A Brief History of Family Policy in Russia, 1917-2013

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The history of twentieth-century Russia is one of social and political upheaval, and the family, being the “natural and fundamental group unit of society” (Article 16.3 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights), could not escape being profoundly affected.¹

Society’s development and its stability and prosperity depend, among other things, on the continuous growth or, at the very least, stability of population size.² This piece of common knowledge is complemented by a vast body of research indicating that the stability and security of the natural family are vital to such development. The environment provided by the natural family plays a crucial role in the social well-being and productivity of younger generations. In other words, securing society’s prosperity requires not only reversing the current depopulation trend, but also ensuring that most children are being born and raised in intact, two-parent (mother-father) families.

This is especially important in Russia, where the birthrate continuously lags behind replacement levels. According to official Rosstat

¹ The present article is largely based on Социология семьи: Учебник (Family sociology textbook). / Под ред. проф. А. И. Антонова, Москва, 2010 (ed. By Prof. A. Antonov, Moscow, 2010).

figures, natural population loss in 2010 amounted to 239,600 people. The aggregate birthrate in 2009 was 1.54, compared to the replacement level of 2.1, a figure even the most optimistic Rosstat forecasts say Russia will not be able to reach before 2030. Meanwhile, Russia leads the world in abortions, with abortion rates in 2010 reaching 1,186,100 per year. The institution of the family in Russia is, too, undergoing a crisis—in 2011, 51 marriages out of 100 ended in divorce.

Today’s Russia needs to develop and implement a comprehensive family policy that would strengthen marriage, fatherhood, motherhood, and with it family life and family values. This need makes it worthwhile to study the history of family policy in Russia, both to observe the roots of some of the current issues and to avoid serious mistakes in the future.

**The Revolution and Its Consequences (1917 – 1921)**

The first signs that industrialization in Russia and the processes related to it were beginning to drag the family into a systemic crisis began appearing as far back as the end of the nineteenth century. Cities and industrialized regions of the country saw birthrates decreasing, children increasingly born outside of marriage, marriages becoming less stable, and multigenerational families and family ties weakening.

Laying what later became the ideological groundwork for the post-1917 Communist authorities in Russia, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels are widely known to have entertained largely negative views of the traditional family. According to Marx and Engels, under Communism the “bourgeois” family would have to “disappear,” just as “the capital” would. The practice of parents “exploiting” their children would be abolished, and family education would be replaced by public education.

These ideas were taken up and further radically developed into early post-revolutionary Russian ideology. The new authorities’ first steps were to “liberalize” family relationships—and thus simultaneously to undermine the influence of religious institutions such as the Russian Orthodox Church.

The year 1917 saw the Soviet government passing decrees “On Civil Marriage, Children, and Registries” and “On Dissolution of Marriages.” The decree “On Dissolution of Marriages” granted spouses unconditional freedom to a divorce, performed by a local court, at the desire of either
one or both parties. “On Civil Marriage” decreed that all except civil marriage (including religious marriage) would cease to be recognized by the state, while at the same time abolishing all distinction between legitimate and illegitimate children. (It should be noted that the sole aim of introducing civil marriages was to undermine religion. Writing in 1922, one Soviet lawyer stressed that “[t]he institution of Registrars was necessitated by the fight against the Church.”

Affirming such moves, the 1918 Family Code introduced a whole new morality, contravening the existing practices of marital and family law. In its provisions for divorce, the new legislation granted spouses rights to separate property and thereby abolished shared, family property. The Code also included vague criteria for deprivation of parental rights. Article 153 stated that “[p]arental rights are exercised exclusively in the interests of the child, with courts invested with the right to deprive the parents thereof in case said rights are exercised improperly.” Article 183 prohibited adoption, replacing it with a system of state-appointed foster caretakers. The Soviets were also the first government to proclaim complete freedom of abortion.

All of these steps were in line with the new authorities’ ideology of considering the family the backbone of the oppression of women. Russian Communists thought the liberation of women required destroying family households and family education for public versions of both, while drawing women *en masse* into public production. Writing in 1919, Lenin argued that “true liberation of women, true Communism comes about only when and where the masses rise up . . . against . . . small-scale households.”

In his 1920 work *The ABC of Communism*, Nikolay Bukharin and Yevgeni Preobrazhensky, ideologues of the new order, wrote:

In a bourgeois society, a child is viewed as being exclusively, or at the very least, largely a property of his parents. When parents speak of a child as “their daughter, their son,” it implies not

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only their parenthood, but also the right to educate their own children. From a Socialist point of view, this right is entirely and completely unfounded. An individual does not belong to itself, but to society—humankind.

This view is seconded by Lenin, writing in 1920: “We are serious in delivering on our manifesto commitment to transfer the economic and educational functions of the individual household to the society.”

The new ideologues explicitly stated the need to destroy the family. A. M. Kollontay, one of the Communist party’s most active family policy makers, formulated this need in no uncertain terms as far back as 1918: “The family is doomed. It will be destroyed.” N. Bukharin also wrote that “in a Communist society, when private property and oppression of women finally come to an end, so, too, will prostitution and marriage.”

As a natural consequence of the new authorities’ antifamily policy, a rapid disintegration of the family followed. Freedom of divorce led to serial polygamy and prostitution masquerading as marriage. In 1920 Petrograd (now St Petersburg), 41% of marriages lasted only three to six months, 22% less than two months, and 11% less than one month. Open prostitution was rampant.

The number of divorces skyrocketed. While in 1913 there were 0.15 divorces to 1,000 marriages for Russian couples, 1926-1927 saw 11 (almost 100 times more). In 1920 Petrograd 92 marriages out of 1,000 ended in divorce, and in 1926 Moscow it was 477 per 1000. The state widely advocated freedom of sexual relations.

One can say with certainty that the period dealt the natural family a devastating blow, one from which Russian family policy is still recovering.

5. Воспоминания о В. И. Ленине (Recollections of Lenin), М., 1957, Т. 2, с. 490.
8. Материалы по статистике Петрограда и Петроградской губернии (Documents on Petrograd and the Petrograd Province Statistics), Вып. 5, Пг., 1921, С. 26.
The “New Economic Policy” Period (1921 — 1929)
The next transition for the Soviet state was to replace the policy of “war Communism” with the so-called “New economic policy,” aimed at restoring a Russian economy badly damaged by the civil war. Thanks to economic changes and related legal changes, the disintegration of the family had somewhat slowed down. The need to revive the economy required granting citizens some freedom of private property and enterprise, which, unsurprisingly, proved to be closely linked to family policy. The state recognized that the family had to be somewhat stabilized.

Still, the Communist authorities did not abandon their program of destroying the family, but merely put it on hold. In 1920s’ social journalism “there enjoyed wide currency the critique of traditional family roles for women, the family’s notorious lack of openness, and so on, together with propaganda of occupation outside the family, of public education, the relaxation of morals, etc.”

In 1926 a new “Code of Laws on Marriage, Family, and Guardianship” was passed. The Code no longer required registering marriages at all, effectively equalizing official marriage with cohabitation. Other new norms were introduced. In particular, while the 1918 Code acknowledged parents’ right to determine the religious affiliation of children below the age of 14, Article 37 of the 1926 Code nullified this provision.

Moreover, it was Soviet Russia that, for the first time in the history of continental European law, allowed the state on vaguely defined grounds to remove children from their parents. Article 46 of the 1926 Code stated that a court can take children away from their parents “in cases when the parents either fail to carry out or abuse their obligations towards the children, or abuse said children”; when leaving the children in their family is deemed “dangerous,” child protective services can remove the children before any court ruling.

Against this backdrop of high divorce and low birthrates, the number of children being born out of wedlock continued to rise steadily. In the mid-1920s came the so-called paternity epidemic, a huge wave of suits for child support, with paternity often decided on no proof other than the woman’s statement.

Nevertheless, actual marital behaviour of Russian citizens of that time, as researchers have pointed out, was determined not only by the new Communist ideological trends, but also by pre-revolutionary cultural and, above all, religious traditions. Family life, therefore, became the subject of complex, schizophrenic influences both of traditional social and cultural attitudes and of the antifamily ideology of the Communist authorities at the same time.

**The Stalin Period (1929 – mid-1950s)**

Stalin’s rule was marked by serious changes in family policy, prompted by the state’s huge nation-building effort. Collectivization and industrialization led to Soviet families, especially peasants, having to shoulder a heavy extra burden. The demographic and social situation, already undermined by early Soviet policy and the civil war, was worsened. The overall birthrate fell even more, while extramarital birth and abortion rates rose. Continuing with the early Communist policy would catastrophically undermine the stability of the state. Practical considerations demanded drastic policy changes.

Realizing this, from the 1930s onwards authorities adopted an official plan of strengthening the family. Serving this new policy, an ideological doctrine was developed, according to which the earlier attacks were aimed at the “bourgeoisie family,” while the new Russia had a new “Socialistic” family institution. The Soviet family was proclaimed to be one of Socialism’s achievements, something to be strengthened.

In 1936 the Council of People’s Commissars and the Central Executive Committee of the USSR issued a decree “On Prohibiting Abortions, Increasing Material Assistance to Women in Childbirth, Establishing State Assistance to Large Families, Extending the Network of Maternity Hospitals, Day Nurseries, and Kindergartens, Intensifying Sanctions for Child Support Payment Avoidance, and Various Amendments to Laws on Divorce.” At the same time, the state introduced social security payments for large families, albeit restricted in their application—only blue- and white-collar workers with seven and more children were eligible, but no peasants. Of all the families living in Russia in 1937 fewer than 1% were actually receiving the payment, highlighting the harm already done.

The new policy was further developed in the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR Decree of July 8, 1944, “On Increasing State
Assistance for Pregnant Women, Mothers of Many Children, and Single Mothers, Strengthening the Protection of Motherhood and Childhood, Establishing the ‘Heroine Mother’ Honorary Title, the ‘Glory of Motherhood’ Order, and the ‘Medal for Motherhood’ Medal.” In addition to these moves, cohabitation (equalized with official marriage in 1926) was losing its legal recognition. Freedom to divorce was significantly limited, and the divorce procedure made more complicated. These steps made a substantial cut in divorce rates. In 1946 Leningrad (St. Petersburg) there were eight times fewer divorces compared to the period 1938-1939.

The new policy of strengthening the Socialist family was met with sharp criticism by exiled dissident Communists. Trotsky, in particular, wrote in his 1937 Revolution Betrayed: What Is the Soviet Union and Where Is It Going? that “the Revolution made a heroic attempt at destroying the so-called ‘hearth and home,’ the primitive, stagnant, backward institution where the working-class woman was sentenced to hard labour from her childhood to her death.” But Stalin’s state, he argued, had betrayed this policy by “solemnly exculpating the family.”

Nevertheless, one cannot help but notice the discrepant, schizophrenic nature of Stalin’s family policy, which promised to strengthen the Socialist family while simultaneously placing family life under almost total control of the Communist Party and the state. The family was denied both real economic and ideological autonomy—that is, the right freely to raise children according to one’s own views. Almost all the practical steps this “pro-family” policy resulted in were limited to either prohibitions or declarations, with the latter, too, being discrepant. For example, one inevitably notices that all the decorations and honorary titles introduced in 1944 stressed the idea of motherhood, but completely ignored fatherhood. Positive steps to support the family were limited to state benefits, neither substantial nor widely available. For all intents and purposes, Stalin’s policy viewed the family not as an autonomous entity or institution, but as a tool for transmitting state ideology. It protected not the family per se, but the ideological instrument of state policy.

The “Full-fledged Socialism” Period (1950s – mid-1980s)
Despite the steps the Soviet government took to restore birthrates and lower divorce rates, ultimately, the policy failed. Lack of large Soviet
families was still endemic. Soviet demographer V. A. Borisov described this period as showing “a constant unidirectional downward trend of the family underperforming in nearly (or, possibly, all) of its functions.”

In a continued effort to increase birthrates, the state gradually shifted its focus to supporting families with children. This, however, was targeted not at the family at large, but at a limited group of families (families with many children, low-income families, etc.), while the actual support and benefits remained insignificant (a characteristic persisting into later periods). Nonetheless, in the early 1980s, state policy turned to increasing the number of benefits for families, as well as providing subsidized loans for families with children. By the mid-1980s there were 14 kinds of welfare payments for families, with 80% of their aggregated budget going into maternity allowance; child care allowance for children under 12 months; and benefits for children from low-income families, mothers with many children, and single mothers.

State policy, however, did very little to change society’s family priorities and make families want to have more children. The main model of family life remained a family with fewer than three children. In reality, support of the family in this period was always last on the government’s priority list.

**The Perestroika and Post-USSR Period (late 1980s – 2010)**

Far from improving the condition of the family, the political and economic upheaval of this period in many respects made it even worse. To a great extent this worsening can be attributed to the economic crisis Russia experienced in the late 1980s. Welfare benefits for families were not adjusted to increases in prices and expenses.

The family’s plight was also linked to an ideological crisis, however. The breakup of the USSR and the rejection of Communist ideology had destabilized public morals. By persecuting religious organizations and promoting atheism, the USSR had succeeded in undermining the influence of religious and traditional cultural and moral values on society and replacing them with its own “Soviet” ideology. The dissolution of

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12. Борисов В. А. Деградация института семьи и пути ее преодоления (V. Borisov, Degradation of the Family and Ways to Reverse It), Семья в России, 1995, No. 1-2, c. 70.
the USSR meant this ideology was dead, leaving a moral and cultural vacuum. It took the rest of the century for the revival of the Russian Orthodox Church and other religious communities to begin to fill this vacuum. Still, to this day the consequences of the ideological crisis have not been fully overcome.

The moral crisis and economic hardships of the Perestroika and later periods adversely affected the family’s circumstances, with a rise in negative factors like divorce and alcohol and drug abuse. All this served as a context for “democratization.” Instead of building its own system of democratic government, taking into account the country’s history, culture, and the values—family values in particular—that had safeguarded Russia’s social stability, “democratization” was largely an effort to artificially transplant international standards.

To the extent it was achieved, this transplantation in fact made the discrepant nature of Russian family policy even worse. It was not the classical standards of democracy inherent to Western civilization that the newly rebuilt Russia was faced with, but the product of the complex and conflicting dynamics that had been at work internationally for the previous decades. These dynamics put onto the world stage new radical ideologies aimed at eroding traditional family, moral, and religious values. The still naïve new Russian state was sold extreme ideas such as radical feminism; extremely wide interpretation of the rights of the child; obsession with so-called domestic violence; abortion rights; and, to some extent, reproductive and sexual rights.

This international influence resulted in a number of ideologically motivated resolutions. In particular, alongside reasonable means of securing the interests of children, the 1998 Law “On the Basic Safeguards of the Rights of the Child in the Russian Federation” also gave governmental bodies and public organizations the right to challenge in court virtually any decision made by the child’s parents.

The new 1996 Family Code essentially views the family not as a whole, but as a number of individuals interrelated though mutual rights and obligations. Ignoring the calls from any number of experts, modern Russian law, just as in the Soviet period, does not regard the family as a unique and separate legal entity. The new Code pushes for further “democratization” of family relationships and grants state agents more
powers to intrude into family life under the pretext of vaguely defined rights of the child. For example, under Article 121 of the Code (still in effect), a child can be declared as lacking parental care if his parents “through their action or lack thereof” are creating conditions “interfering with his or her normal upbringing and development.”

Thus, post-Soviet family policy proved to be even more controversial than early Soviet family policy. Alongside the revival of family and moral values, its influences included both the legacy of Soviet ideology and the congeneric radical ideologies transmitted to Russia part and parcel of the new “international standards.” Such mixed signals made for conditions still less than suitable for the real revival and strengthening of the family and a rise in birthrates.

**The Modern Period (2010 – the present)**

The discrepancies inherent to present Russian family policy have been increasingly acknowledged lately by experts and public figures. The incompatible ideologies and worldviews are creating an environment which is, at the least, detrimental to the effectiveness of the state’s family-building efforts. Sometimes, this environment is outright destructive of the family itself.

All this lends greater importance to the Familistic school of Russian family sociology and demography, which recognizes that a substantial review of the state’s family policy is needed to shift it towards revitalizing and bolstering the family as an institution. Among the principles of proper family policy developed by the Russian Familistic school is the concept of “family sovereignty,” that is, the right of the family freely and without outside interference to make any decisions regarding its own private life and development. Another important principle is that of “social contract,” according to which the family and the state should engage with each other as social institutions equal in rights.

It should be noted that one of the principles of family policy adopted in the 1996 “Main family policies of the Russian Federation” (passed by a Presidential decree) is:

The independence and autonomy of the family in making decisions concerning its development. The economic, legal, and
ideological steps taken by the State as part of its family policy shall not seek to regulate its behaviour, but to assist it in its development, leaving it free to choose among different forms of support available.

Unfortunately, the state in practice fails consistently to implement this Familistic principle of family sovereignty, instead undermining it with actions and approaches directly contrary to it.

Still, the rise of various pro-family public movements and the activities of pro-family experts (such as the FamilyPolicy.ru advocacy group) are causing the legislature and the executive to pay more attention to pro-family ideas and to realize that to tackle demographic and social challenges modern Russia has to adopt true family-strengthening policy.

In this regard some of President Putin’s public speeches acquire particular significance. For example, in his speech addressed to a family-centered meeting in February 2013, Mr. Putin noted that:

Russians and almost all the peoples of Russia have centuries-old traditions of a big family, which unites several generations. Care for the elderly and the children always had special importance. We must revive these traditions, while at the same time making every effort to avoid blindly copying other cultures’ experience. This is because the management models of social phenomena are controversial in these spheres and in those countries where the rules of juvenile justice are most widely applied.

It is especially revealing that the Russian President thinks that uncritically adopting mechanisms of protecting childhood “can lead to the violation of family sovereignty, cause distrust and discord between parents and children.” Concluding this key part of his speech, Mr. Putin said that “[t]he family must be in the centre of public attention and we should see the family as our national heritage.”

That ideas formerly alleged to be “international standards” are now beginning to get a critical reassessment was demonstrated on June 11, 2013, when the State Duma (the lower House of the Russian Parliament)

ratified federal legislation prohibiting the propaganda of “non-traditional sexual relationships” (homosexuality, in particular) among children. This bill, which surveys showed enjoyed the overwhelming support of around 88% of Russian citizens, was achieved in face of serious pressure from the European Union and a number of other international organizations.¹⁴

Russia is turning away from uncritical acceptance of international trends, just as it once turned away from uncritical acceptance of Soviet ideology. We can see now a new political pathway for Russia, one that is based on gradually accepting the need to strengthen its national sovereignty, in family policy in particular. We can only hope that, sooner or later, Russian families will be able to enjoy the benefits.

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