December 26 1919, with the Decree ‘On the liquidation of illiteracy among the population of the RSFSR’. Under the terms of the Decree, all people from 8 to 50 were required to become literate in their native language.<sup>62</sup> Even prior to the Revolution, Tsarist officials had expressed concerns about the incompatibility of widespread (and largely peasant) illiteracy with modern industrialisation, though anxieties remained about the deconstruction of belief in tsarism and Orthodox as a potential consequence of the promotion of literacy and reading.<sup>63</sup> In a similar vein, a key motivation behind the literacy campaigns of the Soviet state in the 1920s was mass mobilisation of the population behind the Soviet state, considered necessary for ‘modernising’ (or at least breaking down traditional, pre-Revolutionary attitudes) among the population and building support for the new state and society, aiding socialist construction. The war on illiteracy was also closely associated with the campaign against religion.<sup>64</sup>

At the time of the Revolution, though there had been a considerable demand for education and literacy (largely among wealthier peasants and townspeople), its acquisition was limited.<sup>65</sup> Between 1875 and 1914, male illiteracy had fallen from around 80% to between 30—40%, with the skill distributed unevenly across social

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<sup>61</sup> V.I. Lenin, ‘The New Economic Policy and the Tasks of the Political Education Departments’, in *Collected Works: Volume 33*, (Moscow, 1965), via

<https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1921/oct/17.htm> [last accessed 05/12/2018].

<sup>62</sup> C.E. Clark, *Uprooting Otherness: the Literacy Campaign in NEP-Era Russia*, (London, 2000), p. 23.

<sup>63</sup> Brooks, *When Russia Learned to Read: Literacy and Popular Literature, 1867-1917*, (Illinois, 2003), p. 354.

<sup>64</sup> Fitzpatrick, *Education and Social Mobility in the Soviet Union, 1921-1934*, (Cambridge, 2009), p. 162.

<sup>65</sup> Brooks, *When Russia Learned to Read*, p. 36.

groups and geographical communities throughout the period in question.<sup>66</sup> A similar rate of female literacy levels in the period is not available for comparison, though we know that, by 1917, 'women' constituted the group in society with the lowest literacy rate.<sup>67</sup> According to accepted figures, in 1917, 12.5% of women/female citizens over the age of seven in the new Soviet state could read; as opposed to 37.5% of men (though it must be noted that illiteracy was unevenly distributed). Low levels of literacy and education are explained by the demands of daily life prior to the Revolution.

Prior to 1917, literacy had possessed lower value for girls than boys, as the 'opportunity cost' to the household economy was higher: while the labour performed by boys was largely seasonal, the housework undertaken by girls and women was not.<sup>68</sup> According to the Bolsheviks, literacy was to offer emancipation from the patriarchal daily life of the pre-Revolutionary era. As Lenin had himself stated, '...only literacy and consciousness can emancipate a woman from the domestic way of life and enable her to be independent of her husband.'<sup>69</sup> Literacy programmes in the reading rooms sought to reinvent daily life and raise the political consciousness of their participants, and covered divorce, venereal disease, and reproductive rights. That said, the Soviet state understood the significance of women's role in society in relation to its men and its children, and sought to reinvent daily life characterised by a Soviet consciousness, as the fledgling state believed that the supposed "backwardness" of women threatened the Revolution's success, holding back the education of her children, and dampening her

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<sup>66</sup> Vincent, *The Rise of Mass Literacy*, pp. 9-13.

<sup>67</sup> There had been a movement aimed at increasing female literacy in the mid-Nineteenth Century, which called on 'noblewomen and priests' to teach literacy to peasant girls, for the purpose of guiding peasant maternity practices and 'improving' peasant society in general. This was not altogether successful. Susan Smith-Peter has explored this movement in 'Educating Peasant Girls for Motherhood: Religion and Primary Education in Mid-Nineteenth Century Russia', *The Russian Review*, 66:3, (2007), pp. 391-405.

<sup>68</sup> Brooks, *When Russia Learned to Read*, p. 45.

<sup>69</sup> Clark, *Uprooting Otherness*, p. 96.

husband's revolutionary spirit.<sup>70</sup> The New Soviet Woman should therefore be literate and politically conscious.

Though literacy campaigns directed at women were subject to severe vacillations in their funding and momentum, by 1939, female literacy had increased to 72.5% (as opposed to 90.8% male literacy). This indicates that in general terms, the campaigns for the liquidation of illiteracy were obviously statistically successful.<sup>71</sup> It can be argued further, however, that the drive towards literacy, though clearly politically motivated, extended beyond the intentions of the state, due to the dynamism and willingness of women to take advantage of the situation with which they were presented. The skill of literacy affected women of different generations in different ways; it was dearly valued by many; and used in ways not intended by the state by others. Fitzpatrick has demonstrated that, 'for the Bolsheviks, social class was defined both by basic occupation and by 'consciousness', which was essentially a political criterion.'<sup>72</sup> Though they took up the skill at varying rates, women were keenly aware of the implications of the acquisition of literacy and subsequently political literacy for their social status, and viewed it as means of access to the ideologically 'correct' social class, and the associated social inclusion. Moreover, as Fitzpatrick has attested, when workers and peasants complained that they were being deprived of the rights bestowed by the Revolution, these rights were to education and social mobility *out* of the traditional confines of the

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<sup>70</sup> This attitude towards women's education was common in left-wing movements of the Twentieth Century. James Yeoman in chapter 2 of his doctoral thesis 'Print Culture and the Formation of the Anarchist Movement in Spain, 1890-1915' explored the relationship between gender equality and education in the Spanish anarchist press, arguing (like the Bolsheviks) that their feminine 'backwardness' was socialised, rather than essential (though, like the Bolsheviks, sex and female sexuality remained a problem). Similarities can also be found between the two case studies regarding the degree of individual responsibility for emancipation that was assigned to women.

<sup>71</sup> L. Grenoble, *Language Policy in the Soviet Union*, (Boston, 2003), p 56.

<sup>72</sup> Fitzpatrick, *Education and Social Mobility in the Soviet Union*, p. 4.

working class and peasantry.<sup>73</sup> Women saw literacy as transforming their traditional roles within peasant and working communities, providing them with opportunities for 'socialist self-improvement', and the occupation of a variety of politically prestigious social roles.

With the help of the Zhenotdel and Trade Unions, a network of *likpunkty*, or liquidation points and reading rooms were set up across the country in 1920 (though the aims of these measures often exceeded the means to execute them). Though attendance was sometimes poor amongst women, attendance at groups run by women, groups with childcare, and (often derided) sewing circles was often high. According to Clark, male peasants were said to '... look down on women, and refuse to sit with them in the same classroom'.<sup>74</sup> The most widely used textbook was based on a pamphlet by D.Iu. Elkina, containing the famous opening line 'We are not slaves', and filled with similarly relentlessly political sentences for instruction. The textbook is in fact referenced in letters to *Krest'ianka*. However, it was clearly not the intention of the Soviet state to impart to its population a critical attitude, or aid it in its development of an independent world view by teaching it to read and write. Indeed, the 'unnecessary weapon' of literacy without sufficient political guidance was explained by a *Likbez* pamphlet in the early 1920s to literacy instructors, which maintained that:

If you only teach your students to read and write, without giving them the necessary direction to their thoughts, without giving them interests, and an active involvement in their surrounding life, you give your students a weapon without teaching them how to use it. Such knowledge might turn out to be unnecessary and easily forgotten.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Fitzpatrick, *Education and Social Mobility in the Soviet Union*, p. 16.

<sup>74</sup> Kenez, *The Birth of the Propaganda State*, p. 148.

<sup>75</sup> V.A. Kumaney, *Revolutsiia I proshvshchenie mass*, (Moscow, 1973), p. 168, cited in Kenez, *The Birth of the Propaganda State*, p. 146.

But, the development of a sceptical attitude and a critical world view was in some ways inevitable. At the heart of demands for literature prior to the Revolution was 'the belief that the printed word [was] a means to attain power over oneself', according to Brooks.<sup>76</sup> Although many women were enthusiastic to learn to read and write, it follows that there was a sizeable number of women who were not, as well as those who simply did not have the time - or the childcare - to easily do so, particularly in the 1920s, when the commitment to women's literacy was faltering at best. A survey of Smolensk textile-workers conducted at the end of 1926 and the start of 1927 recorded the desire to study according to age, taking into account both desire and realistic expectations of ability. While women under 20 and women over 39 were highly motivated, women (and men) between 20 and 39 recorded a relatively low motivation (30.1% and 50% respectively), indicating (although not with total certainty), that the responsibilities carried by adults of this age group prevented them from 'feeling enthusiastic' about literacy instruction. Ironically, it was people aged between eighteen and thirty-five at whom the literacy drives were aimed, demonstrating further the generational priorities of the authorities in the period.<sup>77</sup>

However, women of all ages faced more personal factors that determined their approach to literacy. One anecdote sent to *Krest'ianka* describes the "strength and patience" required to educate the young peasant girls in 1924:

Girls gather in the gazebo and talk about school... Almost all are illiterate, and do not dare to go... It is clear that one would not mind learning grammar, but feels that to study is only for children, [for her] it is a big shame. This goes on for quite a while, as the girls tease each other about learning (and boys). Eventually they decide to go to school. 'Masha you go first' requests one girl.... They argue a long time about who should open the door and go in.

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<sup>76</sup> Brooks, *When Russia Learned to Read*, p. 34.

<sup>77</sup> Clark, *Uprooting Otherness*, p. 19.

Finally, Masha is elected. Masha resolutely opens the door and goes into the school. Then, we begin negotiations with the teacher<sup>78</sup>

Amongst this group of young women of similar ages, various concerns regarding age-appropriate behaviour were expressed: being 'too old' to learn; pride; romantic distractions; and even petty day-to-day squabbles about who should 'lead' the activity. All of these concerns affected the practical inclination of girls to read. Even where the will was present, study was difficult for many women, as one might expect. A letter with the title 'girls are learning to read' was sent to *Krest'ianka* in 1925 detailing the difficulty with which girls in the village were learning to read and write. The letter explained that the liquidation of illiteracy in the village (Cheriank) had been going badly, but was now going much better – there were fifteen girls enrolled in study at the present time. 'Although they read with difficulty, they [can] write.'<sup>79</sup>

Letters to *Krest'ianka* from 1924 also emphasised the reluctance found among older women when it came to literacy lessons, and the difficulties they faced trying to learn to read. Describing the difficulties literacy instructors faced in galvanising the efforts of their older, rural students, one woman, Ksenia Vatepova, wrote that 'In the beginning the peasant women did not agree to go to school, saying that we are too old and we won't learn, and so we will live.'<sup>80</sup> She described that the women were surprised to find that they had learnt to read and write so quickly, explaining the effect that literacy had had on the women's world view, and stating that they 'now realised, that when there is the desire (*pri zhelanii*), everything can be achieved (*vse mozžno sdelat'*)'.<sup>81</sup> Literacy was portrayed in this letter as 'unlocking' the potential of all citizens. That the letter was intended for publication in the magazine highlights the degree to which literacy was

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<sup>78</sup> RGAE, f. 396, op. 2, d. 29, l. 424.

<sup>79</sup> RGAE, f. 396, op. 2, d. 33, l. 508.

<sup>80</sup> RGAE, f. 396, op. 2, d. 29, l. 428.

<sup>81</sup> RGAE, f. 396, op. 2, d. 29, l. 428.

viewed as a key component of the New Soviet Woman. Although, as has been discussed, we cannot know the 'true' value individuals placed upon different elements of their lives, the public intentions of the statement demonstrate that the author understood that literacy was crucial for bringing the New Soviet Woman into being. Moreover, literacy was portrayed by Vatepova as having transcended the boundaries of the old women's world views. Previously, as old women, they had seen no use for the skill. Having acquired it, they 'realised' that anything was possible. In this respect, literacy is posited as having 'undone' the agedness of the women's worldview, enabling them to acquire those politically determined characteristics of youth, that according to Smirnova were quite distinct from the biological components of age.<sup>82</sup>

Evidently, though difficulties enthrusting older women to learn literacy were undoubtedly frustrating, (in no small part, due to the stubborn reputation afforded old peasant women), their reluctance was not necessarily due to stubbornness or inability, but lack of consciousness, resolvable through the initiative and socialist labour of fellow citizens. A local delegate, uncertain about her own skills of literacy but deeply committed to educating her peers, requested assistance from the editorial board of *Krest'ianka*: 'we are asking you comrades, help us, don't leave us, so that we are not again left in the dark, we want light, we are dark now and many are illiterate, though many try, so few are strong [...] for we live in a pit, and do not see or hear anything [...] Sorry that this is poorly written' the 'little educated (*malogramotnaia*) Kh. Korneieva', wrote to the journal in 1925.<sup>83</sup> Noteworthy in Korneieva's letter is her visceral association between literacy and social and political consciousness. Having acquired her own literacy, she became a delegate, and transmitted her skills to her peers.

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<sup>82</sup> Smirnova, 'Konstruirovaniie vozrasta v zhurnale 'Rabotnitsa' v sovetskoe vremia'.

<sup>83</sup> RGAE, f. 396, op. 1, d. 5, l. 87.

As literacy and education became more commonplace, the former became more firmly consolidated essentially as a means of social currency and access to the new political society – and of exercising agency within it. As discussed, by the 1930s a sense of ambiguity had emerged surrounding the value of older generations to society. Although their socialisation under capitalism made them politically problematic, older people. They also served the purpose of safeguarding Soviet social cohesion by contextualising the present ‘free and bounteous society’ with the lived historical memory of the old regime. While technically illiterate, Arganova was evidently politically quite literate, and though her employ of Bolshevik language seems very ‘deliberate’ she was able to easily reproduce the ‘foundation narrative’ of the new Soviet State.<sup>84</sup>

The meaning of literacy and education then, once these skills were transferred to the women of the Soviet Union, was no longer in the hands of educators. Women were free to internalise a sense of entitlement or attachment to education; to communicate and bargain with the state; and to read and communicate the texts of their contemporaries; all beyond the immediate directive of instructors and officials. Literacy – and crucially, its usages – was ‘a tool for enabling individuals and social groups to extend their understanding of themselves and their world’, with literacy itself a component of that world.<sup>85</sup> Attitudes to literacy throughout the period are thus more dynamic than they were perhaps ‘supposed’ to be by those who encouraged them, with opinions based on more personal and micro-social reasons than ‘backwardness’.

Moreover, literacy, and subsequently education was the key to acquiring and cementing proletarian identity, and mobility from their traditional communities, of which women

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<sup>84</sup> Lovell, ‘Soviet Socialism and the Construction of Old Age’, pp. 579-585.

<sup>85</sup> Vincent, *The Rise of Mass Literacy*, p. 24.



were keenly aware.<sup>86</sup> A prospective *Krest'ianka* correspondent from Tula, named Kuralesova, apparently equated the role with social mobility out of the category of 'peasant woman', or at least with the key to the expansion of the role. She wrote that 'if my notes can be put in the magazine, then please enrol me as a correspondent. And if my notes are meaningless, it is because I'm a peasant women (*krest'ianka*), I graduated only from a rural school'.<sup>87</sup> Her identity as a peasant woman at this time served to explain her backwardness, indicating that she saw the written word as means of transcending this social identity. In this vein, she asked for corrections of her prose, asking the editors 'please tell me what mistakes I make. I really wish to write notes for the magazine, but my poor literacy (*malogramotnost'*) is a burden on me.'<sup>88</sup> Kuralesova's understanding of the value of literacy in enabling social mobility was mirrored in many other letters from women on the subject. Anastasia L. related social mobility to the tropes of darkness and light, with which we are familiar, stating 'you know, that literacy (*gramota*) is the ray, which illuminates the path for your life'.<sup>89</sup> Another correspondent paired illiteracy with darkness, claiming that her local economy was a 'mess', since 'illiteracy and darkness stalk the market'.<sup>90</sup>

The allegory of darkness and light, and the revolutionary transformation that literacy enabled women to harness was commonplace in letters from women on the subject, which frequently outlined a growing desire among women to empower themselves within their social and cultural environments. A letter titled 'WE WILL LEARN', signed by a *krest'ianka*, C. Zorskaia demonstrated the political consciousness achievable by illiteracy by comparing its absence to unconsciousness:

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<sup>86</sup> Fitzpatrick, *Education and Social Mobility in the Soviet Union*, p. 4.

<sup>87</sup> RGAE, f. 396, op. 2, d. 29, l. 394.

<sup>88</sup> RGAE, f. 396, op. 2, d. 29, l. 394.

<sup>89</sup> RGAE, f. 396, op. 2, d. 29, l. 381.

<sup>90</sup> RGAE, f. 396, op. 2, d. 33, l. 222.

In the neighbouring villages, where there are schools, still in the winter girls and women were taught to read and write. But our village is sleeping [...] Still it comes from Moscow, *Krest'ianka*. Here is Enlightenment. But to read it – we have few women and girls who possess [the skill].<sup>91</sup>

As the 'transformative' power of the Revolution remained scarcely visible to many women across the Soviet Union, education became synonymous with self-empowerment. Soviet power had provided women with the *opportunity* for emancipation in those early years, while their role in the workforce remained tenuous, characterised by restriction, and unease within workplaces about the suitability of women's physiologies to the workforce.<sup>92</sup> The education of women, therefore, clearly took on a cross-generational significance for the position of women within a given community environment.

In the letters discussed above, rural conditions were framed, in line with Soviet discourse, as an impediment to the Soviet 'modernisation' of the individual and society, and to the full emancipation of women from their local customs and cultural traditions, which were roundly condemned by Soviet policymakers, and presented as particular targets for transformation. Likewise, the Bolsheviks' colonial 'exoticisation' of non-Russian Soviet identities, and the emphasis upon the unveiling and subsequent 'emancipation' of Muslim women was reformulated by women writing from non-Russian regions of the Soviet Union, reflecting identities as fluid and historically rooted as any other in the Soviet Union.<sup>93</sup> The articulation of this exoticisation by Central Asian Party-affiliated women thus arguably reflects discursive notions of 'Otherness', rather than an internalised sense of 'difference' from Russian Soviet women in certain

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<sup>91</sup> RGAE, f. 396, op. 2, d. 29, l. 284.

<sup>92</sup> Ilić, *Women Workers in the Soviet Interwar Economy*.

<sup>93</sup> Northrop, *Veiled Empire*, p. 31.

respects.<sup>94</sup> In this vein, a woman named Zhernakova wrote to *Krest'ianka* in 1925 to describe her success in teaching literacy to women in Uzbekistan. Recounting her instruction of a school in Uzbekistan, she describes the expectation amongst her diverse group of students:

A school for girls of the mountains is full of Uzbeks [...] The young, almost children, along with old women [...] they feel that there is good in their conversations and laughter, and they gather here in the expectation of something new, and useful [...]

Zhernakova asked for the women to tell her of their lives before the Revolution. An elderly woman described how she had been downtrodden by her husband, which had aged her prematurely. According to Zhernakova, 'tears made it difficult for the woman to speak of such a sad life, to remember the people who had caused her so much grief.' Silence fell upon the room. The way in which the elderly woman's 'old' life was described in Zhernakova's letter spoke of a sense of rebirth, entailed by the possibility of an education, provided by the Soviet government. After a few minutes, another woman rose to speak. Zhernakova's description of the youth and vitality of the woman, and her revolutionary zeal matched the symbolism of the New Soviet Woman, underlining her earlier suggestion that both old and young women embarked upon 'new' lives after the Revolution:

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<sup>94</sup> Indeed, according to Kamp though the visions of the Uzbek *Zhenotdely* for the new Uzbek woman did not always share a single goal for women's Soviet transformation, and were sometimes with odds with radical wings of the Russian *Zhenotdel*, the focus on women's own agency, and the necessity for literacy and enlightenment for all women, formed a common thread amongst local Party activists. This locates the New Uzbek Woman, at least in her discursive formulation, firmly alongside New Soviet Women from other backgrounds in this context: M. Kamp, *The New Woman in Uzbekistan: Islam, Modernity and Unveiling Under Communism*, (London, 2006), p. 99. Yulia Gradsikova has also explored how 'the otherness of 'Other' women was negotiated and reconstituted in the process of such a transformation [as the construction of the new subject of Soviet modernity] in 'Emancipation at the Crossroads: Between the 'Woman Question' and the 'National Question', in M. Ilić (ed.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Women and Gender in Twentieth Century Russia and the Soviet Union*, (Basingstoke, 2018), pp. 117-131, quotation from p. 119. bell hooks has most clearly presented the argument that colonialism does not negate patriarchal norms or replace gendered solidarity in oppressed communities, in chapter three of *Ain't I A Woman: Black Women and Feminism*, (London, 1981), pp. 87-117, and chapter four of *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Centre*, (London, 1984), pp. 43-67. hooks' arguments complicate assertions that Bolshevik colonial measures were rejected on principle, supporting Kamp's claims that the reception of measures aimed at women's education and liberation were truly mixed.

Now a young, beautiful *Uzbekchka* (Uzbek woman) rises, the wife of a communist, who wishes to study, and breaks the silence with sharp, guttural sounds. She speaks of the lives of illiterate girls, trapped behind walls, who are sold as objects. [She speaks] of the law, of the Mullah [...] We women want to learn, [...] but there is no law, no courses, husbands do not like scientists [...] Now the good Soviet power, wishes well, [and] allows us to dream in school, and we go to study, and [once] literate, we will live as the New Uzbek Woman, and be able to work like the European woman.<sup>95</sup>

The emotive description of life prior to the Revolution depicts Uzbek women as ‘reborn’ after 1917, freed from the restrictions placed upon them by the customs of their daily lives in the Russian Empire, as well as the attempts by KUTBZh that Yulia Gradszkova has described, to remove them from ‘established practices of control over her body’ by men from her community.<sup>96</sup> Critically, it was the ‘modernising’ Soviet state which freed women from the ‘walls’ behind which they were trapped, though the individual endeavour of the Uzbek woman to learn enabled her to acquire this freedom fully. Zhernakova’s letter contained a litany of the assumptions made in Soviet ideology in the 1920s and 1930s about the superiority of European cultural practices, the advantages of youth, and, since the ‘voice’ of the New Uzbek Woman was defined by her marriage to a communist, the subsidiary position women still held in relation to men. Nonetheless, the role granted to literacy in the life of the New Soviet Uzbek Woman was one of awakening: with life granted anew to old and young after 1917, women of all ages could transform their lives through education.

As literacy became the ‘norm’, rising as we know to 72.5% among women by 1939, it appears to have been more imperative to women of all ages to be able to participate in this in some way.<sup>97</sup> Literacy became a key part of what it meant to be a Soviet woman, though critically, literacy seems to have taken on its own meaning to women. The skill

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<sup>95</sup> RGAE, f. 396, op. 2, d. 33, ll. 306-7.

<sup>96</sup> Gradszkova, ‘Emancipation at the Crossroads’, p. 124.

<sup>97</sup> Grenoble, *Language Policy in the Soviet Union*, p. 56.

of literacy influenced self-perceptions, and women's understandings of their rights both as women and as citizens. Literacy enabled them to negotiate and bargain with state officials regarding their social positions; to complain about one another; to seek counsel for personal problems; or simply to send greetings and thanks. There is a significant amount of evidence that literacy and education were seen as the key to social inclusion in the Soviet state amongst those who did not receive their primary education under the Soviet system. Women wrote to officials just to say hello, to send thanks, or to keep officials abreast of their activities. One newly-literate woman, A.K. Massagetova, wrote to Nadezhda Krupskaja on the subject of her own literacy, expressing her delight at being able to write the letter in the first place. Having learnt literacy three years earlier, following a visit from Krupskaja to her *kolkhoz*, she had been inspired to learn, and made a promise to study. She wrote: 'I want to report that I fulfilled the promise I made to study. Now, I'm studying on cooperative courses (*kooperativnykh kursykh*), and the liquidation of illiteracy.'<sup>98</sup> Massagetova's progress, sparked by Krupskaja's visit, had been quite remarkable. She commented that 'when I entered [the *likbez*] I was totally illiterate, but look now how I write fluently since I left!'<sup>99</sup> Although Massagetova's letter contained a number of spelling and grammatical errors (making it quite difficult to transcribe), this actually serves to emphasise the sense of transformation she felt it necessary to express in her letters. The visit from Krupskaja, as Deputy Minister for Education, had changed her life, and she wished to be able to extend the same sense of transformation to her own students, stating that she taught classes of '60 people [who] would love for [Krupskaja] to come to us, and who would love to have a chat with

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<sup>98</sup> GARF, f. 7279, op. 8, d. 15, ll. 83.

<sup>99</sup> GARF, f. 7279, op. 8, d. 15, ll. 83.

[her]'.<sup>100</sup> Massagetova's literacy had unlocked the possibility of further technical education for her, providing her with access to the world of skilled socialist labour.

## **Labour and Socialist Construction**

In letters to officials and newspapers, women frequently referred to their access to literacy or education in terms of labour and employment opportunities. Though not unexpected, this is a significant element of women's reproductions of the Bolshevik 'script': labourers, toilers and workers were venerated as heroic proletarian identities in the new Soviet state, to which education represented the key. As the beneficiaries of the Revolution, labour and revolutionary consciousness were intrinsically intertwined, and had perceptible effect upon (working) women, who had been emancipated by the Revolution. After the Revolution and Civil War, labour began to combine with, and in some cases replace older 'female' identities, which had been based upon a woman's status within household, or her relationship to male relatives. In this manner, labour constituted the 'core' of the transformative power of the Revolution, and means of illuminating the 'dark' corners of everyday life. As such, letters relating to issues of employment and Revolution provide considerable potential for study of the social reception of Soviet gender ideology.

A group of former teachers – all women – who were unable to work, detailed in their request for an increase in their pension to Chairman of the Council of Ministers Viacheslav Mikhailovich Molotov in 1936 the reasons for their entitlement to a comfortable old age. Their generation, and crucially their ability to meaningfully

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<sup>100</sup> GARF, f. 7279, op. 8, d. 15, ll. 83.

participate in the Revolution at the time, they felt, entitled them to discard the identity of 'worker'. They wrote: 'many [of us] are old, unfit for work, and can't survive on a pension [...] without assistance from loved ones.' Feeling that the small pension on which they were required to live was 'an affront to human dignity', the women stated that 'not only had [they] been teachers, but were... in the midst of the revolution, the party, and the defeat of capitalists – [they] should be able to look back, retire, and live comfortably.' The letter was signed by ten women under the word: *pensionerki* (female pensioners).<sup>101</sup> That these women had evidently lived as adults through the Revolution meant that their revolutionary experience, and crucially, their revolutionary contributions established a sense of 'generation' amongst them. This caused them to feel, as revolutionary 'veterans', entitled to retire comfortably from the socialist construction required of their youngsters. Moreover, the women suggested that through their labour, they had already earned the salvation provided by the Revolution. By claiming that they should be able to look *back* upon their achievements, the women located themselves temporally on the 'right side' of the Revolution. They implied that since they were part of its success, they should be privy to its benefits.

The framing of their letter also suggests that as pensioners, a group who had been drawn back into the fold by the mid-1930s, the women were aware of their social position as holders of what Lovell has termed the 'key foundational narratives' of the Soviet state, and were willing to use their role to bargain for a more comfortable existence at the time.<sup>102</sup> That they felt they should be able to 'live comfortably' and reflect upon their socialist achievements suggests an awareness amongst the letter's signatories that their time remaining was short. For this reason, the women were

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<sup>101</sup> GARF, f. 5446, op. 82, d. 51, ll. 130-133.

<sup>102</sup> Lovell, 'Soviet Socialism and the Construction of Old Age', p. 585.

comfortable requesting fuller inclusion in the Soviet social system: at the end of their lives, they implied, they should be able to enjoy positive experiences, both due to the limitations of their own mortality, and the allowances made by Soviet discourse for elderly people, whose 'moment in the sun' of the Revolution's transformation was limited.

On the other hand, those girls and women who foresaw the time ahead of them as significant consistently referred to the Revolution in terms of the freedom it afforded them or the potential they now had as a result. As we have seen, 'older' women, who lived as adults prior to the Revolution, accentuated a desire to establish a sense of meaning – both in terms of their significance to the Revolution, and its transformative effect on their lives. On the other hand, younger women and girls associated their present states with the possibilities their future held. For them, with what they assumed to be the rest of their lives ahead of them, their inclusion in the revolutionary process was necessary for their own socialist futures. For younger women, participation in socialist labour, like education, promised inclusion in the new Soviet society, and prevented them from being 'forgotten', and lost to the capitalist past.

In 1934, a young girl named Maria Gorokhova wrote to Nadezhda Krupskaya in 1936 to plead for the restoration of her education, reflecting its significance to her as the key to labour and social inclusion, and the urgency this took on for those raised under Soviet power who had reached the highly exclusive conditions of the 1930s. She pleaded to Krupskaya: 'I am now seventeen years old I don't work anywhere, I am burning with shame in front of my girlfriends, because they are continuing their education, while I am



deprived of this because of the circumstances set forth above'.<sup>103</sup> Maria wrote in part to express a particular understanding of the importance of literacy, but she also indicated an understanding of the meaning of the Revolution according both to the historical location of her *primary* education, and the seemingly unlimited horizon ahead of her. By stating her age as if she were in danger of becoming 'too old', Maria suggested an enthusiasm for acquiring as many skills as possible, as soon as possible. It is evident that she associated education with her future, and its absence as was a 'deprivation', which reflected her understanding of the Revolution as something intrinsically linked with potential and opportunity.

Likewise, in 1930, a group of girls from a mountainous region in Dagestan implied that their 'backwards' gender identity had acted initially as an obstacle to their experience of the Revolution. They saw their failure to be 'educated', or to participate in socialist labour, as the root of the persistence of the 'old' life, tainted by pre-Revolutionary darkness. As they explained themselves:

The Soviet regime has existed for twelve years, but we are women. Mountain girls are still so dark and not developed, we still have much, much to learn (*uchit'sia*), in order to throw off from ourselves the yoke of the old daily life (*byt'*) and finally liberate ourselves from the old life.<sup>104</sup>

The letter was signed by all the members of the group that were present with some names signed in Russian, most in Arabic, and 'for the illiterate, a fingerprint'. Evidently, the girls saw the Revolution as the key to education, literacy, and to the political status of 'emancipated'.<sup>105</sup> However, we can also gauge from their letter the degree to which they accepted responsibility for the transmission of this 'Revolutionary light': writing in

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<sup>103</sup> Letter from M.S. Gorokhova petitioning Krupskaja to continue her studies', 13 November 1934, RGASPI, f. 78, op. 1, d. 524, ll. 99-99ob., in *Stalinism as a Way of Life*, L. Siegelbaum, A. Sokolov, (eds), *Stalinism as a Way of Life: A Narrative in Documents*, (London, 2000), p. 408.

<sup>104</sup> GARF, f. 7279, op. 8, d. 15, l. 24.

<sup>105</sup> GARF, f. 7279, op. 8, d. 15, l. 24.

the first person plural, they described that it was they who had much to learn in order to liberate themselves, rather than that the Soviet state still had much to teach them.

Due to the topic of the letter – socialist education – we can conclude that by ‘marking’ the letter with fingerprints, the girls desired not to be ‘left out’ of the Revolution, marking their participation in the composition of the letter and the activities it described. Marking the letter also reflects the degree to which the girls perceived ‘written word’, and its use for maintaining dialogue with the Soviet project, as a textual marker of social inclusion. That their home in the mountains was ‘still so dark’ was not the fault of the Soviet state. The Revolution simply had not reached the mountains yet, though the simple occurrence of the Revolution provided them with the opportunity to seek ‘socialist salvation’ through their own self-improvement:

And so in order to go out to the bright road which will lead us to a bright future, we at the *aul* opened a *Saklya* for mountain girls, to which we gave your name: “*Saklya* for Village Women [in the name of] *Krupskaia*”, in order to find a brighter future. This is the first [such] hut in our distant and remote area lost between enormous mountains. We earnestly desire that you take patronage over our *Saklya*, and would direct us dark mountain women, and we believe that, guided by your hand, we will arrive to/at our bright future, and finally throw off from ourselves the old *byt*.<sup>106</sup>

By describing themselves as ‘lost between enormous mountains’, the girls also indicated the degree to which they perceived their lives as culturally and geographically peripheral to the industrial centres of Soviet power. Nonetheless, this did not present the women with an insurmountable obstacle to the reception of Soviet values, and identity. Their cultural identities were evidently not considered to be irreconcilable with Soviet values. Rather, their geographical separation from Soviet power explained to them the lack of cultural transformation that they feel has taken place. Their

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<sup>106</sup> GARF, f. 7279, op. 8, d. 15, l. 24.

'marginal' status also reinforced their grounds for assistance as a literary device, whilst the contents of their letter, by outlining the work they had already done to serve the Revolution clearly reflected the perception that the women should assume the bulk of responsibility for their self-improvement. It was through self-improvement, facilitated by the patronage of Krupskaia, that the girls could expand their horizons, and illuminate the road from their remote mountainous location to the bright future of Soviet power.

However, letters from women from a slightly older age group portrayed this responsibility for self-improvement differently. Writing to Nadezhda Krupskaia in 1934 about her daughter's suicide, a woman named Maria iterated the need for state responsibility for the improvement of gender relations at an early age, signifying a more cautious approach to the emancipation offered to girls and women after the Revolution. 'I am the mother of two *pionerkas* (now one)' wrote Maria. 'I want to say something concerning my daughter's suicide.' Maria's daughter had committed suicide at the age of 12, after humiliation at the hands of some boys from her school. Maria plainly urged Krupskaia to help ensure the state take responsibility for its involvement in matters of gender: 'Better relations between boys and girls are necessary.... I know you are busy, but I have my daughter to protect'.<sup>107</sup> Politically, Maria's role as an adult – and crucially as a mother – was to shape and improve the social relations of the new Soviet generation, to undo un-Bolshevik vices and prevent their entrenchment. She saw her role as one of collaboration with Soviet power. As a grieving mother, whose primary concern was the well-being of her remaining child, born a Soviet citizen, Maria saw her inclusion in Soviet society as the critical factor in this process.

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<sup>107</sup> GARF, f. 7279, op. 7, d. 18, ll. 15-16.

Finally, the letters of older women provide perhaps the most striking examples of the impact of perceived time left upon one's desire for 'meaning' and personal remembrance through socialist participation. In her biography of her young daughter – Liza – a woman named Maria S. declared her intention in writing to *Krest'ianka*: 'On the international day of working women, I, mother of Liza and Volodia, I want to share the grief and pride of women.' Liza had worked tirelessly to help Maria raise her siblings, but had ultimately left home to join the Red Army, and fight in the Civil War. Upon her return, Liza had been 'unrecognizable', exhausted and ill. Liza's brother and Maria's son Volodia, was killed by bandits one evening. The following day, Liza committed suicide. Maria S. then sought to resume her children's efforts for the Revolution towards the end of her own life, by raising awareness of their feats:

It is hard for a mother to lose her children, such as mine, and my old eyes weep, but I am proud of my own children Lisa and Volodia, who sacrificed their young lives for the struggle against the bourgeoisie. Goodbye my dear children, sleep tight. You have to [achieve] change and it will bring an end to [the bourgeoisie], and your old mother as best [she can] helps Soviet Power.<sup>108</sup>

Maria S. in her old age, sought to find some comfort in her grief, by attempting to continue the work of her children creating, essentially, a 'meaning' in their early deaths. In drawing attention to her children's work for the Revolution, Maria S. referred to her own generational identity as making her less 'suited' for the work, though she would try her utmost. Writing in 1924, Maria's prose reflects contemporary concerns about the 'suitability' of the older generation for the work that socialist construction entailed. Yet, having lost both of her children, she sought not only to provide comfort for herself, but to consolidate their legacy for the new Soviet state. Both by continuing their work, and preserving it in the written word, in the press, she ensured that neither she, nor they,

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<sup>108</sup> RGAE, f. 396, op. 2, d. 30, l. 42.

would be 'forgotten' in the forward march of the Revolutionary process. This echoed the letter from Arganova, who in her final days sought to underline her work and contribution to the Revolution, especially her contribution to the literacy of young women in her village.<sup>109</sup> The metaphorical genealogy in the letters of the three women – Maria, Maria S., and Arganova respectively, is telling: both sought to contribute to the Revolution through their work for the subsequent generation, their symbolic 'daughters', and to give meaning to the deaths of their own flesh and blood daughters in the Civil War.

Attitudes to labour and the construction of socialism, then, were delineated markedly by generational cohort and, crucially, generational identity. Discussions pertaining directly to labour and employment reflect a clear distinction between those younger women who see their employment as a salient part of their public identity, and those elderly women, who emphasise their age, and seek instead to demonstrate the meaning of their achievements thus far. Reading the letters more closely, a subtler distinction becomes apparent. Both older and younger women sought inclusion in, and recognition by Soviet society, and frequently wrote to authorities to ensure that they would not be 'forgotten'. The grounds upon which they sought to achieve recognition in Soviet society were the related political cornerstones of labour, self-improvement, and education, which were seen as holding the 'key' to the transformation promised by Soviet power, and to the 'light' of its salvation. However, the letters from older and young women can be distinguished by the manner in which they spoke of their access to Soviet salvation.

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<sup>109</sup> GARF, f. 7279, op. 8, d. 15, ll. 33-34.

## Generation, Revolutionary Transformation, and the Problem of Mortality

Though it might be argued that the generational differences expressed in the letters were applicable simply as the effects of social and historical landscapes on women's outlooks, the applicability of the concept of 'perceived time left' in this context is demonstrated by comparison of the letters of older women with the changes in attitudes of young women and girls who have overcome a serious illness. Anna, who as a very young girl wanted a friend to take on walks, was unable to because of weak heart. Though her parents made her stay at home, for fear that she would die, she sat and wished that someday she would be healthy, and could get a friend to have fun with. In 1924, when she wrote to *Krest'ianka*, Anna was 'all grown up' and it seemed, in much better health. Thanks to the October Revolution, which 'made women all free' Anna 'for the first time went to a party with [her] friend, where [they] met boyfriends'. Though 'Soviet power [was] doing very well', their boyfriends were going to Komsomol meetings, and they thought that it was a shame that girls were shut out from the meetings.<sup>110</sup> Anna and her friend, now that Anna is well, sought to expand their horizons, and to get involved in party activities, and 'build the Revolution'. How far this was actually due to Anna's revolutionary zeal, or her desire to be with her friends and boyfriend, is unclear – what is clear, is that she did not want to be 'left out' of her new environment. However, by relating the possibilities involved with her 'new' life after her period disability to the Revolution and its emancipation of women, Anna portrayed the expansion of her horizons as a direct result of the transformation brought about by the Revolution.

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<sup>110</sup> RGAE, f. 396, op. 2, d. 30, l. 194.

Anna described a life which had abruptly changed once she becomes stronger and healthier: beyond simply wanting to enjoy spending time outside with a friend, Anna now wanted to experience new things and participate in public life, an opportunity she saw as being a direct consequence of the establishment of Soviet power. However, beyond the simple change in Anna's outlook once she became well, it is notable that the priorities described by Anna at the beginning of her letter corresponded generally with those displayed by Arganova in the letter she wrote in her ill health. She spoke about her desperation for things in her life which would increase her happiness, all of which related to her involvement with the Soviet society under construction: solutions to her loneliness; the chance to go to school, have fun with friends, and to walk around outside. Arganova, for her part, prioritised the parts of her life that made her feel useful to the new society, and therefore proud emphasising: 'I did something useful, and that makes me feel good'.<sup>111</sup> That Arganova was old enough to be referred to as the mother or grandmother of the young women in the village no doubt reinforced this perception of her own mortality in relation to Soviet power. In essence, however, the two letters are similar in that, though they were from women of very different ages, as a result of the prospect of their mortality they prioritised their present inclusion in Soviet society, rather than their involvement in an abstract socialist future. Ultimately, both women related in their letters a desire not to be left out, or forgotten by the Revolutionary process, a prospect with which both women had recently had to grapple.

The 'problem' of mortality, and the redeeming properties of the performance of labour for the socialist project is highlighted in a letter from Sofia, a *'personal'naia pensionerka* ('personal' pensioner, or 'personally a pensioner') who wrote to Molotov requesting her reinstatement at work in 1935, having been forced to leave her job as a secretary in

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<sup>111</sup> GARF, f. 7279, op. 8, d. 15, ll. 33-34.

1931, due to ill health. Though by 1935 she felt as though she had recovered, she found herself unable to return to her previous job. The situation 'create[d] for [her] unbearable emotional oppression', as she was left to wonder what she could do with her 'acquired life skills' – perhaps she would be qualified to be an official in a sanatorium?<sup>112</sup> Though Sofia was, at this time, evidently infirm enough to qualify for a pension- which, since no old age pensions were as yet in place, was no mean feat - the most acute period of her ill health was over. This had clearly affected her perception of the life she had ahead of her, to the degree that her goals had once again changed. Though she would have liked her previous job, Sofia was keen to put her skills to new use, and to continue to contribute to the state.<sup>113</sup> At first glance, the *pensionerka* Sofia's experience of recovery was little different from that of teenage Anna.

Yet we can see that the language that she used, and the way in which she discussed the Revolution is distinct both from that used by the much younger Anna, and the much older Arganova. Sofia, at the beginning of her letter, emphasised that, though she had no remaining family and was *odinochka* (alone/loner), her brother was a 'close personal friend' of Lenin, and that she was unable to continue (rather than begin) to contribute to the Revolution caused her great anguish. Evidently, her prior experience of the Revolution as a working adult, and the social achievements that she felt affirmed her worth in the new Soviet society fell broadly in line with those who lived as adults *alongside* the Bolsheviks during the Revolution. Moreover, that she had no family at that time suggested that, whether she had ever had a partner or children or not, she remained keen to contribute to the socialist future through self-sufficiency and labour, rather than as the metaphorical 'mother' we see evoked elsewhere. The 'cohort identity'

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<sup>112</sup> GARF, f. 5446, op. 82, d. 51, ll. 252-254.

<sup>113</sup> GARF, f. 5446, op. 82, d. 51, ll. 252-254.



she shared with Lenin through her brother therefore reinforced her rightful inclusion in the bright-lit Soviet society. Her inclusion meant that she would not be left under the 'unbearable emotional oppression' of belonging 'politically' to the older generation, whose roles, though worthwhile, were now over – and who would only enjoy a brief moment of the new society.<sup>114</sup> Ultimately, Sofia's letter serves to substantiate the argument that women saw their own participation in labour, education, or other forms of socialist construction as their key to the deliverance granted by Soviet power.

One group of young women had written to Krupskaja seven years earlier in 1928, evoking the language of darkness and light which had characterised both pre-Revolutionary religious discourse, and early Soviet discussions of the Revolution. They complained that there was 'still a lot of darkness, drunkenness, hooliganism in our everyday life.'<sup>115</sup> Though the emphasis of the language in the two letters was slightly different in that the earlier places responsibility for the lack of revolutionary progress with those community-members of her village, and the other seems to emphasise that it is rural village life itself which has delayed the arrival of the Revolution what is clear, is that both comfortably reproduce the language associated with the Revolution and the new Soviet state.<sup>116</sup> Women who identified as the 'older' generation displayed significantly less fluency in this respect. One self-proclaimed pensioner, to whom we will return in more detail later in the thesis, lamented the poor living conditions allowed by her pension in 1936, and asked Molotov: 'Don't forget us old people, [...] give us a piece of personal happiness, so we can be happy though at the end of our days, and from

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<sup>114</sup> These conclusions also substantiate related points discussed earlier, and made in: Smirnova, 'Konstruirovaniye vozrasta v zhurnale 'Rabotnitsa' v sovetskoe vremia', pp. 92-102 and Lovell, 'Soviet Socialism and the Construction of Old Age', p. 579.

<sup>115</sup> GARF, f. 7279, op. 6, d. 8, ll. 33-35.

<sup>116</sup> Halfin, *From Darkness to Light*.

the heart would say ‘our homeland is the USSR – there’s a land of joy, a country of universal happiness’.<sup>117</sup> Though this *pensionerka* (pensioner) seems to have been roundly positive about the results of the Revolution, she nonetheless chided ‘the state’ for seeming to ‘forget’ about older people, reflecting a position somewhat ‘outside’ the Revolution, indicative of a life lived mostly before it.

Another self-professed ‘old woman’ wrote to Krupskaja (via Molotov) in 1937, detailing her difficult material position in her request for an increase to her pension. The poverty of her material position was demonstrated by the holes in underwear, which made an unusually explicit link between the Revolution and the hardship she suffered. She stated: ‘[i]n the first years of our revolution we had to endure the most difficult period in our economy.’<sup>118</sup> The explicit allocation of responsibility for this economic hardship with the years following the Revolution was striking. Even letters from younger women, who were members of socially marginalised groups and therefore considered to possess a lower ‘threat level’ than others, sought to redirect the blame for the problems they identify away from the state.<sup>119</sup> A 1939 letter to Procurator General Andrei Ianuarievich Vyshinskii from the noted graduate of the Kharkov School for the Deaf and Blind, Olga Skorokhodova, contained assertive and severe reproach of the treatment of and provision for her peers and her school, in comparison to that received by schools for

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<sup>117</sup> GARF, f. 5446, op. 82, d. 51, l. 254-5.

<sup>118</sup> GARF, f. 5446, op. 82, d.51, ll. 130-133.

<sup>119</sup> Deaf people were frequently deemed ‘model workers’ in the Soviet period, since they were able to undertake ‘mainstream’ labour, and presumed to be resistant to the chatter of a hearing workplace. For more on the status of d/Deaf communities in the Soviet Union in its early years, see I. Sandomirskaja, ‘Skin to skin: language in the Soviet education of deaf-blind children, the 1920s and 1930s’, *Studies in East European Thought*, (2008), 60:4, pp. 321-337, S. Birch ‘Transcending Revolutions: The Tsars, The Soviets, and Deaf Culture’, *Journal of Social History*, 34:2, (2000), pp. 393-401, M. Galmarini-Kabala, ‘Ability to bear rights or the ability to work? The meaning of rights and equality for the Russian deaf in the revolutionary period’, *Historical Research*, 90:247, (February, 2017), pp. 210-229, and C. Shaw, ‘Deaf in the USSR: ‘defect’ and the New Soviet Person’, (2011), doctoral thesis, University College London (UCL).

hearing and seeing children.<sup>120</sup> Though Olga's letter was clearly very critical of her experience of Soviet life as a deaf-blind child, she stopped short of blaming Soviet life itself, and spoke instead of the particular institutions in which she has been homed. She expressed a desire to work, to be of 'value' to the state, and not to be considered an invalid. In short, she expressed a sense of entitlement to be a real, full Soviet citizen: the fault lay with her care-givers. This is not to say that, by using particular language, or by virtue of their age, women were able to write whatever they want with impunity – but attention to the broad generational cohort, or to the time a letter-writer states they have ahead of them, helps to account for the range of permissible accounts presented to officials and newspapers at any given time. Old age or approaching death might account for some 'slips' in Bolshevik fluency, and frustrations with the delivery of socialist benefits, both due to the effort directed at adapting to the project, and the revolutionary credentials implied by the participation in the labour force (either in public or the home) – all, of course, for the revolutionary cause. On the other hand, a sense of youthful exuberance and revolutionary enthusiasm for the socialist project, narrated in fluent 'Bolshevik' might mask ideologically irrelevant tales in letters from younger authors.

## Conclusions

By exploring the role of generation in the expression of emotional discourse, 'rights' and entitlement, and finally, personal relationships, we can properly understand what

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<sup>120</sup> GARF, f. 5446, op. 81a, d.22 ll. 145-6. Olga Skorokhodova was the 'success story' of the Kharkov School for the Deaf and Blind. Though little has been written about her directly, more about her life can be found in: I. Sandomirskaja, 'Skin to Skin: Language in the Soviet Education of Deaf-Blind Children, the 1920s and 1930s', *Studies in East European Thought*, 60:4, (2008), pp. 321-337. Charles Beacroft is also currently working on deaf-blind children in the early Soviet period. His thesis, titled 'Educating the Uneducable: The Education of Soviet Deafblind Children in the Soviet Union, 1926 – 1960' is in progress at the University of East Anglia.

women understood the New Soviet Woman to mean. The diversity in outlook present in the sources, apparently across generational lines, might at first glance negate any conclusions we can draw about distinct generational cohorts of women based upon the timings of historical events in their lifetimes. By applying socio-selectivity theory, and in particular the idea of 'perceived time remaining', it is clearly possible to mitigate this diversity. The concept aids understanding of how, despite the 'separate lives, with individual sorrows and achievements' involved, it is still possible to identify distinct generational patterns in the responses of women to the new Soviet state, and in particular, the New Soviet Woman.<sup>121</sup> Since the shorter the amount of time that a person perceived to remain in their lives causes people to attach themselves to meaning-focused goals, rather than focusing more upon novelty, potential and the acquisition of skills, 'perceived time left' produced clear delineations in the reception of the new Soviet gender discourse by women at different stages of life. Empirically, this seems to be a salient determinant of the content of letters. When writing about tenets of the New Soviet Woman, women placed a clear social premium upon literacy and labour, and the Revolution more broadly. Those girls and women who perceived less 'time' ahead of them tended to relate different aspects of their lives to Soviet discourse, in different ways.

Since 'perceived time left' roughly corresponds with age, we can see how this forms a broad 'framework' upon which to understand women's experiences. But, it is not enough simply to rely on chronological measures alone. Women who grew up before the Revolution were obviously influenced by things that were not the Soviet state, in terms of their experience of interpersonal relationships, language acquisition, and historical events. Likewise, the age at which letter-writers experienced the Revolution

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<sup>121</sup> Carsensten, 'The Influence of a Sense of Time on Human Development'; Ransel, *Village Mothers*.

affected their perception of it, as well as the discursive tools they possessed in correspondence with authorities. This combination of dynamics presents a convincing blueprint of the lives of women and girls in the Soviet Union from which to understand their reception of the gender ideology of the new Soviet state. That 'perceived time left' plays a role is important when understanding particular emotions experienced and (perhaps more importantly, expressed) by women and girls hinted at in the letters thus far examined, and which will form a portion of the analysis in the thesis.

That Arganova found such satisfaction in her contribution to the literacy drive amongst women whom she described as her 'daughters', as part of a broader desire for meaning at the end of her life, in the first decades of the Soviet state is particularly interesting.<sup>122</sup> The role of generation as it is influenced by social and historical time was most pertinent when analysing women's senses of self in their personal relationships, evoking depictions of the self in 'genealogical terms' as part of a larger Soviet family. The changing nature of the family and gender relationships also had a particularly tangible practical effect upon women's lives: not only in terms of their social and moral standards, but in that social events such as marriage, divorce, parenthood all affected a woman's ability to make a living in the Soviet Union, and often affected their personal safety and material well-being. Women were sharply affected by historical processes in their appreciation of what is 'normal', and in addition, seem to be influenced practically in their outlooks by social events such as marriage and motherhood that generally occur within particular age ranges. However, their perceived sense of 'time left remaining' also influences their framing of particular events and processes, such as the transformative power of the Revolution, or the social value of their labour.

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<sup>122</sup> GARF, f.7279 op.8 d.15 ll.33-34.

Therefore, in order to properly understand the way women and girls consider themselves in terms of their emotions, rights and relationships, the understanding of generational cohort which appears to be most credible when assessing the voices of women is as a group of individuals who, broadly speaking, share both a common historical context for their earlier, most formative years; and a similar perception of the time remaining in their lives. The scene described by Arganova, and the sentiments she evoked, exhibit these characteristics of generation clearly. In her discussion of the Revolution, she spoke of a future that she would not be part of, internalising Soviet generational discourse with an explicit acknowledgement of the lack of time ahead of her, something she saw as defining her experience, apart from the other, younger women of her village. In Arganova's recognition of her role, as a woman *and* a mother (both literally and figuratively speaking), we can see the convergence of both pre-Revolutionary, and new Soviet social norms. Her discussion reflects both the monumental time of pre-Revolutionary kinship both in terms of language and social structure, as well as an attempt to secure her 'role' or 'legacy' in the Soviet future by relating herself to those she perceives as having the available time to assume a significant role in that future.<sup>123</sup> Arganova's letter to Krupskaja, which we encountered earlier, encapsulates both elements of generational identity: socio-historical time; and perception of available time.

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<sup>123</sup> GARF, f.7279 op.8 d.15 ll.33-34.

## Chapter Two

‘A new system of feelings, new psychology, new emotions and new culture’: Locating ‘un-Soviet’ emotions in the emotional landscape of the new Soviet State.

Ruminating on the differences between their own lives and those of their mothers in 1939, five members of a women’s reading circle in Essentuki wrote to Nadezhda Krupskaja, after whom their new library had been named, to ask her to approve the tribute to her and her husband: ‘In our country, there has been constructed and developed a new system of feelings, new psychology, new emotions and new culture’.<sup>1</sup> This new system of feelings was credited by the women to Lenin, to whose memory they had opened the library. They asked Krupskaja to ‘accept this modest monument to grandfather Lenin, who freed woman from centuries of slavery, and opened for her the path to the conquest of the human mind.’<sup>2</sup>

For these women, the new system of feelings, psychology, emotions and culture was an intrinsic element of Soviet life and womanhood, and their letter discussed little else beyond its meaning to them, and to the activities of their group (which they had briefly listed). Yet, the phrasing of their sentiments is quite curious. The women conceptualised their role as women in Soviet society primarily as raising the next Soviet generations, stating that ‘[t]he woman as mother, and as teacher of the New Soviet Person, is assigned the important task of educating ourselves in the essence of high culture, high knowledge of contemporary science, technology, and art. Through the creation of our club, we strive to help women acquire all knowledge, and to raise their cultural level.’<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> GARF, f. 7279, op. 17, d. 38, l.1

<sup>2</sup> GARF, f. 7279, op. 17, d. 38, l.1

<sup>3</sup> GARF, f. 7279, op. 17, d. 38, l.1

Their work, then, seems not to have been finished: in 1939 responsibility for women's advancement still seems to have rested squarely with them.

Following the Revolution, Soviet authorities sought to re-forge the Russian mind, body and soul in their entirety. The New Soviet Man and Woman were to be subject to a new system of feelings more suitable to a socialist society, and characterised by revolutionary zeal and happiness, and a righteous anger towards class enemies. In essence, the state sought to revolutionise the private and emotional life of Russian citizens, deconstructing the 'individualism' around which emotional lives had previously been constructed, and destroying the causes of 'unhappy' emotions. This would be of particular significance to women in the new Soviet state. Since the newly 'emancipated' Soviet woman had been granted entitlement to divorce, alimony, suffrage, abortion (albeit temporarily), and wage and labour equality, which would allegedly relieve her suffering under capitalism, neither she nor any other group of Soviet citizens had any real 'need' for unhappy emotions or negativity.

Instead, women had a civic obligation to express public and collective gratitude and happiness in line with discourse promoted by the state in posters, education, letters and speeches. They had been granted happiness and freedom, materially and socially, by the Soviet state, first, under Lenin.<sup>4</sup> Fostering what Jeffrey Brooks has called a 'moral economy of the gift' in the construction of the vanguard party as the new Soviet society's 'benefactor', Lenin had established 'gratitude' as a primary feature of the Soviet emotional vocabulary: citizens should express gratitude for the opportunities for

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<sup>4</sup> C. Kelly, 'A Joyful Soviet Childhood: Licensed Happiness for Little Ones', in M. Balina, E. Dobrenko (eds), *Petrified Utopia: Happiness Soviet Style*, (London, 2009), pp. 4-5.



socialist happiness opened to them (attainable through self-sacrifice).<sup>5</sup> Following the consolidation of Stalin's leadership, these gifts were owed to Stalin and his command of the state. The 'economy of the gift' was expanded further by 1935, when citizens were informed that socialism had been 'achieved'.<sup>6</sup> Yet in reality, though public childcare and employment for women apparently now abounded, women were left in a peculiar position, for they had been saddled with both domestic and public employment through two decades of economic and political uncertainty, and experience with undoubted potential for unhappy experiences and feelings. In the midst of this, they were assigned the responsibility for building the next generation, critical to the ongoing success of the Revolution.

Since they would grow up entirely free from pre-Revolutionary influences, children in the early Soviet state, were recognised as a key target for propaganda, and so propaganda for and about them absorbed and intensified through the 1920s and 1930s a key Soviet trope about 'happy childhoods'. The press throughout this period explicitly associated negative experiences with the tsarist past. Unhappy children suffered as a result of bourgeois influences, whereas in the workplaces of the home and the factory an adherence to the emotional and behavioural norms 'gifted' to the population by the Party produced happy children – and subsequently happy adults. A typical example reproduced in posters, photographs, parades, speeches and letters to, for and from children, was that of 'Thank you beloved Stalin for a Happy Childhood!'. There were often some variations: 'beloved' was often replaced with 'Father', 'Comrade', or even 'Uncle'. A 'happy childhood', however, required affirmations of gratitude and indebtedness in performances of socialist happiness, in order to confirm the ideological

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<sup>5</sup> J. Brooks, *Thank You Comrade Stalin! Soviet Public Culture from Revolution to Cold War* (Princeton, 2001), p. 83.

<sup>6</sup> Brooks, *Thank You Comrade Stalin*, p. 83.

acceptability of the sentiment, and as Brooks notes, to 'solidify' the political hierarchy that was in place more broadly.<sup>7</sup> As such, by the end of the 1930s, the emotional discourse of Soviet society was considered to have been fully established, with an entire generation of adults having reached at least the age of twenty-two since the Revolution. By the outbreak of war in 1941, there was an entire generation of citizens, born, educated, and socialised in the new Soviet state. Following Stalin's proclamation in 1935 that 'life has become better, life has become merrier', the end of the decade constituted a crucial milestone in the construction of socialism. In print, the 'negative life experiences' of the tsarist past that had featured in NEP-era publications took a backseat, replaced by internal enemies and 'pre-Stalin' elements, and overshadowed by depictions of smiling Soviet citizens.<sup>8</sup>

Despite this, Soviet society was still in its infancy: several generations raised under tsarist rule remained, generating a curious dichotomy in discourse on the construction of socialist society and in particular, the new psychology and system of feelings. The language of feelings and well-being in the 1930s appears initially to have been unambiguously positive: life had become merrier, women had been successfully emancipated and as a result, a generation of 'happy youth' had been raised. Yet, subtly apparent amidst the celebration is an increased focus upon happiness as an ongoing 'process' in public discourse as it relates to wider society. Though the tone is more rigidly and relentlessly positive tone in that discourse relating directly to 'youth', the complex identities of those partly raised prior to the Revolution were ideologically compelled nonetheless to participate in the process. Older people were vital

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<sup>7</sup> Brooks, *Thank You Comrade Stalin!*, p. 84.

<sup>8</sup> Brooks, *Thank You Comrade Stalin!* On p. 86, Brooks discusses the evolution of the 'negative past' in the Soviet press. As discussed in chapter one, *Krokodil* magazine in November 1936 ran a special edition to celebrate the Stalin Constitution. It depicted on its front cover a crowd of joyful, smiling citizens.

participants in the jubilant society in construction, as bearers of the historical memory of the tsarist past and Soviet foundation myth, as shown earlier in the thesis.<sup>9</sup> Though life has *become* merrier by 1935, it has become *merrier (veselee)*, rather than *merry (veselaia)*, or *happy (schastlivaia)*. The process was still ongoing, allowing public emotional discourse to retain an optimistic and forward-looking tone.<sup>10</sup> As the women of Essentuki had described their aims: '[t]he woman as mother, and as teacher of the New Soviet Person is assigned the important task of *educating ourselves* in the essence of high culture, high knowledge of contemporary science, technology, and art. Through the creation of our club, we *strive to help women acquire all knowledge, and to raise their cultural level.*'<sup>11</sup> Therefore, although arguably by 1939, women *should* have reached the same cultural and educational level as the socialist man, since they had been granted the tools to do so, it was accepted that, due to their particularly backwards state prior to 1917, this was not necessarily the case. The women remained positive, but recognised their own responsibility. Lenin freed women by opening a path to them, not by raising them up. Their happiness, then, became their own responsibility.

By 1939, women possessed a civic obligation to express joy and gratitude for their freedom, if they were not yet rid of their 'backwardness'.<sup>12</sup> However, whether this afforded them greater leeway in their articulation of negative emotions, or introduced greater rigidity, is not immediately clear. The 'future-oriented' focus of socialist happiness, for women in particular, created a space in Soviet emotional discourse for less roundly 'positive' Soviet emotions, such as anger and disgust for un-Soviet elements

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<sup>9</sup> More on the role of older generations as the bearers of historical memory of the tsarist misery defeated by the revolution can be found in S. Lovell, 'Soviet Socialism and the Construction of Old Age', pp. 564-585.

<sup>10</sup> Kelly, in 'Joyful Soviet Childhood', discusses on p. 3 the distinctions between the variety of epithets related to happiness.

<sup>11</sup> GARF, f. 7279, op. 17, d. 38, l. 1. [italics my own]

<sup>12</sup> Fitzpatrick, 'Happiness and Toska', p. 357.

of society. These emotions were accessible to both older citizens, and the otherwise happy younger citizens, as both were expected to struggle against the anti-Soviet elements that had been identified and lampooned throughout the 1920s and 1930s, such as kulaks, NEP-men and religious believers.<sup>13</sup> What is clear, however, is that the discourse reproduced by women emphasised a consistently 'future-oriented' character to the conceptualisation of 'socialist happiness' – a path to 'progress', to 'light' from darkness'. Soviet work was now finished, and women's work had begun: their lives had been made better, yet their equality and their *happiness* – their own transformation – was in their own hands. Thus, any residual negative, or un-Soviet emotions, would be associated solely with the past, or a present to which citizens were obligated to improve. Consequently, emotional discourse in the early Soviet state was certainly of great importance both in the maintenance of the public mood by authorities, in the promotion of particular emotional states in public discourse, and consequently in the rationalisation of divergent emotions by women – or in other words, how they sought to navigate this emotional regime with their more troublesome feelings, whilst remaining newly made 'Soviet Women'.

## **A New System Of Feelings**

The first decades of Soviet power were a clear demonstration of the significance of emotions to both power and ideology, as authorities struggled to measure and control the public 'mood', and to ensure full and total support of the project of socialist

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<sup>13</sup> An overview of the social crises that faced the Soviet Union in the 1920s, resulting in the emergence of these internal foes, can be found in: W. G. Rosenberg, 'Introduction: NEP Russia as a "Transitional" Society', in S. Fitzpatrick, A. Rabinowitch, R. Stites (eds), *Russian in the Era of NEP: Explorations in Soviet Society and Culture*, (Indiana, 1991), pp. 1-11.

construction. As Nicole Eustace has claimed, 'efforts at emotional control constitute negotiations of power': in other words, feelings and emotions evolve over time, either by direction or organically, and hold political meaning.<sup>14</sup> Thus evidently it is, at this stage in the study of emotions, more useful to consider what Julie Livingston has termed 'the politics of emotional expression' and the way in which individuals navigated their shared script, than the authenticity of their bodily experience of said emotions. In short, it is more fruitful to focus upon 'smaller truths' than universalistic claims.<sup>15</sup> That individuals are constrained by their emotional vocabularies, shaped themselves by contemporary social and political conditions, is particularly pertinent to a society such as that of the early Soviet Union, in which, clearly, huge shifts in social and political conditions had occurred in the lifetimes of its citizens: as such, it is of great value to understand the way in which these emotional vocabularies might have been shaped by the conditions in which the citizens acquired them.

To summarise briefly the introduction above: emotional discourse in the 1920s and 1930s was particularly distinctive, as the state fought to redefine the emotional lives of its citizens. As the construction of socialism progressed into the 1940s, so too would the absorption into official culture of the idea that happiness could be enjoyed – but it still required individual work. The Soviet Union had no real place for unhappy emotions. They were viewed as 'decadent moods', since they were considered symptoms of capitalism, which would, as with other such 'capitalist' phenomena as prostitution, abortion, and the nuclear family, eventually wither away. Though the tone of the 1920s was *relatively* mixed, the optimistic flavour of cultural discourse was undeniable. The construction of socialist happiness was underway, and by the mid-1930s, it was simply

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<sup>14</sup> N. Eustace, E. Lean, J. Livingston, J. Plamper, et al, 'AHR Conversation: The Historical Study of Emotions', *American Historical Review*, 49:2, (December, 2012), p. 1525.

<sup>15</sup> Eustace, Lean, Livingston, Plamper, et al, 'AHR Conversation', pp. 1490, 1513.

impermissible to fail to recognise one's own happiness – or progress towards it. By this time, there was essentially a civic obligation to express public and collective happiness, in line with the discourse promoted by the state, intensifying after Stalin's 1935 declaration about life having become 'better and 'merrier'. Not to recognise this, as Catriona Kelly has argued, became 'tantamount to a political crime'.<sup>16</sup> However, it would prove impossible to enforce this 'political requirement' for happiness in any meaningful way, as realistically the remit of authorities in this respect was limited to the government of public expression emotional experiences. Moreover, the positive emotional experiences acknowledged almost by definition the existence of an 'emotional opposite', forcing negative emotions back onto the political agenda.

As Fitzpatrick has astutely noted, it is perhaps impossible to attempt to draw findings beyond the 'conventions of performance' of a society and its citizens:

I can't tell you how people "really" felt in Stalin's Russia. For that matter, I'm not sure how accurately I can tell you how I feel today, and if I were to make claims about *your* emotional condition – individually and collectively – those claims would be very dubious. What is accessible to the historian is the emotional repertoire of a society – which emotions were most frequently performed (expressed) in a specific historical (social, cultural) setting, and what the conventions of performance were.<sup>17</sup>

Moreover, and as Sheila Fitzpatrick again has noted, 'confessional' letters to authorities formed a relatively small, but significant portion of citizen communication with authorities, citing the definition by Dal' in his 1881 dictionary: 'a sincere and complete confession (*soznanie*) or explanation (*ob''iasnenie*) of one's convictions, thoughts and

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<sup>16</sup> Kelly, 'A Joyful Soviet Childhood: Licensed Happiness for Little Ones', p. 4

<sup>17</sup> S. Fitzpatrick, 'Happiness and Toska: An Essay in the History of Emotions in Pre-War Soviet Russia', *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, 50:3, (2004), p.357.

actions'.<sup>18</sup> Fitzpatrick goes on to highlight that readers of these letters 'get an immediate sense of the unmistakably *personal* flavour of many of the public letters that people wrote to political leaders, and even to newspapers and government institutions.'<sup>19</sup> Undoubtedly, though we might be unable to ascertain the 'veracity', 'authenticity' or physiological experience of the emotions expressed in letters to authorities, we might also reasonably assume a certain level of *sincerity* in these letters, in relation to their genre and context. Likewise, it would be implausible to root the study of emotions too robustly in 'bodily experience', as William Reddy and Jan Plamper have suggested.<sup>20</sup> The process of ensuring that emotional expressions are accurate articulations of bodily experiences and emotional states, though hypothetically interesting, is of limited utility to the study. Indeed, as part of the same 'conversation', Barbara Rosenwein stated that:

Even our most "sincere" and "unpremeditated" expressions are willy-nilly constrained by our emotional vocabulary and gestures. They are shaped as well by our conventions, values, and even implicit "theories" of emotion... Emotions are largely communicative tools, and if we are to understand one another, we are wise to express ourselves through well-worn paths that all of us are familiar with.<sup>21</sup>

As noted by Anna Wierzbicka, 'we know from introspection that, on the one hand, we are capable of a great variety of feelings, and on the other, that these different feelings are not capable of being counted'. Whether different feelings are understood to be shades of the same emotions, or different emotions entirely depends to a significant degree upon the language 'through the prism of which these emotions are interpreted'. As such, attention must be paid both to the idiosyncrasies of the Russian emotional vocabulary, and to an appropriate 'semantic metalanguage' with which to analyse the

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<sup>18</sup> *Tolkovyi slovar' zhivago velikorusskovo iazykla Vladimira Dalia*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed, (St Petersburg, 1881), cited in S. Fitzpatrick, 'Supplicants and Citizens: Public Letter-Writing in Soviet Russia in the 1930s', *Slavic Review*, 55:1, (April, 1996), p. 82.

<sup>19</sup> Fitzpatrick, 'Supplicants and Citizens', p. 82

<sup>20</sup> W. Reddy and J. Plamper, part of Eustace, Livingston et al., 'AHR Conversation: The Historical Study of Emotions', p. 1492.

<sup>21</sup> B. Rosenwein, part of Eustace, Livingston et al., 'AHR Conversation: The Historical Study of Emotions', p. 1496.

former.<sup>22</sup> According to Wierzbicka, a small set of simple concepts, including 'feel', 'want', 'say', 'think', 'know', 'good', and 'bad', having been 'independently verified as plausible candidates' are the most appropriate for the task.<sup>23</sup> The complexity of locating generically 'good' or 'bad' feelings within Soviet emotional discourse precludes the restriction of an analytical terminology to such 'simple and universal' concepts.

Furthermore, as Kelly has shown, the vocabulary usually associated with 'good', or 'happy' emotions, in Soviet emotional discourse in the 1920s and 1930s, created a number of difficulties for those citizens who wished to reproduce it. For example, the Russian word *schast'e* – a word usually rendered into English as 'happiness', is arguably quite a particular emotional state, associated with 'good fortune', or elation: a type of 'earthly bliss', a potential force, that is not necessarily to be relied on. Similarly, *radost'* – usually translated as joy or gladness - and *vesiolost'* (fun, merriment), both suggest a response to some other event or condition, rather than as some permanent condition.<sup>24</sup> The word *dovol'stvo* – roughly translated as contentment, a more constant type of happiness - is perhaps, according to the Russian ethno-linguist Anna Zaliznyak, cited by Kelly, a better representation of 'happiness' as it is understood in the English language. Nonetheless, as an emotional state, this sense of 'contentment' is usually conceived of as dependent on a particular set of circumstances – and in any case, is not the language usually associated with socialist happiness.<sup>25</sup> According to Zaliznyak and Kelly, it follows that this sense of transience imbues the language with a particular dualism: happiness (even as it is understood in English) tends to be a short-lived phenomenon,

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<sup>22</sup> A. Wierzbicka, "'Sadness' and 'Anger' in Russian: The Non-universality of the so-called 'Basic' human emotions', in A. Anathasiadou, E. Tabakowska, (eds), *Speaking of Emotions: Conceptualisation and Expression*, (Berlin, 1998), pp.4-5.

<sup>23</sup> A. Wierzbicka, "'Sadness' and 'Anger' in Russian', p. 6.

<sup>24</sup> Kelly, 'A Joyful Soviet Childhood', p. 3.

<sup>25</sup> A.A. Zaliznyak, I.B. Levontina, A.D. Shmelev, *Klyuchevye idei russkoi iazykovoi kartiny mira*, (Moscow, 2005), p. 167, cited in Kelly, 'A Joyful Soviet Childhood', p. 3.



particularly once it is recognised, and is intimately connected with its opposites.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, happiness as presented by official discourse, i.e. as a permanent state of elation, joy – and gratitude – would by its nature have been very difficult to express convincingly, without an equivalent ‘pair’. Expressions of happiness therefore implicitly recognised sadness, yearning, anticipation or anxiety; all politically ‘unnecessary’, and not quite Soviet emotions. Thus, the difficulty of using such language as this is compounded. Yet, this dualism takes on a function in the reproduction of popular political discourse, in terms of navigating what Kelly termed ‘civic obligations of collective joy’, and finding a ‘place’ for un-happy emotions.<sup>27</sup> Accordingly, the direct usage of ‘positive’ emotional language in women’s letters does not appear to be as frequent as might otherwise be expected. The articulation of ‘happiness’ and ‘gladness’, and other such positive emotional states, is fairly limited, and with quite particular functions.

Choosing to focus upon happiness and *toska* (longing or yearning), two feelings which ‘cover a fairly wide gamut’, Sheila Fitzpatrick in her exploratory study of emotions in pre-war Soviet Russia expanded the perspective of the historiography, to begin to address the *use* of emotional discourse by citizens, rather than particular emotional states.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, Fitzpatrick begins to explore the presence of both ‘Soviet’ and ‘un-Soviet’ emotions in the voices of citizens in the 1930s: her results indicate a flexibility to the Soviet emotional landscape hitherto little considered, and a process of dichotomy, negotiation and performance which clouds the resoundingly positive discourse promoted by authorities.<sup>29</sup> In particular, the study addresses the idea that ‘grief and

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<sup>26</sup> Kelly, *A Joyful Soviet Childhood*, p. 3.

<sup>27</sup> Kelly, *A Joyful Soviet Childhood*.

<sup>28</sup> Fitzpatrick, ‘Happiness and *Toska*’, pp. 357-371.

<sup>29</sup> Fitzpatrick, ‘Happiness and *Toska*’, p.370.

melancholy' could be expressed in the period, as long as they were not causally linked with the regime.

The letters addressed thus far in the thesis support the assertion that women understood emotional discourse to be flexible enough to accommodate negative feelings, though there appears to be more to the story. It is therefore crucial to explore the implications of different intersections of identity for negotiations of Soviet power, and to public identity. Generation, in particular, has already been shown to be present in the way women perceived of themselves and their experiences of Soviet power. As has been identified in the letters discussed already, though women did not *necessarily* possess interests determined by their generational cohort, the way in which they articulated their narratives in letters to the state was significantly impacted by the historical context in which they acquired language, and to a lesser extent, literacy. Their generation also provided them with a symbolic frame of reference against which to negotiate their social value with the state. Though the previous chapter has shown that women were conceptually quite fluent in Bolshevik discourse, the examination of emotions to follow will demonstrate that the technical fluency of women of different generations varied. That said, their conceptual understanding of their roles as older or younger women would serve to 'mitigate' any technical inarticulacy or presumptions of ideological irrelevance that were present in their prose.

Bearing in mind the basic premise that a perception of life's finality would ostensibly cause a person to attach greater importance to finding meaning and satisfaction from life, seeking 'positive' emotional states, we can also mitigate any differences in the tone

and style of letter writing not attributable to life events or political literacy in this way.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, the correspondence between this desire for personal meaning and for broader social relevance reveals the types of emotional expression women understood to be appropriate for a Soviet woman to articulate. That women evoked these emotional devices in requests for assistance, lenience and simply acknowledgement reflects a broad social understanding, informed by one's generational cohort and degree of fluency in Bolshevik language, of the types of emotional expression likely to curry favour with, or mask dissatisfaction from, editors or authorities.

### **Vagueness, Omission, and Performance as Emotional Euphemism**

To pursue the assertion that the historical context of one's upbringing affects one's emotional language, it is also critical to examine the language which might be used in place of explicitly emotional expressions, since, as William Reddy noted with regards to gaps in historical document, 'What remains unsaid can be eloquent.'<sup>31</sup> Considering the particular focus upon 'happy' emotions within Soviet emotional discourse, 'what remains unsaid' is then particularly worthy of exploration. Grondelaers and Geeraerts, in their study 'Vagueness as a Euphemistic Strategy', provide perhaps the most illuminating insight into the nature and function of said 'gaps', addressing a historiographical neglect of the communicative importance of language as emotional expression.<sup>32</sup> In identifying language *as* emotional expression, focus is shifted to the emotive connotations of expressions 'not primarily designed to denote emotions', in

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<sup>30</sup> L. Carsensten, 'The Influence of a Sense of Time on Human Development', *Science New Series*, 312:5782, (June 30, 2006), p. 1914.

<sup>31</sup> W. Reddy, as part of Eustace, Lean, Livingston, Plamper, et al, 'AHR Conversation: The Historical Study of Emotions', p. 1498.

<sup>32</sup> S. Grondelaers and D. Geeraerts, 'Vagueness as a Euphemistic Strategy', in A. Anathasiadou, E. Tabakowska, (eds), *Speaking of Emotions: Conceptualisation and Expression*, (Berlin, 1998), p.357.

particular, euphemistic strategies to avoid 'taboo' subjects or emotions'.<sup>33</sup> Grondelaers and Geeraerts use 'euphemism' to denote an avoidance strategy, whereby 'an emotionally neutral or positive word' is used instead of a negatively connoted, or 'taboo' word, and 'vagueness' to denote 'semantic under-specification', for example, with the substitution for an emotionally charged expression of 'unhappiness', of the intentionally non-specific description of one's difficult circumstances, or emotional performance.<sup>34</sup> Vagueness as a euphemistic strategy thus has clear applicability in the Soviet context. Since, as Kelly has noted, not to recognise the joy Soviet power brought to everyday life had become 'tantamount to a political crime', negative emotions functioned as un-Soviet, decadent moods: essentially, as political taboo. Indeed, this was explicitly evident in the response of the Soviet authorities to the emotional lives of its citizens, monitoring the 'mood' in the cities and villages, and forwarding 'un-Soviet' correspondence to newspapers and officials for further inquiry. Similarly, records of suicides were halted following anxieties about an 'epidemic' during the 1920s, and unwillingness by authorities to publicly address this.<sup>35</sup>

Having observed the types of allegory evoked in political propaganda, such as speeches and posters, of darkness versus light, and forward motion versus regression reproduced in letters of any genre, to discuss negative feelings or situations in place of direct mention of 'despair', 'sadness', or 'frustration', the concept of euphemistic strategies enriches the study of emotional expression in letter writing in this context. The group of teachers encountered earlier, who had written to Molotov in 1936, referred to their

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<sup>33</sup> Grondelaers and Geeraerts, 'Vagueness as a Euphemistic Strategy', p.358.

<sup>34</sup> In their study into the use of vagueness as euphemistic strategy in discussions of cancer, which they substituted in euphemism for 'disease', Grondelaers and Geeraerts distinguished this function of vagueness from its alternatives in order to establish robust empirical support for the thesis, and isolate contexts in which the vagueness was attributable only to avoidance, rather than, for example, a lack of medical expertise.

<sup>35</sup> C. Baudelot, *Suicide: The Hidden Side of Modernity*, (Cambridge, 2008), p. 97.

perceived right to 'be able to look back, retire, and live comfortably', having lived and worked through the Revolution, strongly implying that their present circumstances were not the comfortable retirement they deserved.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, Kh. Korneieva, the elderly woman we also encountered in the previous chapter, who wrote to *Krest'ianka* magazine in 1924, lamented the obstacles facing women's public participation in public life, writing: 'Help us ... that we are not again left in the dark, we want light, we are dark now and many are illiterate, though many try, so few are strong [...] Sorry this is poorly written...'.<sup>37</sup> In addition to connotations of generation, discussed in detail earlier, Korneieva's letter reflects her conception of a relationship between the emotional and political transformations of the Revolution, to which the allegories of light and dark were wedded. Moreover, the vague metaphor of 'darkness' as a descriptor for their lives reflects a rather negative appraisal of their present experience of Soviet power, which was intendedly diminished by the statement of their efforts at self-improvement. Korneieva indicated that their failure to attain the enlightenment of Soviet selfhood was due to their fundamental backwardness, as elderly peasant women. The sources discussed thus far in the thesis therefore indicated that, though women frequently wrote to authorities about less than satisfactory experiences, it is quite plausible that the outright omission of any direct reference to a negative emotional state, with a more factual description of the problems inherent in their lives allowed them to do so. The strategy of omission or vagueness, coupled either with the metaphorical evocation of revolutionary transformation, or a strictly factual description, was intended to moderate the degree of responsibility women were increasingly expected to take for their own 'socialist happiness'. In this way, omission and vagueness functioned as a

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<sup>36</sup> GARF f. 5446, op. 82, d. 51, ll. 130-133.

<sup>37</sup> RGAE, f. 395, op. 1, d. 5, l. 87.

strategy to soften the 'blow' to the regime of its citizens' dissatisfaction. The frequency of the strategy's usage reflects the proficiency with which Soviet women interacted with their political environment.

This chapter argues that women emphasised the impermanence of their negative emotions, affording the emotions a sense of physicality, and not only creating a distance between the performer and the act, but a sense of transience to the feeling itself. Moreover, of those letters examined this far, a number contain references to emotional *performances*, which offer an alternative strategy for presenting politically 'inappropriate' emotions. Crying would appear to be one such performance of emotion. Maria S., whose biography of her daughter Liza we encountered in the previous chapter, described how she wept over the loss of her children: 'It is hard for a mother to lose her children, such as mine, and my old eyes weep, but I am proud of my own children Lisa and Volodia, who sacrificed their young lives for the struggle against the bourgeoisie.'<sup>38</sup> The act of crying remained in the present tense, but was attributed to her eyes, rather than her sense of self; moreover, she describes her internal emotions as ones of pride. In contrast, a young girl named Lera, delighted at her receipt of a postcard from Nadezhda Krupskaja confirming her assistance with her acquisition of medical care, reported 'crying like a fool with joy'- because due to this, her mother could now go out and get her medicine tomorrow.<sup>39</sup> She was able to attribute her tears to her 'internal' emotional state, because were feelings of joy and gratitude were politically acceptable in the Soviet context.

Yet it is prudent not to restrict study to the analysis of particular 'named' emotions through this prism since, as noted earlier 'we know from introspection that, on the one

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<sup>38</sup> RGAE, f. 396, op. 2, d. 30, l. 42.

<sup>39</sup> GARF, f. 7279, op. 14, d. 14, ll. 23-4.

hand, we are capable of a great variety of feelings, and on the other, that these different feelings are not capable of being counted'.<sup>40</sup> Though studies of particular emotions in both the Soviet Union and in Russia have been fruitful, they are by their nature particular, and as such would require a vast linguistic mapping in order to be able to begin to assess their relationship to Soviet gender identities. It is of more use therefore to consider broader strategies for articulating negative emotions, in order to account both for the degree of communicative variation possible in women's letters and for our inability to fully know the exact emotional experiences indicated. As such, it is possible to locate women's letters within the political cultural context of the Soviet Union, by examining their uses of direct emotional expressions, descriptions of performative emotions, or euphemistic uses of language *as* emotion.

### **Constructing Socialist Happiness: Self-Fulfilment And Gratitude**

As suggested in the introduction to this chapter, and indicated by many of the letters consulted in chapter one, women in the early Soviet Union shared common strategies, such as omission, vagueness, or suggestion, to eschew open criticisms of the regime, to avoid expressing that they are unhappy, or to safely express negative experiences of Soviet power. Common amongst these strategies is an acknowledgement of their own responsibility for the attainment of happiness, framing the enjoyment of the benefits of Soviet power as a 'process', or a struggle, to overcome the remnants of the old way of life, in which they should rightfully participate. Frequently women translate this struggle, like that of the acquisition of education, or entry into labour, into the paradigm of darkness and light.

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<sup>40</sup> Wierzbicka, "Sadness" and "Anger" in Russian', p.4.

Also notable is the extent to which women are aware that though they are responsible for their bad feelings, they are ideologically obligated to express the necessary gratitude to the state when their socialist happiness arrives. Expressions of gratitude were quite sharply delineated by the author's generational identity: while younger women state their thankfulness for the opportunities for betterment and a productive future, as we might expect from the discussion in chapter one, older women tend to infuse their gratitude with a sense of sorrow that they will not experience Soviet power for very long. For example, Arganova's 1930 letter to Krupskaja, cited in chapter one, seems, on a first impression, to be an expression of joy and self-fulfilment through the Soviet project, yet underlying its initially jubilant tone is an allusion to a sense of painful anonymity and sorrow at the end of one's life, increasingly evident through the course of Arganova's narration.<sup>41</sup> Arganova's account of her work for the Revolution indicates a continuing sense of grief for her deceased child, or at least a lingering sadness that her daughter did not live to see the benefits of Soviet power, perhaps to be forgotten after her mother's death. In a similar vein, Arganova emphasised that she was 'known', that she was part of the Soviet project, indispensable to her community – and would not be forgotten. Both aspects of her writing suggested an underlying sadness, yet both were couched in the vocabulary of socialist happiness. The letter, in its totality, told of a woman coming to terms with her own mortality, in a society she only briefly encountered. 'I know that I will die, but I know that the undertaking will never die', she stated, apparently desiring acknowledgement of her contribution.

A similar strategy for articulating dissatisfaction was employed by one self-identified *pensionerka*, who, writing on behalf of her husband and herself, for assistance in obtaining a state pension, implored Molotov:

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<sup>41</sup> GARF, f. 7279, op. 8, d. 15, ll. 33-34.



Don't forget us old people, give us a piece of personal happiness, and so that we would be happy though at the end of our days, and from the heart can say 'our homeland is the USSR – there's a land of joy, a country of universal happiness.'<sup>42</sup>

This forthright and almost bargaining tone was unusual amongst women's letters more generally, though less so amongst letters from marginalized groups. As has been discussed, older people were for the most part sidelined in early Soviet discourse: their 'role' in the Revolution was over, the socialist project to be left to the new Soviet generations. Yet, this elderly writer outlined her role as an active participant in the Revolution, suggesting that she *should* be able to tell of the universal joy of the Soviet Union, emphasizing how important it was to her, and to her legacy, that she should benefit from Soviet power. Her tone almost bartered with the authorities for assistance in building socialist happiness. In her letter, the *pensionerka* practically proved her eligibility for access to happiness: she had not withdrawn from labour 'voluntarily', or at the first opportunity, but had 'worked until [she] fell down'. Nonetheless, the *pensionerka* wrote of happiness in the terms of a 'conditional future', a request for *access* to Soviet happiness, rather than permission to attain it. Clearly, she did not experience the obligatory socialist happiness, and seemed unafraid to say so. At the end of their days, the *pensionerka* implied, the pair had earned their 'piece of personal happiness', and in addition, sought satisfaction and meaning at the end of their lives.

Both women, Arganova and the *pensionerka* portrayed their adulthood at the time of Revolution as evidence of their deserving efforts, rather than as evidence of their tsarist upbringing. Both had witnessed the misery of life before 1917 and had worked to construct its alternative. Considered in tandem, the letters from these elderly women show that women wanted to – or made themselves seem to want to – participate in the

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<sup>42</sup> GARF, f. 5446, op. 82, d. 51, l. 254-5.

collective happiness they saw the new Soviet person experience in discourse. They wanted their lives to correspond with that of the New Soviet Woman. They feared 'losing out' on a place in Soviet society, and the 'rights' to which they appear to have felt entitled by virtue of their participation in the revolutionary project.

This kind of consistent reference to 'future', as yet unattained, socialist happiness, or to past suffering, also reflected another significant shade of negative emotion expressed in letters by women to the Soviet state: feelings of alienation or loneliness from the positive experiences of Soviet power had by peers. It is in these letters that the 'vagueness' women employed as euphemistic strategy to describe the difficult process of obtaining happiness is particularly apparent. A young girl named Nura wrote a seemingly formulaic salutary letter to Krupskaja, suggesting a meeting, at the end of December 1930:

Long I have dreamt to have (*imet'*) a correspondence with the great leader of the young friends of Pioneers... I do not have the opportunity to visit Moscow, I have no father or mother, and I do not have the means to visit Moscow and see you. Happy are those Pioneers who have the opportunity to see you. But I will unfailingly work in the squad to get permission to visit, then I will get happiness to see you, dear friend... I hope I receive a reply from you, I will be very proud amongst my comrades, that I have a correspondence with you

P.S. I've attached a few stamps for a speedy reply!<sup>43</sup>

Upon closer inspection, however, many of the features of omission as euphemism present in the previous correspondences are present. Nura spoke of the happiness she would feel, if only she could 'chat' with Krupskaja. She evoked 'happiness' – but in future tense, not in its permanent, socialist sense. Nura also positioned herself on the 'outside' of her circle of peers. She referred to *those* Pioneers who had already had the opportunity to see, or meet Krupskaja, as happy. Nura, on the other hand, had neither

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<sup>43</sup> GARF, f. 7279, op. 8, d. 15, ll. 57-8.

parents nor material means to facilitate this, and thus, was not one of those Happy Pioneers, though she *would* have been with just a letter, to prove her correspondence with Krupskaja.

By relating her current condition to Krupskaja in this way – an orphan, with no resources for travel, and desiring the happiness of a personal meeting, and if not then at least a letter – Nura conveyed a sense of anticipation. It may be that Nura simply saw a childish sense of pride, or competition in ‘standing out’ amongst her fellow Pioneers – which would be quite understandable. However, by the way that she related her lack of means it seems just as likely that she sought a ‘level playing field’ upon which to relate to peers, a just extension of the opportunities to partake in the happiness she saw them as possessing, either with their families, or with more material means. Nura’s sense of anticipation ostensibly masked a sense of loneliness, and alienation from her peers.

These feelings of longing were reflected by other features of Nura’s letter. The timing of the letter just before *novyi god* (New Year), which assumed a secular cultural role akin to the Christian Christmas, added a sense of poignancy and longing to the letter. Touchingly, she included stamps to facilitate a reply from Krupskaja as best she could. Reading the letter as a whole, while paying attention to the way that Nura discussed happiness, and the features of her young life which were lacking, we can see clearly the way that she used euphemism to express a sense of loneliness, and perhaps longing or anticipation for the sense of socialist happiness she saw her peers experience. In doing so, Nura avoided attributing responsibility for her ‘un-Soviet’ feelings of loneliness and longing to the Soviet regime itself. Although Nura was disadvantaged by the circumstances of her upbringing, she had already embarked upon the process of

achieving happiness by engaging with authorities, and making the most of her membership of the Pioneers.

This strategy of allocating responsibility for dissatisfaction with a party other than the author or government, in order to preserve the author's role in the construction or attainment of happiness, was another common theme in letters to the state. Another letter to Krupskaja about women's work in the village, this time from 1930, lamented the writer's perceived sense of her own backwardness; she felt that the promises of Soviet power were still abstract, detached from her own experience. Yet, she sought to identify the cause of this dissatisfaction as 'village life', and her womanhood: 'I felt that if I had gone to work with them one year ago, I would have made myself useful to the liberation of the workers, but our dark village life has confused my understanding of life, and I was motionless, like many peasant women!'<sup>44</sup> The reflexive form of the verb 'to make (oneself)' here emphasised her responsibility as a citizen to participate in the Revolution, identifying conditions upon the benefits bestowed by Soviet power. The author perceived her life until this point as having failed to aid the construction of socialism, however by employing reflexive language, the author clearly assigned the culpability for this failing to herself. It is the author who was responsible for her dissatisfied state, and it was never the responsibility of the state to 'rescue' her. Still, by 'implicating' the relatively generic 'village life', the writer was able to avoid portraying herself and her activities since the Revolution as actively anti-Soviet. She was unhappy, her situation unfortunate, yet this is *because* she did not experience Soviet power, not due to the privations its first decade granted. The author made clear that, although she was 'late to the Party', she had not rejected the Revolution's transformative power, but sought to work with it, to bring its benefits to her life and her village.

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<sup>44</sup> GARF, f. 7279, op. 6, d. 8, ll. 33-5.

Another letter depicting the struggle to obtain the Soviet happiness still ‘looming’ over the horizon can be found in a letter written to Krupskaja several years earlier, in 1928, by a young woman named Maria Sh. Aged twenty-three, Maria had been very unhappily married to an abusive man since she was sixteen. With few options for self-improvement, and her marriage at a breaking point, she turned to Krupskaja for advice to improve her awful circumstances. Although she was trapped in a very abusive marriage, Maria was still able to portray her struggle to safety as part of the broader struggle for self-improvement. In doing so, she avoided direct discussion of any type of emotion, positive or negative. Yet, the feelings the situation evoked in her were clear: she did not yet participate in the socialist happiness for which she, as a young woman, was expected, to be grateful. Nor did she appear, at the time of writing, to be engaged with the ‘opportunities’ provided by Soviet power. Still, her letter was imbued with a poignant sense of sorrow that, due to her strategy of omission, was not necessarily in conflict with state discourse:

Only after a long while have I decided to write to you, and ask you for advice. I am 23, and it is now seven years since I married, I have two children, and now my husband, almost every day tells me that, he can cheat on me anyway because I have nowhere to go... And if I leave him, I will have to go on the streets and sell myself. Actually he’s right, there’s nowhere to go...<sup>45</sup>

Though Maria Sh. did not directly mention any feelings at all through the letter, her imprecision served to give full weight to the implications of each episode she recounts. That her response to her husband’s infidelities, and his instruction that if she left, she would have to engage in sex work on the streets, was simply: ‘actually, he is right’, might almost be described as factual. The sparse manner of her description effectively emphasised the desperation of the situation, and her sense of certainty of her own

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<sup>45</sup> GARF, f. 7972, op. 6, d. 8, l. 25.

powerlessness. Yet, at no point did Maria Sh. refer directly to her own feelings about her circumstances.

In a similar manner, Maria Sh. tied her economic disadvantages firmly to her health. She prescribed her unhappy circumstances a concrete, medical basis, suggesting that her difficulty resulted from her husband's coercion, rather than the material destitution suffered by many throughout the 1920s. However, it is clear that Maria's financial conditions were attributable, at least in part, to an experience of Soviet power. Maria provided the necessary information to deduce that her poor material circumstances were related to the Civil War: Maria Sh. would have been sixteen in 1921, and the first years of her marriage would have taken place in the years of reconstruction following the Civil War:

At sixteen years to free my mother from unnecessary burdens, I left to get married. The first years we lived on nothing, then children, lack, disadvantage and a few abortions undermined my health and now of course he says 'who needs you?'

Since they followed the pregnancies in the first years of her marriage in 1921, we can deduce that the catastrophic abortions Maria described took place in the mid-1920s, several years into the life of the Soviet Union. The way she referred to her abortions implies strongly that they were coerced in some way, a fact which could challenge the Soviet Union's emancipation of women, and concern for public health. Maria's association between her unwanted abortions and her poor health was made unproblematic, by her *husband's* culpability, with an abusive relationship with an individual responsible for the apparent coercion. Her husband's control over her reproductive capacities was presented by Maria's letter as an aggravating factor, if not the cause, of their real hardship, rather than the circumstances of their marriage. In any case, it is clear from her letter that her negative experiences were not a result of her

own inaction in the construction of socialism. Maria went on to emphasise her desire for opportunities for self-improvement:

And here I ask you to give a little advice, whether to study and where, or somewhere to arrange to work and how to arrange it. I would of course very much like to study to know everything... If you have the spare time, answer at.... [ADDRESS]. Maria Sh. <sup>46</sup>

Though Maria Sh. from the start presented her letter as a request for counsel, she discussed her previous attempts to improve her situation without state assistance, and thus avoided the implication that state facilities have been absent or insufficient. Though she had tried to find work, and get a fuller education, and made the most of the opportunities provided for women, and had tried to go to a summer school for adults, she was unable to complete the class when one of her children became ill with measles. Maria Sh. steered clear, however, of taking credit for her efforts for herself, tying her choices in life to a 'collectivist' attitude, wishing not to burden her mother, nor to live on the labour of others. At the time of writing in 1928 this would have been in alignment with discourse on domestic life, as the nuclear family was not yet 'rehabilitated', and citizens expected to zealously construct socialist society through their efforts in labour, public and private life.

Overall, Maria Sh.'s letter demonstrates the employment of vagueness and omission as euphemism for unhappy feelings, in order to foreground the process of self-improvement necessary for the acquisition of the benefits of Soviet life. Maria Sh. was not old enough to participate in the Revolution proper, as the *pensionerka* and Arganova had done, yet unlike Nura, she was old enough to remain culpable for her inaction in the construction of socialism after the Revolution. Clearly, requests by both older and younger women for respite from wretched material or domestic circumstances

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<sup>46</sup> GARF, f. 7279, op. 6, d. 8, l. 25.

frequently framed this in terms of building socialist happiness and a socialist future, obtaining for themselves a 'piece of personal happiness'.<sup>47</sup> Common euphemistic strategies used to acceptably articulate negative experiences and feelings within the Soviet regime included the expansion, so to speak, of revolutionary light, as well as statements of personal responsibility to obtain socialist happiness.

Yet, these attempts to 'Speak Bolshevik' in the retelling of individual struggles were sharply distinguishable according to generation. In particular, the allusions and strategies of avoidance stand in stark contrast to the jubilant and thankful manner in which the majority of missives from children were written. Nura's sense of anticipation is distinct from the missives from her elders. As a Pioneer, who was raised in a children's home she had essentially always been in full possession of the opportunities of Soviet youth at the time. Her use of the opportunities that she had thus been granted for the betterment of her circumstances was implied. Whereas Maria Sh., Arganova, and the *pensionerka* could 'unlock' a sense of belonging, and therefore happiness, Nura was raised entirely under Soviet power, and so her 'unfailing work' alone would be key to her happiness. The delineation of emotional expression according to generation cohort, then, illuminates the ambiguity of the status of adult and elderly women after the Revolution, and the flexibility this afforded them in their emotional experiences of Soviet power.

Two letters from young girls, both addressed to Molotov, rather than Krupskaja, highlight this rigidity of the emotional regime for younger women, denoting explicitly their eternal obligation to the paternal Soviet state. One letter, from a young girl named Asya Omarova wrote to express her gratitude over her stay at the children's camp Artek,

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<sup>47</sup> GARF, f. 5446, op. 82, d. 51, ll. 254-5.



and followed a format common among children at the time, focusing solely on her gratitude to the paternalistic state. Her letter provided a striking counterpart to the melancholy tones of the letters discussed previously:

Dear father, Viacheslav Mikhailovich Molotov. In July this year, I rested in Crimea in the pioneer camp 'Artek'. I will never forget this happy day [...] We live joyfully and well, this happy life was given to us by the Communist Party and our beloved father Comrade Stalin [...]<sup>48</sup>

The inherent paternalism of the Soviet state is indicated by Asya's reference to Molotov, as well as Stalin, as 'father'. Though men and women might nominally have possessed equal status within the new Soviet society, this was, as Brooks has explained, necessarily in permanent subordination to a paternal – and patriarchal – benefactor.<sup>49</sup> The newest Soviet generation in particular were encouraged to regard authorities as nigh-omnipotent protectors, to whom gratitude must be expressed.<sup>50</sup> Asya's eternal indebtedness to the regime as a Soviet child was indicated by the reverence in which she stated she held her memory of her day at 'Artek': an unforgettably happy day.<sup>51</sup> Asya stated the obligation owed to Stalin for her joyful young life and its provision by state services so explicitly that it is almost beyond comment. Asya's letter did however go on to describe the self-education she had performed in this respect. Asya was aware of her indebtedness to 'the great Stalin' and his 'closest companions' because she had herself read the Stalin Constitution:

Thanks to the great Stalin and you, his closest companion, for a happy [and happy] childhood. I read the Stalin Constitution and understood there is a lot that is good and joyful for us [...]

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<sup>48</sup> GARF, f. 5446, op. 82, d. 56, ll. 302-4.

<sup>49</sup> Brook, *Thank You Comrade Stalin!*, p. 85.

<sup>50</sup> A fuller explanation of the development of the Stalinist leadership cult for Soviet children is presented in C. Kelly, 'Riding the Magic Carpet: Children and the Leader Cult in the Stalin Era', *The Slavic and East European Journal*, 49:2, (2005), pp. 199-224.

<sup>51</sup> The Pioneer camp 'Artek' was founded initially as a 'health' camp for children, after the Civil War. Its status in the Soviet Union escalated, and it eventually became something of a 'model' Pioneer camp.

Take from us once again our ardent pioneer greetings. Asya Omarova, Pioneer of Zakatala District, Azerbaijani SSR<sup>52</sup>

By making clear that she had read the Stalin Constitution, and understood the gifts it provided, Asya indicated an awareness amongst young girls, as well as women, that responsibility for educated and cultured socialist happiness lay with the citizen, as much as the state. Though Asya's letter appeared quite scripted, showing little of the lived experience behind the pen, more atypical reproductions of this discourse of happy childhoods and gratitude reveal relationship that their young authors understood to exist between their political environment and their selves. Three school-friends or siblings (it was not clearly specified which) from Kharkov, Galia, Elia and Shura wrote to Molotov in a similarly jubilant tone in 1935 to thank him for the books they had received at their school:

Hello, Uncle Molotov! We received your books, thank you for these books! Uncle Molotov, we have put your books in the library, and each taken out one for ourselves [...] Uncle Molotov, we promise that for the new school year we will strive for excellence and success. Shura is a Pioneer and will wear a tie, Elia and Galia are Little Octobrists and will wear stars. Uncle Molotov Galia is very sick and probably will not survive. Uncle Molotov, Galia is very sick with Scarlet Fever. Goodbye, Uncle Molotov, we wish you well!<sup>53</sup>

The relentlessly positive tone of the disclosure of Galia's illness is jarring, and almost absurd in its juxtaposition with the children's academic affiliations, though probably largely attributable to the children's youth. Yet, by comparison with Asya's letter, the tone of gratitude and opportunity imparted upon children remains striking. The children were aware, even at an early age, that their social identities as Little Octobrists and Pioneers, and related sense of public belonging, were dependent upon their

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<sup>52</sup> GARF, f. 5446, op. 82, d. 56, ll. 302-4.

<sup>53</sup> GARF, f. 5446, op. 82, d. 41, l. 81.

fulfilment of certain political criteria, such as personal endeavour towards academic excellence. Their emotional expressions followed suit.

Such an awareness of the contingency of Soviet belonging upon the fulfilment of particular criteria – such as labour and self-improvement – was frequently expressed in communications with authorities, particularly among the young. A young woman, Elena Bykova, requested assistance from Molotov in dismantling the obstacles she faced in finding employment. Twenty-three years old at the time of writing in 1937, Elena would have been in infancy at the time of the Revolution in 1917. Having been raised in Soviet kindergartens, schools and youth groups, would have been keenly aware of the symbolic social and political significance of productive employment to a Soviet woman:

Dear Viacheslav Mikhailovich! I appeal to you [...] with a request to stop the mockery and lawlessness that is committed against me, a young Soviet person. The Stalin Constitution enshrined the right to work for every citizen. Comrade Stalin spelled out the words ‘The son does not answer for his father’. And now, despite the Leader’s instructions, despite the Constitution, I [...] a young Soviet schoolgirl [...] I can not find work for myself.<sup>54</sup>

Notable in the beginning of her letter is the author’s explicit familiarity with Stalinist maxims. Though her father’s business had caused his classification as a social alien, Elena was vehement that Stalin’s assertion that ‘the son does not answer for his father’ should be applied to her own circumstances. Her feelings of disenchantment and humiliation therefore reflect that her circumstances contravened Stalin’s own words – if she should not be punished for her father’s political crimes, then her potential employers’ rebuttals were, at best, politically problematic. Though she went on to state that she was twenty-three at the present time, Elena took care to reiterate her Soviet upbringing, and consequently, the longevity of the influence of Soviet principles upon her:

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<sup>54</sup> GARF, f. 5446, op. 82, d. 65, l. 157.

A Soviet school *brought me up*, the Soviet government gave me the opportunity to get an education. I'm twenty-three, my whole life, all my views were created in our Soviet reality, in Soviet society. And now, now I actually have been deprived of the right to work, I have had taken away the opportunity to repay my debt. [...] Viacheslav Molotov, I ask you to help me with this, give me the opportunity to work hard and I assure you, I will give my all for the benefit of our homeland.<sup>55</sup>

Conspicuously, the debt of the Soviet citizen to the state reappeared in Elena's letter, which reflects Brooks' concept of the moral economy of eternal gratitude existed of moral and political debts to the state, which had to be repaid in exchange for full Soviet citizenship.<sup>56</sup> For Elena, the deprivation of these rights was akin to 'mockery' and 'humiliation', anathema as unemployment was to her worldview, which was 'created', as she wrote, in 'our Soviet reality'. Elena established a sense of comradeship and common purpose with Molotov himself by referring to 'our Soviet reality', and constructed a 'bond' between the pair, which she used to construe her unhappiness as an aberration. Ultimately, Elena's pleas were effective. Her letter was forwarded by Molotov to another official, Tikhmirov, with the notation 'It is necessary to sort out and quickly arrange the matter of work of comrade Bykova'.<sup>57</sup> In turn, Elena wrote back to relay her exuberant thankfulness, emphasising again the relentless discursive expectations of gratitude:

Dear Viacheslav Mikailovich! I would like to express my gratitude to you for your paternal care and attention to me. Again, thank you. Thanks to your participation, I feel that I am a full-fledged citizen of our Great Socialist Motherland [...] I wish you, dear Viacheslav Mikhailovich, many many [sic] years of work for the happiness of the people.<sup>58</sup>

In addition to reinforcing the perpetuity of Elena's gratitude to the authorities, both for the resolution of the matter but more generally for the paternal care for citizens, her note of thanks reflected the contingency upon which Elena's sense of inclusion in the

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<sup>55</sup> GARF, f. 5446, op. 82, d. 65, l. 157. (italics my own)

<sup>56</sup> Brooks, *Thank You Comrade Stalin!*, p. 83.

<sup>57</sup> GARF, f. 5446, op. 82, d. 65, l. 157.

<sup>58</sup> GARF, f. 5446, op. 82, d. 65, l. 156.

happy socialist society depended: her ability to repay her 'debt' for the gifts granted by the motherland through productive labour. This was echoed, somewhat, by her wishes for Molotov that he be 'rewarded' with many, many years of *work* for the happiness of the people. The relationship between socialist labour and happiness, and a sense almost of indenture to the State for providing the opportunities to acquire these is palpable in letters from women across generations. A sense of gratitude for the gifts that women *did* have, and their completion of part of a process towards socialist happiness in the place of direct attention to unhappy experiences, served to mitigate euphemistic confessions of negative feelings and experiences. This was a strategy that was employed fluently by women throughout the late 1920s and the 1930s, as women of all ages acceptably communicated their negative experiences of Soviet power by thanking authorities for the opportunities of improvement, or gifts of legislation, that it provided.

In 1936, one response to the 1936 Decree on the Protection of Motherhood addressed to Krylenko, from a woman named Glumova, opened with the statement: 'I wish to express my deep gratitude for your great attention to women, who have been suffering mockery from their husbands.'<sup>59</sup> Her letter went on to explain that the alimony arrangements made by the decree protected women against the abuses and infidelities of their partners. Women's struggles in this respect were subsumed as part of the necessity of raising 'the healthy children needed to strengthen and defend our Soviet country', deflecting any direct discussion of the feelings raised by the decisions of husbands and wives 'to seek sexual intercourse on the side'. Though the inclusion of the decidedly negative experience of 'suffering', in addition to the mockery of Soviet values posed by politically unsavoury elements is conspicuous, the letter's confessional tone served the broader intention of the letter effectively. The threats to the Soviet state and

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<sup>59</sup> GARF, f. 9424, op. 1 d. 1476, ll. 54-5.

the healthy Soviet family lay not in the individual spousal conflicts, but ‘prostitution[,] as the remnants of the old tsarist life’, to which the experiences of ‘suffering and mockery’ by women were directly related.

A confessional tone in the articulation of negative experiences was a common feature in letters of gratitude. Though the combination of gratitude and ‘confession’ might in part be due to the dualism inherent to such language as ‘gladness’, and ‘joy’, these phrases must have served some purpose within a discourse which valued permanent states of elation so highly, and at such great cost. This is illustrated by a letter from a ‘mother of many children’ to the Ministry of Justice, following the 1936 Constitution which rewarded mothers of large families. The writer confessed that she had been mocked and humiliated prior to the drafting of the Constitution (so effectively for up to nineteen years of Soviet power):

Often before this time people who had no children laughed at us, because we had a lot of children, and sometimes scolded us, reproaches were heard everywhere... Glad we are now that the state wants to give us, the mothers, such a great help, for which, of course, we thank it!<sup>60</sup>

This additional information was not strictly necessary to the letter, the purpose of which was to welcome the news of material assistance for large families. The admission of socialist *un*-happiness – humiliation and mockery by her fellow Soviet citizens, as a direct result of Soviet policy - seems again to be nested within a letter of gratitude for the purposes of legitimacy. As someone who, since she had had enough children to qualify for state assistance, was presumably at this point well into adulthood, it appears that the writer is evoking the familiar trope of having waited for the benefits of Soviet power – but continuing to wait. Like Arganova, whose letter to Krupskaja we addressed

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<sup>60</sup> GARF f. 9424, op. 1, d. 1476, l. 130.

earlier, she sought relevance to the regime as someone no longer in her youth, yet, she did not have the benefit of an unwritten future and a sense of dependence any longer. Instead, she had the responsibility of a large family. Therefore, she effectively 'reinforced' her gratitude for the attention to her difficult lot. Another common aspect of Mother-of-many's letter is her desire not to be left out of the Soviet public consciousness. In her gratitude to the 1936 Constitution, the letter-writer conveyed a sense that, prior to this, her existence and her role as a mother were devalued, ignored, or ridiculed – which was equally likely to be a result of tsarist power and the remnants of tsarism in her community, or the revolutionary discourse on the family that characterized the 1920s. The writer chooses not to specify. This sense of gratitude for acknowledgement after a period of unhappy anonymity was very common in responses to the decree. A woman named Zaelenskaia presented a similar sentiment in her response to the 1936 Decree:

I read this project with such admiration, with such great joy that I have not encountered in my 43 years of life, that our Communist Bolshevik Party and Soviet Power are going to remove mothers' hardships [...]<sup>61</sup>

Zaelenskaia's use of the adjectival 'maternal', or in this context, 'mothers', implied a sense that her negative experience was shared amongst women under Soviet power. Yet, this implication is mitigated considerably by the sense of 'admiration'. The inclusion of her age – forty-three years old – was included to suggest that she was born, and partially schooled prior to the Revolution, and so the novelty of her admiration was significant: it presented Soviet power as having been (on balance, at least) an improvement to mothers' lives. The durability of the 'maternal hardships', which in this context we might presume to be material and ideological - implied that their total

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<sup>61</sup> GARF, f.9492, op. 1, d. 1475, ll. 137-8.

removal is a considerable feat, having spanned at least the lifetime of the author.

Zaelenskaia went on to propose a further stipulation to the decree:

My personal consideration is to establish help for mothers of families of 4-7 children, as there are more such families in the state than [have] 7-11 children [...] maybe this is difficult for the state, but it will be possible to establish smaller amounts as benefits [...] I am making my proposal because it is terribly difficult to rise [this many] children [without other adults to help].

The letter explained that, with a 'usual' rate of births in one's lifetime in mind, 'as for the help to mothers who have 11 children, the older ones, reaching the age of 22, 20 or 18, are able to assist the parents. I take this as an example from the life of members of our collective farm'.<sup>62</sup> Zaelenskaia's 'personal consideration' ostensibly pointed out a perceived oversight present in the decree. Yet, by framing this as an issue for the collective – i.e. in terms of an eternal 'mothers' hardship', and drawing from the experience of many on her collective farm, Zaelenskaia was able to demonstrate the existing benefits of Soviet power, which served to amplify the sense of admiration noted at this new decree.

Gratitude, and a desire to work *towards* socialist happiness, then, were commonly employed methods used by women to articulate negative experiences of, or feelings under, Soviet power. The discursive requirement of Soviet citizens to continuously demonstrate thanks to their benefactors provided the space for them to identify grievances, if only to suggest they had been, or could be resolved through assistance and a process self-improvement. This gratitude was frequently accompanied by a sense of 'confession' of the hardship endured after the Revolution. Overall, the expression of gratitude for the rectification of a hitherto unknown grievance constituted one of a number of techniques used to portray happiness as an obtainable entity. Women sought

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<sup>62</sup> GARF, f. 9492, op. 1, d. 1475, ll. 137-8.



to alleviate the implications of their negative experiences by thanking the state for helping them, by demonstrating their participation in the transformation of the Revolution, or by choosing to omit any direct mention of their feelings. In general, it appears that younger women's strategies for negotiating the Soviet 'emotional regime' were more restricted: having been raised with the opportunities for education, participation in labour, or collective life more generally, their negative emotional experiences were expressed more commonly through thanks, evidence of self-improvement, or omission entirely. Older women, as bearers of historical memory, and whose futures in the Soviet state were relatively short, were at relative liberty to present their negative emotional states with more flexibility.

### **Emotional Performance and Medicalised Feelings**

The endlessness of these expressions of appreciation and gratitude, the requirement of their authenticity, and the permanence of their symbolic significance compelled women frequently to 'perform' such feelings, placing distance between themselves and the feeling. This textual 'performance' served to maintain detachment for any perception of inauthenticity or inappropriate emotions. By performing emotions physically, or ascribing them a physical or medical character, women were able to describe moments of high emotion – and risk – without implying their permanence. Likewise, women frequently constructed negative experiences or feelings as medical complaints. In doing so, their emotional conditions were externalised, and treatable. Emotions which were performed or medicalised cast no aspersions on the Soviet self.

A daughter and mother, Lera K and 'M.K', wrote to Krupskaja in 1937, to express gratitude for the assistance they had received from her in order to obtain medicine for Lera, who had been seriously ill.<sup>63</sup> In her response to having received a postcard that morning from Krupskaja, briefly cited earlier in the chapter, Lera found herself was 'crying like a fool with joy': the postcard reported that her mother would be able to go out and get her medicine tomorrow. Once she was well, Lera would be able to study, and read good books – 'probably *Pionerskaia gazeta* or *Leninskie Iskry*', if she could get them. 'Grateful-to-you Lera' and her endearing and over-excited thankfulness, despite the fact that she had been unable to read good (Soviet) publications, as I have discussed, expresses a relationship with the state typical of Soviet childhood: able to depend on a benevolent state for a chance at a happy childhood. Her mother's note at the bottom of Lera's letter told us more of the meaning of the exchange. M.K. describes Lera's medical suffering through her illness, explaining how difficult it had been 'to see [her] child suffer on the sidelines', and that there were 'no words' with which to describe the change in her face now that her 'joyful soul' had returned.

Of course, there must have been correspondence prior to this postcard, outlining Lera's suffering, at least in some form, and it is not evident from this letter alone the degree of detail relayed in the previous letter to Krupskaja. What we can infer, however, from this letter of thanks, is that the *emotional* suffering that Lera enjoyed was most likely not shared with Krupskaja initially. The note from Lera's mother, written as a post script, possessed an almost confessional tone: if Lera's pain was described in their request for assistance, her mother's almost certainly was not. This was appropriate only within a letter whose purpose was to send gratitude. Coupled with the sheer elation the pair

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<sup>63</sup> GARF, f.7279, op. 14, d. 14, ll .23-4.

articulated, it might be gathered that the gratitude for state assistance served to legitimise the confession of this sorrow.

On the other end of the emotional spectrum, having suffered financially and emotionally from abandonment by a husband and father one woman wrote of her highly emotional state, and the sorrow that her daughter suffered due to her own broken relationship. She described her daughter's unhappiness as a state which was 'performed', rather than felt: '[My daughter], of course, understands everything. And she suffers together with her mother. She comes home and cries: 'I'm not going anymore, because they tease me, that my father left you' ... And what about the conditions of the child and mother?... *We must punish bullying.*'<sup>64</sup> The writer evoked the image of the next generation in order to legitimise writing to authorities about her feelings of despair. Additionally, as it has been established is a common feature of letters from women of childbearing age, she evoked her role in the next generation as a mother; her role in monumental time: '... she suffers together with her mother... what about the conditions of the child and mother?' In doing this, the writer establishes the potential permanence of her position in the Soviet future: if it is not her case which is properly addressed, it would be someone else's; playing upon the new Soviet state's anxieties, she suggests that the fate of the mother is inextricably linked to the fate of the child, the future Soviet citizen.

Upon this context, perhaps in order to reconcile her place in women's time with the collectivism of the Soviet state, the writer then suggested that '*We must punish bullying*'. This 'we' chimed with the collectivism that would be expected by authorities from citizens, yet the writer also positioned herself as working *with* the state, allowing her to subtly transfer some responsibility for her unhappy circumstances, should they continue, to

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<sup>64</sup> GARF, f. 9424, op. 1, d. 1476, l. 92 (italics my own).

the authorities. Perhaps due to the potential repercussions, the writer stopped short of making a formal complaint (*zhaloba*) against her ex-husband; her tone remained throughout grateful for changes in legislation, and forward-looking in its suggestions to work together. Nonetheless, the letter retained a sense of the physical performance of this suffering: far from existing in a continuous way in this state of suffering, the mother – and in particular, her daughter – act out the emotions, through crying, as though to remove themselves from any permanent emotional state. The letter also sought to limit the temporal space occupied by this negative experience, requesting a ‘trial’ for the cruel and mocking former spouse. In this way, through the textual construction of a performance of emotional justice, and subsequent ‘punishment’ for the emotional suffering wrought on the family, the mother and child suggested that the negativity should be ‘fleeting’, that Soviet power should not allow these feelings or experiences to remain. Depictions of emotional performance, both physical and symbolic, therefore, allowed women and girls to depict highly emotional moments in their letters to authorities, without suggesting their permanence. In essence, the reduction of negative experiences and feelings serves to remove the politically unsavoury emotion from the person’s sense of ‘self’ in relation to the Soviet project.

Crucially, where problematic emotions were not able to be ‘performed’, women often ascribed them a medical, or physical character. Their negative feelings under Soviet power were therefore externalised – and critically, made treatable. In this manner, Olga Dmitrieva forwarded a concern for her material well-being to Mogilny, medicalising her sense of distress in their description of ‘heart attacks’. Worried that the lack of response from Molotov implied that he had refused her request for an increase in her pension, she framed her request to Mogilny in an apologetic tone:

Dear Comrade MOGILNY! First of all, I apologise for the trouble, forgive me for writing to you, but I'm very concerned that I did not receive anything from Viacheslav Molotov, that he refused my request [...] I am completely alone, I have no one else to ask, and no one helps me, except Viacheslav Mikhailovich. I'm so worried about this that I've frequently started to have heart attacks [...] Olga Ivanovna Dmitrieva (Kharkov)<sup>65</sup>

Of course, it seems unlikely that Olga was really suffering from heart attacks with worry about her situation, and common wisdom about the experience of panic attacks would suggest that this is a more likely explanation for her physical distress. Significant in this context, however, is that the physical symptoms of her despair are the primary explanation for her repeat communication to authorities. Being able to assign her psychological distress a *physical* character serves as a justification for the urgency with which she makes her request for assistance. Her anxiety is not considered a 'permanent' emotional state, nor a basic flaw in Soviet social provision, but a medical issue solvable with special attention to her material needs as women eligible to draw a pension.

In a similar manner, Kondratieva, whose husband (a scientific researcher) had been imprisoned, sought to 'medicalise' the reasons for her opposition to her husband's incarceration, stating that though her husband has already served more than half his sentence, the time left ahead seemed endless and her husband's health could not take it:

At the end of the summer, the doctor found his heart and nervous system so shaken that he claimed to need to transfer him from Suzdal for special treatment. My husband is currently feeling so unwell that he is forced to interrupt his scientific studies, and this alone supported him in his cheerfulness of spirit. I am afraid, that if it goes on like this, he will lose the opportunity to work in the field of science.<sup>66</sup>

The physical medical symptoms Kondratieva describes were tied clearly to her husband's 'cheerfulness of spirit'. Though the exact nature of Kondratiev's health problems was unspecified, it seems as though his imprisonment, which interrupted his

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<sup>65</sup> GARF, f. 5446, op. 82, d. 56, l. 30.

<sup>66</sup> GARF, f. 5446, op. 82, d. 56, ll. 153-156.

scientific research, had caused his mood and subsequently his mental health to decline significantly. Kondratieva's prognosis of her husband's conditions suggested that his unhappiness – or the inability to undertake scientific endeavour, which in turn undermined his 'cheerfulness of spirit' – would lead to the failure of his ultimate rehabilitation into productive labour, as he would be unable to return to his work. Though Kondratieva seems to have been contesting the principle of her husband's imprisonment, and its effect on his wellbeing, she took care to ascribe his overall decline a physical character – that of the heart and nervous system – as well as to emphasise the socialist value of his scientific work, to mitigate any apparent criticism of the arrest and imprisonment itself. No mention was made of his alleged crime. That Kondratieva explained her husband's mental health condition as a physical ailment may in part be related to the physical symptoms that often accompany mental health conditions. However, she made clear that the illness is related to the loss of his 'cheerfulness of spirit', implying that she did not wish necessarily to hide his depressive symptoms. The substitution of physical for mental health, therefore, appears to have acted as a means of externalising the symptoms. By placing his illness outside the Soviet self, Kondratieva emphasised that neither Kondratiev's crimes, nor his loss of 'spirit' reflected his inner being, which remained that of a healthy and productive Soviet citizen.

Nonetheless, many women's letters took less care to 'mask' mental health conditions, instead explaining them simply as illnesses, or related to 'triggers' of a temporary nature. A woman named Yeva Friedlander sought to defend her husband in response to his arrest by medicalising his state of inaction in his own defence:

My husband is mentally ill, gravely mentally ill. His illness is not outwardly detectable, and it was not detected by investigator Dolgov in Cheliabinsk, it does not show up in fevers or in rashes, but it suppresses his desire to live.<sup>67</sup>

Yeva's letter took clear issue with her husband's treatment by authorities, calling into question the grounds for his arrest by raising the issue of his mental health, alleging that the investigators were mistaken in their assessment of him. The authenticity of Yeva's medicalization of her husband's circumstances may be assumed to be correct, yet beyond a simple statement of medical fact, the disclosure functions as a strategy for delivering criticism of the acts of authorities. Their *correct* diagnosis, as Yeva frames the matter, would result in the possibility of treating the illness, and dispelling the un-Soviet behaviours her husband had demonstrated. Yeva delivered the information about her husband's mental illness astutely, mitigating symptoms of his illness deemed un-Soviet (such as dissatisfaction, sadness, and lethargy) by focusing on the urgency of his lack of 'desire to live'. This leaves the reader to assume that, had her husband the desire to live, he would undoubtedly participate meaningfully in the Soviet project. Beyond this, Yeva stopped well short of stating explicitly that investigator Dolgov was incorrect. Rather, she stated clearly the invisibility of her husband's condition, to lessen the error she perceives in the authorities' actions, placing responsibility for the unfortunate situation abstractly 'with' the illness.

A similar strategy was employed under quite different circumstances in a letter to Molotov from a woman in Leningrad, requesting material help, in 1934. She limited the instance of her unhappiness to a single instance, imploring Molotov: 'Forgive me for taking up your time. I decided to turn to you in a moment of despair'.<sup>68</sup> The author –

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<sup>67</sup> Letter from Yeva Friedländer to Presidium of Supreme Soviet, 16 May 1938, GARF, f. 7523, op. 23, d. 201, l. 49. Certified typewritten copy, in *Stalinism as a Way of Life*, L. Siegelbaum, A. Sokolov, (eds), p. 229.

<sup>68</sup> GARF, f. 5446, op. 82, d. 42, l. 71.

whose signature could not be deciphered - went on to suggest, writing herself into Molotov's revolutionary narrative, that she had been close with his brother and aunt. As time passed, however, she found herself in 'extremely difficult conditions'. She was low-paid, and supported both herself, and her sick and elderly 'substitute mother'. Though her conditions were described as difficult, they are separated from the fleeting negative feelings, the 'moment of despair', about the experience. Unexpectedly, she went on to claim that 'life is not worthwhile on such a small salary' - a particularly unusual statement of desperation, directly associated with her state salary, particularly since it implies that the future would *not* change for her or her mother.

However, the emotional narrative established effectively allayed the responsibility possessed by the state for the author's desperation. Having been acquainted with Molotov (in reality or fiction), the author implied the longevity of her revolutionary credentials. By suggesting that the low pay she received for her labour was used to support an ailing adopted relative, the author underlined her collective outlook, and her actions to this end. Finally, by suggesting that, in her moment of despair, she felt that life was 'not worth living' on such a low salary, she afforded her plea a temporary, and crucially, a remediable quality: by granting her request for a wage increase, the government could alleviate the conditions which had triggered the lapse in the woman's psychological health. In letters to authorities which sought to pathologise or medicalise problematic or high risk emotional states, or negative feelings, therefore, it was feasible for women to internalise the difficulties of their surroundings, so long as they provided a solution. This solution could, women understood, be material assistance, earned through the longevity of the author's commitment to the Revolution, or self-improvement.



This is demonstrated further in the letter from a young teacher, Gardovskaia, who in 1929 described the sorrow with which she struggled against religion in her community, as well as the resistance her instruction of gender equality faced, as a source of physical pain. She wrote to Krupaskaia, as the Deputy Minister for Education, for reassurance:

It's painful to hear this in the twelfth year of the revolution. We do not want to understand that a woman is also a person [...] As soon as one looks at these peasants how much one wants to do in order to enlighten them a little, it would be like that, and they would turn over their old way of life to a new one, but they will not work when you work, you work and you can not see the benefits of results[...]<sup>69</sup>

The familiar allegories of enlightenment, and the transformation from old to new are present in her letter, explaining the source of her frustration and unhappiness as the remnants of the 'old way of life', which could be remedied by the 'illumination' Soviet political consciousness provided. A reply from Krupaskaia, in the same file, apologised for the delay in her response, reassuring the writer of the value of her efforts:

Dear comrade,

I did not answer your letter for a long time, there are so many jobs this year that I do not have time to do anything: I send you my last books, they can help you a little in your work with the pioneers [...] Can it be [already] obsolete at twelve years old, what has been maintained for centuries? Rural life and working conditions delay the emancipation of women.<sup>70</sup>

Krupaskaia's response related neatly to the ideological language in the letter she received: the old way of life was to blame for the sluggishness with which the benefits of Soviet power were dispersed, to shed light on the corners of the rural regions of the Union. Nonetheless Gardovskaia's work was not in vain – she was to maintain her belief in the potential of her socialist labour to bring results. Self-sacrifice – still the flavour du

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<sup>69</sup> GARF f. 7279, op. 7, d. 18, ll. 58-60.

<sup>70</sup> GARF f. 7279, op. 7, d. 18, l. 61.

jour of the 1920s – and tenacity through the painful process would, it was implied, eventually succeed in educating the peasant children, bringing the emancipation of women to the Gardovskaia's village for the next generation.

Soviet women and girls used a variety of methods to mask and articulate unpleasant, unhappy and negative emotions in communications with the state. The 'moral economy of gratitude' was employed, with considerable effect, to emphasise the gifts bestowed by the state, and bargain for assistance, or allege un-Soviet behaviour against lower level bureaucracies. Generational identity was demarcated by the selection either of gratitude for the opportunities for self-transformation, or gratitude for the happiness a Soviet childhood provided. Additionally, the transience of negative emotional states was frequently suggested by the euphemism of physical performance or treatable physical symptoms. Women used these strategies assuredly and effectively to produce sincere and often personally meaningful correspondences with the state, frequently in defence of their individual agency, while toeing the line of individual versus collective interests.

### **Exceptions To The Rule?: Grief and Motherhood**

Though at face value, grief appears to be a highly individual feeling, in women's letters to authorities, the expression of grief, and particularly of grief for a child, took on an atypical character in the letters of Soviet women through the increasingly collective expectations of emotional states in though the 1920s and 1930s. Frequently, women delivered descriptions of desperately personal grief through the vehicle of social struggle. As we know from the discussion of generational cohorts and motherhood in the previous chapter, Maria's daughter had committed suicide at the age of 12, after an

incident of humiliation. Maria – ‘the mother of two *pionerkas* (now one)’ - plainly urged Krupskaja to help ensure the state take responsibility for its involvement in matters of gender: ‘Better relations between boys and girls are necessary.... I know you are busy, but I have my daughter to protect’.<sup>71</sup> Maria’s grief-stricken concern for her remaining daughter was presented in tandem with the socialisation of the next Soviet generation. In doing so, Maria located her daughter – presumably the ‘true’ object of Maria’s worry – firmly amongst her peers in her generational cohort.

Employing a similar strategy, a woman named Larisa wrote to Krupskaja in 1930 following the death of her infant daughter from the measles, to request her assistance having been denied time off to care for the child by the school board. Along with a description of her sense of grief, her letter expressed a strong sense of her personal role as a mother, and professional role as a teacher, as separate, yet intrinsically linked, identities and commitments: ‘How I could get weary, with a sick child in my arms, to raise the productivity of a class, and what now can I give to my own [family] members?... I’m sorry, a thousand times sorry dear Nadezhda Konstantinovna, I have wasted an hour of your precious time, but it is hard for me.’<sup>72</sup> Larisa explicitly linked her grief to her social role and purpose, which was to ‘raise the productivity of a class’ of children, simultaneously bargaining for a reappraisal of her case, and emphasising the difficulties of her bereavement. Crucially, like the women of the Essentuki reading group, Larisa treated the roles of mother and educator in tandem. Her role as mother – and mother teacher – allowed her to describe her individual grief, through its practical social effects.<sup>73</sup> Thus, it is evident that though women’s roles had been ideologically reoriented away from motherhood, the role of ‘the mother’ continued to be a powerful rhetorical

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<sup>71</sup> GARF, f. 7279, op. 7, d. 18, ll. 15-16.

<sup>72</sup> GARF, f. 7279, op. 7, d. 18, l. 42.

<sup>73</sup> GARF, f. 7279, op. 7, d. 18, l. 42.

tool for women to express sorrow, dissatisfaction, or the need for change in Soviet life. There is no reason to doubt that a mother's grief, as articulated in letters such as these, would be genuine – undoubtedly, it would be. However, its particular framing in this case is remarkable in the sense that by aligning her grief with the struggle against un-Soviet forces, the writer's feted role as a mother was reinforced in the construction of socialist society.

Framing one's grief in the terms of social injustice or work towards the socialist struggle was far from uncommon in letters expressing personal grief. Maria S, whose 1924 biography of her young daughter, the civil war veteran Liza we encountered in the previous chapter, juxtaposed her individual mourning with her children's feats in the struggle for the Revolution, and thus her hopes for the Revolution, lamenting that: 'It is hard for a mother to lose her children [...] and my old eyes weep, but I am proud of my own children Liza and Volodia, who sacrificed their young lives for the struggle against the bourgeoisie'<sup>74</sup> Maria S articulated her grief through the 'vehicle' of stating her own commitment to their work. By transferring her voice to the second person, referring to herself as 'your old mother', Maria expressed the sense of comfort she finds in relating her own life to their work, essentially, finding a 'meaning' in their early deaths. This search for 'meaning' substantiates the argument that, later in life, and as one perceived less time ahead of them, people seek positive meaning in their experiences.

The function of this device appears to work in tandem with that of public legitimacy. Maria S's biography of Liza was written in 1924, for International Women's Day: at which time, as we have seen, the Soviet commitment to the emancipation of women was still (relatively) strong, and the collective mind set of the new Soviet society was not yet

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<sup>74</sup> RGAE, f. 396, op. 2, d. 30, l. 42.

so strongly established. Despite this, the 'social' significance of Maria S's grief was heightened by the chronological proximity of the Civil War, and the uncertainty which surrounded so the uncertainty of the allegiances of citizens at that time.<sup>75</sup> Overall Maria S's evocation of her children's revolutionary commitment allowed her to legitimately sentimentalise her grief in her public monument to her daughter: the letter, after all, was a biography, and so this emotional device works both to rationalize Maria's grief, but also to allow her to do so comfortably and without risking 'individualism' in the public forum of *Krest'ianka's* pages.

Finally, Arganova, with whom we are familiar, sought in her final days to underline her work and contribution to the Revolution, in her contribution to the literacy of young women in her village.<sup>76</sup> Though Arganova wrote of the joy she felt at the legacy she has left, the basis of her letter was that she would soon die. As such, her account expressed a sense of rationalisation, primarily of her own grief at the end of her own life, and arguably that she will die childless and illiterate. In rationalising these aspects of her life, Arganova evoked a maternal role, which was increasingly, by 1930, a valuable social identity in relation to the collective: However, what marked out Arganova's sense of grief from those expressed by Larisa, Maria, and Maria S, is that Arganova's letter sought to rationalise her coming to terms with the end of her own life, rather than that of a child. As such, her letter focused primarily on her commitment to the goals of the Revolution highlights the way in which the awareness of one's impending mortality amplified the search for positive emotional experience – but also perhaps the extent to which one might be expected to legitimise a sense of private grief. This might be gleaned from the continued relevance of the identity of 'mother' in Arganova's statements, as a

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<sup>75</sup> The Russian Civil War, 1917-1922, saw a variety of political factions vie for the future of Russia, with the two largest factions being the Red and White Armies.

<sup>76</sup> GARF, f. 7279, op. 8, d. 15, ll. 33-34.

public role: it is possible to comprehend, from her repeated assertions of her social relevance, and her maternal role in the lives of local girls, the collective character with which motherhood was conceived – particularly by 1930.

In light of this argument, it might tentatively be supposed that Maria S's daughter's suicide was, in some way, connected to a perceived need for stoicism as a soldier for the Revolution, and an inability to face one's grief. Thomas Ewing's study of the suicides of young female teachers in the 1930s has indicated that the potential space in the system for the assertion of any self-determination was so small that suicide may be interpreted as the 'last effort by each woman to gain a measure of control over her immediate situation'.<sup>77</sup> Thus, it might feasibly be posited that since the expression of sorrow was considered by the party faithful, at least, to be at odds with Soviet values at this time, Maria S's daughter (Lisa), felt ill-equipped to cope with her brother's murder.<sup>78</sup> Grieving mothers in the Soviet Union's first decades employed many of the techniques engaged by other women in the period, in particular, a sense of revolutionary commitment, and a strong sense of the collective – often, in solidarity with other women. Nonetheless, they possess a degree of licence in the period, in the direct expression of their sorrow. Though all the women take care to relate their lives to the 'big' family of the Soviet Union, all are clear in their retention of their identity as mothers, and defend the social value of the role for society more broadly.

## Conclusions

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<sup>77</sup> E.T. Ewing, 'Personal Acts with Public Meanings: Suicides by Soviet Women Teachers in the Early Stalin Era', *Gender and History*, 14:1, (April, 2002), p. 131.

<sup>78</sup> Ewing, 'Personal Acts with Public Meanings', p. 131.; GARF, f. 9492, op. 1, d.1476, ll.89-92.

It is clear that euphemistic strategies, such as vagueness and reflexive indications of responsibility were employed to express un-Soviet dissatisfactions, including alienation from society, and its collectivism. As Fitzpatrick has demonstrated, grievances could be acceptably expressed by their re-direction to other sources: a partner; an employer; a neighbour; or one's own previous 'backwardness'.<sup>79</sup> However, upon discussion of the sources, 'vagueness' as a euphemistic strategy is more properly understood accompanied by omission as a strategy for the discussion of unhappy experiences and feelings. In cases where women neither discussed, nor vaguely addressed negative emotions, the omission of the emotional experience altogether served to highlight its existence. Women ostensibly learnt that negative feelings were not a subject for discussion with authorities, yet still felt able to describe particular miserable situations. This served to imbue the experience or feeling with a sense of 'separation' from the Soviet person in the situation, emphasising the degree to which it was superficially or temporarily felt – or, not 'felt' at all. Another strategy used to present un-Soviet feelings was the use of a verb rather than a noun or adjective, from which the reader infers a sense of the transience of the emotion, which was equal or greater than that of the intrinsically fleeting nature of 'happiness'.

Also of note as a strategy which presents un-Soviet emotions as 'outside' of the person, is the reflexivity of the verbs that women use in their writing. Though often when describing an emotional response to one's circumstances the writer stated that she may have wept or have begged, a feature which was almost always present was the use either of reflexive verbs, or of verbs requiring an object in the accusative. This evoked a sense that the women's situations have been 'done unto' them, either by themselves or others: whether they have, or that they wish to better themselves or enlighten

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<sup>79</sup> S. Fitzpatrick, 'Happiness and Toska', pp. 357-371.

themselves; or whether they are tormented by other, un-Soviet elements.<sup>80</sup> The pervasiveness of these strategies is emphasised by the extent to which more direct expressions of negative emotions was mitigated by one's relatively marginal role in society. Upon this foundation, what is evident is the range of emotions – including negative emotions – that could make up a New Soviet Woman. That 'happiness', and 'gratitude' appeared frequently in letters about miserable experiences as the counterpart to negative experiences, serves to underline the extent to which positive emotions were increasingly expected of women, who had been dragged out of domestic slavery as socialism was constructed. Since life had become 'merrier' following the construction of socialism, rather than 'merry', or joyful, which would be possible only upon the achievement of communism, the experience of a 'hard' time, or of some encounters with un-Soviet elements was tacitly accepted. So too was righteous anger, on behalf of the Soviet state by its citizens in the face of class enemies, or in defence of the rights it granted to its citizens. Perhaps surprisingly, shame appears to have been admissible, in quite particular contexts. Shame about low educational status, or attainment, for example, for an inability to find and retain employment, for abuses of one's rights to employment or education, to motherhood, or even one's Soviet morality.

Most interestingly, appearing so frequently in letters, in so subtly nuanced a range of expressions, grief emerged an emotion not considered to be wholly un-Soviet. Despite its associations with individual loss, it was an emotional state quite frequently linked with the Soviet project. Yet people sought to explore their new identities, in ways that did not necessarily correspond with the state's emotional aspirations for them. In addition, the closeness of mortality to the lives of women of all ages seemed to erode generational differences, in the articulation of grief and experiences of loss. What

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<sup>80</sup> GARF, f. 9492, op. 1, d. 1476, ll. 89-92.



appears most pertinently to have marked generation in articulations of loss and grief instead was the presence of responsibility in one's life. Younger women and older women all spoke of the responsibilities they have lost; that they retain; or that they have acquired as a result of the grief they carry, whether that be from the loss of a partner; a parent; or a child. More broadly, this makes sense: one might be accused of individualism by dwelling too much on personal grief.

Since motherhood was part of the Soviet project, so too was a mother's grief, and this seems to have been sharply perceived by women themselves, as reflected in the 'responsibilities' named in their letters to the state, in the 1920s and more explicitly and assertively in the 1930s. Though initially, the articulation of grief is one aspect that does not appear so readily to be determined by generation, due to the near omnipresence of mortality during the 1920s and 1930s, and discussions of responsibility present in many letters, upon closer inspection, there does appear to be a positive correlation between a woman's cohort identity as older women, and the readiness with which women evoke feelings of grief in their letters to authorities, beyond simply the degree of fluency in 'Soviet' language.

## Chapter Three

### 'The State Begins to Wither Away'? The Rights and Responsibilities of the New Soviet Woman

The rights afforded to citizens of the Soviet Union were tied to their fulfilment of certain obligations to the state. For women, these obligations were distinctly gendered: though all citizens had the responsibility to participate in the socialist labour force, or be eliminated as 'parasitic elements of society', as has been outlined by the introduction to this thesis, women also retained their obligations to domestic labour, caregiving, and the good of the younger generation of Soviet society, for the 'future' of socialism. Since the fulfilment of 'rights' was explicitly dependent upon the fulfilment of practical and political responsibilities, this chapter will reveal how women understood the relationship between their rights and their responsibilities by examining two aspects of the relationship of women with the Soviet state. Firstly, the chapter will examine the rights and obligations of women in the 1920s by exploring the case study of women involved in education and librarianship: two professions of clear importance for the 'betterment' of Soviet society. This will be followed by an examination of the responses made by women in response to the 1936 Decree and Constitution respectively. In doing so, the chapter demonstrates that women were deeply conscious of the fact that their rights were dependent upon their engagement with 'productive labour', as well as the degree to which the principles of this labour were politically constructed. The chapter also argues that women were quick to defend rights they felt they had earned, reproducing Bolshevik language and employing a variety of strategies to communicate this to authorities.

Before proceeding, it is necessary to establish what exactly did rights ‘meant’ in the context of the early Soviet state, and the total reconstruction of its society. Or, as succinctly put by Benjamin Nathans, ‘What happens to human rights when ‘the human’ is understood as a work in progress?’<sup>1</sup> In her examination of the meaning and accessibility of rights and equality for the Russian deaf in the revolutionary period, Maria Galmarini-Kabala has suggested that ‘rights’ within socialist society were ‘neither natural nor inalienable, but man-made and politically determined – something to be conferred by the state in its effort to transform society’.<sup>2</sup> In light of this, we might argue that ultimately rights constituted a tool for the construction of the new human. Yet, the state’s efforts to transform society shifted significantly between 1924 and 1941, and these legal and discursive shifts corresponded with the changes in discourse which were expressed by citizens in their communications with the state.

While, as Stuart Finkel has argued, ‘late imperial Russia’s legal order was a morass of contradictions’, the legal consciousness of subjects of the Russian empire was growing, and encompassed a clear comprehension of their rights within their legal framework.<sup>3</sup> Following a series of reforms after 1832, and up until around 1905, peasants possessed a core of rights, and sense of independence from their former landowners, and frequently made use of legal regulations to advance or protect their interests and defend themselves for perceived infractions upon their rights. The sole route to ‘rights’ of any kind in imperial Russia, was the ‘estate’ system, by which peasants (as well as members of other estates) would be legally identified, and by which marriage, trade,

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<sup>1</sup> B. Nathans, ‘Soviet Rights-Talk in the Post-Stalin Era’, in S. Hoffman (ed.), *Human Rights in the Twentieth Century*, (Cambridge, 2010), p. 169.

<sup>2</sup> M.C. Galmarini-Kabala, ‘Ability to bear rights or ability to work? The meaning of rights and equality for the Russian deaf in the revolutionary period’, *Historical Research*, 90:247, (February, 2017), pp. 210-229.

<sup>3</sup> S. Finkel, ‘The “Political Red Cross” and the Genealogy of Rights Discourse in Revolutionary Russia’, *The Journal of Modern History*, 89:1, (March, 2017), p. 85.

residence, and inheritance were regulated.<sup>4</sup> Though the estate system was the sole means to legal status and associated rights, its absence would, as Burbank has suggested, 'hardly have occurred as a possibility for most peasants. Instead, they took their estate based rights for granted, as the ordinary way of things'.<sup>5</sup>

The final statute in the first section of the *General Regulation on Peasants* (the first book of the 1861 legal code *The Regulation on the Rural Estate*) which regulated former serfs and state peasants, declared that '[p]easants may not be deprived of the rights of the estate, or limited in these rights other than by a court or a verdict of society, confirmed according to the rule established in this Regulation'. Yet, identification with an estate did not *inevitably* result in interests in common between its members. Estate-based rights were held and exercised as individuals – so rather than improve the lot of one's entire estate, peasants sought to improve their own circumstances, seeking to join a higher estate, and serving the larger 'community' of the Russian empire. That said, peasant interest in politics and law were not been necessarily limited to individual interests, and could quite conceivably coexist with collective allegiances. As Peter Waldron has noted, the flood of petitions produced by peasants following the edict of 1905 was not lessened by suppression of the first and second Dumas, or by the reduction in representation in the June 1907 election. Both phenomena were evidence of significant communal loyalties.<sup>6</sup> As such, pre-Revolutionary peasant communities displayed similar behaviours to their 'reconstructed' Soviet communities, since Soviet citizens also occupied a (perfectly reasonable) middle ground between individual interests and communal loyalties. Moreover, it is likely that the binding of particular

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<sup>4</sup> J. Burbank, *Russian Peasants Go To Court: Legal Culture in the Countryside, 1905-1917*, (Bloomington, 2004), p. 12.

<sup>5</sup> Burbank, *Russian Peasants Go To Court*, p. 13.

<sup>6</sup> P. Waldron, 'Late Imperial Constitutionalism' in I.D. Thatcher, (ed.), *Late Imperial Russia: Problems and Prospects*, (Manchester, 2005), p. 41.

rights to certain 'class' or 'estate' identities also functioned to establish a political culture possessing a blindness to conflicts of interest between individual and corporate or collective rights, which can be traced forward into the Soviet Constitutions, and in responses to them.<sup>7</sup>

Urban workers prior to 1917 lacked meaningful clout in local politics, since their concerns and affronts were never seriously addressed by government or by employers, or the scantily distributed factory inspectorates. This led to an upsurge in strikes in the late imperial years.<sup>8</sup> There were, as we might imagine from the discussion of emotional responses in the previous chapter, numerous reasons for strikes during which workers often raised issues of individual dignity and political and civic freedom. Strikes frequently addressed specific and long-term economic grievances, such as the reinstatement of sacked colleagues, the length of the working day, or general changes to working conditions (which, predictably, were not usually made in favour of the worker). Ian Thatcher draws attention to the concern of being treated 'like a human being', which is expressed in documents ranging from the writings of worker authors, to specific demands and resolutions during strikes. Thatcher also notes that '[t]he workers also connected a desire for human recognition to the need for the rights and freedoms of citizens if they were to protect their interests'.<sup>9</sup> This is corroborated by Finkel, according to whom, by 1905 politically conscious workers were framing their demands in terms of their 'rights', and even the 'inalienable rights of man'.<sup>10</sup> Mark Steinberg has shown that this was rooted in concepts of dignity of personhood, or *lichnost'* developed

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<sup>7</sup> S.A. Smith, "Workers and Civil Rights in Tsarist Russia, 1899-1917", in O. Crisp, L. Edmondson (eds), *Civil Rights in Imperial Russia*, (Oxford, 1989), p. 169.

<sup>8</sup> I.D. Thatcher, 'Late Imperial Urban Workers', in I.D. Thatcher, (ed), *Late Imperial Russia: Problems and Prospects*, (Manchester, 2005), pp. 113-4.

<sup>9</sup> Thatcher, 'Late Imperial Urban Workers', p. 114.

<sup>10</sup> Finkel, 'The "Political Red Cross" and the Genealogy of Rights Discourse in Revolutionary Russia', p. 91.

by the workers' 'intellectual' contemporaries.<sup>11</sup> As Mark Smith has suggested, by foregrounding the issue of human dignity in its relationship to class oppression, the proletarian discourse of 'freedom', or *svoboda* may have facilitated in some way the principles of the Soviet system that followed. In particular, the exclusion of certain categories of citizen (such as the bourgeoisie), from the enjoyment of rights by fault of their contribution to class oppression are pertinent in this respect.<sup>12</sup>

At the same time, it is arguably in terms of 'human dignity', and the categorisation of citizenship that engagement with public life and labour acquired its greatest significance for debates over women's rights in the late imperial period. Thatcher has suggested a link between urban industries prone to strike, and those employing a higher percentage of women, who would likely have felt their personal dignity encroached upon to a greater degree than men – for example, when undergoing daily body searches to check for stolen items. Thatcher identifies strikes as a form of action through which female labourers could attack both property and 'the world of male domination', identifying the necessity to recognise and protect their own, gendered, humanity.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, William Wagner in his study of women's rights and civil rights in legal discourse, highlighted the vulnerability of women in domestic situations, due to the inconsistent and unsympathetic personal and socioeconomic status afforded them by the state and the Orthodox Church. For example, since marriage was considered a 'personal' affair, within which women were under the patriarchal authority of their husbands, a husband's efforts to 'discipline' his wife were considered outside the remit of the law, unless they resulted in serious harm. In this circumstance women were often

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<sup>11</sup> Finkel, 'The "Political Red Cross" and the Genealogy of Rights Discourse in Revolutionary Russia', pp. 91-2; M. Steinberg, *Moral Communities: The Culture of Class Relations in the Russian Printing Industry, 1867-1907*, (Berkeley, 1992), pp. 112-5, 235-45.

<sup>12</sup> Smith, 'Workers and Civil Rights in Russia, 1899-1917', p. 168.

<sup>13</sup> Thatcher, 'Late Imperial Urban Workers', p. 115.

reluctant to go to the courts, as the difficulty in accessing divorce meant that they would face the repercussions of this action once their husbands returned from prison.<sup>14</sup> In contrast, the Soviet state sought to 'make the personal political', bringing marriage, divorce and family life into the public sphere, and altering the nature of social identities and their associated rights. 'Wives' were no longer simply 'wives', but women, workers, and peasants, gaining rights within the previously private domain of marriage. The Revolution ultimately realised novel social identities for men and women, nominally distinct from their pre-Revolutionary counterparts.

The substance of the Soviet constitutions in 1918 and 1936 applied a graduated exclusionary system of citizen's rights, according to which those deemed 'representatives of the exploiting classes' were subject to a reduction in economic, social, and legal status. As a result, Alexopoulos has argued, 'Soviet society consisted of citizens who experienced various and often paradoxical states of civic belonging'.<sup>15</sup> Although 'fundamental human uniformity' underpinned the Russian socialists' understanding of equality, citizenship operated within set boundaries, and functions on the principle of exclusion, a principle which is rooted in contemporary understandings of what it meant to be 'human'.<sup>16</sup> The protections implied by this system of 'bestowed' rights and citizenship status' were arbitrary, and vulnerable almost by definition to political engineering at the hands of Party leaders. In theory, this model of Soviet rights would by

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<sup>14</sup> W.G. Wagner, 'The Trojan Mare: Women's Rights and Civil Rights in Late Imperial Russia', in O. Crisp, L. Edmondson (eds), *Civil Rights in Imperial Russia*, (Oxford, 1989), pp. 67-8.

<sup>15</sup> G. Alexopoulos, 'Soviet Citizenship, More or Less – Rights, Emotions, and States of Civic Belonging', *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, 7:3, (2006), pp. 487-528.

<sup>16</sup> Alexopoulos, 'Soviet Citizenship, More or Less', p. 212; A. Zaharejivić, 'How to know a citizen when you see one? The sex of a citizen', *IDENTITIES: Journal for Politics, Gender and Culture*, 1:2, (2013), p. 72. Here, Zaharejivić identifies the moment that citizenship and humanity became inextricably linked as the publication of the *Declaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen*, in 1789: 'To be a human, to be a man meant to have certain natural and imprescribable rights which belonged to an individual by dint of his humanity. This was, however, also a basis for his being a full member of a community as the possessor of rights'. She goes on to suggest that those possessing fewer civic rights – such as women, non-white persons – were subsequently deemed less 'developed' persons, p. 72.

1936 ensure that full citizens had the right to a job and quality-dependent pay – which in practice, was a duty as well as a right. The fulfilment of this right established access to workers' clubs, sanatoriums, annual leave, medical care, limited social pensions and the right to education in preparation for work.<sup>17</sup> Yet, if the equality afforded those belonging to the proletariat implied the potential to 'achieve' a fundamental standard of human uniformity, the repercussions of this was that, the very humanity of the social alien was in question.

By 1936, the basic framework of Soviet rights was fully delineated, and categorised according to three mutually dependent classes: socioeconomic, political and personal. Socioeconomic and political rights ensured such formal standards as the right to work, to access welfare and a decent standard of living, and to vote: personal rights theoretically guaranteed Soviet citizens the right to pursue their conscience and identity in the security of the legislative framework.<sup>18</sup> In practice this proved to be complicated, since this framework was rooted in traditions of the commune, and subsequently, in the collectivist ideology and compounded by the 'unity model' of the Soviet system.<sup>19</sup> Ultimately, since in theory this 'unity model' meant that state, individuals, and 'para-state' organs such as labour unions were by definition incapable of conflict, there was in reality no mechanism in place to protect the rights afforded by the government. This was compounded by the contradictory rhetoric of Soviet liberation – that access to certain (political and socioeconomic) standards of living for citizens was an inalienable

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<sup>17</sup> M. Smith, 'Social Rights in the Soviet Dictatorship: The Constitutional Right to Welfare from Stalin to Brezhnev', *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism and Development*, 3:3, (Winter, 2012), p. 387.

<sup>18</sup> Smith, 'Social Rights in the Soviet Dictatorship', p. 386.

<sup>19</sup> D. Healey, 'Defining Sexual Maturity as the Soviet Alternative to an Age of Consent', in F.L. Bernstein, C. Burton, D. Healey (eds), *Soviet Medicine: Culture, Practice, and Science*, (Illinois, 2010), p. 112. Also relevant here are Svetlana Boym's discussions of the relative absence of a 'private life' in pre-Revolutionary vocabularies: S. Boym, *Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia*, (London, 1994), p. 73.



right, previously denied the people of the Russian empire, but at the same time, a generous gift bestowed by the benevolent Party.<sup>20</sup>

Though the Soviet government constantly proclaimed the unique nature of the privileges it granted its citizens, the Soviet system drew on a pre-Revolutionary tradition in which there was an understanding of rights as something both communal and individual, and at the same time contributed to a much broader conception of rights which would encompass both labour and welfare. Though in late imperial Russia, civic rights had generally been conceptualised as a parliamentary or republican phenomenon, which absolutist monarchs were forced to grant by sufferance, the revolutionary situation emerging by 1917 posited that political rights could not reasonably exist without socio-economic rights, which would later be accepted by a number of states throughout Europe in the post-war world. Though the Russian concept of social community is to some extent distinctive, with the Empire being based on the principle of reciprocal rights and obligations as community members, it was arguably this principle which both the Soviet state and international covenants would have in common. This was due to the establishment of a common standard for 'rights' by the covenants, which sought to inculcate a similar sense of international solidarity, with reference to all members of the human family.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, this is supported by the argument made by Anja Johansen, that the distinction between 'civil liberties' and 'human rights' in this period was primarily terminological, since the organisations and thinkers who promoted them all sought to protect individuals against the state.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Smith, 'Social Rights in the Soviet Dictatorship', p. 386.

<sup>21</sup> Smith, 'Social Rights in the Soviet Dictatorship', p. 3.

<sup>22</sup> Finkel, 'The "Political Red Cross" and the Genealogy of Rights Discourse in Revolutionary Russia', p. 83, from where the following citation was found and followed up: A. Johansen, 'Defending the Individual: The Personal Rights Association and the Ligue des droit de l'homme, 1871-1916', *European Review of History: Review europeene d'histoire*, 20:4, (2004), pp. 559-579.

Moreover, the socialist response to 'bourgeois' liberal ideas about civil rights, served to inextricably entangle itself in the predicament posed to it by these same bourgeois values.

Although Marx himself was openly hostile to the very idea of the 'rights of the person', which he decried as inescapably individualistic, his work recognised the mutual dependency between political and (corporatist) civic rights. However, as Smith has noted, Marx's own ideas never actually became the 'orthodoxy' on the matter for the Second International. Rather, the Second International saw civil rights embedded in the programmes of affiliated movements, as a *necessary* feature of the bourgeois revolution to which Russia was fated, before socialism encompassed them in a far superior, more authentic, and inviolable liberty.<sup>23</sup> Late imperial Russian socialists had paradoxically inculcated an awareness of the necessity of civic rights to labour forces, which had hitherto been largely 'insulated' from liberal influence. 'Humanity', then, and its liberty – and associated rights - were by 1917 firmly entrenched in Bolshevik assumptions about the standards that Soviet political rights should meet. In this sense, the dynamism of the relationship between liberal and socialist ideas about civil rights after the nineteenth century is clear.

Linda Edmondson's study of women's rights and debates over citizenship in 1905 suggests that working women inherited, via the socialists, the 'emancipatory and egalitarian philosophies' of the 1860s. The rhetoric of rights that characterised the 1905 Revolution spoke of the 'equality before the law of all citizens', the 'inviolability of the person', and 'freedom of conscience, speech, movement, assembly and association'.<sup>24</sup> As

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<sup>23</sup> Smith, 'Workers and Civil Rights in Tsarist Russia', pp. 146-7.

<sup>24</sup> L. Edmondson, 'Women's Rights, Civil Rights and the Debate over Citizenship in the 1905 Revolution, in L. Edmondson (ed.), *Women and Society in Russia and the Soviet Union*, (Cambridge, 2009), p. 89.

we have seen, women's inherent equality was part and parcel of the Soviet system of rights as a matter of principle, so long as they were members of the toiling classes, though little attention was paid to how this would unfold practically for women until at least 1917. As Soviet citizens, after 1918, women enjoyed the same opportunities to access Soviet rights as men, facilitated (again, in theory) by a system of childcare and maternity provisions. This was reinforced by the 1936 Decree, which rehabilitated the nuclear family. However, the role of citizenship status in the Soviet system of rights had particular implications for women, who had long been considered 'backward' as a result of their oppression. As elsewhere in Europe (and beyond), women were a project for improvement, having long occupied a liminal space in historical processes of citizenship and personhood.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, due to gendered standards of citizenship across Europe, and of scientific assumptions about the essentialism of gender, '[w]omen, as sexed humans, were hence rightfully positioned within the boundaries of humanity, but without the limits of citizenship'.<sup>26</sup> Correspondingly, in nineteenth-century European discourse (and in particular Russian discourse), women were considered by those across the political spectrum to be biologically predisposed to irrationality, childishness, vanity, biological 'unfitness' and moral depravity, all of which were a result of their inferior development, of course making them unfit for full citizenship. Where their assumed biological traits were not straightforwardly problematic to public life, their 'natural femininity' and 'modesty' – and even their ability to bear children(!) were considered by those liberal

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<sup>25</sup> Carole Pateman's analysis of the fashioning of the 'civil body politic' as a masculine individual and the consequent 'bodily removal' of women from civil society, though sometimes regarded as essentialist, reflects assumptions about womanhood and their suitability to society in the early Soviet state: C. Pateman, *The Sexual Contract*, (Cambridge, 1988).

<sup>26</sup> Zaharijević, 'How to know a citizen when you see one?' p. 80.

opponents to women's rights to be actually threatened by the full involvement of women in public life.<sup>27</sup>

Similarly, conservative opponents to civic equality in late imperial Russia contested that existing law had developed not only in accordance to the 'natural equality of rights', but to the historical development of Russia, thus embodying the unique national and Orthodox traditions that Russia possessed.<sup>28</sup> Clearly, since the Bolsheviks had sought to dismantle the legacy of tsarism, the bourgeoisie and the Orthodox Church, this conceptualisation of the historical progress of the Russian Empire was quickly replaced with an almost eschatological Marxist narrative, whereby the oppressed were 'saved' from their backwardness, and set on the path leading from darkness to light. Accordingly, the Soviet state attempted to cast this quasi-dehumanisation of women as redeemable, inflicted in part by political and economic circumstance. Though, this was not without considerable anxiety about sexual difference and the dangerous 'tragedy' for the establishment of the state that womanhood and maternity posed.<sup>29</sup> Women could be 'rescued' from their slavery and rehabilitated as fully developed humans, and full Soviet citizens, worthy of the complete system of rights. As Galmarini-Kabala has asserted, '[o]n one hand, these populations [such as women, and the disabled] were formerly enslaved groups that needed liberation through the acquisition of rights. On the other hand, they were backward peoples who could achieve enlightenment and

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<sup>27</sup> Edmondson, 'Women's Rights, Civil Rights and the Debate over Citizenship in the 1905 Revolution', pp. 77-100.

<sup>28</sup> Wagner, 'The Trojan Mare', p. 79.

<sup>29</sup> As earlier discussions have suggested, Bolshevik anxieties about the threat posed to the success of the Soviet state by women and their reproductive capacities, and their possibilities for socialist redemption, has been astutely covered by a number of scholars, including (but not limited to) Eric Naiman in *Sex in Public: the Incarnation of Early Soviet Ideology*, (Princeton, 1997), Siobhán Hearne in her recent publication 'the "Black Spot" on the Crimea: Venereal Diseases in the Black Sea Fleet in the 1920s', *Social History*, 42:2, (May, 2017), pp. 181-204, and Elizabeth Waters, in 'Victim or Villain? Prostitution in post-Revolutionary Russia', in L. Edmondson (ed.), *Women and Society in Russia and the Soviet Union*, (Cambridge, 2009), pp. 160-167.

better socio-economic conditions only through the support of the socialist state.<sup>30</sup> Since a key factor in these policies was the involvement in productive activity, labour, as explained in chapter one, became the only viable path to rights, not only for industrial workers but also for all other layers of Soviet society.<sup>31</sup> For women and other 'minorities', the rights 'granted' by the state were the only route out of their degradation, yet their obligations to labour ensured their *own* responsibility for their fate. This dynamic, mutually dependent relationship between state and citizen (or would-be citizen) resulted in the fragmentation of citizenship statuses in a number of dimensions. Alongside the distinctions in the nature of the rights associated with full citizenship – as gift and/or a goal – were several dimensions to the nature of their possession.

The labour that constituted 'useful' work – particularly with regards to familial child-care and domestic labour – would continue to be redefined. Moreover, it is necessary to uncover the processes of inclusion and exclusion that constituted the conferral of rights from state to woman as they were made fully 'human', in light of the historical limitations placed upon citizenship for women due to the scientific naturalisation and essentialism of biological sex in nineteenth century political thought.<sup>32</sup> In the early years of the new Soviet state, their continued engagement in domestic labour constituted one such 'obstacle. The persistence of the demands associated with domestic labour – and the failure to fulfil it – also presented a political obstacle to authorities as they attempted to reconstruct the economy, and emancipate women. Both

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<sup>30</sup> Galmarini-Kabala, 'Ability to bear rights or ability to work?', p. 213.

<sup>31</sup> Galmarini-Kabala, 'Ability to bear rights or ability to work?', p. 213. The assumption that women and other marginalised groups could only be 'rescued' from their oppression and afforded full rights through revolution was far from unique to the Soviet case: left-wing and anarchist movements across the globe have made similar assumptions. An overview of this is provided by Sharif Gemie in 'Anarchism and Feminism: A Historical Survey', *Women's History Review*, 5:3, (1996), pp. 417-444, while a case study of the process in early Twentieth Century Spain is presented by James Yeoman in chapter 2, subsection 2 'Education as Emancipation' in 'Print Culture and the Anarchist Movement in Spain, 1890-1915' (2016), University of Sheffield.

<sup>32</sup> Zaharijević, 'How to know a citizen when you see one?' p. 71.

the responses of citizens, and the financial constraints faced by the state, compelled a reformulation of theory and policy regarding domestic labour and family life through the first decades of the state, until its formal rehabilitation in 1936. Women of all ages in the 1920s and 1930s lobbied the state for the fulfilment of the rights to which they felt entitled, by virtue of their contribution to society in the roles of revolutionaries, workers, students, and mothers. Since women often occupied more than one of these social categories, their letters display a careful consideration of the social value associated with each role in their negotiations with authorities.

### **Domestic Labour versus 'Socially Useful Labour'**

Marx and Engels established the basis for policy on the 'woman question' in communist states of Eastern Europe, providing a series of accounts of gender within their treatise on politics and economics. *The German Ideology* clearly stated that the division of labour was ultimately 'based on the natural division of labour in the family', which had relegated women to the role of domestic labourers. It continued that this 'latent form of slavery', was the first form of private property, which would be liberated under socialism.<sup>33</sup> The role of women, though, was not considered in any depth in this work, showing gender to be of peripheral importance to class in Marxist thought, even when Engels' *The Origin of the Family* is taken into account.<sup>34</sup> As addressed in the introduction to the thesis, the Bolsheviks possessed a quagmire of anxieties about women, their bodies, and their dubious potential for socialist salvation following the Revolution.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> K. Marx, F. Engels, *The German Ideology*, (Moscow, 1964), pp. 51-2.

<sup>34</sup> F. Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, (Chicago, 1902).

<sup>35</sup> E. Naiman in *Sex in Public: the Incarnation of Early Soviet Ideology*, (Princeton, 1997), S. Hearne 'the "Black Spot" on the Crimea: Venereal Diseases in the Black Sea Fleet in the 1920s', *Social History*, 42:2,

This culminated not only in intrusive policing and public health policies aimed at the eradication of prostitution and venereal disease, but also in an abundance of demanding, yet contradictory instructive propaganda aimed at women and their redemptive use of their time and bodies with social obligations.

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, images of socially and politically emancipated women appeared alongside those subordinating the agency of women to the supposed 'demands' of the next generation, associating women with domestic labour in addition to their public responsibilities. Elizabeth Waters has shown that, as mothers reappeared in the imagery of political posters by the mid-1920s, they were rarely depicted accompanied by any family members (male or female), but their infant children. She notes that the exclusion of husbands and fathers was most likely due to 'respect for social verisimilitude', as they traditionally had very little to do with childcare, reflecting our earlier conclusions about the attention paid by Soviet policymakers in the 1920s and 1930s to the meaningful redistribution of domestic labour.<sup>36</sup> These conclusions are also reflected in time budget studies in the 1920s which, despite being skewed towards the representation of married urban citizens, show that even in the early twenties, though women spent on average the same time on activities associated with their employment as their male counterparts, they had more than three times as much housework as men. They devoted as much as one fifth to one quarter of every twenty-four hour period to domestic labour, whilst (married) men devoted the majority of theirs to 'free time activities'.<sup>37</sup> Figures for young, childless and single women –

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(May, 2017), pp. 181-204, and E. Waters, in 'Victim or Villain? Prostitution in post-Revolutionary Russia', in L. Edmondson (ed.), *Women and Society in Russia and the Soviet Union*, (Cambridge, 2009), pp. 160-167.

<sup>36</sup> E. Waters, 'The Female Form In Soviet Political Iconography, 1917-32', in B. Evans Clements, B.A. Engel, C.D. Worobec, (eds), *Russia's Women: Accommodation, Resistance, Transformation*, (Oxford, 1991), pp. 236-7.

<sup>37</sup> M.P. Sacks, 'Unchanging Times: A Comparison of the Everyday Life of Soviet Working Men and Women between 1923 and 1966', *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 39:4, (November, 1977), p. 798.

concentrated at this time in the new factories in the provinces - show a larger proportion of their time spent on leisure activities. No solution to this was ever presented. Lenin, in his typically condescending tone, conceded that domestic labour continued to be left to women, stating with what we might, with our own hindsight, consider as foreboding:

You all know that even with the fullest equality in their labour force participation, women are still in an actual position of inferiority because all housework is thrust upon them. Most of this housework is highly unproductive, most barbarous and most arduous, and it is performed by women. This labour is extremely petty and contains nothing that would in the slightest degree facilitate the development of women.<sup>38</sup>

As the attention of Soviet policymakers and theorists to the issue of women's association with domestic labour diminished, as no obvious solution that was both practical and politically acceptable presented itself. Though Aleksandra Kollontai did suggest a programme of socialised domestic labour, with communal kitchens and teams of domestic labourers, this was ultimately rejected as being neither economically practical nor a sufficient priority to Party leaders. Moreover, the low political value of domestic labour - and that of its labourers - was never fully resolved at all.

Despite the glorification of motherhood and child-rearing, which characterised the 1930s (as shown by the thesis's introduction), the economic and social rights established by the Stalin Constitution also included the right to employment, to leisure, to material security in old age and in the event of illness or incapacity to work, and to education - up to and including higher education. Article 122 of the 1936 Constitution of the USSR, which was circulated on December 5 stated that 'Women in the USSR are accorded equal rights with men *in all spheres* of economic, state, cultural, social and

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<sup>38</sup> V.I. Lenin, 'The Tasks of the Working Women's Movement in the Soviet Republic', *Pravda*, 25 September 1919, reproduced at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1919/sep/23a.htm> [last accessed 05/12/2018].



political life', clearly indicating that women were absolutely free to perform their heroic duty to the state.<sup>39</sup> These rights would be realised by affording women 'equally with men' the right not only to labour (*trud*) and its related rights (pay, rest, social insurance), but also by 'state protection of the interests of mother and child'.<sup>40</sup> The protection of these interests would be covered by: state assistance to single mothers and mothers of many children; paid maternity leave; and the 'broad' (*shirokoj*) provision of maternity homes, kindergartens and nurseries.<sup>41</sup> Women's share of industrial labour increased rapidly after 1930, coinciding with the sharpest drop in birth rates recorded, decreasing overall family size from 4.26 in 1927 to 3.8 in 1935.<sup>42</sup> Wendy Goldman has argued that 'by 1932, women had become one of the most important sources of labour in the drive to industrialise'.<sup>43</sup>

For this reason, the role of women in the workplace required the protection of social provisions for domestic labour. This included socialised dining, childcare, and provisions for prospective and new mothers, all of which and were outlined in the second phrase of article 122.<sup>44</sup> Yet, as Ilić has demonstrated, though the Constitution displayed the inclination to protect the interests women and their participation in the workforce, the focus of labour legislation in the decade shifted firmly toward 'equality', reinforcing women's presence in industry, rather than facilitating their meaningful

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<sup>39</sup> Konstitutsiia (osnovnoj zakon) Soiuza sovetskikh sotsialisticheskikh respublik, (Moscow, 1947), italics mine).

<sup>40</sup> Konstitutsiia (osnovnoj zakon) Coiuza sovetskikh sotsialisticheskikh respublik.

<sup>41</sup> Konstitutsiia (osnovnoj zakon) Coiuza sovetskikh sotsialisticheskikh respublik.

<sup>42</sup> Goldman, *Women, Revolution and the State, 1917-1936*, p. 313.

<sup>43</sup> Goldman, *Women, Revolution and the State, 1917-1936*, p. 312.

<sup>44</sup> Goldman, *Women, Revolution and the State, 1917-1936*, p. 312.

integration, since disparities in the distribution of all rights based on gender, race and nationality were 'forbidden'.<sup>45</sup>

Although the rights of women were by 1936 protected by the Constitution, their overall importance seemed in part to be gauged by the Stalinists as an economic demographic, a human resource, rather than as women. Stalin himself stated that: 'The women in the collective farms are a great force. To keep this force down would be criminal. It is our duty to bring the women in the collective farms forward and to make use of this great force'.<sup>46</sup> Women were extolled by Stalin himself as 'the greatest reserve of the working class', an economic powerhouse in industry and agriculture as well as in the home as mothers to a new generation of Soviet workers.<sup>47</sup> The frequency with which they appeared in posters as urban and rural workers arguably reflects this prioritisation of the political agitation of the growing female labour force.<sup>48</sup> Demonstrating the expectation that women would perform both public and domestic labour, in 'The Political Education of Women', Stalin asserted that 'working class and peasant women are mothers; they are rearing our youth – the future of our country'.<sup>49</sup> Alongside the labour demands of the Soviet state in the 1930s, women's entitlement to the fullest protection of their formal equality hinged increasingly upon their engagement with this labour.

Perhaps not unexpectedly, time budget studies from the 1930s have shown that the dual burden for Soviet working women continued. In addition to working full-time outside the home, women averaged four to six hours per day on domestic chores. In

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<sup>45</sup> Ilić, *Women Workers in the Soviet Interwar Economy*; Nathans, 'Soviet Rights-Talk in the post-Stalin Era', pp. 171-2.

<sup>46</sup> J. Stalin, 'The Political Education of Women', in *Works*, Volume 5, (Moscow, 1953), p. 358.

<sup>47</sup> Stalin, 'The Greatest Reserve of the Working Class', p. 44.

<sup>48</sup> Waters 'The Female Form in Soviet Political Iconography', p. 239.

<sup>49</sup> Stalin, 'The Political Education of Women', p. 65.

contrast, the time men spent on household chores averaged at one hour per day.<sup>50</sup> What is also clear is that the time spent on education or cultural activities (which had been included in studies from the 1920s as 'work, or time connected to work') declined, in favour of time spent on domestic responsibilities.<sup>51</sup> Women's participation in the domestic sphere was in the 1920s portrayed as a remnant of tsarism which was ripe for eradication. However, women's domestic labour appeared simply to have been sanctioned by the Stalin Constitution as a valuable and necessary contribution to socialist construction, in addition to their labour outside the home. So, the shift in discourse by 1936, which is typically understood in Western historiography as an 'abrupt' shift towards social conservatism, is more accurately understood as a process of continuity: the utopian ideals of the immediate post-revolutionary period, which extended the Soviet system of 'rights' to women, through their entry into the labour force, was maintained. In theory, women's presence in the labour force was facilitated by the protections of the equality achieved by socialism, which should have eased the burdens on their time caused by their maternity and domestic labour. Women appeared with greater frequency because they had allegedly been emancipated by Soviet policies before 1930.<sup>52</sup> In real terms, little changed for women's lives but the words and images used to depict them, with the exception perhaps on the time they were afforded to participate in cultural or educational activities, which decreased. As we might imagine, the dual (or triple) burden was - at all times - a heavy one. The multiple spheres within which women existed, and within which they possessed certain duties, with corresponding rights, clearly contained the *potential* for conflict.

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<sup>50</sup> D.L. Hoffman, *Stalinist Values: The Cultural Norms of Soviet Modernity, 1917-1941*, (London, 2003), p. 115.

<sup>51</sup> J. Barber, 'Working Class and Political Culture in the 1930s', in H. Gunther (ed.), *The Culture of the Stalin Period*, (Basingstoke, 1990), p. 5.

<sup>52</sup> Waters, 'The Female Form in Soviet Political Iconography', p. 238.

Therefore, although Soviet policymakers ostensibly doubled down on their commitment to women's equality as the 1920s proceeded into the 1930s, it continually failed to acknowledge the labour women performed in the domestic sphere upon which the state depended to function at a basic level. Far from passively accepting this double burden, women's letters express an awareness of the conflict between their equality, and their working and living conditions, which are particularly apparent in their responses to the 1936 Decree and Constitution. Though they did not necessarily consider their occupation of multiple social roles as inherently problematic, they were quick to defend their rights within each role on occasions that their associated obligations came into conflict.

### **The Rights and Obligations of the New Soviet Woman in the 1920s**

Women in possession of a thorough education – often teachers and librarians - were often ready and eager to assert certain material rights, both according to the basis of the law, and on the basis of the political value of their profession. They demonstrated a strong self-awareness of their own implications for the future of the Soviet project, and wielded this in their letters to emphasise the material rights they were due by law. The political premium held by education was therefore evident in the ways in which women would assert their rights as citizens, based upon these contributions to society, or express anxiety about the potential political consequences of their lack of education. There was manifest evidence amongst the writing of women to state organs and officials of a sharp awareness of the significant responsibilities of educational work, and the heightened obligations to satisfactorily fulfil this role, in order to merit its associated rights.

A sense of these obligations was palpable in a letter from a librarian named Elizaveta, who dramatically decried her semi-literacy in a letter to Krupskaja following the latter's *Pravda* article of April 10, 1929. In desperation, Elizaveta turned to Krupskaja for advice as to whether she was really suitable to be a librarian, due to her low level of literacy. Having been working as a librarian for six months at the time of writing, Elizaveta made clear that she understood 'the importance and seriousness of this work completely.' She explained that her studies had been interrupted in part by the Revolution, but mostly due to the impact of her father's death. However, she took care to demonstrate that, though her studies were interrupted in 1917, it was her family's poverty – and associated proletarian status – that prevented their resumption:

The thing is that I had to study for three years only, because my father died (and in general in 1917-18 studies were bad) and then I had to go to work to support my family [...] now, now I'm already an employee and [so] the path to learning is closed to me. I'm self-educated [...] And now I'm faced with the fact that I do not deserve my post as a librarian, I'm poorly acquainted with literature, I know hardly any literature I'm semiliterate, and I'm a librarian but I can't satisfy such demands, study their interests, and teach them systematically to read about reading is what I need – it torments me terribly [...]<sup>53</sup>

Though Elizaveta claimed to be semi-literate, this was clearly not the case – though her prose is quite rambling, it was generally reasonably well written. Instead, it was her *political* literacy which Elizaveta saw as being the core of her ineligibility to be a librarian. The torment that Elizaveta felt that she was not qualified for her role echoed the sentiment of letters encountered earlier, that their authors feared being forgotten by, or excluded from, the revolutionary process. This sense of exclusion from Soviet society, though largely hypothetical in this case, allowed her to state her emotional turmoil, which was a direct result of her inability to properly fulfil her obligations to the state:

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<sup>53</sup> GARF, f. 7279, op. 7, d. 18, l. 56.

The further I read about the library business, the more I see myself disappearing [...] Would it not be more honest on my part to say that I am not fit for purpose and leave? Answer me please and advise me [...]<sup>54</sup>

Though the head of Elizaveta's local Party organ evidently took no issue with her capabilities, Elizaveta was convinced that her lack of formal technical and political education was an almost insurmountable obstacle, and that her political naiveté, prevented her from fully meeting the requirements of her job:

I've already talked about it for a long time with the head of the regional CPSU Ushakova, but she advises me to stay on and says that if I have the desire, a real librarian will emerge from me, especially in our workers' libraries where I feel that with my own weight with the workers I can give something. But in fact desire alone does very little.<sup>55</sup>

In turn, she appeared to suggest that she did not deserve the right to employment the state had granted her and that she was cheating them in some way, even suggesting that she should be 'honest' and leave the position. The suggestion indicated a sense of guilt over her feelings of dishonesty, something omitted from explicit mention in the letter. This euphemism elucidates to some extent the relationship between rights, the duties upon which they were contingent, and the emotional effects of their degree of fulfilment for Soviet citizens. Elizaveta considered herself undeserving of her employment as a librarian, aware of the political significance of her duties, and so felt guilt and dishonesty by her continued receipt of the right to employment in this field. Her highest priorities moving forward were clearly self-improvement: her political education thus far had been self-taught, but she sought to arrange courses to facilitate her further education as well as that of others. Indeed, she brought evidence of her continued efforts in this vein despite her departure from the library, stating towards the close of the letter that 'But I like work! I especially like anti-religious work, almost every day

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<sup>54</sup> GARF, f. 7279, op. 7, d. 18, l. 56.

<sup>55</sup> GARF, f. 7279, op. 7, d. 18, l. 56.

now I engage in debates', and detailing the anti-religious reading and games in which she participated.<sup>56</sup> Elizaveta's letter, therefore, reflected a comprehensive understanding of the system of rights and obligations in the Soviet 1920s as it pertained to the (broad) field of education. Though it was largely her (implied) proletarian background that had prevented her from obtaining the necessary education to responsibly undertake the role of a librarian, Elizaveta was nonetheless sensitive to the obligations held by Soviet citizens for self-improvement.

Library workers, more secure in their professional and educational skills demonstrated a similar awareness of the significance of their work for the socialist project. In contrast to Elizaveta's angst that she did not deserve the benefits associated with her position, other library workers were keen to defend the benefits they had 'earned' through their labour in the field of education. Writing to the trade newspaper *Red Librarian* in 1930, P. Maksimtseva, in a formal 'declaration (*zaiavlenie*), stated:

I hereby request the editor of *Red Librarian* to help me out in getting the salary from [the] village Council Region at the rates established and published in the resolution of the Central Committee and the Sovnarkom of the RSFSR, in "proceedings of the CEC of the USSR"<sup>57</sup> [...] Ask the editors not to refuse my request.<sup>58</sup>

Maksimtseva shared an apparent sense of legal entitlement with her peers in her request for due payment. Emphasising her status in her place of work, Maksimtseva instructs the recipient of her letter to aid in the resolution of remuneratory problems. Yet, rather than emphasise the centrality of her lauded identity of worker (*rabotnitsa*) in order to make clear her entitlement to her due pay, Maksimtseva foregrounded her constitutional right to due payment outlined by the Central Committee, censuring her

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<sup>56</sup> GARF, f. 7279, op. 7, d. 18, l. 56.

<sup>57</sup> The Central Executive Committee of the USSR, the highest governing body of the Soviet Union at the time, which existed from 1922 until 1938.

<sup>58</sup> GARF, f. 5462, op. 12, d. 226, l. 35.

local Council for their breach of this right. In this sense, Maksimtseva portrayed herself as having been denied the rights to which she was entitled to for her labour, alleging that, far from it being her responsibility to demonstrate her entitlement to her pay increase, it is instead *local* (and not central) authorities that were responsible for any violation of Soviet policy.

Letters written to the editorial board of *Red Librarian* in pursuit of unpaid wages were assertive in their requests for proper attention to their entitlements. Another letter from the same collection read: 'We ask that you immediately inform us whether this situation is a violation of TsIK and Sovnarkom from 10/08/1930, and if so, to take action to correct this violation, since here in Aleksin, we were unable to do anything, despite the fact that we ourselves and our Groups sent information of a corresponding character to the City Soviet.'<sup>59</sup> Though it is unclear to which 'Groups' the writer referred, the picture emerging from this collection of letters is that for the librarian, their trade publication was seen to function with reasonable efficiency as a mouthpiece on behalf of its readership and related organisations. That so many of its correspondents were women, unlike, for example, the correspondents of the sugar-workers' trade magazine *Golos sakharnika* (Sugar worker) ostensibly reflects that the profession was reasonably feminised, arguably producing a small 'community' of sorts within which women felt quite confident in their voices, and ability to vocalise their rights as workers in the socialist state. Having examined the corresponding files for *Golos sakharnika* trade magazine, only one letter from a woman appears to have been received (or at least archived). The letter was signed anonymously, by 'a girl from the factory' (*devushka s*

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<sup>59</sup> GARF, f. 5462, op. 12, d. 226, ll. 6-8.



*zavoda*), and detailed the abuse in her factory of the working conditions of an elderly male colleague.<sup>60</sup>

Significantly, however, there was a perception among the librarians that their work, though not undertaken in a factory, or a farm, was vital to the construction of socialism, as it provided an educational environment in which the education of proletarian communities might thrive. Timofeeva perhaps verbalised this most articulately, writing that she 'Should have been given a pay increase of 13 rubles [...] No increase has been received [...] Please provide assistance, with the inclusion of the creation of favourable conditions for workers in political education [...] Timofeeva.'<sup>61</sup> There is some indication here of a possible explanation for the assertiveness of librarians and teachers in their claims to certain rights or entitlements. Certainly, their style of prose was more confident than those of letter-writers from professions less associated with education and literacy. The significance of this factor was demonstrated by the 'semi-literate librarian' Elizaveta, whose command of the written word did not seem poor enough to qualify her as 'semi-literate', but was indicative of a relative lack of confidence in her abilities and her political education. This is reiterated by the fact that at one point, late in her letter, Elizaveta asked Krupskaja if she would mind receiving a few of Elizaveta's poems about Lenin, stating that although she 'still did not dare to do it, but [would] probably send them to mark May 1<sup>st</sup>'.<sup>62</sup> Moreover, as Natalie Delougaz has pointed out, the 1930 issues of *Red Librarian* (from the archive of which the above examples are drawn), were published in the wake of a series of decrees from the Commissariat for Education and the Central Committee, recommending a series of organised library campaigns promoting library service, and the establishment of a nationwide network of

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<sup>60</sup> GARF, f. 5463, op. 7, d. 261, l. 59.

<sup>61</sup> GARF, f. 5462, op. 12, d. 226, l. 50.

<sup>62</sup> GARF, f. 7279, op. 7, d. 18, l. 56.

larger library units respectively.<sup>63</sup> This increased emphasis on the importance of library work (and no doubt the associated pay rise) arguably imbued the women with a sense of confidence in their own value to the regime, and subsequently in their claims to proper payment, in tandem with their confidence in their writing style.

In this respect, the significance of the intended audience of the letters to *Red Librarian* should not be underestimated. According to Natalie Delougaz's 1945 review of *Red Librarian* issues from 1924 until 1940, its list of contributors included a considerable proportion of 'non-librarians', indicating a relatively broad readership to whom issues relating to libraries were pertinent.<sup>64</sup> Indeed, Delougaz notes that the most frequently covered topic in *Red Librarian* was the general 'role' of the library in public life, with the majority of these articles – both by the publication's editorial team and its contributors – deal with the importance of libraries in political education. We might also submit, then, that the high worth afforded to political education led (at least among the readership of *Red Librarian*) to a sense of boldness in the claims made by library workers to certain rights. Yet, with reference to the 'semi-literate librarian', these claims were contingent upon a particular standard of professional achievement, as evidenced by the semi-literate librarian's pleas for assistance in raising herself to the standard of literacy and professional ability that she sees to be appropriate.<sup>65</sup>

This emphasis on the significance of education for the consolidation of the Revolution was not limited to librarians. The letter on pensions from a group of elderly teachers to Molotov encountered in chapter one demonstrates a sense of indignation at the disregard for their entitlement to material assistance, as veterans of the Revolution.

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<sup>63</sup> N. Delougaz, 'Some Problems of Soviet Librarianship as Reflected in Russian Library Periodicals', *The Library Quarterly: Information, Community, Policy*, 15:3, (1945), p. 216.

<sup>64</sup> Delougaz, 'Some Problems of Soviet Librarianship', p. 214.

<sup>65</sup> GARF, f. 7279, op. 7, d. 18, l. 56.

Justifying their right to a larger pension by stating that ‘not only had [they] been teachers, but were... in the midst of the Revolution, the party, and the defeat of capitalists – [they] should be able to look back, retire, and live comfortably.’<sup>66</sup> Despite the discursive preoccupation with youth, and the risk posed by the pre-Revolutionary generations and their tendency to bourgeois individualism, the women plainly stated that due to their revolutionary contributions the women were angered by what they saw as a breach of their entitlement to a comfortable living. The letter, signed by the women under the word: “*pensionerki*” (female pensioners), presented the women’s clear sense of their entitlement to those rights *because of*, rather than in spite of, their old age.<sup>67</sup> The letter was undoubtedly critical in its tone, yet the women mitigate these criticisms of the Soviet pension system by presenting their contribution to the Revolution as an entitlement to the privileges of Soviet power, aligning ‘human dignity’ with Soviet values.

The discursive and political obligation of women to perform productive labour outside the home was, of course, very familiar to women themselves. Generally speaking, the fact that rights and entitlements to the benefits of full citizenship were so intrinsically tied to labour outside the home did not *conceptually* present women with a sense of unease, or of conflict with motherhood, or the expectation by the state of motherhood from women. Yet practically, conflict often arose between the fulfilment of the labour obligations, and personal rights of women as mothers.

Larisa, who we briefly encountered in our earlier discussion of grief, wrote to Nadezhda Krupskaja in 1929. In describing her grief, she clearly explained the burden placed upon mother-teachers, and the conflict between her working and maternal responsibilities.

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<sup>66</sup> GARF, f. 5446, op. 82, d. 51, ll. 130-133.

<sup>67</sup> GARF, f. 5446, op. 82, d. 51, ll. 130-133.

Her daughter had died of the measles, apparently due to the unwillingness of her school board to allow her to take leave to seek appropriate treatment. Having had little opportunity either to spend time with her daughter before her death, or to grieve following the loss, she explained the magnitude of this injustice to Krupskaja, an extract of which reads as follows:

I have come to the conclusion that we, who remain strong for the upbringing of the new generation, must not have our own children, the flowers that colour and illuminate our lives...

How could I, tired, and with a sick child in my arms, raise the productivity of the class, what now can I give my pupil? All the cheerfulness, the desire to build freedom of the pupil that I have is gone. I function mechanically, and am afflicted by this [...] but such unfortunate teachers and children's tales are scattered around the clutter of our Union. We mother teachers work not to improve our material position, but because of cases of family misfortune[...] or the absence of a husband[...]<sup>68</sup>

Written in 1929, (obviously) prior to the 1936 Constitution, and to the 1930s closure of the Zhenotdel, her letter nonetheless implied to the reader a sort of equivalence between the work of a teacher and a mother, stating in no uncertain terms that she did not teach for the money, but to provide a parental, or care-giving role as an educator, in 'cases of family misfortune... or the absence of a husband' (a telling acknowledgement of the persistence of absconding husbands...). Larisa reinforced this through her references to the time and self-consuming obligations of her two roles held, and the conflict this presented. She highlighted the significance of her commitment to either one of these roles by reference to the engagement with the next generation of Soviet society that both entailed. Likewise, Larisa also wrote also of her desire to feel the joy that she had previously felt in 'building freedom' for and with her pupils, reiterating in this way, reflecting the priority that the construction of Soviet society and introduction of Soviet

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<sup>68</sup> GARF, f. 7279, op. 7, d. 18, l. 42.

power represented – though this element of the letter was no doubt heightened by Krupskaja's role as Deputy Minister for Education. We can, however, see reflections of this priority elsewhere in letters to authorities, and particularly in letters to Krupskaja. Evident also is the way in which this prioritisation of the rights of the younger generation of the first 'native Soviet citizens' was used to articulate the perceived transgression of the author's rights as a mother:

For us there is not regulation... The power that stands in the country of the interests of the toiling people should forbid us to have children. In the country of the Soviets, there must not be unfortunate children and unsupervised, neglected (*beznadzornie*) children, who spend most of their time under the supervision of semiliterate nannies, with whom childhood passes by grey, and unprepossessing. I'm sorry, a thousand times sorry dear Nadezhda Konstantinovna that I took from You an hour of precious time, but it is very hard.<sup>69</sup>

Larisa's writing, clearly, was coloured by a deep sense of private grief – deemed emotionally 'appropriate' for her in her association with the rearing of the new Soviet generation. Yet, the manner with which she expressed this to Krupskaja is striking in its clear evocation of the 'emancipatory' discourses presented by the state – including its shift back towards the 'stable' nuclear family. Larisa foregrounded in this passage the supremacy of the 'de-gendered' (or de-feminised) 'toiling class' against all others, placing it in a passive relationship with the state. Against this context, Larisa's discussion of the nannies she seemed to hold responsible for the neglect of children portrays them, in their 'semi-literacy' as almost bourgeois, despite their role in socialised childcare. They were unmistakably female, and, not having fully engaged with the emancipatory process of liquidating their own illiteracy, were engaged 'only' in domestic labour, unable to meet the standards expected of them in Soviet society. Yet, as we have seen,

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<sup>69</sup> GARF, f. 7279, op. 7, d. 18, l. 42.

the role of 'mother' in the nuclear family was considered to be distinct from this social category of domestic labourers.

By demanding that teachers should be 'forbidden' from having children, to protect the childhoods of Soviet children, a page after having referred to children as 'flowers that colour and illuminate our lives', Larissa's letter served two purposes. Firstly, she implicitly suggested that her work as a teacher would be a sufficient 'substitute' in her identity formation and sense of purpose, and well-being in such a relentlessly purpose-driven society. Secondly (though more explicitly) she suggested that the obligations of a teacher, without regulation in some way, were an infringement of the rights of mothers – the other part of Larissa's compound self-identification as 'mother teacher'. In this way, Larisa depicted to Krupskaja her *over*-fulfilment of her obligations to the Soviet state, and her entitlement to sufficient recognition by the state for the sacrifices she had made through her fulfilment of duty.

However, women were not able to assert whichever rights or entitlements they had themselves identified as due with impunity. The significance of women's strategies of 'Speaking Bolshevik', as well as the evocation of particular categories of politically acceptable labour, is highlighted by comparison to one of the rare examples found in the archives in which direct criticism – and a clear abuse of rights, if the writer is to be believed – were articulated to Soviet authorities. A woman named Natalya Kudialeva sent an angry exposé of her local volunteer militia to *Pravda* in 1925, in a letter entitled 'Where to complain about the police?'. The letter was stored in a file of correspondence forwarded from the editors of the newspaper *Krest'ianka* to the NKVD for investigation, and contained allegations of police brutality in a local village.

The police in Bielsko County, beyond the rules and laws during interrogations, [set upon] a citizen as if in an ambush and in a drunken manner commits violence against the person and health of the interrogated, such measures as terror to the peasants are alleged to be Soviet power. So, beaten by representatives of the police, the citizen is forced not to seek help from a doctor, after such interrogations. Here is a recent example. Comrade Antonov, a policeman at Zemtsovsky ox with witnesses, beat up during the interrogation of a citizen of the same parish Ivan Lukanov, and Ivan Nikifor... Show him the decree on interrogations, which he probably lost while drunk.<sup>70</sup>

Natalya K.'s letter displayed a sarcastic and dismissive rhetoric taking care to localise the issue by consistently identifying the individuals involved, thus removing the culpability for these abuses from the Soviet state. Like other letters, retained in the files of their original recipient, or filed simply as 'comments' or 'suggestions' in the bureaucracies regarding specific policies, the letter is ostensibly concerned with rights, citizenship, and the state. Yet, Natalya's attempt to localise the problem proved to be insufficient, and failed to mitigate her anger. This is perhaps due either to the degree of social marginalisation of the writer as a rural woman, the tone of the letter, its details, its target – or some combination of the four features. As we know from discussions of negative emotions in chapter two, other letters criticising authority measures tended to frame these criticisms in terms of the impact of errant individuals towards 'protected' or marginalised groups. Natalya K.'s letter, however, condemned the behaviour of members of the local police as 'hooliganism', drunkenness, thuggery. Though she criticised the violence and terror committed by police against the peasantry, she did not present this as an affront to Soviet values, but makes a sarcastic reference to the suggestion that this violence *was* Soviet power.

Moreover, Natalya K.'s letter, unlike other letters of criticism, did not reference her status in society as a party member, worker, or revolutionary, and as such did not attempt to align herself with the Soviet project. Nor did she emphasise particular

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<sup>70</sup> RGAE, f. 393, op. 56, d. 142, l. 249.

membership to a 'marginalised' group in Soviet society, or suggest any efforts she had made with respect to 'self-improvement'. In fact, Natalya K. included in her letter no details about herself, other than that she was a 'rural correspondent'; a vast element of the population whose 'mood' was closely monitored in the 1920s, due to its reputation of 'backwardness'. That the audience was the readership of *Krest'ianka*, a newspaper aimed at rural women, the *most* 'backward' element of the rural population would only have compounded the anxieties that Natalya K.'s letter stirred. This disparity in the response to letters detailing perceived infringements of rights, and more generally the persistence of issues of rights in letters detailing frustration, unhappiness and gratitude is clearly a very significant question to address. That women sought such a variety of strategies throughout the 1920s to articulate these perceptions of rights provides important evidence that there were a number of 'entitlements' considered to be rights intrinsic to the Soviet Woman.

### **Tracing Changes in Rights-Speak in Women's Responses to the 1936 Decree**

As a result of the 1936 'Decree on the Prohibition of Abortions', the traditional nuclear family was officially 'reinstated'. Wendy Goldman's work on women, abortion and the family suggests that prior to the reinstatement of the family, women had managed their reproductive lives effectively, responding flexibly to their circumstances, and seeking to preserve their autonomy. Although contraception was absent from most official discussions of women's emancipation, some Soviet demographers estimated that a significant proportion of Soviet women – including peasants – practiced some form of



contraception.<sup>71</sup> Goldman suggests that although doctors and OMM (Department for Maternity and Infancy Protection) officials were aware of the need for available contraception and abortion, it was women themselves who held the most thorough understanding of the relationship between reproductive control and liberation, pointing to the evidence that among both peasant and urban women, the groups who most frequently chose abortion were women who were already mothers.<sup>72</sup>

This understanding is corroborated by Ransel's study of reproductive discourse among rural women. Ransel's interviews make a convincing case for a transformation in the reproductive culture of villagers, arguing that village women were open to learning new methods of managing their reproductive lives, giving birth, and raising children. He notes that 'many [women] were quick to take advantage of whatever assistance proved convenient and did not ask them to sacrifice whatever little autonomy they enjoyed'<sup>73</sup> Though often presented as evidence of the latent conservatism of the Soviet population, upon this basis, women's letters can be seen as a defence of their own 'space' for existence within society. Women were not inherently opposed to changes in legislation which affected their domestic lives, but sought to preserve their own autonomy in these spheres.

Many responses to the decree – again, solicited by the state via newspapers - criticised the strains of Soviet life and its conflict with the maintenance of a family (albeit in strictly acceptable language). Indeed, women's response to the 1936 decree was far from meek, indeed their letters contained considered responses to the legislation and its effects. Citing poverty as the primary motivation behind the need for abortion,

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<sup>71</sup> Goldman, 'Women, Abortion and the State', p. 244.

<sup>72</sup> Goldman, 'Women, Abortion and the State', p. 248.

<sup>73</sup> D.L. Ransel, *Village Mothers: Three Generations of Change in Russia and Tataria*, (Indiana, 2000), p. 252.

peasant and urban women alike were acutely aware that if abortion was prohibited, women would seek illegal abortion in its place. That said, Evans notes that the majority of these letters were written by students, professional women and female shock workers, while instead, 'ordinary' women tended to write on issues of alimony, divorce and state benefits.<sup>74</sup> The letters archived in response to the 1936 decree broadly corroborate much of the work undertaken in the field by virtue of their sheer diversity: women's proposals for the decree responded to a vast array of 'stimuli' from their own environments – which we might broadly categorise according to class or background, but should be careful not to view too rigidly.

Complaining about the ready availability of divorce, and the sense of insecurity this created for women, a typist from Stalingrad wrote that 'We need in the future, the very best pilots, farmers, artists, professors, so give women the opportunity for calm and normal conditions [in which] to nurture.'<sup>75</sup> Another woman, who argued that further protections were required for new and nursing mothers, wrote:

Living side by side with collective farmers (*kolkhoznami*), I see how in almost every family the birth of a child is still a burden, because the mother-peasants (*materi-krest'ianka*) want to make money, and not to give the child to anyone, such as the nursery. The farm though, signed a contract for the opening of the nursery and the Foundation has allocated, both food and cash, but the Chairman of which has already spent half of the funds on the purchase of seeds and the nursery, he says it is not needed, as there are no means [to set it up].<sup>76</sup>

The author's letter has much in common with other criticisms of Soviet legislation: she presents her own life squarely within a collective framework, living 'side by side' with peasants. Like other women, she compounded the identities of mothers with their

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<sup>74</sup> J. Evans, "The Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the Woman's Question: The Case of the 1936 Decree 'in Defence of Mother and Child'", *Journal of Contemporary History*, 16:4, (October, 1981), pp. 757-775.

<sup>75</sup> GARF f. 9424, op. 1, d. 1476, l. 36.

<sup>76</sup> GARF f. 9424. op. 1. d. 1476, ll. 114-5.

occupation outside the home. It is notable, however, that the author continued to articulate the rights of the working mother with her child as the 'main subject' of the proposal she made. By highlighting the misdirection of funding for her proposed nursing facilities, the author of the letter suggested that the intended effect of the law would have been to establish nursing facilities for new mothers, to preserve the bond between mother and infant, and prevent any conflict between the obligations of workers and mothers. Like Larisa, the dual identity possessed by working mothers is evident in her letter, and though the candour with which the author asserted the value of the maternal relationship and rights of the mother (and child), there is a strong continuity between the language used by Larisa seven years earlier. Crucially, the author of this letter claims that the work of peasant woman was impossible without the arrangements for nursing that she described: 'For the work of peasant women, pregnant or with young children, to leave your young ones for 5 and 6 hours without a breast to go is not allowed [should not be allowed]'.<sup>77</sup> The clear implication of this statement that child-rearing – as well as farm labour – were integral components of the work of a peasant woman: a succinct acknowledgement of the responsibility formally re-assigned to women by 1936 for both public and domestic labour.

In spite, or perhaps because of, the heavy load of 'obligations' for which women were responsible in the first decades of Soviet power, a number of women wrote of the gratitude they felt for the material and ideological protection of their large families by the 1936 Constitution, and the endorsement they feel of their desired role as mother of a large family.<sup>78</sup> M.M. Kuzovokva, whom we first encountered in our discussion of emotions, when writing on behalf of her colleagues on her farm, expressed such an

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<sup>77</sup> GARF f. 9424. op. 1. d. 1476, ll. 114-5.

<sup>78</sup> GARF f. 9424. op. 1. d. 1476, l. 136.

appreciative sentiment: 'After reading in the newspapers of the great care of our proletarian state towards mothers of large families, we want to express many thanks for showing us feeling'.<sup>79</sup> By presenting herself in opposition to the 'people who had no children' that had laughed at her, Kuzovovka created a clear sense that being a mother of a large family was an intrinsic part of her own identity. She was grateful that she had been given greater appreciation under the legislation, and as a result of financial assistance from the state, now possessed the opportunity to fulfil this role more freely. Moreover, her choice of the term 'mother of a large family', rather than 'mother to many children', implies that not only does her sense of her role as mother encompass the raising of children, but a wider role as matriarch of a family unit which is valuable and appreciated in public life.

A more striking example of the shift in emancipatory discourse relating to labour and motherhood that accompanied the politics of the 1936 Decree, was the letter of an expectant mother found in the same file, which begins:

I want to tell you the attention our kolkhoz pays to women. I have three and a half months left of my pregnancy. Up to three months, I worked at all jobs, true, I felt pain, but nothing extraordinary. At four months, I went to the doctor to find out what it is – the doctor told me you get it from heavy labour, and gave me a certificate for light-medium labour. I threw out the claim, because [even] this work is unbearable for me. I began to ask the management of the kolkhoz for easier work.

Though the letter was in fact a response to the 1936 Decree, the letter began as if it sought to 'inform' the authorities of the grave misbehaviour of her superiors on the *kolkhoz*. As it proceeded, the author explained that, far from an excuse to 'shirk' her responsibilities on the *kolkhoz*, she had already borne the implications of heavy labour on her pregnancy for four months. Her inability to continue with heavy labour had been

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<sup>79</sup> GARF f. 9424. op. 1. d. 1476, l. 130.

medically certified – as had the impermanence and the possibility of resolution of her problem. Though she was confident in the certification of her inability to perform heavy labour, the *kolkhoz* had rejected her request to be reallocated to a less laborious role on the farm:

This was not granted, but rather I was compelled to attend a board meeting [...] Listening to all this ridicule and blackmail, I cried, I begged, that I can't go to heavy labour. I was put to particularly great shame then, when [the Chairman] spoke with insult and mockery about my pregnancy.<sup>80</sup>

It is improbable that the author's description of the mockery and 'blackmail' she had endured was embellished for the purposes of the letter, due to the level of specificity. However, located so shortly after her explanation of the due legal and bureaucratic process she had undertaken to ensure her legitimate transferral to 'light or medium' labour, the mockery is escalated to the implication that it is 'illegitimate', and a contravention of the legal protection of mother and child by the Decree. The author went on to evoke her potential Soviet motherhood, which reinforced the gravity of her situation:

After all, I'm just in my first year of marriage, and I want to become a happy mother, but because I have been so bullied and forced into a ruinous job, they extorted from me and with tears I said that I would go to work. Then everything calmed down, and they said: 'So, that's how to disassemble the sick women, and everyone will go to work'.<sup>81</sup>

The expectant mother's mistreatment at the hands of her *kolkhoz* board was presented as a risk to the well-being of other sick or pregnant mothers on the *kolkhoz*. Though the author was plain in her descriptions of the un-Soviet behaviour of her local superiors, she had until this point, made only veiled references to her emotional response to the situation, having been 'put to shame' in the context of the meeting. The author's return

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<sup>80</sup> GARF f. 9424. op. 1. d. 1476, l. 130.

<sup>81</sup> GARF f. 9424. op. 1. d. 1476, l. 130.

to heavy labour was 'extorted', through her tears, evoking one of the strategies common amongst women wishing to articulate unhappy emotions or experiences of Soviet power: emotional performance. In this chapter, that the author was brought to tears by the board was particularly significant. Though her despair was physically performed, and removed from her internal life and 'true' experience of Soviet power, it should be noted that the source of her unhappiness was also external to her, attributed to the contravention of her rights by the *kolkhoz* board. Indeed, her own participation in the decision was claimed to have been 'extorted' from her by their bullying. Nonetheless, since she 'want[ed] to be a happy mother', our maligned author intended to successfully contribute to the upbringing of the next generation, relating her own emotional state to that of her role as a mother. She also went on to relate her own negative situation to her own, present struggle to 'join' the Soviet authorities in their protection of the interests of mother and child, and ultimately the emancipation of women, defiantly stating that:

Of course, when I heard these words I decided not to work, without paying any attention to these zeroes at the last minute, because I see that these brutish attitudes towards women are impossible to break [...] I just want to ask you, can such relationships with women be, or not, because you still have others such as I, and they too suffer the same pain, but I tried and made sure that not simply I, but all women receive help. And one outcome is that each of us will be paid her own allowance, which is a relief for women on our *kolkhoz*...

I know that if this year I successfully carry to term, next year I will be able to work and return to the ranks of the Stakhanovites as it was before... But I should not be thrown out as a quitter, because I am not able to work. I urge you not to delay your response to me. I hope, wait with anticipation, that I will not leave work until I receive an answer.<sup>82</sup>

Though this author's prose was slightly convoluted and excitable she clearly associated her unfortunate situation with that of other working mothers, with whom she expressed a sense of solidarity and collectivism. Much of the letter discussed her

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<sup>82</sup> GARF f. 9424. op. 1. d. 1476, l. 130.

personal responses to her situation, but its framing was determined by the discursive emancipation with which she had been granted, both as a Soviet woman, and as a mother. Her decisions to ignore the directives given to her by male superiors in the workplace 'condemned' them as somehow 'un-Soviet' aberrations. Her inherent 'rights' as a working mother provided her with the authority to overrule directives by employers that were perceived to transgress them.

Regarding the more punitive alimony legislation outlined by the decree, one woman complained that the decree refers to 'the first family and forgets about paying alimony to the second family. For Soviet power every living person possesses the right to live and to live well... Please act on our request, and care for the children and wives of the first marriage and second.'<sup>83</sup> By clearly couching her request in terms of the right of a Soviet person (*chelovek*), the author emphasises both her expectation that the state is obligated to provide her and her family with the means of a comfortable living, but additionally reflects the sense of equality outlined by the Constitution. By choosing the term person, rather than citizen (*grazhdanin/grazhdanka*), the author presents her right to a decent standard of living as a basic right regardless of gender, making clear that her understanding of herself as a Soviet *woman* involves no conditions upon the state benefit she receives as a mother and wife. Moreover, the use of the word *chelovek*, or 'person', rather than the more overt use of the word 'citizen', implied a discursive conflation between full citizenship and personhood, corroborating the work of Finkel, Alexopoulos and Thatcher, who have between them demonstrated that the 'paradoxical' states of civic belonging that emerged as part of the Soviet system of 'rights' was related

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<sup>83</sup> GARF, f. 9424, op. 1, d. 1476, l. 24.

to the demands of workers in the pre-Revolutionary period to be treated 'like a human being'.<sup>84</sup>

Attention in responses to the right of *all* women 'to live and live well', as Soviet people, was not uncommon. A young woman named Zakusova, discussing her husband's alimony payments, introduced herself simply by stating: 'I am 22 years old. I am the fourth wife of my husband'<sup>85</sup> Despite arguing against her husband's alimony payments to his remarried first two wives, Zakusova recognised that as a single mother, it must be difficult for his third wife to make ends meet, conceding that:

the third works herself – though only gets 300 rubles. Yet it is certainly necessary to help – she needs child support. Yet I, because those two women are married and take child support – I can not have a child... I want children, and the law gives the possibility for me to have them.<sup>86</sup>

Clearly, Zakusova expected to be able to enjoy her own family life, and while she objected to the burden placed on her husband by his first two wives, she did not object to the financial requirements of her husband's third wife, accepting that subsistence would have been difficult for her on only one income. Moreover, it is necessary to acknowledge that Zakusova, aged twenty-two in 1936, would have lived her life in its entirety either in revolutionary uncertainty, or under Soviet power. Her status as a 'fourth wife' held little shame for her, presumably having grown up accustomed to the easy availability of divorce and remarriage. In this respect, her disclosure of this information serves to emphasise her right 'to live and live well'.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Alexopoulos, 'Soviet Citizenship, More or Less', Finkel, 'The "Political Red Cross" and the Genealogy of Rights Discourse in Revolutionary Russia', and Thatcher, 'Late Imperial Urban Workers'.

<sup>85</sup> GARF, f. 9424, op. 1, d. 1476, l. 33.

<sup>86</sup> GARF, f. 9424, op. 1, d. 1476, l. 33.

<sup>87</sup> GARF, f. 9424, op. 1, d. 1476, l. 24.



The matter of fact self-identification in many letters, as a subsequent wife or family can be seen to have a specific semantic purpose, imbuing this identity with a sense of public legitimacy: seeking to assert a presence worthy of recognition within this paradigm, these wives presented themselves as a lauded role amongst the Soviet pantheon of heroes, as the cultivators of a new generation. Several women in their responses to the 1936 decree, voiced concerns that women's rights and interests were, when in a secure relationship with a family, actually harmed by the availability of divorce, due to the ease with which a husband might leave for another woman. This was perhaps most articulately expressed again by the typist from Stalingrad who we met in chapter one: 'when people [are married] 10-12 years or more, have children and then one of them decided to "retire." Is departing right in such a case, leaving the other half-way, and maybe at the end of life, with family and with a broken life?'<sup>88</sup>

### **'Women in the USSR are accorded equal rights with men in all spheres of economic, state, cultural and political life': Women's Responses to the 1936 Constitution**

The invitation to comment on the contents of the Draft of the 1936 Constitution was extended to citizens in the five months prior to its publication in December 1936. As Nathans has explained, '[T]he economic and social rights pioneered in the Stalin Constitution included the right to employment, to leisure, to material security in old age and in the event of illness or incapacity to work, and to education, up to and including higher education.' Articles 122 and 123 ensured that any impediment to the fulfilment

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<sup>88</sup> GARF f. 9424, op. 1, d. 1476, l. 36.

of these rights based upon gender, nationality, or race, were prohibited.<sup>89</sup> Though nominally ensuring full equality for all citizens, the Constitution distinguished between 'having' rights, and having rights conferred, or granted by the state (along with the means to attain them). In other words, though it would be possible to obtain rights – up to a more or less uniform standard – these were neither innate nor an entitlement. Rather, they were obtainable from the state in return for meeting a particular set of socio-political criteria, the most significant of which was participation in socially useful labour. The Constitution also categorised the conditions on which the different degrees of citizenship might be conferred. Nathans has suggested that, according to the Stalin constitution '[l]abour [was] the indispensable link between duties and rights, the only activity listed under both categories'.<sup>90</sup> Ellen Wimborg cites one letter to *Izvestiia* from a woman named Gavrilova which encapsulated the relationship perfectly, while at the same time toeing the party line of criticism against corrupt or bureaucratic local officials, suggesting that 'such heartless bureaucrats who ignored the pleas of their constituency ought to be deprived of the right to lead Soviet organs'.<sup>91</sup> As this extract indicates, following the publication of the draft Constitution newspapers did carry portions of the national discussion of its contents. Though as John Arch Getty has warned, it is impossible for us to know either the inclusion and exclusion processes for the archiving of responses to the draft, or the views of those citizens afraid or apathetic to chime in, the responses to the draft display a considerable variety of opinion across and within social groups – in particular with regards to the rights that citizens would receive.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Quotation from Nathans, 'Soviet Rights Talk in the post-Stalin Era', pp. 171-2, articles 122 and 123 from *Konstitutsiia (osnovnoj zakon) Coiuzs sovetskikh sotsialisticheskikh respublik*, (Moscow, 1947).

<sup>90</sup> B. Nathans, 'Soviet Rights Talk in the post-Stalin Era', p. 171.

<sup>91</sup> *Izvestiia*, 6 July 1936, p. 3, cited in E. Wimborg, 'Socialism, Democratism, and Criticism: The Soviet Press and the national discussion of the 1936 draft Constitution', *Soviet Studies*, 44:2, (1992), p. 321.

<sup>92</sup> J. Arch Getty, 'State and Society under Stalin: Constitutions and Elections in the 1930s', *Slavic Review*, 50:1, (1991), p. 24.

Wimburg has noted that of the letters (from citizens of all genders) detailing specific articles of the Constitution, the vast majority were written regarding rights to material protection, rest and education, as well as the electoral system: the statistics she provides show that 53% of responses to the Constitution dealt with chapter 10 of the Constitution: 'Citizens' Basic Rights and Duties'.<sup>93</sup> Given the preponderance of letters from women on related subjects – and in particular education – prior to the drafting of the 1936 constitution, this is perhaps unsurprising.

In his study of the language of 'rights-speak' resulting from the 1936 Constitution in the post-Stalin era, Benjamin Nathans has suggested that 'complaints [by citizens] appear to have been couched in the language not of common citizenship but of a specific form of parity and fairness: If workers get such-and-such, so should peasants'.<sup>94</sup> After twenty years of the Stalin constitution, Soviet citizens appeared to have a nuanced understanding of the complexities of the conditions of full citizenship, and their associations with duty, and constantly fluctuating constructions of socially valuable labour and behaviour. Yet, responses to the draft of the Constitution from citizens prior to its ratification indicate that such attitudes appear to predate the constitution, rather than emerge as a result of it. Upon its circulation, article 122 of the 1936 Constitution of the USSR had, as we know, established the theoretically non-negotiable principle of gender equality, with a brief provision of measures which would be taken by the state to protect the stipulation and 'the interests of mother and child.'<sup>95</sup>

Though brief in its framework of the codification of gender equality, the comments and suggestions the Constitution solicited from citizens were detailed, and thorough in their

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<sup>93</sup> Wimburg, 'Socialism, Democratism and Criticism', p. 325.

<sup>94</sup> Wimburg, 'Socialism, Democratism and Criticism', p. 172.

<sup>95</sup> Konstitutsiia (osnovnoj zakon) Coiuza sovetskikh sotsialisticheskikh respublik, (Moscow, 1947).

conceptualisation of the rights and responsibilities it laid out. Arch Getty has demonstrated the distinction that the Stalin Constitution re-drew between workers and peasants, in the alteration of the former statement that the USSR was a 'state of free workers of farm and country' to Stalin's version, a 'socialist state of worker and peasants'. Though hypothetically all citizens were guaranteed the rights laid out by the Constitution, its wording, specifically that rights were guaranteed for 'the working people', called into question the relationship between them and the newly reclassified peasantry. Arch Getty has noted that, long before Nathans' peasants demonstrated a keen awareness of the potential implications of these distinctions, rural Soviet workers were sharply critical of the second class status with which they felt they had been lumbered by the Constitution.<sup>96</sup>

Indeed, the language women employed in their responses to this article reflects the 'specific form of parity and fairness' that Nathans notes as being present in *post*-Stalinist rights-talk, as well as this sensitivity to the ambiguity of their eligibility for the rights guaranteed citizens by the constitution. A woman named Eframova suggested that the constitution should '[e]qualise *kolkhoznitsi* near labour (*kolkhoznits-rozhenits*) in the provision of maternity leave with working women and employees'.<sup>97</sup> Similarly, a woman by the name of P'iavkina suggested that the constitution should '[s]ave the wages for *kolkhoznitsi* women (*kolkhoznitsi-zhenshchiiii*) on maternity leave, and moreover, equalize the maternity leave of working and *kolkhoz* women'.<sup>98</sup> Her sentiments were echoed again by Razorenova a *kolkhoznitsa* from Dzherzhinskii *kolkhoz* who suggested that this should be enshrined in writing: 'Include a special point to article 122 [...] providing for leave for *kolkhoznitsi*-women for pregnancy equal to that of *rabotnitsi*-

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<sup>96</sup> Arch Getty, 'State and Society under Stalin: Constitutions and Elections in the 1930s', p. 27.

<sup>97</sup> GARF, f. 3316, op. 41, d. 40, l. 3.

<sup>98</sup> GARF, f. 3316, op. 41, d. 40, l. 3.

women.<sup>99</sup> All three proposals to the Constitution compound the status of their authors as specifically female toilers, or collective farmers on the one hand, with their status biologically as women, or indeed as childbearing women on the other. By stating these professional aspects of their identities in their calls for ‘equality’ – or parity – with working women, the authors emphasise the sense of ‘fairness’ amongst different social strata they feel the Constitution should entail, rather than a sense of ‘common citizenship’.<sup>100</sup> Yet, compounding their professional status as collective farmers with their sexed identities, as (child-bearing) women, the suggestions of Eframova, Razorenova and P’iavkina all contain subtle reminders to the reader that they are all distinctly *female* citizens.

A large proportion of propositions to article 122 were similar in the nature of the requests they made, however they were far from uniform in their form or implications, reflecting the individual conception of each woman of the value of her circumstances, their place in Soviet society, and the rights to which she was entitled. Perhaps one of the most striking examples of the varying degrees with which women endorsed article 122’s vague provisions for gender equality, is that suggestion made by Zhukova, a resident of Budyonnovsk who proposed that the Soviet state should ‘PROSECUTE men, who try to break (directly or indirectly) the equal rights of women (wives), in public or in the household.’<sup>101</sup> Zhukova’s proposition is suitably vague, perhaps hopefully leaving considerable room for the prosecution of smaller transgressions of the rights of women without too much fuss from the courts. Evidently, article 122 was understood by Zhukova in its broadest sense, and the value she placed upon the breadth of this

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<sup>99</sup> GARF, f. 3316, op. 41, d. 40, l. 21.

<sup>100</sup> Nathans, ‘Soviet Rights-Talk in the Post-Stalin Era’, p. 172.

<sup>101</sup> GARF, f. 3316, op. 41, d. 40, l. 19; capitalisation my own to reflect the emphases afforded by the word order in Russian.

legislation of gender equality was reflected in the scope of prohibited behaviour she felt should be codified within it.

By way of contrast, a longer addition to the article was made by Kuzmina, who identified herself as a working woman of the Sverdlov factory. It appears to suggest that, although she did not disagree with the *principles* the article entails, she was not quite as convinced by their inclusion in the 1936 Constitution. She stated:

I want to add one thought to article 122 about which it is said, that the woman in our country is provided with equal rights to the man. It seems to me, that this formulation is not necessary.

Our country is already nineteen years old; the rights of man and woman we have always been uniform. In life we do not encounter and will not encounter such things, that woman would be limited in her rights. The truth is evident, it is absolutely undeniable.<sup>102</sup>

The conception of the rights and citizenship of women that Kuzmina put forward offered several suppositions. First of all, though at first glance her criticism for including an article ensuring the rights of women appears to have been a negative reaction, upon closer inspection, it could be read as a celebration of the fact that nineteen years of Soviet power had already achieved gender equality. Kuzmina did not discuss the pre-Revolutionary situation: for her, the nineteen-year-old Soviet state marked the beginning of 'time'. Anything occurring before the Revolution was clearly unworthy of note in her historical narrative. Though she does not state whether women have *ever* had their rights restricted, women *do* not and *will* not experience limitations of their rights under Soviet power.

Nonetheless, Kuzmina's evaluation of gender equality also spoke volumes of her conception of citizenship and gender, recalling Zaharejivić's illustration of the impact of

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<sup>102</sup> GARF, f. 3316, op. 41, d. 40, l. 21.

the nineteenth century scientific naturalisation of sex upon the formulation of the boundaries of citizenship.<sup>103</sup> Her choice of the word ‘uniform’ (*odnorodnie*) to describe the rights of men and women in the Soviet Union strikes a contrast with their usual description as ‘equal’ (*ravniie*), and association with equality (*ravnestvo* or *ravnopravnie* – the latter being literally, equal rights). Though women’s experience of life after the Revolution was in no way ‘uniform’, by any account, in suggesting that their *rights* have been uniform, Kuzmina suggested that the article on gender equality was redundant, since she felt that women were already guaranteed equality their respective rights as citizens.

However, the majority of responses from women to article 122 saw no reason to question the necessity of the legislation on women’s equality itself, instead suggesting the inclusion of additional clauses, either to codify the rights of their particular demographic, or to facilitate the rights they already possess as members of different social categories. For example, Evdokia Belitskaia in her proposal to the Constitution, stated that: ‘In my opinion, it is necessary to provide in the Constitution for the establishment on each *kolkhoz*, of birthing homes and crèches, in order to give the possibility to all mother-*kolkhoznitsi* to give birth to happy children for our wonderful motherland’<sup>104</sup> Though it is not possible to gauge the generational cohort of the women responding to article 122 from their brevity, written nineteen years into Soviet power, the language in which Evdokia’s letter was couched is strikingly ‘Soviet’ in tone, not least because of its reference to ‘happy children’. In addition to this, though we cannot be certain as to whether Evdokia was herself a mother or not, by compounding ‘mother’ and ‘*kolkhoznitsi*’ in the order that she does, Evdokia expressed her professional status

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<sup>103</sup> Zaharejivić, ‘How to know a citizen when you see one? The sex of a citizen’, p. 71.

<sup>104</sup> GARF, f. 3316, op. 41, d. 40, l. 5.

as a worker as the 'core' of a woman's identity, presenting motherhood as its potential modifier. Likewise, as a self-identified *rabotnitsa*, or 'working-woman', L. Kirbakova, suggested that 'to article 122 [I would] propose the addition 'to organise specialist circles for woman-mothers with infants'.<sup>105</sup> The degree of specificity of this proposal indicates that this is a circumstance with which Kirbakova is familiar, either through her own, or through a peer's, personal circumstances. In this respect, Arch Getty's claim, that peasants proved themselves more than adept at using the language and norms of the state to express personal criticism of the 1936 Constitution, does hold some weight.

Nonetheless, Arch Getty's claim that the Soviet state was 'startled to find a sullen, critical, unliberal, class conscious peasantry more interested in corporate rights and punishing perceived enemies than constitutional niceties' is a little unfair, at least to the women of the peasantry with whom this study is concerned.<sup>106</sup> Beyond their commitment to parity between working and peasant women, and occasional outburst against particular women who they felt had caused them personal injury, peasant women often delivered thoughtful and personal responses to the Stalin Constitution. Present in many of the proposals made by women were reflections of their personal experience of Soviet life. Efrosina Ragulina suggested that 'For a mother, regardless of how many children she has, if she has another, award her a cash prize'.<sup>107</sup> Efrosnia was presumably familiar in some way with the financial pressures an expanding family might pose. Similarly, a *kolkhoznitsa* of the *kolkhoz* 'Svoboda' wrote: 'to article 122, speaking of rights and of state help to woman, it is necessary (*nado*) to make an addition: to grant the right to local authorities to release women with large families and pregnant

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<sup>105</sup> GARF, f. 3316, op. 41, d. 40, l. 18.

<sup>106</sup> Arch Getty, 'State and Society under Stalin: Constitutions and Elections in the 1930s', p. 32.

<sup>107</sup> GARF, f. 3316, op. 41, d. 40, l. 6.



women from meat supply and milk supply/requisition for a certain period'<sup>108</sup> Since her proposal criticised the requisitioning of kolkhoz produce by the state (the use of the word 'release' implies a seizure of assets rather than a voluntary or dutiful contribution) the author of this suggestion declined to leave her name. Similarly, Comrade T.N. Ostretsova was similarly vague about her circumstances, and her personal investment in her proposal, which suggested that '[t]o article 122, [one should] add that the right during pregnancy to take leave with pay from 30 to 50 roubles per month for *kolkhoznitsi*.'<sup>109</sup> Ostretsova reinforced her eligibility to make policy suggestions to the authorities not only by retaining a certain objectivity from her suggestions, but simply by referring to herself first and foremost as 'Comrade' Ostretsova.

Thus, we find evidence of several common features of women's letters to the state by 1936 regarding their rights as women and mothers. As we might expect by 1936, women evoked with considerable fluency the terminology and concepts commonplace in materials produced by or for the Soviet authorities and their organs. The discussion of 'specialist circles' for mothers, the political significance of the well-being of the 'next generation', of the remuneration of motherhood, and of course the self-reference by women as 'comrade', all indicate conscious attempts to write in a language to which the recipients of the letters might respond more favourably. Likewise, the 'compounding' of socially valuable social identities served to emphasise not only the social value of the writer, but of her proposals to the Constitution. The ease and nuance with which identities such as 'mother', 'worker', 'woman', 'peasant' and so on were combined, and the implicit prioritisation of their constituent parts, again reflects a sense of confidence in the re-articulation of Soviet language amongst the women. Quite strikingly, we also

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<sup>108</sup> GARF, f. 3316, op. 41, d. 40, l. 6.

<sup>109</sup> GARF, f. 3316, op. 41, d. 40, l. 18.

find evidence of the recurrent use of vagueness or omission as euphemistic strategy. Women frequently omit details of their lives, or speak vaguely about themselves, articulating only the details they consider to be 'useful' to their proposal, such as their peasant or worker identity. In doing so, the women not only express their proposal plainly and directly, they also avoid the direct implication the difficult or unhappy experiences lying behind the proposals – such as the implications of grain and meat requisitions; the insufficiency of maternity; and ultimately, as in Kuzmina's letter, any mention of life (good or bad) prior to the Revolution.

In contrast, some women readily divulged details of their lives and identities, beyond allusions couched in proposals for rights for particular groups. 'Comrade Motyleva', who identified herself as a housewife (*domokhoziaika*), for example, noted that the Constitution should ensure: '[t]he involvement of housewives in public (*obshchestvennaia*) work and the provision of a wide network of kindergartens, nurseries and playgrounds for schooling, where children can be left with round-the-clock service.'<sup>110</sup> 'Comrade' Motyleva's assertion of the proper civic entitlement of housewives is interesting. As discussed in the introduction 'wives' were almost invisible as a social category in the first years after the Revolution.<sup>111</sup> Yet, in their responses to article 122, women were not uncomfortable asserting their rights as wives and as housewives. Zhukova's request that all men who break the equal rights of women (and wives) be prosecuted specifically denoted the inclusion of women as independent citizens *and* within partnerships be protected equally. Motyleva's use of the epithet 'comrade' certainly indicates that she possessed a sense of enthusiasm to be considered as a full citizen. Beyond this, however, by stating the necessity of childcare, to enable the

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<sup>110</sup> GARF, f. 3316, op. 41, d. 40, l. 12.

<sup>111</sup> Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, p. 156.

undertaking of other forms of social labour, she clearly asserted her faith in the value of domestic labour outside the realm of childcare, which was 'worthy' of the same benefits as other forms of labour.

In this way, women responded to article 122 of the 1936 Constitution in a way that sought to protect their own interests, and prevent the breach of their rights to equality not only with their male peers, but also their female counterparts from alternative social categories. The reluctance of these women to divulge details of their own lives in addition to the strategy of 'avoidance' of direct negative emotional expression identified in chapter two, arguably reflects an unwillingness to present themselves or their peers as the beneficiaries of the Constitutional supplements they propose, preventing accusations of individualism. Yet, since one's frame of reference dictates one's world view, reflections of individual circumstances and senses of right and civic entitlement permeate. It seems that Mlovaiskaia's abrupt proposal 'to add a point on punishment of mothers who abandon infants', for example, must have been rooted in some event in her frame of experience in her community.<sup>112</sup>

Moreover, it is clear that the particular words women chose to articulate their understandings of their rights as Soviet women convey their attempts to negotiate their contemporary discourse, which categorised and hierarchized different social groups. In doing so, they assert their socialist value along with the rights and entitlements that this entails. Throughout the corpus of responses to article 122 of the 1936 Constitution of the USSR, respondents demonstrated an appreciation for the complex categorisation of 'degrees' of citizenship afforded individuals within the Soviet state. They were also able to nuance and blend certain categorisations of their identities by aligning themselves

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<sup>112</sup> GARF, f. 3316, op. 41, d. 40, l. 18.

with applicable alternative social categorisations: collective farm workers and women; mothers and women; comrades and housewives; and collective farm workers and child-bearers. As might be expected, due to the status workers enjoyed in the new Soviet state, 'working women' appears to have been the sole social category which did not require qualification.

## **Conclusions**

Upon reflection, then, it is evident that women considered their statuses, rights, and responsibilities as *women* to be in no way distinct from their status, rights and responsibilities as *citizens*. It is evident that, to an extent, Soviet full citizenship came to be equated with full humanity, and maximum social value, in a similar manner to which full citizenship, humanity, and white masculinity were equated as in the previous century. The familiar language of darkness and light also remained present in discussions of rights and their emotional ties, in particular with relation to self-improvement, and the quest for education.

Since the concept of citizenship was predicated on exclusion, particularly during the late nineteenth century, the exclusionary nature of Soviet citizenship evident in official discourse, and reproduced by Soviet women in their letters was not necessarily exceptional. However, one might have expected that the scientific naturalisation of sex and race that had previously delineated the confines of citizenship would ultimately be replaced by 'Sovietness' and labour value – particularly in light of the expectation of the withering of the nuclear family. Yet it is apparent that to a certain extent, Soviet citizenship incorporated the scientific rationalisation of sexual difference into its implicit understanding of 'equality' as the period progressed. The conceptual, essential 'difference' between man and woman in Soviet thinking in the period is encapsulated in

Stalin's declaration that 'many of you underrate the women, and even laugh at *them*. This is a mistake, comrades, a serious mistake'.<sup>113</sup> Despite overtures towards meaningful equality, the value seemed often to be evaluated by their contemporaries as an economic and demographic tool: Stalin speaks *about* them as an Other, and not *to* them as peers. Kuzmina's allegation in the following year that legislation for the equal rights of men and women was 'unnecessary', it having existed (at least) since the inception of the Soviet state, appears to contradict the state of affairs portrayed by Stalin himself, yet, inherent in the statements of both are the underlying assumption that men and women are 'different, but equal'; though they may be treated differently, the rights pertaining to both respectively were, or should be met uniformly, to their fullest extent

Many women appropriated these ideas, 'accepting' them to varying and questionable degrees, but nonetheless reproducing the 'essential' nature of woman. In particular, the duty of women to the state as 'mother' was frequently emphasised, in order to benefit from the rights this entailed. For most, there was no conflict for women between civic responsibilities for labour, and motherhood. Yet, the persistence of the Soviet preoccupation with 'youth' and the rearing of a Soviet generation was consistent, justifying, the entitlement of mothers to certain benefits. Correspondingly, rights of the working mother were often articulated through those of the child, or a new Soviet generation. Though this was generally more pronounced prior to 1936, this is a feature of the writing of mothers that was sustained (at least) until the close of the 1930s. Maria, whose daughter we know committed suicide following a 'humiliation' at the hands of boys in her school, plainly urged Krupskaja to help ensure the state take responsibility

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<sup>113</sup> Stalin, 'The Political Education of Women', p. 87.

for its involvement in matters of gender for the next generation, ostensibly as means of justifying her right to private grief for her daughter.<sup>114</sup>

Yet, such an emphasis on the rights of mother and child as synonymous is perhaps *less* pronounced following the 1936 Constitution, though references were made to the relationship between mother and infant. Following the rehabilitation of the nuclear family and the heroisation of motherhood, women appeared to be more comfortable asserting rights as mothers, even beyond the fact that they were invited to respond to the proposals in the Constitution. M.M. Kuzokovka, as we have seen, portrayed clearly the way in which her matriarchal pride was restored after the provisions made by the 1936 Decree for mothers of large families, expressing a clear sense of vindication in the faces of her colleagues, who, she confessed, had been cruel to her before the publication of the Decree, due to the large size of her family.<sup>115</sup>

Thus, it is evident that the role of ‘the mother’ continued to be a powerful rhetorical tool for women to express sorrow, dissatisfaction, or the need for change in Soviet life. Yet, though it hardly needs explaining, many women did not have children, due to choice, circumstance, or loss. Their letters indicate that, in their employment of Soviet language many girls and women positioned education – either as an educator or student – as a central ‘purpose’ in its place, rather than labour, and often with direct reference to maternal roles. Where a particular right, or obligation in this regard went unfulfilled, women and girls expressed clear emotional responses, highlighting the constituent parts of civic belonging for Soviet women, and aiding understanding of the types of negative feeling women felt comfortable sharing with authorities.

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<sup>114</sup> GARF f.7279 op.7 d.18 ll.15-16.

<sup>115</sup> GARF f.9424 op. 1 d.1476 l.130.

## Chapter Four

### Personal Lives in Revolution: Kinship, Fidelity, and the Legitimation of Alternative Families

That the language representing Soviet women's emotions, personal and civic rights, and familial and filial relationships was subject to shifts in public discourse exposed much of the personal lives of women in the Soviet Union to state approval, particularly if assistance, material or otherwise, was required. This intervention into private life was far more pervasive under Soviet power, but was not entirely new. The place of social life – and particularly that of women – in the plans and anxieties of Soviet theorists was rooted in a tradition at *least* generations old, a product of the remnants of the tsarist 'estate' system.

According to Robin Bisha and Jehanne Gheith *et al* family membership in the Russian Empire had provided subjects with 'the principal basis for the identity': social, economic and political roles had typically been determined by the status of one's family, and family members identified by their relationship to their father. Women, in particular, were publicly 'defined' by their relationships with men, taking their husband's name upon marriage in addition to their patronymic. Social custom, Orthodox teaching, and political pressures all defined women's roles practically in these terms: as daughters, wives, and mothers (or – alas – as the dreaded 'mother-in-law'). Though the 'procedures' of family life, so to speak, evolved in particular throughout the nineteenth century, Bisha *et al* suggest that amongst contemporaries, there was little room for variation in the cycles of family life, and consequently, in the behaviours expected of women.<sup>1</sup> Common proverbs in the Russian Empire reflected and reinforced women's identities as in

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<sup>1</sup> R. Bisha, J.M. Gheith, C. Holden, W.G. Wagner (eds), *Russian Women, 1698-1917: Experience and Expression*, (Indiana, 2002), pp. 58-60.

relation to male relatives, as well as the strictly patriarchal nature of these relationships. One such proverb 'A good husband is father to his wife' infantilised women, with significant implications for her public role and value - something implicit in the European theories of rights developing throughout the nineteenth century discussed in the previous chapter. The belief that a woman's social value was finished once her reproductive and child-rearing days were over is reflected in the proverb that 'I escaped from a bear in the woods and my mother-in-law at home'.<sup>2</sup>

The Bolshevik vision for the social life of the Soviet population was no less ambitious than those for their emotional and civic lives, yet as with the latter projects, the roots of their ideas lay firmly in the pre-Revolutionary past, made possible by the negotiations of those whose personal lives they sought to reconstruct. As Barbara Alpert Engel's study of marriage and divorce in late imperial Russia has shown, individuals 'across the social spectrum' - and in particular women - had grown more assertive in their pursuit of autonomy and self-fulfilment in their interpersonal relationships, in addition to civil and political rights.<sup>3</sup> This was exemplified by the 'marriage crisis' present in the Russian Empire at the end of the nineteenth century as a result of the changes wrought by the emancipation of the serfs, intensified by the economic 'modernisation' it underwent from the 1880s and 1890s. The system of estates (*soslovie*) - according to which, as we know, legal status and associated rights had been determined - remained in existence. However, its social identities weakened, with groups (such as urban migrants from peasant backgrounds, and educated professionals of diverse origin) emerging outside of the 'estate' system. This resulted in what Gregory Freeze has termed a 'disparity between social origin and social status', which affected Russia's gender order, creating

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<sup>2</sup> Bisha, Gheith, Holden, Wagner (eds), *Russian Women, 1698-1917*, p. 58

<sup>3</sup> B.A. Engel, *Breaking the Ties that Bound: the Politics of Marital Strife in Late Imperial Russia*, (Ithaca, 2011), p. 260.



novel possibilities for self-definition within the home, as well as in the public sphere, laying the foundation for creative solutions to domestic dissatisfaction, outside of the nuclear family.<sup>4</sup> Though changes in legal practices were enabled by the existence of reformers in the Russian intelligentsia, they were prompted by women themselves, who presented the chancellery with carefully crafted narratives in pursuit of separation. In this way, women's narratives both shaped and responded to the values of the Chancellery officials, constructing a particular and mutually understood vocabulary with which to communicate with state organs. The dynamism of this process provides us with another clear continuity between Imperial and Soviet processes of social and civic change, as well as a clear precedent of women living in 'alternative' family units outside traditional multi-generational, patriarchal families.

Thus, marital separation became a possibility for women across the Russian Empire *de facto*, though not *de jure*, in order to accommodate these social changes and maintain the existing imperial system. Yet, the longevity of the social and legal acceptance of meaningful affective ties for a functional marriage must be accommodated in any thesis regarding the familial and marital ties of societies with significant rural populations - which Russia certainly possessed.<sup>5</sup> Z.Z. Mukhina's study of the Russian widow in the countryside from the late nineteenth century, has demonstrated that widows *remained* central characters within their communities following the deaths of their husbands, and that frequently, those who did not remarry, or whose new partners were sent out of the village to work, were responsible for their farming almost in its entirety.<sup>6</sup> From

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<sup>4</sup> G. Freeze, 'The *Soslovie* (Estate) Paradigm and Russian Social History', *American Historical Review*, 91:1, (1986), pp. 11-36, cited in B. Engel, *Breaking the Ties that Bound: the Politics of Marital Strife in Late Imperial Russia*, (2001), p. 2.

<sup>5</sup> M. Segalen, *Love and Power in the Peasant Family*, (Chicago, 1983).

<sup>6</sup> Z.Z. Mukhina, 'Vdova v russkoi krest'ianskoi srede: traditsii i novatsii (vtoraia polovina XIX – nachalo XX v)', *Zhenshchina v rossiiskom obshchestve*, 4, (2012), pp. 62-71.

Mukhina's conclusions it is evident that – at the very least – Russian women remained active participants in their community regardless of their marital circumstances, and often cultivated atypical domestic circumstances.

Moreover, letters from long-married peasant women themselves suggest a sense of pride in the longevity of their relationships. The issue of the necessity of affective ties between partners is intensified by changes in self-definition that women underwent upon their mass migration to urban centres. As Engel has demonstrated, the general increase in recognition of selfhood within the Russian Empire, and subsequently of the right to self-determination, meant that married couples of any background might find themselves incompatible after several years of marriage.<sup>7</sup> Imperial Chancellery records of marital separation requests show an overwhelmingly peasant clientele, many or most of whom had returned at their husband's request from a period of labour in major cities, to find that they 'had changed so much that they could no longer return to [their] former life', thus laying roots with distant relatives, colleagues, friends, or lovers upon the breakdown of a marriage.<sup>8</sup>

Though access to wealth and education determined the resources and responses available to women seeking escape from unhappy home lives, as well as their ability to articulate their wishes, the growth of a 'cult of domesticity' mirroring that of the West undoubtedly altered the outlooks of women across the social spectrum. The domesticity prescribed to 'wives' in the early twentieth century 'raised expectations of marital felicity', and in the popular arts, romantic love and personal choice in intimate life became more visible than they had been before.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, though it would be a far

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<sup>7</sup> Engel, *Breaking the Ties that Bound*, p. 265.

<sup>8</sup> Engel, *Breaking the Ties that Bound*, p. 265.

<sup>9</sup> Engel, *Breaking the Ties that Bound*, pp. 4-5.

stretch to assume that marriages in rural and urban areas were exclusively love marriages by 1917, we can reasonably assume, based on a variety of studies and sources, that women did possess certain expectations about the affective contents of their marriages, and strong peer relationships within their communities.

The coincidence of two critical processes of social change prior to the Revolution – of the increased significance of love relationships, and of the civic and political rights of men and women – therefore resulted in a shift in long-standing norms of gender-relations, and in the relationship between personal and political. By the early twentieth century, women in the Russian Empire were in possession of a vocabulary by which they might voice their discontent, and an awareness of the possibility of marital separation. Bolshevik notions regarding the rights of women in state and society had, as was explored in the previous chapter, evolved in the context of these much larger-scale socio-political developments. In this sense, by 1917, despite the tumult of the war and revolutionary years, ordinary women were increasingly capable of negotiating their roles and social status, and identifying unsatisfactory circumstances in the ideological *lingua franca* required by their given environment. More crucially, they were increasingly willing to do so, where their wealth and personal circumstances allowed.

As a result, when the 1918 Code legalised and secularised divorce, state registry offices were overwhelmed by applications for divorce – especially as literacy was no longer practically pre-requisite in order to petition the Chancellery for separation.<sup>10</sup> The 1918 Code was, in many ways, truly revolutionary, despite the lack of theoretical consensus on the direction of Soviet social policy hitherto, and had been designed to cause the

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<sup>10</sup> Engel, *Breaking the Ties that Bound*, p. 261.

'withering' of the nuclear family, and essentially, 'with its own obsolescence in mind'.<sup>11</sup> Following the abolition of religious marriage, in 1917, and the legalisation of women's applications for divorce, the 1918 Code abolished the tutelage of the church and family over a women's personal life, and of the church over divorce, legalised no-fault divorces, and reduced the obstacles to abortions.<sup>12</sup> Soviet sociologist S. Ia. Vol'fson, almost directly quoting Engels' famous remark, quipped in *Sociology of Marriage and the Family* (*Sotsiologiia braka i sem'i*), that '[the family] will be sent to a museum of antiquities so that it can rest next to the spinning wheel and the bronze axe, by the horsedrawn carriage, the steam engine, and the wired telephone.'<sup>13</sup> The 1918 Code went much further than its precursors, for it entailed a total revolution in the personal lives of women, allowing her to construct a sense of 'self' and subsequently remedy their backwardness, participating in socialist construction as a Soviet Woman.

However, in truth, the ameliorations intended by the Code came to fruition only partially, and met with mixed reception. Though women certainly embraced the opportunities made possible by the Revolution, for many women concern was raised over the social changes that resulted, and the impact of these changes upon their own relationships. In particular, the implications of the new 'communist morality', and the presumed promiscuity that decrees on divorce and alimony entailed prompted alarm amongst women who sought to protect their own versions of family life. Those behaviours that women viewed as breaching community standards, threatening the stability of their own family lives, were easily articulated through the prism of 'anti-Soviet behaviours', and concerns about the 'loss' of potential of Soviet youth. Maria Sh.'s

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<sup>11</sup> W. Goldman, *Women, the State and Revolution*, (Cambridge, 1993), p. 1.

<sup>12</sup> Sbornik zakonov i dekretov raboche-krest'ianskogo pravitel'stva, 76-77, (1918), st. 818.

<sup>13</sup> S. Ia. Vol'fson, *Sotsiologiia braka i sem'i*, (Minsk, 1929), p. 450, as cited in W. Goldman, *Women, the State and Revolution*, (Cambridge, 1993), p. 1.

comments in chapter two about her marriage to her abusive husband at just sixteen were compounded by claims elsewhere that girls are ‘throwing themselves away’ into extra-marital relationships at the age of just seventeen.<sup>14</sup> These relationships were cast in stark contrast to those displaying long-standing honesty and fidelity, the implication that those qualities reflect both the nature of the relationship, and the ‘Soviet-ness’ of the citizen. Women throwing themselves frivolously into vice, entering into ‘dishonest’ adulterous relationships, were therefore stained with their ‘anti-Soviet’ behaviour, recalling arguments by Hearne and Waters about the dichotomy in the early Soviet state between ‘redeemable’ and ‘irredeemable’ sexual behaviour.<sup>15</sup> What underlay many of the accusations made by women were concerns about rivals ‘relying’ on alimony, and about the effects of prostitution, adultery, and abuse of position. They were expressed in terms of the need to collectively defend Soviet values against dangerous women, who were prone to subterfuge, dishonesty and selfishness. Highly personal feelings of jealousy, frustration, and sorrow were therefore framed most frequently in terms of concern for the future Soviet society.

Women utilised this concept of ‘the future Soviet society’ to legitimise otherwise ‘dangerous’ ideas about private relationships with children or family members. Arguably, the social significance of mother-child relationship and the paternalistic narrative adopted by the Soviet state allowed women to defend their personal bonds between mother and child throughout the fluctuations of the ideal of child-rearing throughout the period in question, forging equally legitimate ‘alternative families’ throughout the 1920s into the period of ‘consolidated Stalinism’. The variety of

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<sup>14</sup> GARF, f. 5446, op. 82, d. 56, ll. 160-166; GARF, f. 7279, op. 6, d. 8, l. 25.

<sup>15</sup> S. Hearne, ‘the “Black Spot” on the Crimea: Venereal Diseases in the Black Sea Fleet in the 1920s’, *Social History*, 42:2, (May, 2017), pp. 181-204, and E. Waters, ‘Victim or Villain? Prostitution in post-Revolutionary Russia’, in L. Edmondson (ed.), *Women and Society in Russia and the Soviet Union*, (Cambridge, 2009), pp. 160-167.

strategies identified in letters from working mothers to the state indicated that women's carefully crafted narratives remained, as they had in pre-Revolutionary separation petitions, one step ahead of legislative attempts at total control, appearing in ideologically appropriate wording from the early 1920s at least.

Striking throughout women's discussions of the circumstances of their relationships is the clear flexibility of social institutions in the Soviet Union – particularly that of the family. The idea of the family as a flexible unit with a matrilineal backbone – throughout generations in both rural and urban areas – theoretically lent motherhood and a 'stable' family life, a particular status. Unable to cause its 'withering away', the state capitalised upon it as a source of low cost social labour. Women, for their part, managed their expectations of their relationships according to the principles of the era, embracing fluctuations in the precise form of family life, but maintaining a core belief in their kinship ties throughout the period, across generations. A key component of this flexibility in family life appears to have been the long-standing dynamism between the expectations women had of their relationships, and its accommodation by state institutions. Prior to the Revolution, women were able to craft narratives of their relationships in relation to public life; those with the necessary resources were able to use these to negotiate a better life for themselves – often, in cases of marital separation, at the expense of 'traditional' family life.<sup>16</sup> These practices were maintained throughout the period of the study in question, resulting in a remarkable diversity of family and kinship circumstances, and marking the resilience of family life under Stalinism, and allowing women to accept mutations in the ideological form of their families. Yet, constant throughout the corpus of letters, again reminiscent of the divorce petitions and

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<sup>16</sup> Engel, *Breaking The Ties That Bound*.

factory strikes of old, is the expectation of real 'comradeship', and companionate relationships with male peers.

The varieties of loves, marriages and family roles present amongst interwar Soviet women were matched by the variety of theoretical outlooks of Bolsheviks themselves. In the public sphere, at least, though evidently a premium was placed by women on companionate marriage, there was little moral condemnation surrounding divorce. Rather, it was notions of disparity and unfairness, or dishonesty, which could 'condemn' a former spouse under the terms of the collective morality that had evolved by 1936. Similarly, accusations of adultery frequently employed vocabularies of inequality, the abuse of rights (to labour, etc), or anti-Soviet social elements. Complaints about prostitution in the village, of fathers absconding with secretaries, and husbands with managers, offer insight into the particular language used. Often, women evoked the language of 'abuse' with relation to their rights within their communities, or fidelity to the socialist goal, possibly to articulate feelings of jealousy or betrayal, avoiding individualism in this way.

Most letters on the subject of social circumstances related, if not to workplace or party issues, to family matters or close relationships, rather than friendships or non-specific social matters. This was most likely due to a widespread desire not to be seen as prioritising individual relationships, away from party activities or the institutions of marriage. Close and affectionate relationships between peers were portrayed, at least when considered in relation to official discourse, as a form of alternative 'family' bond, and it would appear that women had little problem, through the upheavals of the Revolution and post-Revolutionary period, reconstructing their family units as circumstance dictated, articulating their alternative families through the prism of the

Soviet 'big' family. Though the discursive power of the revolutionary new families of the commune; of the community family managed by socialised domestic labour; and free love relationships within society's family had waned by the 1930s, their heritage was long established in the social imagination of Soviet women, dating back well before the Revolution. That women should envisage their own lives as located in a public and political sphere was emblematic of a long held social understanding of the meaning of a 'private life', and this informed both the idiosyncrasies of Bolshevik visions for social life and the ability women possessed to negotiate their rights and feelings within their personal relationships with public bodies.

In essence the tripartite relationship between rights, emotional responses and interpersonal relationships is essential to a proper understanding of the comprehension of the New Soviet Woman. Women from across the Soviet social spectrum selected and articulated particular elements of their diverse lives to express a multiplicity of relationships to the Soviet project. The common features of these strategies highlight the agency and perspicacity with which women from all backgrounds navigated their worlds in the interwar Soviet Union. E. Okvortsova's suggestion in response to the 1936 decree inadvertently presents an astute appraisal of the nature and resilience of family life after 1917: suggesting that 'we need to approach each family individually [...] For each family a special approach is needed, and is right'.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> GARF, f. 9492, op .1, d. 1476, l. 127.



## Bolshevism and the Family

The 1926 Code on Marriage, the Family and Guardianship might be seen as a first attempt to retreat on the permissiveness afforded to social relations, which had initially been encouraged following the Revolution, and its language was seeped in that of the protection of gender equality, and the financial protection of women and children.<sup>18</sup> However, the claim that the 1926 Code represented a 'retreat from free love' as many have argued, should not be dismissed outright: many amongst the Bolshevik ranks were profoundly uncomfortable with the type of permissiveness they felt was a potential consequence of the rapid liberalisation of divorce. Where Aleksandra Kollontai stated that 'the sexual act should be recognised as neither shameful or sinful, but natural and legal, as much a manifestation of a healthy organism as the quenching of hunger or thirst', Lenin wrote: 'to be sure, thirst has to be quenched. But would a normal person lie down in the gutter and drink from a puddle?'<sup>19</sup> In this (albeit indirect) exchange, it is clearly evident that little consensus was attained between Bolsheviks regarding what the precise nature of Soviet relationships should be.

In this context, the growing numbers of vocal and politically literate citizens who were able to communicate their policy suggestions to the state provided a sense of political legitimacy to those vying for control of the future of Soviet society. Beatrice Farnsworth has explored the ways in which rural women responded to the expansion of divorce in the 1920s, suggesting that though women experienced a 'heightened sense of self' as a result of their improved literacy (both practical and political), their self-images changed

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<sup>18</sup> J. Quigley, 'The 1926 Soviet Family', pp. 166-174.

<sup>19</sup> A. Kollontai, 'Tesizy o Kommunisticheskoi Morali v Oblasti Brachnykh Otnoshenii', *Kommunistka*, 12-12 (1921), p. 31, quoted in Goldman, *Women the State and Revolution*, p. 11, both cited in W.Z. Goldman, *Women, the State and Revolution: Soviet Family Policy and Social Life, 1917-1936*, (Cambridge, 1993), p. 7; C. Zetkin, 'Lenin on the Woman Question: An Interview with Lenin on the Woman Question', 'in *On the Emancipation of Women*, (Moscow, 1977), p. 106.

quite slowly in 'a revolutionary process in the long run'. Though women often clung to traditional values in their marital disputes, evident nonetheless is a type of social reorientation amongst women: they increasingly used the voices made accessible to them by the Soviet state, in ways which, as we have seen, these voices were not necessarily intended to be used.<sup>20</sup> In doing so, however, citizen complaints and suggestions about social policy as the 1920s progressed provided a rationale for a shift away from the politics of 'free love'.

More practically, neither marital relationships nor the nuclear family had withered away by 1930. Instead, problems of child abandonment, destitution, female unemployment and subsequently prostitution proliferated. Goldman has identified the problem of *bezprizornost'* as the trigger for the resurrection of the family that was to follow: the traditional family unit would be able to 'feed, clothe, and socialise a child at almost no cost to the state'.<sup>21</sup> Alongside the apparent inability of Bolshevik policies to cause the withering of the family and 'fetters of man and wife', the very idea of the family proved a crucial metaphor with which to negotiate loyalty between state and citizens – the 'big' and 'small' family. That Stalin, who would become the figurehead of the Party, was cast as the 'father' to the Soviet peoples, afforded some new lease of life to the traditional (and ultimately patriarchal, in principle if not in absolute terms) nuclear family, lending the appearance to the population of a return to normalcy.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup>B. Farnsworth, 'Rural Women and the Law: Divorce and Property Rights in the 1920s', pp. 168-181; B. Engel, *Breaking the Ties that Bound* explores the way in which uses of the word 'despot' multiplied in separation and divorce applications in the early Twentieth Century, implying that women increasingly sought to defend a sense of inviolable selfhood as she won access to her own rights in practice and principle.

<sup>21</sup> W.Z. Goldman, *Women, the state and revolution: Soviet Family Policy and Social Life, 1917-1936*, p. 100.

<sup>22</sup> C. Hooper, 'Terror of Intimacy: Family Politics in the 1930s Soviet Union', in C. Kaier, E. Naiman (eds), *Everyday Life in Early Soviet Russia*, (Indiana, 2006), p. 62.

Cynthia Hooper's study of family politics during Stalin's 1930s suggests that, as far as the nuclear family provided a useful metaphor for the relationship between state and society, in addition to much cheaper childcare than their initial, socialised alternative, its continued existence was fraught with 'danger' for authorities. As competition with the bonds of kinship waned, officials began to fear that 'small' familial loyalties might surpass, and undermine, civic loyalty to the 'great' Soviet family.<sup>23</sup> This ambivalence (as it might be considered at best) toward the 'small' nuclear family, and along with it, individual personal ties, inadvertently encouraged family members to strengthen their ties. Robert Thurston contends that the interviews of the Harvard Project report a strengthening in family ties, citing that families often closed rank in the face of arrest, and continued openly to discuss politics in the home.<sup>24</sup> In fact, Soviet social policy continued to appear to 'retreat' on a number of key policies of the 1920s, accepting the risk of 'small' family loyalties. As examined in the previous chapter, 1936 saw the introduction of the 'Decree on the Prohibition of Abortions', and the 1936 Constitution between them reinforced the state's commitment to gender equality, and simultaneously undermined access to divorce and reproductive choice, on the heels of the 1930 closure of the *Zhenotdel*. According to Wendy Goldman, 'in the two decades between 1917 and 1936, the official Soviet view of the family [and by extension Soviet social life more generally] underwent a complete reversal'.<sup>25</sup> Acknowledging that this ideological shift occurred in an uneven and contradictory manner, Goldman juxtaposes the 1930 closure of the *Zhenotdel* and the renewed focus upon women's emancipation that accompanied the first Five Year Plan, to demonstrate a vague sense of pragmatism underlying the successive 'retreats' Soviet social policy made. Goldman's thesis suggests

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<sup>23</sup> Hooper, 'Terror of Intimacy', pp. 61-91.

<sup>24</sup> R.W. Thurston, 'The Soviet Family During the Great Terror, 1935-1941', *Soviet Studies*, 43:3, (1991), p. 563.

<sup>25</sup> Goldman, *Women, Revolution and the State*, p. 337.

that this u-turn in Soviet social policy was a result primarily of the social problems that persisted in Soviet society in the 1920s, and was, ultimately, prompted by the suggestions of women themselves, who were dissatisfied with the burdens the total overhaul of family life had created.<sup>26</sup> The shift in social policy in the 1930s was seen to amount to a compromise of Soviet ideals in order to stabilise the regime, and the thesis has typically been interpreted as suggesting a return to pre-Revolutionary family values after 1934. This shift, most commonly known as the 'Great Retreat' has been hitherto shown to have been a process of negotiation between state and society, which did not entirely throw out the utopian principles of its origin.<sup>27</sup>

Indeed, regarding marriage and romantic relationships, Fitzpatrick's statistical analysis on the sexual mores of students provides further evidence for the experimentation and breadth of thinking about utopianism and equality within Soviet relationships, dating back into the 1920s. Fitzpatrick's study examines the conflict between the idealisation of free love and sexual permissiveness, and recommendations of sexual restraint, monogamy and 'the sublimation of sexual energies in work'.<sup>28</sup> As 'official' opinions of the ideal Soviet or Bolshevik relationship appeared in every shade between these polar opposites, so too did the ideas of students about the model romantic or sexual relationship.<sup>29</sup> Fitzpatrick concludes that, stronger than the ideological commitment[s] present in student views on relationships, was the consensus that some definitive norms of sexual behaviour be 'firmly established', reflecting the lack of consensus at any level of society, regarding the recipe for a happy Soviet relationship.<sup>30</sup> Women sought to

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<sup>26</sup> Goldman, *Women, Revolution and the State*, pp. 340-341.

<sup>27</sup> N. Timasheff, *The Great Retreat: The Growth and Decline of Communism in Russia*, (New York, 1946).

<sup>28</sup> S. Fitzpatrick, 'Sex and Revolution: An examination of Literary and Statistical Data on the Mores of Soviet Students in the 1920s', *The Journal of Modern History*, 50:2, (June, 1978), pp. 253-256.

<sup>29</sup> Fitzpatrick, 'Sex and Revolution', pp. 261- 276.

<sup>30</sup> Fitzpatrick, 'Sex and Revolution', p. 276.

defend whichever personal circumstances were most satisfactory, demonstrating the adaptability and multitude of preferred or adopted domestic contexts long demonstrated in petition with the state.

Nor had the maternal relationship been officially 'blueprinted' in any meaningful way. Among Soviet theorists, though all vaguely agreed that the state should take over the practicalities of child-rearing – in public nurseries, schools and so on – the exact role of mother in a child's life was never subject to consensus. Goikhbarg, for example, the author of the 1918 Family Code, believed that parents should abandon their 'narrow and irrational love for their children', considering individual parents as 'ignorant' and significantly less capable of raising a child well than the state.<sup>31</sup> Others, such as the jurist Iakov Brandenburgskii, envisaged a gradual weakening of the family bond over time, as the institutions of state care grew more established and the family unit lost its social functions, withering away. Kollontai, on the other hand, saw the continuation of the maternal bond as inevitable, seeking instead to expand the role of the state in child rearing, to allow women to easily combine their roles as mothers and labourers without any detriment to their well-being or that of their children. She foresaw children as growing up within state care facilities, but with 'on-demand' access for mothers to their children. Zinaida Tettenborn envisaged a more involved role for biological parents, as part of an 'upbringing committee' for their children, who would be resident in public children's homes.<sup>32</sup>

Central to debates over the future of the bond between mother and child was the biological function of reproduction: a function that, as we have discussed, was

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<sup>31</sup> A.G. Goikhbarg, *Brachnoe, semeinoe, i opekunskoe pravo Sovetskoi respubliki*, (Moscow, 1920), p. 5; Ia. N. Brandenburgskii, *Kurs semeino-brachnogo prava*, (Moscow, 1928), p. 20, cited in Goldman, *Women, Revolution, and the State*, pp 8-11.

<sup>32</sup> Z. Tettenborn, 'Roditel'skie Prava v Pervsom Koekse Zakonov RSFSR', *Proletariskaia revoliutsiia i pravo*, 1, (1919), pp 26-27, cited in Goldman, *Women, the State and Revolution*, p. 9.

considered to 'bind' women to the past, through a cyclical and nonlinear 'monumental time', and creating not inconsiderable anxieties for male policy makers after the Revolution.<sup>33</sup> In 'Women on the Edge of Time', Hannah Proctor has explored the ways in which during NEP motherhood was required to be re-construed as a revolutionary act against a backdrop of happy socialist children, revolutionary baby names, and secular relationships and sexual encounters.<sup>34</sup> Sexual relationships, having been theoretically reduced to a chemical act following the October Revolution as part of a developing 'crudely material understanding of libidinal economy', contained the potential to involuntarily entrust women with the future of the Soviet population.<sup>35</sup> Policy-makers were therefore compelled to construct a 'revolutionary' identity for mothers, reshaping the relationship between mother and child, and (perhaps against the wishes of those who saw parental roles as a bourgeois relic) embedding the Soviet mother deeply in the fabric of Soviet society as early as 1921, and legitimising the emotional component of motherhood.<sup>36</sup> It is in this sense that we might hypothesise that the 1936 'resurrection of the family', rather than constituting a retreat from socialised child-rearing, signified a *legal* legitimisation, or protection, of the role of motherhood, which had been *ideologically* (and consequently emotionally) legitimate since the early years of the Revolution.

Therefore, the sheer plurality of opinion on the future of the family and social relations amongst Soviet theorists, and as we have seen, amongst women in response to the 1936

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<sup>33</sup> J. Kristeva, 'Women's Time', *Signs*, 7:1, (Autumn, 1981), pp. 13-35.

<sup>34</sup> H. Proctor, 'Women on the Edge of Time: Representations of Revolutionary Motherhood in the NEP-era Soviet Union', *Studies in the Maternal*, 7:1, (2015), pp. 1-20.

<sup>35</sup> Proctor, 'Women on the Edge of Time', p. 2.

<sup>36</sup> The mother-child bond is considered to be 'reshaped' rather than 'reconstructed' entirely due to the nature of Russian 'personal' life prior to the revolution. As Svetlana Boym has claimed, 'Russian personal life seems rather to fit a concept of publicly sanctioned guilt and of a heightened sense of duty', rather than an existence beyond the reaches of the state, as 'private' life would have been associated with inauthentic behaviour and 'foreignness', S. Boym, *Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia*, (London, 1994), p. 73.

decree and Stalin Constitution, ultimately corroborates Lauren Kaminsky's assertion discussed in the introduction, that the 'Retreat' displayed much stronger continuities with utopian Bolshevik thought than it did a synthesis of pre-Revolutionary and Soviet cultures. In other words: though the concept of the Great Retreat was ground breaking in its identification of the remnants of pre-Revolutionary culture within the Soviet project, it is more accurate to suggest that this is a result of the broader continuities in Bolshevik utopianism than a pragmatic synthesis of old and new.

As such, it is possible to reconcile the fluctuating notions of 'correct' family life in the 1920s and 1930s with the notions held by the population: the state was arguably able to find support for its changing family policy amongst the diverse and conflicting beliefs held by the citizens of the Soviet Union throughout the period, and so families and relationships of all types were made to adapt to shifting circumstances. It is possible to construct a picture of Soviet society in which the family unit was neither destroyed nor survived in its pre-Revolutionary form. Rather, it remains a key institution in women's lives, but takes on a somewhat fluid nature. The character of family life both responded to changes in discourse and negotiated with them: the bonds between people could be broken; stretched across distances; and re-forged entirely, yet the meaning of these relationships remained variable and personal.

As the Soviet state sought to re-forge the daily lives and relationships of its citizens, official discourse throughout the 1920s and 1930s focused its visions for the family firmly in the future. Yet, as women continued to shoulder the majority of domestic responsibility, the institution of the family remained a multi-generational matriarchal unit. Moreover, the roots of the transmutations in the relationships of citizens with the state and with each other were embedded firmly in the past: in forces of change

originating long before the turn of the century. The longevity of these processes ultimately determined the ways in which women adapted to their contemporary rights discourses and emotional norms, and the variety of ways that women rationalised themselves and their relationships in their letters to authorities. Nonetheless, the discursive focus on the socialist future demarcated the generational cohorts present after the Revolution: bound by common primary experiences and upheavals, successive generations of women grappled with concepts of the 'new communist morality' particular to their own coming of age, renegotiating the contemporary meaning of the traditional 'matrilineal backbone' of the family, and the self-identity of its constituents.<sup>37</sup>

### **Truth and Fidelity in Companionate Marriage**

Women's letters display a tendency to temper criticisms of early Soviet social policy with discursive nods towards ideological normativity, as we have seen, but that social values or moral 'turns' that women felt chimed with their beliefs of circumstances often elicited a particular emotional response – resulting in certain patterns in responses of certain issues – such as rights to education, literacy and the practicalities of family life, but produced a more unpredictable response in terms of individual personal relationships. Women frequently sought certain standards of education and literacy that they saw as critical to their standard of living, and likewise, parity in terms of their material family circumstances, often seeking to justify their own autobiographies according to socialist values. However, when it came to the particular compositions of their families, and the nature of their relationships, the flexibility of the family unit and

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<sup>37</sup> Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times*, p. 141.



its emotional bonds remained constant, and relatively 'unjustified' by the socialist project. Indeed, present in women's accounts of their diverse family circumstances is a continuity in the principle emerging in women's expectations, and in their exercise of agency in the late nineteenth century, that the marital bond should be characterised by partnership and a sense of genuine commitment. This quietly revolutionary idea is visible across a variety of interactions with the state, in which very different women, from very different backgrounds, share certain assumptions about the importance of companionate marriage.

A long, confessional missive written by a young woman named Nastya conveyed such a tale of fidelity and betrayal within her village community. Nastya's letter is emotive at times, though upon a closer reading, she divulged much about her understanding of the nature of the betrayal of a relationship, and conversely, about the digression her relationship had taken from the 'norm'. Nastya's letter arguably reflected broader assumptions about the formation of sexual and moral behaviours in the first decades of the Soviet Union, and their pre-Revolutionary heritage, but in particular, she indicated her assumption of norms of marital fidelity, by her description of the external attack made upon them by her husband's other partner. Nastya's choice to share this publicly with the editors of *Pravda* also indicates the role of collective moral and sexual standards of behaviour by 1936, assuming a generally sympathetic audience, and supposing that the attack on the foundations of her relationship are actually borne by many 'suffering women'. She wrote:

Dear Editor,

I do not know who to contact, or who can help suffering women, but I decided to write to you of my ills, those which torment me and all women. I am a *kolkhoznitsa*, entangled by children, shortages, shortcomings etc [...] It torments me, I thought [of it] day and night, how

and who could do this – to stop this dissipation, for which wretched wives and children suffer. And when I read the newspaper, I decided to ask you if it's the right thing for children to suffer, and that wretched prostitute, from whom the wife suffers [...] she should be obligated to pay alimony.

I read the article on the prohibition of abortion, I am pleased with it, and grateful to the person who decreed this. It would be very good if they stopped prostitution, which is found in the Issinsky district without shame, without embarrassment, and without conscience. The husband goes from the wife to the prostitute, but you [the wife] cannot speak, it's none of your business [...]

Here for example, I say to myself, 'I am a woman with a sense of responsibility, I work on a collective farm, where with work, with the children, I have no time for myself, and I do not complain to my husband. Because he found another, the children do not bother him. It's fun, and [for him] nothing more is needed. He worked as a bookkeeper and she was the manager. [...] After a year, a child was born to her and he was sentenced to pay alimony, as you know.<sup>38</sup>

Primarily, it is jarringly obvious that Nastya's unnamed rival was not, as she claims, a sex worker, rather, she was her husband's manager in the book-keeping shop. This blurring of boundaries between recreational and paid sex recalls the near moral panic identified in Siobhan Hearne's case study of Sevastopol, in which Hearne highlights the frequency of raids on the parties of young people undertaken by Soviet authorities as raids on 'private brothels', to tackle the 'black spot', or social stain, on the community.<sup>39</sup> Nastya's bookkeeping rival was more than likely the 'black spot' in this paradigm, reflected in her bourgeois tastes for lace and cash, and dereliction of duty at work in favour of drinking and having sex. This description is also significant that she described the 'other woman' in this way, as a decidedly 'politically alien' element in society, while in the same breath reiterating her socially valuable labour as a collective farmer and mother. Though declining to provide the woman's name in a way prevented any real upheaval or state intervention, the rival's namelessness also reinforced her exclusion

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<sup>38</sup> GARF, f. 9492, op. 1, d.1476, ll.89-92.

<sup>39</sup> Hearne, 'The Black Spot on the Crimea', pp. 181-204.

from Soviet acceptability. In contrast, Nastya later described herself as a 'woman with a sense of responsibility', thus juxtaposing her own discipline and individual sacrifice with her rival's frivolity (drinking behind the scenes at the book-keepers with a husband that was not 'hers').

Now he says: 'She used me, I was drunk, she seduced me and I was smitten, and was pulled in. You come to her and she meets you with affection, we are very cheerful, she is always clean, never busy but free, but when you don't come to her – to meet and spend, and you are busy with the children, you are scolded, all you have is a disadvantage. I do not know what I did wrong, but she just pulled me in, I couldn't resist.' [...] 'Again, her work is easy, with a day's workday, she teases me: 'you're in boots, and I'm dressing all in lace, and there's always money' [...] I also work, and became in a position with a fifth [child], and he says 'have an abortion, we can't afford to raise the fourth let alone the fifth, although I myself am not to blame, now that the court has ordered me to pay.' And so I had to have an abortion, to lose myself through some kind of prostitute and an irresponsible husband. And so, I ask – can you stop such ill-repute?<sup>40</sup>

The apparent sense of 'betrayal', then, is one felt simultaneously by Nastya and intended to be felt by the Soviet project. She is tormented, as she wrote, 'like all women' by predatory prostitutes – from whose involvement with her husband she was excluded. The shorthand description of these women portrays them almost as a subhuman category – certainly not those young women 'driven' to sex work by financial need.

Her hard work and commitment to their family were undermined by the diversion of her husband's wages to his illegitimate child. Yet although the issue of alimony is the rationale for her letter, this is scarcely related to the despair she described, detailing that she came close to 'throwing it all away', turning to crime, and leaving the children. The word count afforded to the affair and her husband's inability to resist it express an anxiety as to its emotional significance in relation to her marriage. Nastya's suggestion that *she* should be paid alimony by the bookkeeper bears little relation to the drain on

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<sup>40</sup> GARF, f. 9492, op. 1, d.1476, ll.89-92.

her household resources the present alimony settlement constitutes, rather, it appears to have acted as a 'debt' Nastya felt she was owed for the betrayal.

We have in our village many such unlucky girls, who threw themselves away at 17, they go unafraid to promiscuity (*они идут в распущенные не боятся*), because of alimony, no one will marry them, because they have lost themselves, the guys lack honest, good girls and these wretched prostitute catches the man, saying: 'Maybe I like him better, he will leave his wife and take me, and we will have children, and if he doesn't take me – he will pay – all the same to me'

And so it goes: who leaves his wife, pays. We have a rare woman who lives quietly, not tormented by a wretched prostitute. They are not afraid of anything, they thrust themselves, they drink a glass like a man, and all that is needed is a second time to seduce him - a familiar road.

Maybe I shouldn't have written to you – but I wrote what I knew and which was painful in my heart, and I was afraid of my husband, that he would scold me for it.<sup>41</sup>

Though from this statement we cannot assume the bookkeeper's age in relation to Nastya or her husband, we do have a clear indication of the approximate 'threshold' for the emotional maturity and moral responsibility for the betrayal. By 'throwing themselves away' at seventeen, the girls assume responsibility for their sexual and moral behaviour at some point prior to this; they possessed a sense of agency enough to be able to 'throw themselves away', outside of marriage. I suggest that this passage and its conceptual distinction indicate that, though it was widely accepted in the Soviet Union that the lifespan of women's sexual relationships may vary, due to the lack of emotional depth or honesty inferred by Nastya, in her view, a great deal of social stigma remained attached to infidelity – in particular, when women became involved with men who were already in relationships. Their 'fate' as either black spot or stray wolf was not set in stone at this moment. Rather, it was their *choices* – presumed or actual – that determined their ultimate 'character', and possibility for redemption.

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<sup>41</sup> GARF, f. 9424, op. 1, d. 1476, ll. 89-92.

In Nastya's case, for example, she presumed that it was greed, rather than material need which drives young women to seek 'unavailable' men from whom to receive alimony, and this alone is what sets them apart as 'prostitutes'. It was not the fault of her husband, nor the failings of marriage as a remnant of the bourgeois past that pose a threat to their relationship, indicating the relative failure of revolutionary ideas about free love. Her husband's self-defence painted the mother of his illegitimate child in a similarly negative light to Nastya, framing her dissatisfaction at the competing demands on his time as little more than manipulation. Beyond this, we know little of the woman's life. Nastya commented on her motivations, suggesting that it was essentially the allure of alimony alone that drove the bookkeeper to embark on an affair with her husband, rather than any depth of feeling comparable to that between Nastya and her husband.<sup>42</sup>

Frequent references to 'prostitution', 'seduction' and the behaviour of young girls imply strongly a gendered notion of infidelity, or dishonesty within relationships in the village. By virtue of another common feature of women's letters – the emphasis of a husband's honesty – we can find evidence of the gendering of this particular moral code in the early Soviet years. Elena Zh., in a 1930 entreaty on behalf of her arrested husband, refers to the incident as a 'fatal accident'.<sup>43</sup> A 'crystal clear Bolshevik', her husband had signed a statement of opposition in 1923, as one of 46 signatories. Since this incident, he was indeed 'one of those few who honestly moved away from the opposition [...] honestly carrying out the tasks of the party and government, of Bolshevik vigilance in the disclosure of this or that enemy of the people'. Elena's letter continued for six pages, detailing the injustice done to her husband by his arrest. Breslav was 'not to blame for anything'; nor however, were the arresting authorities. Breslav was instead, 'a victim of

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<sup>42</sup> GARF, f. 9424, op. 1, d. 1476, ll. 89-92.

<sup>43</sup> GARF, f. 5446, op. 82, d. 56, ll. 160-166.

a band of criminals – his so-called relatives’ who had turned out to be ‘fraudsters, rogues, speculators, maintaining communications with other crooks, bandits in the concentration camps’.<sup>44</sup> Her defence was to be believed, Elena maintains, because she has ‘known this man for eighteen years; known every movement of his pure, beautiful soul’. Elena knew ‘how much and how deeply he suffered from the consciousness of his old mistake [in signing the letter of opposition], which now cannot be blamed on him, because he never hid it from the party and never lied about it’.<sup>45</sup> At the heart of Elena’s impassioned defence is the portrayed depth of her relationship to her husband. Though the circumstances of her correspondence were quite dissimilar to the accusations Nastya makes against *her* love rival, underlying both letters is a constructed sense of the expectation of fidelity in their marital relationships, and their companionate foundation.

Nastya, for her part, sought in a very public missive – to *Krest’ianskaia gazeta* no less – to preserve the integrity of her relationship, which was ‘truer’ than that between her husband and the bookkeeper, and ultimately the revocability of her husband’s reputation, by assigning the origin of the lapse in public morality to her husband’s girlfriend.<sup>46</sup> On the other hand, in a personal letter directed at Molotov to restore her husband’s position after an arrest, Elena invoked the image of an honest, sincere and ‘deep’ Bolshevik marriage to preserve her husband’s socialist reputation, and protect him from the consequences of the allegations made against him. Though serving clearly different purposes, the two letters imply a sense of the ‘honesty’ of their morally proper, Soviet relationships, both under assault from anti-Soviet influences, as a device to protect the individual morality of the letter writer in some way.

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<sup>44</sup> GARF, f. 5446, op. 82, d. 56, ll. 160-166.

<sup>45</sup> GARF, f. 5446, op. 82, d. 56, ll. 160-166.

<sup>46</sup> GARF, f. 9424, op. 1, d. 1476, ll. 89-92.

This is further implied by the fact that Elena's concern was not solely for the fate of her husband, but of her own immediate family in general; herself and her sister in particular. She reinforced the truth of her statement about the depth of her marital relationship by asserting that she was 'not talking about all of this as a [...] wife, or just a friend, but as an old Party member, with the full responsibility for every word of [her defence].'<sup>47</sup> The Party should 'believe the simple, sincere words of an old member of the party, unsullied in 21 years of Party work.' Elena begged, though not through concern for herself, but 'for the cause of Stalin-Lenin, to help to save this man'.<sup>48</sup> Later in the letter Elena reiterates that she and her sister, 'who for many years has [...] abandoned her personal life and devoted herself to work for the party' were an 'honest, pure family'.<sup>49</sup> Elena's blood ran cold at the thought they might 'perish at the hands of their fellow comrades, devoted to the cause of Stalin-Lenin' so that 'scoundrels, blackmailers, and therefore the enemies of the socialist world, capable of all the abominations of the earth' might make some money from the matter.<sup>50</sup> Interestingly, Elena signed the letter under her patronymic, with her husband's surname in brackets. In doing so Elena asserted her own sense of agency, quite apart from the patriarchal authority of her husband that would have been considered characteristic of the old regime, underlining the integrity of her statements. Moreover, her use of the patronymic indicates her openness about her personal background in correspondence with authorities. Her statements regarding her honesty were to be trusted by the reader(s), as she attempted to hide nothing about her family history. Instead she made clear her plural roles as sister, wife, Party worker, and daughter.

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<sup>47</sup> GARF, f. 5446, op. 82, d. 56, ll. 160-166.

<sup>48</sup> GARF, f. 5446, op. 82, d. 56, ll. 160-166.

<sup>49</sup> GARF, f. 5446, op. 82, d. 56, ll. 160-166.

<sup>50</sup> GARF, f. 5446, op. 82, d. 56, ll. 160-166.

The norms of Soviet marriage at this time, are clearly those of comradeship, honesty, respect and a deep, mutual 'knowing'. In Elena's case, this relationship was largely intact but for the physical risk posed to the relationship by Breslav's arrest, demonstrating the positive moral standard by which marital relationships were measured. By contrast, the present state of Nastya's marriage demonstrated the nature of the threat posed this moral standard by lapses in Soviet morality within the community. The dissimilarity of the specific circumstances of the two letters is in some ways unimportant. Both Nastya's confessional plea, and Elena's request for justice echoed a deeply held desire to demonstrate a marital relationship with solid and abiding foundations, which happened to be under threat from an external foe, be that an adulterous affair or treacherous 'anti-Soviet' family members. Though the letters from Elena and Nastya are distinctive in the clarity of their implications, the implications themselves are far from 'unique'. Another woman, who identified herself as O. Vazhanova wrote to Molotov in the same year, 1936, requesting intervention in the case of the wrongful arrest of her husband – an 'honest and devoted man of the party' – who had been accused of wrecking. Vazhanova explained that it would be 'hardly possible to find another executive who so closely and inseparably linked his life with one single branch of industry.' Vazhanov may have made mistakes – it would be impossible not to given the degree of involvement with his work – but any allegations of wrecking would be 'monstrous'. Vazhanova stated the source and nature of her knowledge of the issue: 'I am his wife, I know every day of his hard working life, and I affirm that he gave the whole force of his intellect, will, and energy to the party and to the building of socialism, without reservation.' The veracity of Vazhanova's account of her husband's honesty and fidelity to the party can be 'proven' by the fact that 'the party knows Vazhanov' [...] her faithful son.'<sup>51</sup> Evidently, though her

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<sup>51</sup> GARF, f. 5446, op. 82, d. 56, l. 58.



marriage was indisputably far from ideal at the time of writing, by virtue of Vazhanov's arrest and their separation in circumstances. However, Vazhanova nonetheless continued to consider the marriage an enduring tie, discursively comparable to the paternal relationship between party and 'son'. Though Vazhanova sought to 'justify' her husband's life and work by their contribution to the socialist project, their marriage itself required little justification. She indirectly compared their bond with that between party and party member (an esteemed connection, no doubt), but little light was shed upon their marriage itself, beyond the fact that she has borne witness to his ideological 'correctness'.

The depth and the veracity of a woman's knowledge of her partner as a norm and a socialist virtue was reflected time and time again in letters requesting intervention in an arrest. L. Fotieva mitigated the lack of a legal bond between herself and her husband early in her letter by emphasising the *de facto* bond between the two: 'Although formally Lyubarskii is not my husband, in fact we are husband and wife since 1927'. The marriage itself, though not formally acknowledged, must serve as proof of Lyubarskii's innocence. Lyubarskii, Fotieva contended:

is impeccably honest and deeply devoted to the Soviet government and our party. And through nine years of living together and of intimate, companionate relations (*tesnogo družheskogo obshcheniia*), could not have helped noticing any anti-Soviet sentiments, if they existed or he had them, and of course, could not not react to them as a committed party member [myself].<sup>52</sup>

Fotieva went some degree further in her justification of the veracity of their marital relationship – likely to mitigate the lack of formal record of its existence. But her justification of the relationship itself, though unregistered, is not dissimilar in character either to Elena's or Vazhanova's claims simply of truth and honesty.

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<sup>52</sup> GARF, f. 5446, op. 82, d. 56, l. 45.

The style of Fotieva's writing is of course, more descriptive than others (when compared to Vazhanova's relatively sparse style of writing in particular). She used frequent metaphorical devices, and two adjectives or adverbs where possible. However, this appears to have been a personal characteristic of the author – though it is an effective tool in portraying the truth and honesty she intended. Lyubarskii, Fotieva claimed, 'is a Soviet man (*chelovek*) to the marrow of his bones and [...] his arrest is the product of a serious misunderstanding or a malicious slanderous conspiracy' – this latter point is one of which she was 'convinced'.<sup>53</sup> Like Yeva Friedlander in our discussion of the expression of negative emotions, and akin to many other expressions of worry for the well-being of husbands, Fotieva ascribed the gravity of the consequences of Liubarskii's arrest and potential conviction a medical character: 'the closing of the case could lead to Liubarskii's serious illness, as he suffers from an acute gastric illness and [an illness of] the nervous system, and needs constant medical help'.<sup>54</sup> The physicality of the threat against Liubarskii's well-being lends Fotieva's suggestion that he is a Soviet person to the 'marrow of his bones' a tangible character, imbuing her metaphor with a physical reality, or truth. The description of Liubarskii's symptoms also portrays the matter as 'treatable' – by closing the case, authorities could dispel his illness and restore in her husband his healthy Soviet nature.

Constant throughout the letter, and throughout Elena's, Vazhanova's, and even Nastya's letters, are reemphases of the veracity of the partner in question, and their relationship with them, as well as the dishonesty and untruth inherent to the forces that have caused

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<sup>53</sup> GARF, f. 5446, op. 82, d. 56, l. 45.

<sup>54</sup> Letter from Yeva Friedländer to Presidium of Supreme Soviet, 16 May 1938, GARF, f. 7523, op. 23, d. 201, l. 49. Certified typewritten copy, in *Stalinism as a Way of Life*, L. Siegelbaum, A. Sokolov, (eds), p. 229; GARF, f. 5446 op. 82, d. 56, l.141-4, in which a woman describes her husband as on 'the verge of a self-destructive catastrophe'; GARF, f. 5446 op. 82, d. 56, ll. 153-6, in which a woman explains that her husband's doctor found 'his heart and nervous system' to be 'shaken'.

the difficulties the relationships face. Though truth and untruth were commonly juxtaposed in relation to the Soviet project in letters defending the durability of a marriage in the face of arrest or potential separation, these truths and betrayals related almost entirely to the present circumstances, rather than the value of the relationship itself. This feature of marriage, which emerged concurrently to, and was reinforced by, the Soviet reconstruction of the institution, was emphasised by the prioritisation of the marital bond over other familial relationships, often biological. Vazhanova and Fotieva both claimed the validity and veracity of their marital relationships over kin and family relationships. Another woman, clearly committed to her work in the Zhenotdel, asked Krupskaja for assistance in keeping hold of her delegate's ticket in 1928 on similar terms. She pleaded on the grounds of her and her husband's loyalty to the party despite her father's continued activity as a priest:

Comrade Krupskaja, clarify this question for me, it is very important to me to be given my delegate's ticket when I feel no guilt for myself, I should not be responsible for my father, with whom I have no connection. My husband, a member of the CPSU since 1926, a member of the Komsomol since 1922, works in the justice system<sup>55</sup>

That she had no control or influence over her father's actions, the woman's husband, a member of the CPSU, should in her view serve to facilitate her inclusion in the 'big' Soviet family. Instead she saw her choices as far more significant than her heritage, her partnership with her husband as the more significant social bond in this context.

Thus the strategies with which we are familiar – of euphemism; medicalisation; contributions to the socialist project – were all present in these women's letters. To mitigate their marital difficulties and defend the accused parties, the women apparently feel little reason to justify the existence relationship itself in terms of the socialist

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<sup>55</sup> GARF, f. 7279, op. 8, d. 15, l. 67.

project, leaving us with little idea of the normativity of the marriages or living arrangements when not under such duress. As such, evident throughout the letters is an underlying assumption that a marital relationship in its foundation did not *require* said socialist normativity. As we have hitherto understood, the composition of the family itself was frequently fluid, and the increased emphasis upon the emancipation of women after 1917 created a discursive expectation that – regardless of the reality of their lives – women, as equal citizens, would be equal partners in relationships based upon comradeship and honesty. Since the precise nature of a Soviet woman’s marriage therefore would be mutually agreed between partners, the ‘acceptable’ fulfilment of this expectation might therefore logically take a variety of forms.

## **Alternative Families**

As explored previously, the social validity of ‘the mother’ in Soviet culture was resurrected as the 1920s drew to a close, and the 1930s progressed. Though the straightforward essentialism in Stalin’s statement that ‘working class and peasant women are mothers; they are rearing our youth – the future of our country’ is of course problematic, it arguably presented to many women a recognition of the relationship between mother and child.<sup>56</sup> Mothers, daughters, and grandmothers, through their connection to the ‘domestic sphere’ that had emerged by the end of the nineteenth century, and of course through their connection to the ‘past’, had found their roles in Soviet domestic life policed almost obsessively. Hygiene and sexual health campaigns attacked ‘folk healers’ as the ‘grandmothers’ of the village, and literacy campaigns

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<sup>56</sup> J. Stalin, ‘The Political Education of Women’, J. Stalin, ‘The Political Education of Women’, in *Works*, Volume 5, (Moscow, 1953), p. 358.

almost lampooned the backwardness of illiterate mothers and grandmothers. Frances Bernstein has shown, too, how the first years of motherhood were prescribed in minute detail, with literature and posters frequently decrying the nursing and parenting practices that had been part and parcel of community life in town and country for generations.<sup>57</sup> By the end of the 1920s, however, maternal figures were sought for the Union's millions of 'urchins' and orphans, and by 1936 as exemplified by the Decree, the socialist mother was officially added to the Soviet Union's discursive 'pantheon of heroes'. These apparently minor discursive shifts in Soviet ideology were something to which many women were finely attuned, whether they had children or not. Thus, it is reasonable to hypothesise that, in addition to the maternal role being employed to legitimise particular emotional expressions, and often to lobby for rights, its part in discussions of familial relationships would also be significant.

In a 1929 letter requesting assistance addressed to Kalinin, Chairman of the Central Executive Committee, one woman, after describing her husband's illness and her unhappiness at having had to leave Central Asia to work and support him, stated affectionately, yet plainly that "[my children are] such marvellous little fellows and are so fond of me and if I die – it will be hard for them to be without a mother."<sup>58</sup> Mothers clearly and consistently restated the value of motherhood and the relationship between mother and child both to the mother, the child, and to the state, emphasising the centrality of their own motherhood to the wellbeing of the people. By 1936, women increasingly defended the value of their own maternal relationships to the 'big' family of the Soviet state, however, while prior to the family's official reinstatement, women who

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<sup>57</sup> F. Bernstein, 'Envisioning Health in Revolutionary Russia: The Politics of Gender in Sexual-Enlightenment Powsters of the 1920s', *The Russian Review*, (1998), pp. 191-217.

<sup>58</sup> RGASPI, f. 78, op. 1, d. 350, ll. 27-8.

were mothers sought to defend the value of their maternal role within the 'big' family of the state.

However, though reference to individual relationships are common with reference to children, there appears to have been a reluctance from most women – other than groups of women who wrote letters on political matters – to discuss individual relationships *not* sanctioned by politically celebrated roles. This reluctance perhaps reinforces our conclusions about the changing relationship between the 'small' and 'big' socialist family. That the 'private' relationship between mother and child (or, future Soviet Person), eventually found itself supported by the institutions of state reflects the desire by the institutions of state to absorb and police its free alternative to the socialised family life for which they had hoped. Individual peer or romantic relationships between adults served no such purpose for the state, serving instead as a source of anxiety in particular for those officials charged with policing the public mood. Therefore, that maternal roles within the paternal state might constitute a useful tool to frame discussions of such relationships should come as no surprise.

Following the ratification of the 1936 Constitution of the USSR and the period of terror that was to follow, proposals for amendments to legislation, constructive or otherwise were considerably fewer. Nonetheless, women and girls continued to write to authorities about their lives, requesting assistance, intervention, or correspondence, and within these communications still contain a wealth of evidence as to their authors' understandings of their role and relationship with their social and political environment. Writing to Krupskaja in 1939, a young girl, Olga T., who had recently taken over her late mother's role as 'homemaker', requested the assistance that had been awarded to her mother as a 'mother of many children'. She was responsible for five other children and

her ailing father, and could not manage on the family's current income, which had been sharply decreased following her mother's death. The author suggested that it would be fair for her to receive her mother's maternity benefits, since she had taken over her role, despite still being in school, and reminded Krupskaja of her proper relationship stating that 'because I am not old, I am a young girl (*molodaia dyevushka*) I must spend time on fun, and culture. Without state assistance, the family will not survive. Our family is barely functioning.'<sup>59</sup> This aspect of her letter is quite striking: amidst reference to the grief and material hardship her family experienced, the argument that she still sought to have the same 'carefree' existence as her peers indicates a deeply held sense that she should also be considered to be a child. Though she was compelled by circumstance to take over the matriarchal role in the family, she was keenly aware that her emotional maturity was still that of a child: she serves the state as a mother in her 'small' family, but is owed a duty of care within the 'big' family of the Soviet state.

Olga's reference to fun and culture possessed an alternative function in the girl's letter. By suggesting that she did not have the time or money to spend on leisure activities, she reinforced through euphemism the sense of tedium and hardship she feels has taken over her familial relationships. Moreover, that as a young girl, she 'must' be able to spend time on fun and cultural activities, the author implied that this was her *right* as a Soviet child, daughter to a mother-of-many-children (and one who had assumed the maternal role prematurely). The statement suggests that early admission to the domestic drudgery so detested by Lenin risked a return to the pre-Revolutionary oppressions faced by young women, denying her the cultural (and ultimately political) education that would enable her to come of age as a useful Soviet woman, and her siblings to grow up to be strong and responsible Soviet citizens. Olga almost bargained

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<sup>59</sup> GARF, f.7279, op. 14, d.14, ll. 26-7.

with Krupskaja, reiterating her emotional immaturity, stating '[a]nd I'm [just] a girl acting as the mother of a family, I can't [do it] without government assistance... As a result of this, children can turn out bad.' Her relationship to her family *ought* to have been that of a sibling, not only for the sake of her material well-being, but for the emotional and cultural well-beings of the members of the family unit more generally. Compelled to rely on a mother figure whose broad horizons ahead remained unexplored, who had little experience of childhood or culture may well, Olga reasoned, be catastrophic for the 'big' family - the imagined Soviet community - as a whole. These brief mentions of her 'right' to fun as a Soviet child contain within them a multitude of implications: about her emotional experiences; her changing relationship to her family; her sense of the balance of rights and obligations in relation to the state; and not least, her own sense of her generational cohort.

The image of the family evidently continued to loom large in the decades after the Revolution, having been anchored to the authorities as a paternal unit, and this image pervaded everyday life, often accommodating alternative family structures within the security of the 'big' state family. According to T.P. Khlynina, the political vision for the new Soviet person was closely reflected by architectural forms and, more generally, by the ways of living promoted by policy and discourse. *Kommunalki* remained the norm but, amid financial restrictions upon early plans for large scale Constructivist construction and, subsequently, a diversion towards neoclassical design under Stalin, their blueprint for the transformation of Soviet social life evolved in a similar manner to their architectural blueprints.<sup>60</sup> Despite grand visions for a reformulation of 'the fundamentals of everyday life', the establishment of life in urban communes did not

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<sup>60</sup> T.P. Khlynina, 'Zhiloe prostranstvo i osobennosti ego organizastii v sovetskoj Rossii b 1920-1940gg', *Bylye Gody*, 27:1 (2013), pp. 61-70.



develop evenly or easily.<sup>61</sup> Expanding upon conclusions about the relationship between architectural form and norms of Soviet society, Andy Willimott's work on youth activist communes, explored the ways in which life in communal apartments acted as an alternative to the 'old' family. Willimott presents a letter from a young Komsomol member, Andrei – the founding member of the student commune in question - to an activist friend, Sergei, while both were at the parental home on their summer holiday:

When I think that the petit-bourgeois family atmosphere with which I am now surrounded awaits me when I leave college in a year's time, I get cold shivers down my back. And a deep sorrow seizes me. Is a return to the old family regime really the only way out? Brr, horrible [...] Sergei, my friend! What do you think of staying together after college too? Staying together even if one of us marries? [...] Let us proclaim a storm! We will storm all right – if not heaven, anyhow the forms of life! And what is more important?<sup>62</sup>

Though as a young, male student and activist in the early twenties, the circumstances of Andrei's revolutionary zeal for communal living were quite distinct from the women in this study, his suggestion that his commune should 'proclaim a storm' of the 'forms of life' in Soviet society by eschewing the traditional biological family is reflective of the space that had emerged in Soviet society. This is, he wryly suggests, more effective than storming the heavens, after all.

Moreover, Willimott astutely suggests that, though amongst young people, the idea for the communal apartment was that it should constitute a new 'family' of activists, was inherently dependent on the principle of total equality its members – and not least in terms of their gender: 'only then did they stand a chance of offering a genuine

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<sup>61</sup> A. Willimott, "'How do you live?': experiments in revolutionary living after 1917", *The Journal of Architecture*, 22:3, (2017), pp. 442-3.

<sup>62</sup> The original letter has been lost, but is reproduced in Mehnert, *Youth in Soviet Russia*, p. 171, independently checked but also cited A. Willimott, *Living the Revolution: Urban Communes and Soviet Socialism, 1917-1932*, (Oxford, 2016), p. 90.

alternative to the family'.<sup>63</sup> Women, those without young families of their own in particular, appear to have embraced their shared living spaces, which had, prior to the Revolution, often been required through circumstance in urban areas. One such letter from a young woman, V. Tikhomirova, written in July 1936 contained a non-specific request for material aid to the apartment she shared with her friend Irina. Though the situation as Tikhomirova described it at present is far from ideal, one can quite reasonably assume a previous sense of ease with the living arrangements, as well as a degree of affection between the roommates.

Nonetheless, material concerns had arisen for the pair. Though it is unclear as to whether there are others living with Irina and Tikhomirova, the latter appeared to feel their effects more acutely:

Dear Viacheslav (Molotov), I'm afraid that my letter won't find you in Moscow, but think, that somehow you will get it[...] Soon is the end of my stay at the school. On August 7 I will leave for Moscow. I sent Irina from here [...] She went with great reluctance [...] I did not want to let her go alone, but to go to Moscow, to our room – at the thought alone I was seized with panic. I literally suffer from panic in our apartment. There was some faint hope of changing the room for the better, when Irina got married, but Irina did not want to get married, and decided to dump her fiance. On the one hand, I'm really glad she said no, but financially things are really not good. Viacheslav, I again request of you help with the problem about the apartment. Please do it for us.<sup>64</sup>

Tikhomirova's letter was sufficiently vague as to leave the precise nature of the apartment's financial struggle unknown. It remained unclear whether she wished Irina would marry to add to the 'collective pot', or to leave the apartment, and consequently, leave her with more space. One might *assume* that the reluctance of the author to join her roommate back in Moscow reflected a desire for more space, yet the lack of detail

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<sup>63</sup>Willimott, *Living the Revolution*, p. 90.

<sup>64</sup>GARF, f. 5446, op. 82, d. 51, l.176; though this letter is presented in extracts, its abridged parts contain supplementary information about ticketing and food rationing, rather than information that would illuminate the nature of the author's discomfort further.

afforded her disappointment at Irina's refusal to marry, along with her comment that 'financially things are really not good', left her complaint ambiguous enough to avoid any accusations of petit-bourgeois individualism. Instead, the reader is left with a sense that Irina's impending marriage had been desirable due to the contribution of her betrothed to the household kitty. However, Tikhomirova clearly valued her relationship with Irina, expressing gladness on a purely emotional level that Irina was no longer trapped in an unwanted engagement. Additionally, her request that Molotov assist them with the problem about the apartment 'for them' implied, if only as a device to imbue her prose with a sense of pathos, a sense of solidarity with her roommate. The sincerity of Tikhomirova's feeling for her roommate is indicated by her own reluctance to allow Irina to travel alone, the sense of pathos it instils being somewhat superfluous within the passage. It would have been more than conceivable to any reader that Tikhomirova's sense of (familiarily female) comradeship with Irina was challenged by her desire for the success of their collective unit, rather than by a desire for Irina to move out of the space.

That said, it was far from uncommon for those in collective living arrangements to tire of one another's presence in a shared space. Klaus Mehnert in his account of *Youth in Soviet Russia*, describes a frequent sense of tetchiness amongst the subjects of his observation, stating that 'the burden of the difficult times is responsible for nerviness and irritability.' The triggers of this irritability were often amusing instances of petty or thoughtless behaviour – for example, 'one amateur photographer developed his negatives at two o'clock in the morning, contrary to everyone's wishes'.<sup>65</sup> However, the practical effect of living in close quarters with peers outside the biological family was often tangible, and so we might see Tikhomirova's frustrations as common, if not

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<sup>65</sup> Mehnert, *Youth in Soviet Russia*, p. 164.

representative, of the reality of living in shared apartments. Mehnert stated the causes of the departures of several commune members, occurring in reasonably quick succession. One girl left due to the commune's effect on her health; another because of the behaviour of young men; another young girl married and went to her husband; and a young man was excluded for concealing part of his income.<sup>66</sup> A significant aspect of the series of departures is its gender ratio – it appears primarily to have been young women, who experienced the ill effects of communal living. This is largely corroborated by Willimott's conclusions on the nature of the gender equality 'necessary' for the commune to constitute an alternative family: that the revolutionary new world had been 'implicitly coded' as masculine, as the pursuit of sexual equality generally took place on male terms.

As we know, the assault on 'old ways of living' had in theory and policy been directed at women, and amongst young Soviet socialists too, these presumptions of the objectivity of the male sphere persisted.<sup>67</sup> The masculine reality of the revolution of daily life was painfully apparent in Tikhomirova's almost throwaway comment that 'of course [she] is glad' that Irina chose not to marry when she did not want to, and mirrored in resigned statements about the reality of married relationships and engagement with male or masculine authorities, for example, across the body of letters as a whole. Nonetheless, the ideological suitability of non-conventional living arrangements, and their co-existence with the traditional family even after its rehabilitation, in some cases offered women with an alternative to their unhappy family lives. Critically, women 'occupied' these otherwise masculine spaces upon their own agency, as they had lobbied tsarist authorities for divorce in the decades prior to the Revolution, and as they had in the face

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<sup>66</sup> Mehnert, *Youth in Soviet Russia*, p. 165.

<sup>67</sup> Willimott, *Living the Revolution*, p. 100.

of extreme discrimination commanded their working environments upon entry to the workforce.

One particularly striking example of the pragmatic utilisation of Soviet modes of daily life is found in a letter from a young Russian woman, in 1928, to Krupskaja, to appeal for material assistance. She began by briefly describing her background: 'I will first describe to you my biography. I am a farm labourer. A dairy worker. A member of the union. I have no close relatives.' The author's ambiguous description of the status of 'close relatives' nonetheless clearly avoided the suggestion that she was 'alone' – as a union member and farm labourer, she is surrounded by members of the Soviet family. Yet, the author found herself pregnant, and had wanted an abortion, though '[the father] did not listen', and the doctors told her that, at six weeks pregnant it was 'too late' for an abortion. Throughout this narrative, the author of the letter implied a sense of her own agency, even where it has been denied. Ultimately, the author met an Uzbek woman, and they lived together, as she describes it, 'like sisters'. The roommate had been married for eight years, but had no children. The author had her child, and was now living with her roommate 'like two wives'.<sup>68</sup> The persistent sense of the author's own agency throughout the first part of the letter, in combination with her participation in collective labour, implies a sense that she was relatively 'aloof' from her peers in her locale: she described herself predominantly in the first person singular, an agent acting against a specific context. Yet, by contrast, her description of her living arrangements with the Uzbek woman she met, as 'we', strongly implies a sense of kinship and affection that was absent from the passages preceding. Though we cannot conclude for certain from the letter's contents that this was a lesbian relationship, this seems likely, as the two lived first as sisters, then 'as two wives'. In many ways, this aspect of their relationship

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<sup>68</sup> GARF, f. 7279, op. 6, d. 8, ll. 95-6.

is unimportant: as friends, sisters, or lovers, the women have sought to take advantage of the expansion of the 'norms' of family life that occurred after the Revolution, to establish a living situation that suited them, even when that expansion of 'norms of living' had occurred on largely masculine terms.

Ultimately, the images of shared rooms, communes and communal apartments that permeated Bolshevik discourse as an alternative to the traditional family and its domination of everyday life, remained in the public consciousness long after the nuclear family was formally reinstated. In conjunction with the transience lent to marriage by the formal acknowledgement of the trend towards love relationships, and the necessity of formal separation and divorce, this presented Soviet citizens with the possibility for an almost limitless array of alternative family arrangements, which often acknowledged and sanctioned the modes of living that had been present through necessity in the societies of the former Russian Empire.

A series of correspondence by Marina Tsiurupa, on behalf of herself and her disabled stepmother Nina, about the abandonment and maltreatment by the girl's father, illustrated the convergence of emotional discourses, social discourses and rights discourses in women's letters in the early Soviet state.<sup>69</sup> Writing to Molotov in 1936, Marina claimed that her father left his wife three months earlier, throwing her out of his home, sending his daughter with her, and claiming he could no longer live with her. He had given Marina an emergency contact number, though he refused to explain his departure, 'saying only that he no longer agreed with our character', though as it turned out, after a few days 'it became clear that the issue was not in [our] character'. He left

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<sup>69</sup> It does not appear as though any of the involved parties are direct relations of Alexander Tsiurupa, a senior trade official for the Soviet Union until 1928.

for his office in Tagil, taking with him his secretary, 'with whom he had already lived for some time'.<sup>70</sup>

Marina stated that throughout this time, her father's wife was 'very gravely ill', and being unable to pay for her medicines (which she received only through the sanctions granted by Molotov or his office), saying that she should 'get on her feet and work to pay for them'. Her father had sent a letter through a colleague stating that in light of his departure from the Academy of Science where he worked, he would be unable to give Nina any money, but would send Marina 250 rubles per month. He conceded that everyone may stay in the flat, and that Nina could sell the furniture until she was healed. When he eventually returned to work, he passed on the message that he was cancelling all of his obligations to them, and 'started to chase them out of the flat'. He harassed them by telephone, and then sent a request to the passport office, disputing Nina Mikhailovna's 'right' to the family name, though the day prior to his departure, she had received her new passport with the Tsiurupa family name. At this point, Nina was completely disabled, but Tsiurup would not give her the cards for the Kremlin hospital. Marina stated that her father was, in effect, 'depriving [Nina] of the opportunity to heal, and of the doctors, who already studied her illness and could have helped her'. In addition to this, her father had ultimately sued them for the flat and all of their possessions, with the court date having been set at for the twenty-eighth of that month. Marina stated that 'every day for the past three months, [they] had waited for more unpleasantness – can you imagine the impact of his attacks upon a sick person?' Maria lamented that she had worked very hard at university for three years, having been accepted to attend an 'Aero Club summer school', arguing that under these conditions it was very hard to maintain her hitherto excellent grades. Apologising for the

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<sup>70</sup> GARF, f. 5446, op .82, d. 51, ll. 50-52.

inconvenience, Marina pleaded that the pair were ‘absolutely alone, and no longer had the strength to resist him’. When Marina went to her father’s direct superior for his protection, he told her that it was not of his concern, and that they should seek Soviet power.

Her father duly and perfunctorily replied, having learned of these allegations, and rebutted his daughter and ex-wife’s claims, arguing that his role was ‘not so low as his ex-wife had claimed’, and that though he could do more for the Union, he had since the start of the Revolution been part of the struggle against sabotage, requesting Molotov’s protection and help.<sup>71</sup> The correspondence illuminates the intersection between rights, relationships, and affective responses between family members, communities and former partners. Marina was evidently an accomplished young woman, having completed three years of university, and so was, generally speaking, an ‘adult child’. Nonetheless, her father had sought to renounce any remaining relationship with her – either due to his own agenda, or her allegiance to her ailing stepmother. Marina demonstrates a clearly very close bond with Nina, referring disconsolately to the pair of them as being ‘alone’ (*odni*), having described through the pages of her letter her actions on behalf of herself *and* her disabled stepmother, choosing to remain with Nina, rather than staying at the university, as her father suggested. Underlying this sense of solidarity is clearly a shared sense of despondence, as Nina described them as ‘powerless’ in the face of his assaults. Throughout the letter, too, she referred consistently to the pair as ‘we’, rarely slipping into the singular when the option to use the plural is available. Only in her final line did she request assistance finding access to further education, for herself, and healthcare, and then work, for Nina.

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<sup>71</sup> GARF, f. 5446, op. 82, d. 51, l. 88.



Regarding her absconding father, George, Marina made an effort to underline the impropriety of his professional conduct. Though she declined to list any further his actions against the pair, Marina made sure to include the detail of his affair with his secretary at the Academy of Sciences, as well as his harassment via state organs. The contrast of her father's activities with her own quest for technical education, and her completely disabled step-mother's desire for work served to emphasise their potential to fulfil their obligations as Soviet citizens, and receive rights to state assistance, under George's persecution. Ultimately, the Tsiurupa saga demonstrated the kinship and community priorities in the Soviet 1930s: the bonds of kinship had, clearly, under the pressure of Soviet law, been strengthened in the case of Marina and Nina, albeit in the face of disrespect and maltreatment by a family member that relationship had deteriorated. The extent to which Nina fulfilled a maternal role to Marina is unclear: she had only recently assumed the family name, yet the relationship may have been long-term prior to this. Either way – the bond between the women, consolidated largely through hardship, provides ample evidence of the ways in which women were able to take advantages of the fluidity of family life and form new family bonds, even where their attempts to take advantage of post-revolutionary legal changes met difficulties, having been designed for women living in a world that maintained a masculine presumed subject. Yet again, it is evident that the huge plurality of opinion and lived experience amongst women in the Soviet Union was astutely reformulated in ways that made their entreaties acceptable to Bolshevik ears.

In some cases – perhaps as a response to the belittlement of older women as remnants of the old regime, or due to administrative necessity, women seek to occupy a maternal role in the lives of the wards, rather than identify themselves by their actual

relationship to younger family members. One elderly woman named Elizaveta Pletkina wrote to Molotov in February 1936, requesting material assistance: 'Dear Viacheslav Mikhailovich! Excuse me for bothering you, but I address you by force of necessity. I live now with my adoptive daughter in old age, it is very bad, I cannot work myself due to old age and ill health, and my daughter is being thrown out from grade six – she will be unable to settle down. I appeal to you for help, even if she should work to help me'.<sup>72</sup> It became apparent part way through Pletkina's missive that her adoptive daughter was, in fact, her granddaughter, borne of her daughter whose fate was unclear from the letter. Though the legal status of the adoption was vague, the choice in Pletkina's letter to refer to the child as her daughter served a variety of functions. By stating clearly that the girl was her *adoptive* daughter, Pletkina portrayed a sense of the sacrifice she had made for the proper upbringing of the young girl – a representative of the new Soviet generation, and the new Soviet society. This served to legitimise her entitlement to material assistance as an older woman. Though the fulfilment of the parental role would have been implied had Pletkina described the girl as her granddaughter, her description as daughter consolidated Pletkina's social 'relevance' as engaging in labour that was, at the time of writing in 1936, socially 'useful', despite her inability to partake in paid employment herself.

Moreover, Pletkina (somewhat dubiously) suggested that Molotov stayed with her midway through his journey to Kazan while her son was alive, in 1933: 'I did not know that you are a head of state. And then I recognized you from the photo in the newspaper *Izvestiia* and found out who you were, and was advised to write you a letter, to get help to an old woman and her daughter'. Describing her adoptive daughter in this way in this passage – as the daughter of an old woman – Pletkina established a sense of longevity in

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<sup>72</sup> GARF, f.5446, op. 82, d. 51, l.54.

her role and contributions to the socialist state and its upcoming generations. Ultimately, Pletkina's letter demonstrates the way in which families responded to circumstance – often at the agency of a maternal figurehead, particularly following the death or departure of male relatives – to form 'new' family units – much like Olga T's premature assumption of the maternal role, earlier in our discussions. In correspondence with authorities, these 'new' family units often took on some of the most politically significant characteristics of a nuclear family – such as a mother figure – in order to demonstrate their required security within the regime.

Likewise, another woman wrote a similar request for material aid to Krupskaja in 1930, although this time she did not claim to have met the minister herself. Her style of writing reflects its execution prior to the formal rehabilitation of the family, along with contemporary concerns about the neglect and destitution of children. She stated: 'I live alone in the mountains of Krasnoiarsk [...] my husband has already been dead a long time, and I live with my daughter in very bad conditions, many of my other children died, and so I live with my one daughter very badly'<sup>73</sup> Clearly, the author was not living alone – she was living with her daughter. Yet, in the absence of her partner, and without the assistance of the state as a substitute, she considered herself to be very much 'alone'. She went on to explain that she has two remaining children, living 'as orphans' in a local orphanage, due to her dire financial circumstances – rather than simply stating that two of her children lived in an orphanage. The repetition of the word 'orphan' in this sense suggests that her children were out of place in that context – living 'as orphans' even though they have a mother. The juxtaposition of 'orphan' and 'orphanage' emphasised the political anxiety about orphans and destitute children that was present at the time, providing a clear rationale for material assistance to their mother, so that they might be

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<sup>73</sup> GARF, f. 7279, op. 8, d. 15, l. 63.

returned to her as she desired.<sup>74</sup> Yet, though women made clear reference to politically lauded elements of everyday life – truth in marriage and party membership, and strong maternal guidance to name but two – these discursive features did not serve to *justify* the structure of the social or family lives of citizens, but as a point of reference. As women’s writings about their rights as mothers and wives in varying circumstances reflected the resilience of the concept of the family in the previous chapter so too do the matter of fact acceptance by women of their family lives that do not fit the tropes identified in Soviet discourse.

The persistence of ‘adoptive’ or ‘alternative’ families pervades the ways in which women discuss their social roles further, and continue to form a point of reference around which authorities should understand their circumstances as individuals. In a request for pedagogical research into homeless children – and a role in its undertaking, one woman petitioned Krupskaja again in 1930, for assistance working on the rehabilitation of orphans and ‘street children’:

Dear Comrade and friend Nadezhda Konstantinovna, I’m sure that no one will understand as you do [...] For me, the time is already passed when the heart responds differently to the grief of the child – the so called ‘alien’ child. For me there are no longer other people’s children. Therefore, the comfort that I met in the Children’s City Park of Culture and Relaxation pleased me greatly, as a huge achievement. Children there are gifted with something that in the pre-Revolutionary period, the most wealthy family could not deliver.<sup>75</sup>

The author failed to expand upon why Krupskaja would understand more than other Soviet officials, though as her narrative continues, one can infer that this is due not only to her experience as Deputy Minister for Education, but as an older woman without children ‘of her own’, reflecting an assumption that the Soviet state constituted both a

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<sup>74</sup> GARF, f. 7279, op. 8, d. 15, l. 63.

<sup>75</sup> GARF, f. 7279, op. 8, d. 15, ll. 91-4.

'big' substitute family for its citizens and, consequently, an embodiment of the possibilities for 'alternative' family or social relationships.

Indeed, letters frequently referred to Krupskaja, alongside her late husband, as the mother and father, or grandmother and grandfather of the Soviet Union.<sup>76</sup> The author appeared to credit Krupskaja with the success of the project for specialist children's facilities (in part, no doubt, since so few of the engineers of these projects remained in prominent positions by 1930). Though the author's reference to there no longer being 'other people's children' for her obliquely indicates in its temporal construction that, when she was able to bear her own there may have been such a time, the explicit purpose of this phrase in the letter served to relate the 'mission' she will go on to describe to the 'bigger' Soviet family. She moved to this mission quite swiftly:

But at the same time there are running round dirty, ragged street children on the streets, and when I talk to them [...] it surprises them, as well as random passers-by. [...] The attitude I encountered on the part of the administration, and the attentive views thrown to us by the visitors there showed me that here the 'homeless' is not considered the same child as all children in general. They are afraid, neglected, and they are still a 'pariah' that does not feel like a 'person' (*chelovek*).<sup>77</sup>

The author suggested that much of the 'problem' with homeless children was related to their sense of existence outside the Soviet family: that without the rights and obligations of Soviet children to a happy childhood and to learn and be educated, they existed as 'pariahs', feared by and in fear of members of the Soviet society they encounter. They did not, she contended feel like 'people', without access to the privileges of Soviet life. The author suggested then that, due to her skills in the matter it was her obligation to

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<sup>76</sup> E.g. GARF, f. 7279, op 8, d. 15, l. 73, Another letter from 1939, after Krupskaja's fall from Stalin's favour maintains the idea, claiming that the author is 'writing to [Krupskaja] as to [her] own mother': f. 7279, op. 17, d. 36, l. 26.

<sup>77</sup> GARF, f. 7279, op. 8, d. 15, ll. 91-4.

act as a surrogate mother to the children, to rehabilitate them and raise them as Soviet citizens:

I feel within myself the strength and ability to do this work, I am the supreme leader in this field [...] I have some kind of ability, thanks to which, the homeless, reaching me, soon feel 'at home'. They do not want to run away and steal, they are ready to live, even poorly, enjoying themselves and working, just to be with 'grandmother', as they call me. This nickname, given to me by them, characterizes our relationship as far as possible<sup>78</sup>

Unlike many other letters from women on the subjects of children and grandchildren, or young people in their community, the author did not seek to ascribe herself a direct maternal role. She suggested that 'grandmother' was the best possible description of the relationship between herself and the children. In this way, the author perhaps broadened her role, as a figure of counsel for the children – not unlike the way Arganova, from the examination of Soviet generational cohorts, viewed herself in relation to the girls she helped into the city to learn. This grandmother-to-street-children suggested that the role of a grandmother, rather than a mother, enabled her to expand her contribution to the socialist state, as in the analogy she made to Krupskaia, she casts herself as a grandmother to the children, their guardian from 'moral death' outside the socialist system:

Understand, dear Nadezhda Konstantinovna! After all, if the mother sees how the child is drowning, after all, it is easier for her to drown with him than to stand calmly on the beach. So once I saw this moral death of children, and at once I felt the strength to fight against this phenomenon – naturally, I strive for this work.<sup>79</sup>

As an otherwise isolated figure in the Soviet system, the author relates herself to other isolated, and otherwise ostracized children in the community, as a substitute for a maternal role within the homestead, and as means of rooting herself to the Soviet

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<sup>78</sup> GARF, f. 7279, op. 8, d. 15, ll. 91-4.

<sup>79</sup> GARF, f. 7279, op. 8, d. 15, ll. 91-4.

project, and perhaps more tangibly to the community. Though the author clearly sought to persuade Krupskaja of the validity of this unconventional vocation, through its pedagogical value, it is significant that she adopted a similar motif to Pletkina and others, of the adoptive (grand)mother.

## **The Substitute for the Soviet Family**

The socialist reconfiguration of social relations within the 'big Soviet Family' following the Revolution, though suggested to serve the emancipation of women, was clearly devised in masculine terms. Women remained in maternal roles during all discursive shifts, and little attention was paid to how their domestic roles might be shared by men – in this case, most painfully apparent in the examination of communal apartments. Yet, women continued to occupy the spaces they gained access to after the Revolution, often living independently, reformulating the ideal of the 'shared apartment', in order to protect the modes of living they found most suitable. Women frequently formed 'alternative family units', enabled and in some ways sanctioned by state discourse, and where necessary, sought to employ aspects of the Soviet paternalism as a substitute for certain elements of everyday life.

In a passionate account of devotion to Krupskaja written in 1928, a woman named Drozdova explicitly cast her role as in subordination to the paternal Soviet state, and in particular, to Lenin and Krupskaja as parental figures:

I am a small cog, of poor, little, inconspicuous service, and I will never fulfill my desire, my dream [...] Nadezhda Konstantinovna, I'm not alone – I have a five year old daughter, Oktiabrina, she is also childlike, she loves Lenin too and, like me, she dreams of visiting the mausoleum... Her father has died but she has never heard of him, does not speak of him and

does not visit his grave, she is drawn to Il'ich [...] It's not a matter of talk. I love you with the same love as my mother, and you are very like my dear mama (*mamochka*)<sup>80</sup>

It is unclear what happened to Oktiabrina's father, or what role he played in her mother's life prior to her birth. However, Oktiabrina's mother saw her role no differently than that of other mothers; her daughter had the paternalism of the Soviet state, embodied by Lenin, to substitute the upbringing her biological father might have offered. Women saw the state, or their peers and comrades as significant substitute for politically problematic family members in other aspects of their lives. Other women envisaged their roles as mothers as part of a 'team' of maternal caregivers across the state. One woman, named Ulygina, requested that Krupskaja ensured more coverage of other peasant children, in the magazine *About our Children*:

The magazine 'About our Children' illustrates well the lives of the workers' children, but it does not touch the lives of the peasants' children. It would be interesting to know how the children live on the collective farms. We have only just organised ourselves in the collective farm and are still working on the creation of children's rooms, which liberate the peasant woman and let them put all their efforts to collective farm construction [...] We hope that we women, together, will be able to create a new life for children.<sup>81</sup>

Ulygina's letter echoed the calls for parity between the maternity rights of working and peasant women in the previous chapter, but in its relative length presents the request for parity in a far more harmonious light. Ulygina, as part of a newly organised collective farm, sought examples of those 'like her', to whose everyday life she and her peers might relate, and look to for guidance. Yet, rather than ignore the efforts at socialised childcare experienced by the children of workers, she sought esteem alongside them, so that 'women together' – neither specifically peasant nor working – might create a 'new life' for their children. The principle of women's activism clearly resonated with Ulygina.

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<sup>80</sup> GARF, f. 7279, op. 8, d. 15, l. 73.

<sup>81</sup> GARF, f. 7279, op. 8, d. 15, l. 65-6.



Writing in 1928, before the dissolution of the Zhenotdel, Ulygina's letter displays an understanding of a collective gender identity as part of, rather than at odds with, the Soviet family – a 'sisterhood' in quite a different sense to that we are used to. Thus, the symbolic 'family' of the new Soviet society often inadvertently afforded women a blueprint, so to speak, to innovate ways of living, and forms of family life that best enabled them to preserve their spheres of agency – in Ulygina's case, the ability to participate in labour, without being 'confined' to the domestic sphere; in Drozdova's case, providing a father figure in her daughter's life.

## **Conclusions**

The personal lives of women were subject to escalating levels of state intervention in the 1920s and 1930s, yet women negotiated and often fiercely defended the social institutions and networks of kinship that structured their daily lives. Though policy and theory on the family in the 1920s and 1930s oscillated, women maintained a commitment to their own principles of family life, and frequently ascribed deep value to companionate marriage. Divorce was permissible, and women were generally supportive of the principles of divorce, and its necessity under different circumstances. However, Lenin's concerns about promiscuity were widely shared by women, who in their estimations of marital infidelity, corroborated Lenin's remarks that 'to be sure, thirst has to be quenched. But would a normal person lie down in the gutter and drink

from a puddle?’<sup>82</sup> The companionate aspect of romantic relationships was cherished over any notions of ‘free love’ that might have challenged their enduring bonds.

Extramarital affairs, and unscrupulous alimony claims were often associated with notions of unfairness or dishonesty. Such threats to the relationships of our letter writers were often posited as selfish, or a betrayal of the collectivist character of the state, rather than a betrayal of the scorned partner. Frequently, risks to the stability of family life were framed in terms of ‘anti-Soviet elements’, a technique held in common with other expressions of unhappy experiences as addressed in chapter two. Despite their hostility towards ‘selfish’ behaviours that interrupted their daily lives, women did not necessarily prioritise social bonds or family structures that defied the norms presented in Soviet life, either in the 1920s or 1930s. Women sought to accommodate unconventional family relationships within Soviet discourse in the period, framing them as part of the ‘big’ family of the Soviet Union, as valuable contributions to the ‘new generation’, or as results of the collective environment. Family members were often adopted, and presented in letters to authorities as part of the norm. Likewise, the maternal role, in all its varied formulations, was fiercely defended.

The carefully crafted narratives created by women in their letters effectively remained one step ahead of legislative shifts, as they employed many of the strategies of negotiation explored in previous chapters of this thesis to stretch and reshape the boundaries of Soviet social policy and discourse. Ultimately, through their efforts to maintain their interpersonal bonds, women demonstrated the flexibility and resilience of social institutions such as the family in their letters. The failure of the family to

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<sup>82</sup> A. Kollontai, ‘Tesizy o Kommunisticheskoi Morali v Oblasti Brachnykh Otnoshenii’, p. 31; cited in W.Z. Goldman, *Women, the State and Revolution: Soviet Family Policy and Social Life, 1917-1936*, (Cambridge, 1993), p. 7, and C. Zetkin, ‘Lenin on the Woman Question: An Interview with Lenin on the Woman Question’, in *On the Emancipation of Women*, (Moscow, 1977), p. 106.

'wither away', as Marxist and early Soviet thinkers had predicted forced Soviet policy to adapt to the demands of the new Soviet society. In essence, women's descriptions of their social bonds and family relationships demonstrate the degree to which they strived to accommodate their *own* customs of family life, defending their core allegiance to its ties by cloaking discussions in appropriate discourse.

# Conclusions

A key goal of this thesis was to identify what can be learnt about the ways that different women in the early Soviet state understood what it meant to be a 'New Soviet Woman'. The interrogation of several key research questions formed the basis of the study. What is significant about the language used by women in letters sent to 'the state'? What can be learnt from this about how women of different ages and backgrounds understood their 'emancipation' after 1917? And how far were women able to exercise agency in the determination of their social roles and identities under the authoritarian conditions of Soviet power? By analysing the content of a broad selection of these letters, and tracing the evolution of the intersection between ideology and practice in women's lives, the thesis has shown that women reproduced Bolshevik language, both consciously and unconsciously, to negotiate the terms of their 'emancipation' in the decades following Revolution. Crucially, it has demonstrated that women were able to use letters to accommodate their individual lives – as they actually existed, rather than as they were construed – within the ideological framework of the new Soviet state. In these concluding remarks, I will return to each line of inquiry, before outlining its significance, and indicating some avenues for future research.

## **Emancipation and the Exercise of Agency.**

The thesis demonstrated that women of all ages and backgrounds crafted space for their individual lives in the discourse of the Soviet state, and constructed their social identities in a dynamic process of negotiation with the state. The thesis has shown that

women 'appropriated' certain aspects of discourse, such as education, the right to labour, and the principle of 'equal rights', which were used to construct a sense of social value, and create a more bearable existence under the constraints of authoritarian government. Close reading of a wide range of letters written by women from different backgrounds has demonstrated the extent to which popular reproductions of state discourse did reflect their author's sense of the 'limits' of ideological acceptability. Moreover, the ingenuity with which women employed Bolshevik language has cemented the role of Soviet women as meaningful historical actors.

Although the exercise of this agency was at times in conflict with state discourse or policy, it should not be confused with dissent, but understood as means of engagement with the Soviet utopian project upon their own terms. Women did, of course, provide dissenting voices at time – we need only to think back to Natalya K.'s letter, titled 'Who to complain to about the police?'<sup>1</sup> – but, on balance, women's communication with authorities was characterised by ambiguity and omission. Some elements of dissent were not incompatible with broad support, tolerance, or apathy, for other aspects of the Soviet experience. The ambivalence and diversity demonstrated in the letters consulted for the thesis has also served to highlight the diverse range of preoccupations and priorities held by women.

### **Women's Letters to the Soviet State.**

The thesis has shown that, as a source, letters provide a clear sense of their author's understanding of the discourse in which they were expected to construct their social identities. Although it is necessary to account for the degree to which women's

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<sup>1</sup> RGAE, f. 393, op. 56, d. 142, l. 249.

engagement with Soviet discourse (the process of 'Speaking Bolshevik') served to legitimise Soviet power, this does not lessen the impact of the revelations provided by the study of women's letters to authority, revealing as they are of the variety of preoccupations that women felt they could legitimately raise. The agency they exercised under contradictory and oppressive political conditions remains remarkable. Built upon studies of the Soviet 'self', and studies of letters as a source, the study has examined the reproduction of Bolshevik language as it relates to gender and identity, to shed light on the way that the Soviet *woman* was constructed, arguing that she was actively involved in this process of reconstruction, through the way she spoke Bolshevik, both consciously and unconsciously.

In content a number of themes were common across the writings of Soviet women. By virtue of the variety of personal and familial circumstances discussed in the selection of letters examined, the diversity, flexibility and endurance of the family unit emerged as a concept women were willing to vehemently defend. Women embraced the fluidity of family ideology in the period to accommodate their own unconventional homesteads. Many letters, on a range of different themes, showed the value women attached to literacy and education. According to the letter-writers consulted in the study, literacy, and more broadly education, constituted a transformative process for women from a variety of backgrounds, and fundamental to the process of 'emancipation' as women themselves saw it.

Literacy and education were often central to discussions of negative emotions and experiences, providing women with the opportunity (discursively if not practically) to gain entry to the socialist happiness promised by Soviet ideology. Education was considered to offer the key to the acquisition of Soviet 'rights', through the effective

fulfilment of other obligations of Soviet citizenship, such as productive labour, self-improvement, and motherhood. Education offered women opportunities to fulfil these obligations, through the access to labour outside the home, and the opportunities for socialist self-improvement it provided.

Old and young women, from rural and urban backgrounds across the Soviet Union protected their roles as mothers and daughters, through the prism of the revolutionary socialist mother in her variety of ideological formulations in the period. However, although the opportunity to perform labour outside the home formed a critical component of women's 'emancipation', both in terms of its effect upon self-esteem, and in terms of the practical fulfilment of the obligations upon which Soviet 'rights' depended, so too did the performance of domestic labour – in particular, the upbringing of that vital 'new Soviet generation'.

### **The Variety of 'Soviet' Experiences Amongst Women.**

As noted in the introduction to the thesis, it would have been neither desirable nor possible to prove the 'existence' of the authentic and gendered Soviet self, not least due to the range and variety of individuals represented by the letters found in the archives. However, the study has provided a valuable overview of the variety of gendered experiences of life in the first years of Soviet power, and the ways in which there were accommodated by the Soviet narrative at the behest of women themselves. The thesis has shed light on the extent to which women from different demographic groups were able to construct identities which were socially and politically 'useful' to them, and to

embrace and transform aspects of their 'otherness' to complement, challenge and endorse the regime.

Above all, the thesis has interrogated the concept of generational cohort, both as an ideological tool, and a component of women's identities, revealing how women reconciled the practicalities of their lives and ages with a dominant discourse which prioritised 'youth' as a central factor in the construction of Soviet society. From the perspective of Soviet theorists and policymakers, older women's previous experiences of – and participation in – tsarist life threatened the foundations of the Revolutionary state, which was geared towards the elimination of the past and the construction of a new society free from its constraints. An emerging body of historiography on old age in the Soviet Union has, however, identified that the construction of age and generational cohort after the Revolution was as ideological as it was biological, causing a discursive ambivalence towards the elderly in the period. This inadvertently afforded older women, who were otherwise ideologically undesirable, a degree of flexibility in their emotional and political expression. Indeed, it is evident from their letters that, during the period of the study, women themselves maintained a keen awareness of the ideological malleability of generation in the period.

## **Final Reflections.**

In the selection of letters as its major source base, the study has demonstrated the importance of looking across the boundaries of the traditional social categories that organise studies of Soviet history. Since studies have often focused on particular social groups, such as youth, peasant women, and working women, the thesis has expanded



the focus of studies of Soviet women's lives to address similarities between different groups, identifying the exercise of agency in particular as an activity common to women of all social groups. Allowing the 'common denominator' of the experiences under examination to remain as broad as 'women who wished to communicate, by letter, with Soviet authorities' has meant that the findings of the thesis are determined by the subject matter women selected themselves. Although the study's findings are necessarily broad, this focus has served to re-establish the focus on women's engagement with Soviet ideology, and has provided several important considerations for future research.

The thesis provides a fuller picture of the sense of social mobility provided by education at all levels, as seen through the eyes of those women who received it, showing how their intersectional identities framed the social inclusion and possibilities for mobility that resulted. For future research, an increased focus upon the various intersections of generation and geography would enrich the conclusions of the thesis regarding the value of education, providing vital new perspectives to the historiography on literacy and education among women in the Soviet Union. Additionally, a sustained focus upon the distinction of grief as a less problematic emotion for women to display as mothers, forms an important avenue for future research, as does the preponderance of references to suicide amongst the body of letters.

Finally, the thesis has shown that, through the process of 'Speaking Bolshevik' directly to authorities, women were able to negotiate and defend their lives as they existed, accommodating them within the Bolshevik script. Several studies in the historiographical field have suggested that these processes of engagement served

ultimately to increase the discursive power of the Soviet regime.<sup>2</sup> In contrast, the thesis, had deliberately avoided a 'quest' for either active dissent or support for Soviet power amongst women. Having allowed the letter-writers to direct the major themes of the study, and 'speak for themselves', the thesis argued that the practice of letter-writing was an activity which empowered women to find and reaffirm their own sense of agency, expressing this adeptly and creatively in a variety of ways. Though at different moments, women would praise or criticise aspects of the Soviet experience, rather than reflecting any broader sense of dissent or support for the Soviet project, their letters instead demonstrate the formation and empowerment of a female sense of 'self' in the USSR.

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<sup>2</sup> S. Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilisation*, (London, 1997).

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