
*Abortion Culture:
Soviet Trends in Family Planning*

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According to a 2008 report by the United Nations Statistics Division, the Russian Federation has the highest abortion rate in the world with 53.7 abortions per 1,000 women. Vietnam holds the next highest rate at 35.2, and the United States has 20.8 abortions per 1,000 women. Many countries that previously comprised the Soviet Union (USSR), excluding Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan, have similarly high rates of abortion. Russia's high abortion rate can be traced to the prominence of abortion as a method of family planning from after the death of Joseph Stalin in 1953 until the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991.¹

Since the birth control pill became widely available in the 1960s, many Westerners have come to regard family planning as the use of contraception, sexual education, and counseling but not abortion. However, when women in the West began using the birth control pill, Soviet women increasingly used abortion to regulate the number and timing of children. Reasons for the popularity of abortion are numerous, including the lack of appropriate contraceptive devices, socio-historical precedent, the traditions of the medical establishment, the policies of the Soviet government, and the ideology of Marxist-Leninist thought. It would be extremely unwise to assume that one of these factors alone caused the "abortion culture" in the Soviet Union and its successor states because all of these factors contributed to it in varying degrees throughout the period. After Stalin's death in 1953, Soviet women became increasingly defined by the dual roles of worker and mother, and many women felt forced to choose between a career and a child.

Before discussing the post-Stalin period, it is necessary to provide a brief overview of the rights of women regarding to family planning and abortion. After the 1917 revolution, the USSR quickly became a world leader in the documentation of family planning and abortion measures as a part of a broader push for more comprehensive census records. The republics and provinces openly distributed information published in these reports until 1929, when the central government barred the dissemination of these materials and use of their contents in analysis for all bodies except the Ministry of Health. In addition to banning official statistics, the Soviet government began to espouse pronatalist policies that were driven by a rapidly declining birthrate. Multiple factors contributed to this decline, including the liberalization of tsarist-era abortion laws and the loss of so many young men in the Russian Revolution, the Russian Civil War, and World War I. The government implemented a new family law system and banned abortion in 1936. The new laws aimed to improve the lifestyle of women with multiple children and, thus, increase the desire of women to carry pregnancies to term.² To this end, the

¹ "Abortion Rate," United Nations Statistics Division, last modified March 21, 2008, accessed November 17, 2010, <http://data.un.org/Data.aspx?d=GenderStat&f=inID:12>.

² Mie Nakachi, "N. S. Khrushchev and the 1944 Soviet Family Law," *East European Politics and Societies* 20 (2006): 44.

government provided subsidies to mothers of over two children, made divorces more difficult to obtain, and increased pressure on fathers to contribute child support payments. By 1944, though, the birthrate had declined further, and Nikita Khrushchev, then Communist Party Head in Ukraine, drafted another family law in response. The 1944 Family Law stressed the importance of producing more than one child and provided benefits to larger families. It emphasized that a woman's role as mother was more important than her role as a worker and presented motherhood as the civic responsibility of all women. This early insight into Khrushchev's personal view of the role of women provides insight to the conservative abortion and family planning policies he would pursue after the death of Stalin.³ While many areas of Soviet society "thawed" after the death of Stalin, abortion and family planning remained largely pronatalist during the Khrushchev years.

Though the Soviet government produced little major legislation on abortion and family planning during the Khrushchev era, official government documents and press publications indicate the government's, especially Khrushchev's, viewpoint. In 1955, the government lifted the ban on abortion and soon after released "On the Annulment of the Prohibition of Abortion," which specified the conditions under which the state considered an abortion legal.⁴ Khrushchev liberalized abortion policy to halt the continued plummet of the Soviet birth rate rather than because of any ideological belief. He expressed his personal opinions on abortion in a 1955 speech to the Komsomol of Moscow, stating that people who chose to have no children, "lived without thinking about tomorrow" and, in old age, the childless would require care by the offspring of large families.⁵ The government attempted to further promote large families by drafting labor reforms that included more allowances and time off for maternity leave.⁶ Khrushchev called for more childcare provisions in his speech to the 21st Party Congress in 1959 while also declaring the Soviet government had delivered women from their domestic slavery experienced under tsarist Russia.⁷ Apparently, no one spotted the irony of this statement in light of the release of the *Short Encyclopedia of Housekeeping* a few months later to celebrate International Women's Day.⁸ Khrushchev's lifting of the abortion prohibition expressed not his government's or his own support of women's reproductive right to decide, it instead represented merely one element of a broader campaign to push women toward having larger families in order to increase the birth rate. Much to the Soviet government's disappointment, the abortion rate would spike to approximately 244.5 abortions per 1,000 women in 1956, and the birth rate continued to decline.⁹

Though some protested Khrushchev's pronatalist policies, most Soviets seemed simply to accept the growth of a so-called "abortion culture." The legalization of abortion provided women with a family planning option that had been illicit previously, and many women likely chose not to complain about being urged to produce more children if they also had the legal right to obtain abortions. Still, some women saw Khrushchev's favoring of large families over small

³ Khrushchev's policies were generally conservative despite his repeal of the 1936 abortion ban.

⁴ Patricia Albanese, "Abortion and Reproductive Rights under Nationalist Regimes in the 20th Century," *Women's Health and Urban Life* 3 (2004): 23.

⁵ Mie Nakachi, "N. S. Khrushchev and the 1944 Soviet Family Law," 66.

⁶ *Sotsialisticheskaya zakonnost*, October, 1959, 1, cited in *The Current Digest of the Soviet Press*, vol. XI, no. 42 (Nov. 18, 1959): 10-12.

⁷ *Pravda*, Jan. 28, 1959, 2-10, in *The Current Digest of the Soviet Press*, vol. XI, no. 3 (February 25, 1959): 10.

⁸ *Pravda*, March 9, 1959, 4, in *The Current Digest of the Soviet Press*, vol. XI, no. 10 (April 8, 1959): 31.

⁹ Andrej A. Popov, "Family Planning and Induced Abortion in the USSR: Basic Health and Demographic Characteristics," *Studies in Family Planning* 22 (1991): 370.

as an infringement upon the right to choose how many children they would have. Others observed that the government expected women to fill the positions of both worker and homemaker; however, Soviet society forced them to choose the former, and commentators argued that the government should not exclude women from benefits for making such a decision. Several women wrote to Khrushchev after his 1955 speech to the Moscow Komsomol to express anger at his remarks. Some pointed out that after World War II, women outnumbered men, and thus, women had difficulty finding men with whom to marry and have children.¹⁰ Another woman wrote to Khrushchev explaining that women would be able to have more children if Soviet men acted responsibly and remained monogamous for an extended period of time.¹¹ Members of the male intelligentsia started a letter campaign to the *Literaturnaya gazeta* highlighting the harsh restrictions of the family law on women's free will.¹² Although several drafts circulated among members of the Supreme Soviet and Council of Ministers, no new laws on the matter came to fruition under Khrushchev's tenure.

Media discussion about whether Soviet women should fulfill the role of worker or that of housewife further contributed to the proliferation of abortion culture under Khrushchev. The government-controlled Soviet press did not answer this question with any certainty, leaving women forced to emphasize one identity or the other. In 1959, *Literaturnaya gazeta* presented V.L. Nemtsov's and Y.E. Nilova's opinions about whether women voluntarily chose to balance both work and housekeeping in support of the Soviet cause or whether a society in which they held no control forced them to do so.¹³ The Soviet media profiled women who had vacillated between these dual roles but found no resolution. *Izvestia* ran a story about a woman named Raya Sitnik, who was offered the opportunity to take agronomy classes to further advance in her collective farm position, but had to stay home in order to care for her husband and family. She fell into a deep depression, her productivity dropped, and the collective farm eventually evicted her entirely.¹⁴ The author of this article offers no possible positive resolution for Raya's predicament or for any readers who may find themselves in a similar situation. When faced with the choice between devoting time to the work they felt a duty to perform as Soviet citizens and fulfilling their traditional duties as housewives, many women chose to pursue careers. With little guarantee of finding a husband to support them, a career became necessary in order to survive, and, as a child would not easily fit into pursuit of a career, abortion became a means of attaining this choice.

Once abortion became a legal option for women, the high demand for it spawned a medical industry that specialized in the procedure. Many physicians from across the Republic found work in cities in Russia found work as abortion providers, and conducting abortions became a staple of the curriculum in medical schools. The surgical nature of abortion made it easy to standardize the process to some degree, and Soviet physicians viewed performing it with less reservation than western doctors because women's ability to control reproductive decisions about their bodies had already been introduced conceptually by the government.¹⁵ Furthermore, a doctor's ability to perform abortions not only drew in many clients but also lent a degree of

¹⁰ Mie Nakachi, "N. S. Khrushchev and the 1944 Soviet Family Law," 66-67.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 67.

¹² *Ibid.* 67-68.

¹³ *Literaturnaya gazeta*, January 10, 1959, 2, in *The Current Digest of the Soviet Press*, vol. XI, no. 9 (April 1, 1959): 66.

¹⁴ *Izvestia*, August 4, 1959, 2, in *The Current Digest of the Soviet Press*, vol. XI, no. 31 (September 2, 1959): 20.

¹⁵ Libor Stloukal, "Understanding the 'Abortion Culture' in Central and Eastern Europe," in *From Abortion to Contraception*, ed. Henry P. David (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1999), 27-28.

prestige to any physician able to perform the operation. Thus, doctors had no real incentive to discourage abortion, and with a relatively straightforward process for obtaining an abortion at the price of only five rubles, few women felt the need to consider other options. Any alternative options a woman might have for family planning at this time were likely not well known or readily available to her anyway. Condoms and intrauterine devices (IUDs) were available at the time, but neither the public nor the medical profession viewed them as particularly effective at preventing pregnancy. A 1958 medical handbook stated that IUDs could prove physically harmful to women. This statement, though rather general, held some truth since the IUDs produced in the Soviet Union generally contained higher amounts of hormones and failed more often. Couples who relied on condoms also experienced a high rate of failure, and many viewed them as uncomfortable to use.¹⁶ The ease with which women could procure abortions, combined with the difficulty they had obtaining and using contraceptives, helps to explain why abortion became the preferred method of family planning during the Khrushchev era. This would prove disastrous for the birth rate despite the efforts of the government.

Although Khrushchev personally opposed abortion, he pursued pronatalist rather than explicitly anti-abortion policies, and, for the latter part of the 1960s, Leonid Brezhnev followed a similar pattern. During the mid to late 1960s, the fertility rate continued to decline, dropping from 2.461 to 2.389 from 1965 to 1970.¹⁷ The abortion rate began to drop in the mid-1960s but soon plateaued at over six million per year, so, despite the decline, the fertility rate still fell far short of creating a net population growth.¹⁸ The Brezhnev administration initially attempted to reverse the population decline by revising policies pertaining to divorce and other elements of family law. In 1965, the government liberalized divorce law to make it easier to obtain and, in 1968, enacted the Basic Principles of Family Law. These laws streamlined the divorce process, lowered the cost, and lifted the abortion regulations enacted during the Khrushchev era. In addition, it made issues of illegitimacy easier to settle by allowing men to claim paternity. These major legal measures of Brezhnev's first years in power reflected the realities of ordinary Soviet citizens' lives and the government's attempt to reconcile population policy with its ideological support for freedom of choice in family planning. Large families still received subsidies, but those who no longer desired to stay married could now end them more easily. The single mothers that resulted from these divorces received help from the more relaxed procedures to determine paternity. However, legal reforms also opened up the option of abortion to more women, and, consequently, the abortion rate stayed consistently high while the birthrate continued to fall.

Since the government had yet to portray abortion in a particularly negative manner and chose instead to promote family values seemingly at odds with abortion, the Soviet media followed suit. A 1967 transcript of a discussion between students and physicians on the causes and treatment of impotence ended up expounding the many benefits of sexual intercourse as long as one did not engage in it too early in life.¹⁹ If a woman became pregnant earlier in her reproductive life, when she was less likely to be emotionally or economically established, the chance she would choose to terminate the pregnancy increased. Thus, they advised couples to

¹⁶ Andrej A. Popov and Henry P. David, "Russian Federation and USSR Successor States," in *From Abortion to Contraception*, 247.

¹⁷ W. Ward Kingkade, "Demographic Prospects in the Republics of the Former Soviet Union," in *The Former Soviet Union in Transition*, ed. Richard F. Kaufman and John P. Hardt (London: M.E. Sharpe, 1993), 804.

¹⁸ Alain Avdeev, Alain Blum, and Irina Toitskaya, "The History of Abortion Statistics in Russian and the USSR from 1900-1991," *Population: An English Selection* 7 (1995), 58.

¹⁹ *Science and Life Monthly of the Knowledge Society*, July 22, 1968, no. 8, 72-76, cited in *The Current Digest of the Soviet Press*, vol. XIX, no. 52 (January 17, 1968): 15-16.

wait to have children when they would be better able to raise them. “The woman question,” as Stalin put it, or the ability of women to balance work and family, apparently still called for debate among the Russian people as well, with several non-governmental publications discussing the matter.

During this period, contraception began to gain popularity in the United States and Western Europe, eventually becoming the preferred method of family planning. Public policy scholar Helen Desfosses likens the zeal with which American women adopted the birth control pill to the readiness with which Soviet women adopted abortion as a method of family planning.²⁰ While American women enjoyed the benefits of the birth control pill, Soviet women still found few forms of reliable contraception, enforcing the historical and social tendency to choose abortion instead. A *Literaturnaya gazeta* article from 1968 estimates that around 25% of Soviet women used contraceptives as their main method of family planning and that 75% used abortion. The article acknowledged that the contraceptives available to women in the Soviet Union were extremely ineffective at preventing pregnancy.²¹ Many of the “contraceptives” defined in the article might not actually refer to contraceptive devices. In a study of Latvian sexual practices, 75% of the families polled stated they used contraceptives; however, when asked about the specific kind, responded that they used *coitus interruptus* rather than any specific device.²² When these devices failed, as the poorly made condoms often did, or when methods like *coitus interruptus* proved ineffective, women simply stopped using any type of contraceptives. Since the desire to avoid having children remained strong, many women sought abortions once they became pregnant.

The majority of Brezhnev’s time in power (1970-1982), was marked by an intensification of the policies pertaining to abortion and family planning already implemented. However, the legislation produced during this period focused on population policy rather than any moral concern for the family. The birthrate in the Soviet Union continued to plummet, and the abortion rate began to fall very slowly.²³ The government’s earlier emphasis on the benefits of family life simply failed to persuade more people to have children. It became a matter of civic duty to have children rather than a matter of personal preference or moral duty. As a result, official decrees and policy measures began to glorify mothers not necessarily as happy housewives but as ideal Soviet citizens fulfilling their obligation to the state. The government placed more emphasis on the value of motherhood in the hope that more women would choose to become mothers. On the 1972 Soviet calendar, for example, the picture for Women’s Day included a happy mother and child rather than a woman worker.²⁴ During the Communist Party greeting at the 1975 Women’s Day festivities, Boris Ponomarev thanked women for their “valiant labor on behalf of the prosperity and happiness of the beloved homeland” and then elaborated that their labor meant raising the future Soviet nation.²⁵ This theme reached a climax with Article 53 of the 1977 USSR Constitution, which placed the family under the care of the state and specified its functions as

²⁰ Helen Desfosses, “Pro-Natalism in Soviet Law and Propaganda,” in *Soviet Population Policy*, ed. Helen Desfosses (New York: Pergamon Press, 1981), 99.

²¹ *Literaturnaya gazeta*, July 31, 1968, no. 31,12, in *The Current Digest of the Soviet Press*, vol. XX, no. 32 (Aug. 28, 1968): 20-21.

²² Desfosses 101.

²³ Andrej A. Popov, “Family Planning and Induced Abortion in the USSR: Basic Health and Demographic Characteristics,” 370.

²⁴ Michael P. Sacks, “Sex Roles in Soviet Russia,” (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1974), 111.

²⁵ Desfosses 109.

reproduction and upbringing. Despite the efforts of the state, however, fulfilling civic duties never became a popular reason for having children and, consequently, also never became a popular reason to forgo an abortion.

The state-sponsored press rarely glorified motherhood and the arguments presented in print were almost entirely based upon population policy goals. The government emphasized heterosexual couples and their duties to not only replace themselves but also to contribute to a larger Soviet population. The government anticipated that this new population would fulfill the role of the workers and soldiers of the future. Abstracts printed in a Soviet newspaper on a conference about population problems suggest that creating a workforce large enough to support the massive Soviet economy constituted one of the more important concerns at the time. The abstracts discuss very little about family planning or the social aspects of population policy; rather, they approach the problem as a matter of numbers that must be rectified for the productivity of the state to continue.²⁶ Considering the declining state of the Soviet economy at this time, producing a workforce large enough to facilitate recovery seemed essential to the wellbeing of the state as a whole. The extremely popular 1979 film *Moscow Doesn't Believe in Tears* does not glorify motherhood or housewifery as particularly enjoyable; however, none of the women featured in the movie procured abortions at any point during their lifetimes. The probability that three randomly selected women in Moscow had not had an abortion would have been quite rare at the time. This could have been an oversight by the director, an element intentionally left out in order for the movie to seem more audience-friendly, or a reflection of the extremely commonplace nature of abortions at the time. Nonetheless, the protagonist of the story (an ideal Soviet worker) chooses to keep her child not only out of love but also concern for the greater good of the state. The situation of the real-life professional in Moscow, however, was far less glamorous than the movie, and a single woman might have lacked either the ability or desire to perform her civic duty in both public and private spheres.

While the press unsuccessfully expounded the idea of one's civic duty to parent, state-sponsored medical institutions began a campaign to convince women about the dangers posed by abortion. This campaign did not distinguish between legally executed abortions and illegal abortions but rather attacked the procedure altogether using the language of science. One element of the program detailed the many ways in which an abortion could go wrong. Author I. Zak discussed cases of women found unconscious and bleeding in various places after receiving unsafe, illegal abortions.²⁷ Scientists also expounded the idea that an only child would undoubtedly grow up to be dysfunctional, and, because of this, it was preferable not only to have a child but multiple children. In 1970, the Institute for the General Problems of Upbringing "produced" a scientific study that found that one-fourth of children classified as difficult had no siblings. Another study from 1970 examined the role of birth order in relation to a child's tendency to become a juvenile delinquent. The results indicated that nearly half of the delinquents interviewed had been first or only children.²⁸ Soviet women were encouraged to believe that it would be best for themselves and their children if they had more than one child. This explosion of scientific publication on the subject during the time may have brought to light the health risks posed by unsafe abortions, but failed to provide them with any reliable

²⁶*Voprosy ekonomiki and Planovoye khozyaistvo*, abstracts presented by R. Galetskaya and B. Svetlichny, in *The Current Digest of the Soviet Press*, vol. XXVII, no. 9 (Mar. 25, 1975): 9-10.

²⁷ Christopher Williams, "Abortion and Women's Health in Russia and the Soviet Successor States," in *Women in Russia and Ukraine*, Rosalind Marsh ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 146.

²⁸ Desfosses 108.

alternatives to the procedure.²⁹ Thus, many women of this generation possessed knowledge of the dangers of abortion but possessed few other options for avoiding pregnancy.

Although Soviet women were aware of the dangers posed by unsafe or too frequent abortions, most possessed few other reliable options they could pursue. During the 1970s, contraception generally became more available in the Soviet Union, but remained too unreliable for many women to be able to count on it for family planning. IUDs became more widely available on the Soviet market (by no means indicating availability to every Soviet woman), but more effective copper IUDs were not yet available to most women, thus, the existing devices still had a high fail rate.

The pill began circulating in the Soviet market during this time as well. Though one may expect a reaction similar to that of the United States, where women felt they found a safe, reliable method and most became users of that method primarily, the chemical composition of the pill and the Soviet government's stance toward it essentially ensured any woman desiring to take it would be dissuaded. The pills introduced by the Ministry of Health in 1970 contained high doses of estrogen with more extreme side effects than their American counterparts, and, based on these side effects, use was soon restricted in 1971.³⁰ By mid-decade, the Soviet government decided the pill posed too much of a health risk to be an encouraged method of birth control, and it released thirty contraindications for using the pill.³¹ Doctors soon advised women to carry pregnancies to term rather than seek an abortion or take the pill. Therefore, despite the availability of some methods of birth control, most women in the Soviet Union either could not obtain these contraceptives or did not want to risk their health by using them. Abortion, a well-established process with a far more effective rate of success, still provided Soviet women with a safer option if they chose not to carry to term.

Issues of sexuality, women's rights, and family planning became much more prominent during the 1980s in the Soviet Union. Either because of or in spite of the efforts of leaders Yuri Andropov and Konstantin Chernenko, discussion of the subject became commonplace. The policies toward abortion and family planning during the 1980s merely continued and reinforced the previous governmental approaches of pronatalism and emphasized the health risks of abortions without actually adjusting well-worn policy to fit the needs of an evolving populace. In 1981, the Presidium of the Supreme Council of the USSR enacted a set of laws intended to provide benefits and financial assistance to women with large families, which, by this time, had come to be regarded as a classic pronatalist policy. The laws aimed to encourage the birth of second and third children by giving women with multiple children paid maternity leave and preferences for public services like housing. As S.V. Zakharov and E.L. Ivanova assert, the structure of this benefits plan caused Soviet women to wait longer periods between having second or third children. This extended interval caused the birthrate to plummet more into the 1990s, a trend that continues today.³² Thus, though the policy measures of the 1980s seemed initially successful in raising the birthrate through the promotion of large families to a place of privilege, personal concerns about the timing of children negated any initial gains of this plan.

²⁹ Williams, "Abortion and Women's Health," 146-147.

³⁰ J. Moffet, "Sex and Birth Control in the USSR," in *Soviet/East European Survey, 1985-1986*, ed. V. Mastny (Durham, NC: Duke University Press), 327.

³¹ Popov, A. A., A. P. Visser, et al., "Contraceptive Knowledge, Attitudes and Practice in Russia during the 1980s." *Studies in Family Planning* 24, 4 (1993): 231.

³² S.V. Zakharov and E.L. Ivanova, "Fertility Decline and the Recent Changes in Russia," in J. Da Vanzo, ed., *Russia's Demographic Crisis* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Publishing, 1996), 53.

Furthermore, the plan likely failed to reach many women who otherwise planned to undergo an abortion, since the abortion rate experienced a spike in tandem with the spike in the birth rate.³³

The practice of obtaining an abortion in the 1980s in the Soviet Union changed somewhat from the previous decades. While the process remained streamlined, the government added several features to discourage women from choosing abortion. Since an abortion seeker needed to submit a formal request, an advisor would set up an appointment and explain the various risks involved and possible negative consequences. Women also received no paid time off from their jobs for the abortion procedure; for a voluntary abortion, a woman received five days of unpaid sick leave.³⁴ Additionally, the government produced brochures to place in offices depicting secret abortions as only slightly more evil than a legally pursued abortion, negating any credibility gained from the legality of the procedure. Some restrictions were placed on the practice of abortions as well. A physician could only perform one on medical grounds after twelve weeks of gestation and not perform one after twenty-seven weeks.³⁵ Despite these regulations, abortion rates remained extremely high compared to the birth rate. Contributing to this, a private (and in the Soviet Union illegal) abortion industry sprang up in the mid-1980s. This industry involved imported equipment and posed less of a health risk dangerous than previous illegal abortions since it involved vacuum-aspiration at the earliest of stages of gestation. Though the government officially condemned this practice and mandated that all abortions require an official mandate, the ease and privacy offered by the black-market “mini-abortions” as they were known became a popular alternative to official (and often obstructive) channels.³⁶

Despite the stranglehold that abortion still held on family planning in Soviet society, knowledge about contraceptives increased dramatically during this time. However, this knowledge only led to the realization that Soviet contraceptives were not only difficult to obtain on a regular basis but also very unreliable anyway. The increased awareness about contraceptives led to a series of surveys throughout the Soviet Union documenting what (if any) contraceptives people chose to use, why they chose them, and how often they used them. None of these surveys managed to encompass the entire Soviet Union, but they highlighted rural versus urban habits of contraceptive use. Around two-thirds of the people polled used traditional, unreliable methods of contraception like rhythm or coitus interruptus, and the majority of people cited the high failure rate of most types of modern contraception as the reason for their choice. Also, though by no means a majority of those polled, some people cited the unavailability of other types of contraception as the reason for their preference.³⁷ When asked about the relative efficacy of various types of contraception, respondents cited rhythm as the most effective while oral contraception (by this time relatively safe to take on a regular basis) sits almost at the bottom of the list.³⁸ While the irregular access to birth control pills may account for this response, as women would likely not want to take the pills if they could not assume they would have access to them every month, it seems the government’s initial condemnation of birth control pills still

³³ Popov and David, “Russian Federation and USSR Successor States,” 229.

³⁴ A. Heitlinger, *Women and State Socialism: Sex Inequality in the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1979), 128.

³⁵ Popov and David, “Russian Federation and USSR Successor States,” 239-240.

³⁶ Andrej A. Popov, “The USSR,” in B. Rolston and A. Eggert eds. *Abortion in the New Europe* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994), 285.

³⁷ Andrej. A. Popov and A. P. Visser, et al., “Contraceptive Knowledge, Attitudes and Practice in Russia during the 1980s,” 230.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 231.

influenced decisions. The government so adamantly refused to accept the pill that, as scholar S.A. Polchanova noted, “If some women do nevertheless ask a doctor about using the pill, it is strictly prohibited to supply them with any commercial names of pills.”³⁹ Despite growing knowledge about the types of contraceptives, the government’s previous influence of public opinion still pushed women to choose abortion since it seemed the most reliable method to ensure the desired outcome.

The need for sex education for Soviet adolescents had been debated for decades. In fact, debate of its appropriateness had been raised as early as 1964, when the issue appeared in an article in *Izvestia*.⁴⁰ In 1982, the government settled the matter when it implemented sex education classes in all Soviet schools. The curriculum actually included very little sex education, with the word “sexual” mentioned only rarely in the syllabi.⁴¹ Mostly, teachers seemed too embarrassed or appalled at the curriculum to delve deeply into topics about sexuality, gender, abortion, or family planning, although it seemed the need for such education existed. The largest percentage of Soviet adolescents became sexually active between the ages of sixteen and eighteen, the exact age groups targeted by the sex education classes.⁴² This silence on topics of sexuality not only showed up at the local level, the government itself never spoke on the subject. Only one manual on sexual education existed at the time, and it failed to address many subjects, describing homosexuality simply as “a violation of normal principles of sexual relationships.”⁴³ In an environment as restrictive and silent as this, students explored few questions about sexuality, including those pertaining to abortion and family planning. While the government could have chosen to stress the possible negative side effects of one or multiple abortions and explain whatever alternative they preferred, it stayed mute on the subject. The effect of this policy on the populace is demonstrated by a 1988 satellite conference between Soviet and American students in which one Soviet student stated, “We have no sex here,” and no one in the Moscow audience laughed.⁴⁴

Soviet, and later, Russian women’s use of abortion as a form of birth control continued into the 1990s, largely because of circumstances rooted in the Soviet period. It would be unwise, in a discussion of how abortion and family planning in the Soviet era determined the current state of abortion today, to neglect investigating how, after the fall of Soviet Union, the discussion surrounding sexuality and women’s health maintained this unique abortion culture. In October 1990, an international conference titled “From Abortion to Contraception” convened and participants officially recognized that Soviet women’s over-reliance on abortion for birth control had become a public health problem. However, by this time, abortion was simply too ingrained into Soviet society for a complete removal. Over 3,000 physicians performed abortions full-time

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 232.

⁴⁰ *Izvestia*, September 18, 1964, 4, in *The Current Digest of the Soviet Press*, vol. XVI, no. 38 (October 14, 1964): 33

⁴¹ J. Muckle, “The New Soviet Child: Moral Education in Soviet Schools” in G. Avis ed., *The Making of the Soviet Citizen: Character Formation and Civic Training in Soviet Education* (London: Croom Helm, 1987), 18-20.

⁴² J. Maddock and I.S. Kon, “Sexuality and Family Life” in James W. Maddock, M Janice Hogan, Anotolyi I. Antonov, and Mikhail S. Matskovsky, eds., *Families Before and After Perestroika: A Russian and U.S. Perspectives* (New York: Guilford Press, 1994), 116.

⁴³ James Riordan, “Sexual Minorities: The Status of Gays and Lesbians in Russian-Soviet-Russian Society,” in Rosalind Marsh ed., *Women in Russia and Ukraine* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 161.

⁴⁴ L. Attwood, “Sex and Cinema,” in I. Kon and J. Riordan, eds., *Sex and Russian Society* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 66.

and 20,000 women missed work every day in order to obtain abortions.⁴⁵ Approximately half of the Ministry of Health's budget went toward abortion and related topics, and, as suggested, by the amount of women missing work each day, abortion affected the overall productivity of the nation.⁴⁶ Abortion became such a prominent element of Soviet culture because of the pressure of that society, but, by the 1990s, abortion clearly affected parts of post-Soviet society in a sort of feedback loop.

In the beginning of the 1990s, a few physicians attempted to dispel the prevalent rumors in the Soviet Union that the birth control pill could cause cancer and pointed out that late-term abortion (a more popular method) actually posed much more of a danger.⁴⁷ The safer, low-hormone birth control pills available to women in Western Europe began to enter the Soviet Union, but the government and medical professionals continued to assert the dangers of this contraceptive method and attempted to prevent widespread use. After the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, imported (and more efficacious) contraceptives became more accessible to women in the former republics, but supply failed to meet demand and prices remained extremely high. The low availability of these contraceptives combined with the perceived health risks of the pill enabled abortion to remain a popular form of birth control. In 1990, the government legalized sterilization but only streamlined the process for women who were over thirty years of age with at least two children and women with acute illnesses.⁴⁸ However, a 1991 survey conducted for the magazine *Health* indicates the enduring popularity of abortion. The survey polled 8,059 women aged 25-39 of varying educations, social statuses, and locations on preferred family planning methods. Forty-one percent of the women polled had already undergone one or two abortions.

During the 1990s, public sex education programs in the former Soviet Union remained as nonexistent, just as they had been in the 1980s. However, during the 1990s, youths' and adults' opinions on sexuality began to diverge, with adults preferring to remain with the traditional sexual values they grew up with and the youth supporting the liberalization of policies related to sex. This difference of opinion resulted in a slow increase in discussion about sexuality and its importance in relation to marriage. Currently, there is no standard curriculum for sexual education in Russia. A pilot program with the United Nations Fund for Population Activities was implemented in 1996, but met swift opposition from conservative Duma members, who claimed the program introduced a corrupting western influence. In a 1990 national public opinion poll, though, almost fifty percent of respondents stated their support for sex education.⁴⁹

During the 1990s, possibilities for conservative and progressive reform proliferated in Russia. The reintroduction of religious institutions into the country brought about a pro-life movement. Anti-abortion organizations, which were sponsored by both Christian and Jewish churches, launched multi-faceted campaigns to reduce the country's abortion rate.⁵⁰ The new moral terms of the abortion debate in Russia is evident in media depictions of the procedure. In 1990, *Pravda* ran an article discussing the high abortion rate among Russian woman and, for the first time, denounced abortion not only on medical grounds but also on religious grounds. The

⁴⁵ H.P. David, "Abortion in Europe, 1920-1991: A Public Health Perspective," *Studies in Family Planning* 23 (1992), p. 14.

⁴⁶ Popov and David, "Russian Federation and USSR Successor States," 241.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 247.

⁴⁸ Christopher Williams, "Abortion and Women's Health in Russia and the Soviet Successor States," p. 148.

⁴⁹ Maddock and Kon, "Sexuality and Family Life," 116; Popov and David, "Russian Federation and USSR Successor States," 255-256 and Maddock and Kon, "Sexuality and Family Life," 116.

⁵⁰ Vanden Heuvel, "Right-to-Lifers Hit Russia," 489.

pro-life faction in Russia coincided with the religious revival, so more people began to receive the message that they were committing a sin when they had abortions. Still, while the reduction of the frequency with which women had abortions over the course of their lifetimes likely result in improved their overall health, some of tactics used by pro-life organizations to convince women to forgo abortions echo the tactics of the former Soviet regime. For example, anti-abortion organizations sent employees undercover to work in abortion clinics and talk women out of abortions. Also, some groups produce videos about the purported dangers of IUDs and birth control pills much as the Soviet government did in the 1970s and 1980s.

Admittedly, the Russian abortion rate has lowered in recent years, but it still remains the highest in the world with the other former Soviet provinces and republics countries close behind. This can be viewed as a fault on the part of the Soviet government, a reflection of the values of the people, or the result of the Soviet Union's economic situation with the west. However, none of these fully explains the reason why abortion became such a popular method of family planning in the Soviet Union, and why it became ingrained in the Soviet conscious so that, even today, its remains prevalent. During the Khrushchev years, the practice of abortion was brought into the open when the procedure was legalized. By the 1960s, the government sought to reverse the population decline, but the pronatalist policies it pursued failed to encourage couples to have larger families, and the contraceptive market provided few reliable alternatives. When the contraceptive market took off in the 1970s, the government focused so much on increasing the number and size of families that they discouraged contraception and left only abortion as an option. By the 1980s, and after the fall of the Soviet Union, abortion had been the main choice in family planning for over thirty years, and too many women and physicians had grown to distrust contraceptives. This explains why, even today, many Russian women choose abortion when considering family planning options. Abortion has long been and likely will continue to be, the most accessible and reliable method of family planning available, making its prevalence in Russia today almost a matter of circumstance.