The Politics of Population Policy: Abortion in the Soviet Union

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ABSTRACT

Little sense can be made of population policy measures when they are divorced from their broader political context. The development of the Soviet policies on abortion should be viewed as a chain of related events which had their sources in Marxist thought and the Bolshevik revolution of 1917. In the Bolshevik era, social policy was governed by egalitarian concerns and abortion was permitted for any reason. Stalin, led by his economic determinism, decided for a deliteralization in social matters and made abortion very difficult. Khrushchev's 'de-Stalinization' brought a relaxation of many previous restrictions; abortion became legally available, but the official attitude to it remained ambiguous. As time passed, permissive abortion legislation developed in an important element of a tacit social contract, in which the Soviet regime provided various social guarantees, requiring in return loyalty from its citizens. Thus, the character of the Soviet system was no less reflected in policies on abortion than in other policy spheres.

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THE POLITICS OF POPULATION POLICY:
ABORTION IN THE SOVIET UNION

Libor Stloukal*

Introduction

It is the prevailing perspective in most demographic literature that policies relevant to population are easy to analyse since they are explicit and codified. However, little heed has been paid by population scientists to the interface existing between population policies and general political strategies in various social settings. To some extent, past neglect may perhaps be attributed to the uncertainty over whether or not such concerns are legitimate demographic issues. In any case, it seems safe to say that population policies are usually less prominent within the total range of governmental actions than most demographers are inclined to believe.

Past as well as present political practice suggests that population policy measures are hardly ever designed as goals in themselves. Most often, they are implemented to also serve other than demographic purposes and to be the means to broader ends and objectives, presumably the same national objectives as are served by other governmental policies. What are these national objectives? According to van de Kaa (1978), the most fundamental aims pursued by a national government are to maintain the territorial integrity and national sovereignty of the state; and to improve the quality of life, in both a material and a non-material sense, of the society it represents. How these two basic objectives are shaped into primary national objectives of government policy depends on a variety of factors. Government policies may be formulated on the basis of theoretical considerations, or grounded in a particular ideology or religious conviction; or their selection may be the result of the interplay of contending societal forces. Thus they tend to reflect, although not necessarily as faithfully as a mirror, the material and ideological desires and sometimes incompatible views of different groups that exist within a society.

This paper examines the way the relationships between politics and population policy operated in the history of the Soviet Union. To keep the subject within reasonable bounds, the discussion is restricted to abortion, a well known peculiarity of population dynamics in the USSR whose extraordinary demographic dimensions have "no analogy among contemporary developed countries" (Popov, 1991: 369). My approach in treating the issue is necessarily eclectic, and the scope of the essay is further constrained by ignoring some important aspects of the Soviet abortion experience. Largely left aside are, for instance, the statistical data on the numbers and the demographic characteristics of abortion seekers, because much of what can be distilled from the (rather limited) available evidence could be found in the previous

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Population and the Marxist classics

No study of abortion in Eastern Europe can be complete without a reference to Marxist attitudes to population problems. During the years of the communist regime, Marxism was held to be an exhaustive, comprehensive and fully scientific social philosophy; a set of universal values to explain all natural, social, economic, and cultural phenomena. Accordingly, the actions taken by socialist governments in demographic matters were frequently rationalized with Marxist dicta. One would expect, therefore, that Karl Marx (1818-1883) and Friedrich Engels (1820-1895) might conceivably have given a demographic flavour to their central theory of dialectic materialism. In fact, however, Marx and Engels’s writings reveal only limited interest in demographic matters as such, or indeed in demographic evidence of any sort (Petersen, 1988).

The key ideas of Marx’s and Engels’s writings were influenced significantly by German philosophy, British political economy, Darwinism, and French revolutionary and utopian thought of the early nineteenth century. What Marx and Engels found attractive in these intellectual concepts were the idea of inevitable progress and the notion of development as a response to conflict among societal forces. Starting from these premises, they concluded that the fundamental substance of any society was a substratum consisting of economic relationships, including material means of production, and knowledge of how to use the forces of production and exchange within that society. The central element of Marxist teaching is the view of the history of mankind as one of continuous economic struggle between social classes through which less advanced social systems are replaced by more developed ones. The essence of classical Marxism is criticism of the capitalism of the nineteenth century, leading to the conclusion that the emancipation of mankind could not be achieved except by organizing revolution and establishing a socialist society, the first stage of communism. In communism ultimately there would be no private property, therefore no social class, which meant no ruling class, and of course no more need for the tool of the ruling class, the state, which (in Engels’s celebrated phrase) would ‘wither away’. To install a socialist society is the historical task of the socially most responsible group of people, the working class.

Few of the Marxist classics contain material that one could classify as demographic; consequently, it is rather difficult to determine what Marx’s and Engels’s attitudes to key population issues might have been. The founders of Marxism hardly tackled population theory save through sporadic, unsystematic and conveniently flexible pronouncements. The central theme in Marxist population thought stemmed from a polemic against Thomas Robert Malthus (1766-1834) and the population principle expressed in his Essay, which he first published in 1798 and substantially developed in subsequent editions (Petersen, 1979). Marx agreed with Malthus that poverty and unemployment, at least in European society of that time, were the expression of the tendency called overpopulation. But he defined this as an excess of workers relative to opportunities for employment, a condition that he found an inherent characteristic of capitalist economy. To Malthus’s concept that the natural forces always tend to raise population beyond the number that can be supported by economic production (unless kept in check by ‘moral restraint’), Marx counterposed a historical-materialist postulate that patterns of population reproduction derive from the nature of the economic base of a society. The essence of Marx’s objection to Malthus’s theory was expressed in single-sentence form in Das Kapital (1867): Every particular historical mode of production has its own special laws of population, which are historically valid within that particular sphere (Marx, 1867/1976: 784).

By this polemical outburst against Malthus, Marx established what his disciples proclaimed as the only scientific theory of population. However, even if Marx’s main point is taken for granted - that with the development of a capitalist economy there is a long-term trend toward an ever larger number of unemployed - he has virtually nothing to say about what governs population change in primitive, feudal, or socialist societies. Moreover, what Marx termed his law of population for capitalist society is clearly incomplete, since it pertains not to population as such but to the labour force; and while the two are related, they are not identical.

Marx and Engels’s basic concern was, of course, with their present. In picturing the future, both Marx and Engels tended to be generally optimistic, but in detail vague, ambiguous, or even evasive. Observing the onward march of the industrial revolution and socialist movement during the nineteenth century, they had no doubts about the ability of productivity to eventually win the population-production race or about the scientific inevitability of socialism. The overthrow of the current social system was for them both commonplace and a prerequisite to all social betterment; and the solution of the population problems would be so automatic under socialist institutions that they did not find it useful even to sketch in how this would be achieved. Marx and Engels simply believed that socialist civilization would have at its disposal a constantly expanding productive capacity and that demographic processes would be brought under the rational control of a co-operative community. In the spirit of this logic, Engels in one of his letters to the German socialist Kautsky predicted an almost unlimited ability in a socialist society to manage any population problem:

There is of course the abstract possibility that the human population will become so great that limits of growth must be set. But if the communist society should find itself compelled to regulate the reproduction of people in the same way that it will already have regulated the production of things, then precisely this society and this one alone, will be in a position to do so.
without difficulty. ... In any case, it will be up to those people to choose whether, when, how and which means they use. I do not feel obliged to make suggestions or to give you any advice on this. These people will doubtless be able to consider the matter as well as ourselves (Engels, 1881/1983: 200).

As Petersen (1964: 90) observed, by such a comment, Engels avoided having to discuss in any detail either the economic significance of population growth or the moral system of the socialist society he was advocating. Owing to this abstention in Marx's and Engels's writings, it is not altogether clear what their ideas were about the nature of demographically relevant arrangements in the socialist society: the institution of the family, the role of women, or the question of fertility control. Early Marxist visions of the socialist society, as expressed in such well-known documents as the Communist Manifesto (1847), included as a standard feature the emancipation of the woman from household drudgery; but whether she should also be emancipated from bearing many children was not made explicit. Some of the remarks that can be found in Engels's work The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State (1884), the most demographic classical Marxist opus, reveal his disdain for bourgeois marriage and his interest in fully collectivized social organization. Engels pointed to the family and its subjection of women as a symptom and support of the exploitative social order, and a means for preserving private property and passing it on from male to male. This suggests that Engels might have consigned marriage to the category of impermanent supra-structural phenomena:

We are now approaching a social revolution in which the economic foundations of monogamy as they have existed hitherto will disappear... Monogamy arose from the concentration of considerable wealth in the hands of a single individual - a man - and from the need to bequeath this wealth to the children of that man and of no other. ... With the transfer of the means of production into common ownership, the single family ceases to be the economic unit of society. Private housekeeping is transformed into a social industry. The care and education of the children becomes a public affair; society looks after all children alike, whether they are legitimate or not (Engels, 1884/1972: 138-9).

Yet the guidelines of Engels hardly went beyond the vaguest allusions about how in fact the socialist community would accomplish the collectivist upbringing of children after the revolution and relieve women of their special burdens as wives and mothers:

What we can now conjecture about the way in which sexual relations will be ordered after the impending overthrow of capitalist production is mainly of a negative character, limited for the most part to what will disappear. But what will be new? That will be answered when a new generation has grown up... (Engels, 1884/1972: 145).

Neither Marx nor Engels seems to have ever explicitly commented on the issue of birth control and abortion. The only comment on the subject in the classical Marxist Writings are the observations made by Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov, or V. I. Lenin (1870-1924). The well-known text here is Lenin's article 'The worker class and neomalthusianism', published in Moscow in June 1913. In it, Lenin makes a forceful assault on those who would justify legalized abortion in terms of preventing the suffering of the future offspring, and recommends abolition of the Tsarist laws prohibiting abortion and distribution of literature on contraception in Russia:

Such laws are nothing but hypocrisy of the ruling classes. These laws do not heal the ulcers of capitalism, they merely turn them into malignant ulcers that are especially painful for the oppressed masses (Lenin, 1913/1963: 237).

What this passage suggests is that people should be allowed the right of birth control, up to and including abortion. However, elsewhere in the same article it is clearly stated that a growing proletariat is an essential prerequisite for a victorious socialist revolution. Lenin enjoins the working classes not to make use of birth control which he ranks with 'the ugliness of social neomalthusianism'. Instead, workers should rather multiply, go forth to the construction of a new society, and leave fertility regulation to the moribund classes. The prevailing timbre of Lenin's argument is one of a robust trust in the capability of the working class to undertake the heroic tasks that await it, self-consciously contrasted with the conservatism of reactionary forces:

The working class is not perishing, it is growing, becoming stronger, gaining courage, consolidating itself, educating itself and becoming steeld in battle. ... We are already laying the foundation of a new edifice and our children will complete its construction. That is the reason - the only reason - why we are unconditionally the enemies of neomalthusianism, suitably only to unfeeling and egoistic petty-bourgeois couples. ... Freedom for medical propaganda and the protection of the elementary democratic rights of citizens, men and women, are one thing. The social theory of neomalthusianism is quite another. Class-conscious workers will always conduct the most ruthless struggle against attempts to impose that reactionary and cowardly theory on the most progressive and strongest class in modern society, the class that is the best prepared for great changes (Lenin, 1913/1963: 237).

Thus, Lenin seems to make a distinction between the practice or support of birth control and the theory that excess births are the root cause of all working-class misery. Yet, when thought through, such differentiation contains a considerable portion of logical controversy; in fact, Lenin seems to be arguing both for and against abortion prohibition. Given this strange combination of attitudes, it is difficult to say what policy measures in the area of abortion legislation Lenin might have felt necessary. Apparently, all social problems appeared to Lenin to be caused simply by the capitalist economic system; he believed that once such conditions were removed
and replaced by socialist production and planning, rational behaviour and commonsense would prevent any social difficulties.

In short, the classical Marxist texts contain no more than a fragment of a theory of population change, a blueprint in which few of the elements are truly demographic. What Marx and Engels formulated and Lenin developed was a set of principles which they regarded as governing population and its economic and, to a lesser extent, social correlates. Their basic orientation was clearly against laissez-faire norms of liberal capitalism and toward radical social reorganization, but their outline of the population situation in a future socialist society was in many points unclear, to say the least. As with many key assertions in Marxist writings, the way in which population issues were treated remained largely open to differing interpretations. As a consequence, those who claimed to be the heirs of Marx, Engels, and Lenin in theory and policymaking had virtually no clear guidelines within which to shape a specifically socialist population policy. This was one of the reasons for the fluctuations in actual population policies in countries where Marxist theory became the ideological foundation of social reconstruction. Moreover, dogmatic interpretations of Marx's loose position on the subject of population 'laws' have tended to inhibit systematic treatment of demographic theory by later Marxist writers.

Revolutionary law and order: 1917-1935

The Soviet attitude to the problem of abortion, as to most other social issues, had a twofold origin. Its sources, not completely complementary to each other, were Marxist ideology, and the conditions of Tsarist Russia on the eve of the twentieth century. At the close of the Tsarist era, Russia was a semi-feudal empire, rather than a modern capitalist state, which lagged considerably behind the other industrializing countries of Europe in all aspects of economic and cultural life. During the last years of its existence, Tsarism gradually developed a system of 'autocracy tempered frustratingly with grudging reform, of retrograde social policy, and of wasteful and demoralizing foreign adventures' (Juviler, 1976: 172). The Russian economy remained predominantly agrarian, primarily dependent on agriculture at the pre-scientific and pre-mechanical level. Industrial development was slow and irregular, beset by social and political upheavals. The social situation of the country was characterized by widespread poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, female subordination, slave-like conditions of workers and peasants, and related social problems (Lorimer, 1946).

Religion played an important role in pre-revolutionary Russia and many public policies, including those on matrimonial and family matters, were in the hands of the Russian Orthodox Church. In line with church dogma, all abortions were regarded as murder under Tsarist penal law, and both the physician and the woman involved were subject to imprisonment for up to ten years and loss of all civil rights (Avdeev, 1989; Popov, 1993). Despite this, a number of observers at that time reported that clandestine abortion was just as much of a mass-phenomenon in Russia as elsewhere.2

During the first years after the revolution every possible effort was made to free individuals from the claims of the family. To achieve this goal, the government relied principally on two groups of measures: first, it sought to provide communal facilities for the upbringing of children, as well as for eating, cooking and other household chores; second, it promulgated the pertinent legislation. During the first nine years of Soviet rule, the two full family codes (dated October 17, 1918, and November 19, 1926) plus a number of separate decrees gradually developed a complete and generally consistent family policy.3 All legal inequalities between the sexes were abolished. De facto marriage and divorce, and equal status of children born both in and out of wedlock, were legally implemented in 1917 and 1918. Religious marriage was no longer recognized by law, and there seems to have been an official effort to reduce even the civil registration of marriages to a formality of no importance. Simultaneously, divorce became inexpensive and easily obtainable. As one Western historian summarized the situation, 'in the first decade or so after the Revolution it was rather generally though vaguely agreed that the family was not worth much as an institution and would eventually disappear' (Geiger, 1968: 43). Beyond question, the Bolsheviks set in motion a revolution that aroused the imagination of leftists throughout the world.

While the regime actively sought to weaken family ties, it was not much concerned with sexuality. The right of parents to decide for themselves the number of their

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2 See Lawson, 1927; Field, 1932; Halle, 1933; Schlesinger, 1949.
3 For details about the Bolshevik policies related to the family, see Lorimer, 1946, 1958; Schlesinger, 1949; Mace and Mace, 1963; Petersen, 1964; Bronfenbrenner, 1968; Juviler 1978; Holt, 1980.
children was not established as a Soviet norm. In the first days after the October Revolution penalties for abortions were cancelled in practice, but not by law (Savage, 1988). Opinion on the matter within the Party was divided, but in the dominant official view birth control was 'a bourgeois panacea for social ills, which could have no place in a socialist society' (Petersen, 1964: 106). The Tsarist prohibition of abortion remained in force until 1920, through the period when the major social and political upheavals, revolution, Civil War and foreign intervention, famine and epidemics took place. The daily conditions of Soviet Russia during those years were probably harder than under the Tsarist regime. The economy was ruined, inflation was astronomical; the rural economy in particular collapsed into a state of deep backwardness (Hughes and Welfare, 1990). One of the results of this intense period of social crisis was a large number of homeless children, and there is little doubt that parental inability to support children represented one of the gravest social problems of those days (Stoelen, 1988). Presumably, under those circumstances, illegal abortion became an even more common mode of limiting family size. For instance, incomplete data for 1919 on the situation in Moscow and Petrograd indicate a ratio of about three abortions to ten births (Knurr, 1977). Many of those operations are believed to have been performed by unskilled quacks under primitive conditions, and associated with a high rate of complications and fatal consequences. Observations at the time indicated that up to 50 per cent of women resorting to abortions became infected in the course of the operation, and as many as 4 per cent of these women died as a result (WHO, 1971).

Apparently, it was the feeling that legislative punishment was useless and only drove the abortion practices underground that prompted the government to adopt relevant measures. In 1919, a council of medical experts, legal experts and members of women's organizations was established to propose transformation of abortion legislation. On November 18, 1920, these efforts culminated in a substantial legal change: by a decree jointly issued by the Commissariats of Health and Justice, abortion was made available upon the request of a woman during the initial trimester of pregnancy. In the official commentary, particulars and aims of the new legislation were set out as follows:

(1) To permit such operations to be made freely and without any charge in Soviet hospitals, where conditions are assured of minimizing the harm of the operation;
(2) To absolutely forbid anyone but a doctor to carry out this operation;
(3) Any nurse or midwife found guilty of making such an operation will be deprived of the right to practice, and tried by a People's Court;
(4) A doctor carrying out an abortion in his private practice with mercenary aims will be called to account by a People's Court (quoted in Schlesinger, 1949: 44).

It must be noted, however, that the liberalization of 1920 was from its beginning intended to be only a temporary measure. To quote the text of the abortion decree, the new abortion law was presented as an 'evil' necessitated by the fact that 'the moral

survivals of the past and the difficult economic conditions of the present still compel many women to resort to [abortion]' (Schlesinger, 1949: 44). The act legalizing abortion argued not in terms of woman's right to choose, but in terms of the ability of the society to provide for all children. While the country was so poor women were to be offered the opportunity of abortion, but in the future, or so the law seemed to imply, the opportunity could be withdrawn. One of the most explicit comments on the new abortion legislation that could be coaxed from the propagandist writings of that time was made by Alexandra Kollontai (1873-1952), a leading figure in the women's movement in the early years of Soviet regime and an official of the Soviet government. In her speech at the Sverdlov University in 1921 she asked:

What is the reasoning behind this new attitude [to abortion]? Russia, after all, suffers not from an overproduction of living labour but rather from a lack of it. Russia is thinly, not densely populated. Every unit of labour power is precious. Why then have we declared abortion to be no longer a criminal offence? ... Abortion exists and flourishes everywhere, and no laws or punitive measures have succeeded in rooting it out. A way round the law is always found. But 'secret help' only cripples women; they become a burden on the labour government, and the size of the labour force is reduced. Abortion, when carried out under proper medical conditions, is less harmful and dangerous, and the woman can get back to work quicker. Soviet power realises that the need for abortion will only disappear on the one hand when Russia has a broad and developed network of institutions protecting motherhood and providing social education, and on the other hand when women understand that childbirth is a social obligation; Soviet power has therefore allowed abortion to be performed openly and in clinical conditions (quoted in Holt, 1977: 148-149; italics in original).

What this statement reveals is that even the Soviet feminists intelligentsia, or at least an important part of it, perceived fertility control to be anti-socialist. In the early years of the Soviet era it was assumed that, with the development of socialism and the improvement of social conditions for women and children, the problem of unwanted pregnancy would successively decrease and the demand for abortions would gradually disappear. This was a characteristic feature of the Soviet utopianism of the 1920s: there was a sense that all problems were soon going to work themselves out, so there was no need for elaborate social policy. It seems clear that no populationist considerations entered into the initial social policies of the Soviet regime.

Family revitalized: 1936-1955

Beginning with the middle-1920s, the Soviet government gradually reversed its original permissiveness and began to show a more conservative approach to family affairs. Behind this reversal was a realization that the main causes of social problems existing in the Soviet state were not only the so-called petty-bourgeois remnants or external catastrophes such as wars or famines, but also factors operating within
Soviet society itself. Disintegration of the family which the revolution had caused and even encouraged (without, however, offering anything to replace it) was apparently identified as one of these factors. The first signal of discontent with developments in family matters came still from Lenin, shortly before his death in 1924, when he was urging more discipline and less personal freedom as proper revolutionary attitudes. German socialist and feminist Klara Zetkin quotes Lenin as saying:

In the conditions created by the war and the revolution the old ideological values disappeared or lost their binding force. The new values are crystallising slowly, in struggle. In the relations between man and man, man and woman, feeling and thoughts are becoming revolutionised. ... Although I am nothing but a gloomy ascetic, the so-called 'new sexual life' of the youth - and sometimes of the old - often seems to me to be purely bourgeois, an extension of bourgeois brothels. That has nothing whatever in common with freedom of love as we Communists understand it. ... The revolution demands concentration, increase of forces. From the masses, from individuals. It cannot tolerate organic conditions... If harmful tendencies are appearing, creeping over from bourgeois society into the world of revolution - as the roots of many weeds spread - it is better to combat them early (quoted in Zetkin, 1929: 56-57 and 60).

In 1924, only a few months after Lenin's conversation with Zetkin, new regulations were published introducing a fee for abortion as a deterrent, although it was often waived in cases where the woman could not pay. At the same time, special commissions were established to control the number of free of charge procedures (Avdeev, 1989).

Yet the years between 1921 and 1928 were still years of relative prosperity, the result of Lenin's New Economic Policy (NEP) which, in fact, temporarily returned to private ownership and re-established capitalism and free trade (Nove, 1989). Lenin's death in January 1924 became an important moment in the Soviet history, since it brought to the fore the question of succession and future orientation of the Soviet polity. Finally, it was Joseph Stalin (1879-1953) who had sufficiently consolidated his support to be able to seize power. Stalin brought together a mix of Marxist theory, Leninist authoritarianism, traditions of Tsarist absolutism, and his own personality. Within a few years, he had eliminated all opponents, gained total power over the Communist Party (which meant over the Soviet Union), and imposed a harsh one-person rule that ultimately became known as a 'cult of personality'.

As Stalin surveyed the state of the country and the Party over which he now held sway, he became convinced that precious time had been wasted in fruitless daydreams. Abandoning Lenin's dream of world revolution and proclaiming the end of the NEP, Stalin was concentrated on a single objective: to build socialism in the Soviet Union. By the end of the 1920s, the whole country embarked on a massive program of forced industrialization and collectivization of agriculture based on a series of five-year plans. The First Five-Year Plan (1928-1932) laid down targets for the production of everything necessary for an advanced economy. The main goals were electrification and the production of steel and coal, which meant the economic subordination of light industry and communal services to heavy industry. Such economic advances could come only at a tremendous price. In an effort to mobilize and direct the populace, Stalin sponsored an era of political repression that resulted in a loss of individual liberty. The Plan entailed a policy of forced dislocation of people from the country to the cities and industrial centres. To increase labour discipline and overall productivity, an escalating succession of restrictive laws and a chain of limitations in welfare policies were used. The years that followed the promulgation of the Plan were marked by a stress on productivity and by an unprecedented harsh attitude towards those who did not participate. In a word, Stalin's policies gave priority to ends, not means; to economic, not social, efficiency.

It is a commonly accepted fact that industrialization, urbanization and the movement of populations to the cities lead in most societies, at least in initial stages of these processes, to a decrease in the birth rate. The Soviet Union cannot have escaped this phenomenon. Precise figures were never published, but the estimates made by different demographers consistently indicate a substantial decline in Soviet birth rates during the late 1920s and early 1930s (Table 1). Although plausible data on abortion are not available, it may be assumed that the decline in birth rates coincided with an increased resort to abortion, particularly in the period of acute decline in living standards that accompanied the first wave of collectivization and intense effort at rapid industrialization (Avdeev, 1989). There is also some evidence that high numbers of applications for abortion had raised serious difficulties in hospital accommodation (Field, 1956; Hyde, 1970). Sooner or later, it must have become apparent to the regime that its current liberal family legislation on divorce, alimony and abortion encouraged what were called 'frivolous attitudes toward the family and family obligations' (Juviior, 1967: 32). People living in such an environment, it was reasoned, would hardly become the stable, hard-working and conscientious workers required for an industrialized society. Fertility decline and related social phenomena were considered even more alarming in view of the worsening international situation and the growing possibility of war. This was why during the 1930s, the previous legislative innovations in the sphere of the family were completely reversed.

In the late 1920s and early 1930s access to abortion was gradually restricted. A number of political and medical exceptions were introduced to curtail the use of legal abortion services; for example, Communist Party members were de facto denied access to legal abortion (Avdeev, 1989). Beginning in 1933, a new regulation was issued, forbidding abortions for first pregnancies, restricting the time limit to the first three months after conception with a minimum of six months between operations, and prescribing curetage without anaesthetic as the only method of pregnancy termination (Mace and Mace, 1963).

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4 For more details about Stalinist social policies, see Lorrain, 1958; Petersen, 1964; Bronfenbrenner, 1968; Juviior, 1976; Lewis, 1987.
In May 1936 a draft law was formulated that, among other things, prohibited abortion and provided that not only the doctor but also the woman having an abortion would be punished. The state authorities, in an exceptional moment of democraticism, invited the Soviet public to discuss the new proposal. The public deemed the section prohibiting abortion to be the central issue. Although a number of statements published promptly in the Soviet press reflected the prevailing feeling, particularly among women, that couples should have the right to determine the number of their children, popular debate on abortion was suddenly cut off. The propagandist journal Pod znamenem marxisma (Under the Flag of Marxism) published a statement which signalled that the government had already decided on an energetic course against abortions:

The principal motives for abortion have been liquidated in our socialist State.... Therefore, mass abortions resorted to for egotistic reasons are not to be tolerated. The Soviet State cannot countenance the fact that tens of thousands of women ruin their health and delay the growth of a new generation for socialist society (quoted in Schlesinger, 1949: 310).

The new legislation, practically unchanged from the original draft, was named ‘Decree on the prohibition of abortions’, and published on June 27, 1936 together with a large commentary (Schlesinger, 1949: 269-272). It stated that owing to the gigantic growth of material well-being in the USSR, and taking into consideration the high political and cultural level of the Soviet people, it was ‘possible seriously to organize the struggle against abortions by prohibitive laws as well as by other means’ (Schlesinger, 1949: 270). The 1920 liberal law was justified as a measure related merely to the social chaos of the civil war period between 1917 and 1920. Now, emphasis had to be placed on protecting the health of Soviet women against injuries resulting from abortions, as revealed by medical evidence that was previously neglected. Changes in the availability of abortion were abrupt. Abortions were forbidden except in the case of narrowly defined medical indications under which the continuation of pregnancy endangered the life or threatened serious injury to the health of the pregnant woman, or if there were the likelihood of hereditary disease. A doctor performing an illegal abortion was liable to imprisonment for up to two years, the sentence rising to three years for unqualified persons. A woman undergoing such an abortion was to be reprimanded for the first offence and fined for a second offence. No action was taken against contraception, but nothing further was done to promote its acceptance. At this time also, family allowances were initiated for parents with seven or more children, as well as several other measures promoting natality and discouraging the dissolution of families.

Thus, the Soviet ideology entirely abandoned its earlier conception that woman’s primary function, like that of man, is social activity, and that bearing children should

5 For examples of public opinion, see Schlesinger, 1949; Field, 1956; Mace and Mace, 1963: Holt, 1960.

6 For more details about Soviet pronatalist policies of the mid-1930s, see Lorimer, 1946, 1958; Heer and Bryden, 1967; Madison, 1968; DiMaio, 1981.

be accessory to this function. The status of the family was changed from that of a barely tolerated ‘survival of the past’ to that of an indispensable primary cell in Soviet society. As long as it was not possible for the state to accept the social disorganization reflected by the emerging patterns in demographic behaviour, the equalitarian and antistatist elements of Marxist ideology had to give way. Marxism in this sphere (as in others) became little more than a collection of quotations, useful only in justifying current policies. Though women were not encouraged to abandon their jobs for the home, a development which neither they themselves nor the state could afford, traditional sex roles within the family were by and large reasserted. Concurrently with the legislative developments there occurred a marked shift in the overall propaganda approach towards sex and family matters. Those in power now placed emphasis in their speeches on the glorious achievement of the Soviet people in building a socialist society; the increase of population in the Soviet Union contrasted with the decadence of capitalist nations; and the equality of women in all matters, with special emphasis on their share in reproductive labour and on the glory of motherhood in the Soviet Union. What sort of attitudes the official propaganda praised may be deduced from an article published in the women's journal Rabotnitsa (Working Woman):

We must make clear from the very beginning that the application of any means preventing pregnancy is abnormal. The healthy woman must be a mother, for only maternity brings the full development of her physical and spiritual strength. In other words, the result of sexual intercourse must be conception (quoted in Holt, 1980: 101; italics in original).

The effects of changes to the legislation on abortion were dramatic. The immediate result of the virtual prohibition of abortion was a widespread confusion, since many women came as usual to the hospitals only to be turned away (Mace and Mace, 1963). It can easily be surmised that the prohibition did not remove the popular demand for abortion as such, but rather sent abortion practices underground. There is some evidence that cases violating the legal provisions were frequent, and resulted often in grave health complications, since doctors and backdoor abortionists were under great pressure on the part of the population to perform abortions illegally. The authors of the Great Soviet Encyclopaedia (1973, vol. 1: 26) write:

The number of abortions in the country [the Soviet Union] in 1937 as compared with 1935 fell by a factor of more than three, but in subsequent years the number of abortions began to rise again, mainly as a result of nonhospital abortions, which accounted for 80 to 90 per cent of the total.

Field (1956: 425) quotes a Russian emigré, a gynaecologist who in the 1930s had worked in Leningrad, as saying that there was a constant stream of infections caused by unsterile abortions:

... about 70 per cent of the women in our department were there because of complications following botched up abortions. Thus, the government's
intention to increase the birth rate backfired [since] it had planned on an increase in births. Beds reserved for maternity cases had been increased, while those reserved for gynaecology had been decreased; we had so many of these cases we didn't know what to do with them. And the mortality was very high...

Notwithstanding the demand for abortion, the sanctions for those who violated the law remained severe. One author reported that doctors were obliged to report to the authorities women with complications after illegal abortion, and even to refuse to treat them unless they revealed who had performed the abortion (Chalidze, 1977). A Procurator's Instruction of November, 1940 on the 'War on criminal abortion' required the doctor suspecting abortion to keep detailed records, especially concerning who the woman was and how she came to the hospital or clinic, and to preserve all evidence, including the foetus (Savage, 1988).

Demographically speaking, the main outcome following the abortion law of 1936 was a sharp change in the Soviet birth rate. Although it may be assumed that reasonably accurate information on the population of the Soviet Union was available to Stalin's government at that time, no data on vital events were published. A series of available estimates indicates an increase in the birth rate from roughly 28 births per 1,000 population in 1935 to 32 in 1936, and 38 in 1937; thus, in the USSR as a whole, 1937 birth rate was almost 20 per cent higher than that of 1936 (Table 1). In the cities of European Russia, the impact on the number of births was even more dramatic. According to Heer (1968: 231), the number of births in Moscow in 1937 increased by 92 per cent over the 1936 figure, in Leningrad by 69 per cent, in Minsk by 39 per cent, and in Baku by 39 per cent. Yet these effects were only short-lived. With the onset of the Second World War, fertility dropped further, and the 1940 birthrate of 31 births per 1,000 population declined below that of 1936, the year abortion restrictions were implemented.

The tendency towards strengthening the 'socialist family' continued in subsequent decades and policy measures promulgated during the late 1930s, by means of which the state increased assistance to expectant mothers and provided family allowances for third and subsequent children on a graduated basis (Hyde, 1970; Urlanis, 1970). The climactic point in the Stalinist population policy was the 'costly, elaborate and peculiar system of financial and honorific awards to mothers' (Lorimer, 1958: 223) implemented in 1944 after the Nazi invasion had damaged the Soviet populace. In a response to this calamity, a complicated system of orders and medals for mothers of large families was set up, together with new family legislation which deprived de facto marriage of its legal recognition, placed serious obstacles in the way of divorce, abolished alimony, and extended family allowances to third and subsequent children. That the government intended to change reproductive behaviour by changing women's underlying socioeconomic conditions follows from the selectivity and focus of that legislation: it glorified motherhood, taxed persons without families, and provided special aid to unmarried mothers and mothers with many children. The regime justified the new policies in terms of social welfare and help to families whose fathers had died in the war. However, it was apparently also expected that these measures would stabilize the hierarchy of social relations and increase the nation's human resources. It may be inferred that these steps, apart from their demographic nature, were taken with a clear political intent. During Stalin's rule, the power of the Soviet regime became largely dependent on social solidarity, hierarchical relationships, and centralized authority. Thus, a decent family became regarded as a microcosm of the socialist system, indeed as guarantee of the fixity of the Soviet order. The pronatalist program was continued for a few years, but in November 1947 it was announced that the schedule of payments would be cut in half beginning on January 1 of the following year (Heer and Bryden, 1967). Apparently, after the postwar recovery, it was no longer deemed expedient to make such a heavy investment in increasing manpower, and social policies accordingly moved from compelling motherhood toward only encouraging it.

Abortion relegalized: 1955 and later

During the Second World War, Soviet society was confronted with a deep demographic crisis. Vast distance and limited resources kept many men from their wives over long periods of service without leave. Women were labouring long hours, and shortages of food, clothing, and housing were severe. It has been estimated that at least 20 million more persons died than would have died in peacetime and at least 20 million babies were not born who might have been born if the nation had not been at war. The psychological damage caused to Soviet citizens and the impact of the number of married and injured have never been effectively calculated. The war had also profoundly adverse affects on family life, especially by increasing the numbers of illegitimate and homeless children and by creating an unbalanced sex ratio. However great the population losses might have been, the war-induced sex imbalance, resulting in women occupying positions that would otherwise have been held by men, might have been as important as ideology for understanding the logic of post-war demographic policy-making in the Soviet Union.

Given the conditions of war, it is perhaps not surprising that the issue of abortion received little attention from the government. However, notwithstanding the legal prohibition implemented in 1936, Soviet women apparently continued to choose abortion. Although no statistics are available to document the extent of abortion in precise figures, there is no reason to disbelieve accounts in Soviet demographic literature of the abortion situation in the early 1950s:

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7 For more information about the 1944 pronatalist policy package, see Heer and Bryden, 1967; Madison, 1968; Juviler, 1978.
8 For estimates of Soviet population losses caused by the War, see Lorimer, 1946; Sauvy, 1956; Heer, 1968.
9 Juviler (1967) estimated that, at the end of the war, for every two men there were three women between the ages of 20 and 39 years. In 1950, the Soviet population as a whole consisted of 100.1 million women and only 78.4 million men (GOSKOMSTAT, 1988).
The planned goal of the [1936] Decree was not attained because the growth of women’s education, their wide inclusion into production, the growth of the general well-being of the population, and the correspondingly higher demands produced the actual preconditions for lowering the number of children in the family. As a result, the number of abortions performed outside hospitals, mainly criminal, began to grow intensively, and by 1954 the general number of abortions attained the level existing before the 1936 legislation (Shliindman and Zvirdinsh, 1973: 143).

The first official indication that abortions did not cease in the USSR after the 1936 ban was a decree dated August 4, 1954 absolving women from legal liability should they obtain illicit abortions (Field, 1956). Although the repeal appeared without comment or discussion, the aim apparently was to make it easier for women who had abortions to report eventual complications and to reveal the illegal practitioners. Following the 1954 decree, the Soviet press began to publicize criminal abortion cases, perhaps as an attempt to impress upon women the criminality of abortion and diminish their use of it (Savage, 1988). Evidently this did not have the desired effect, because some months later the government again took up the problem of illegal abortion, this time in a more energetic way.

On November 23, 1955 a new decree entitled 'On the annulment of the prohibition of abortions' was passed by the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet (Field, 1956). In its main feature, this measure was identical to the one promulgated in 1920: it permitted the performance of abortion upon request during the first three months of pregnancy; stipulated that it must be done by qualified personnel in medical installations in accordance with instructions issued by the Ministry of Health of the USSR; and confirmed that operations performed outside hospitals, by persons without medical training, or as businesses remained criminal offences. After the twelfth week of pregnancy abortion was permitted only for medical reasons which endangered the mother’s life or health, or for eugenic reasons (genetic defects, hereditary diseases, etc.). The regulation also specified that abortion could not be legally performed less than six months after a previous abortion. The cost of abortion was assessed at five rubles, a low sum which certainly did not cover all expenses related to the procedure, and the operation was evaluated as qualifying patients for up to ten days of unpaid leave. Thus, abortion on non-medical grounds became the only procedure in the Soviet system for which the state did not pay the woman’s medical expenses and the place of work did not pay her while on leave from work (Savage, 1988). In the brief commentary preceding the decree it was noted that it was the advance in Soviet social conscience and cultural level that permitted the lifting of the abortion restriction. Prevention of the health hazard created by illegal abortions and the recognition of a woman’s right to decide freely about motherhood were declared the main intentions of the new decree; a reason much the same as that used in conjunction with the prohibition of 1936. And just as in 1920, the liberalization of abortion was accompanied by special provisions for the care of pregnant women and mothers (Callahan, 1970).

What the new abortion policy move seemed to suggest is that the Soviet leadership realized the failure of legal proscription to eradicate the practice of abortion, and the impracticability of prohibiting something for which there was much popular demand in the USSR. The new decree made it at least possible to bring abortions under the control of state institutions. It was hoped that education and greater use of contraception would curb the abortion rate. To this purpose, Article 66 of the Law on Public Health stipulated that the possible harm of abortion should be explained to mothers requesting it, and that efforts were to be made to discourage women from terminating first pregnancies; however, if a pregnant woman persisted in her request, her application must be approved (WHO, 1971). Fear that the new legislation might again undermine the stability of Soviet families is suggested by the fact that little publicity was given to the new measure in the public media (Field, 1956; David, 1974).

What made the new abortion legislation more interesting was its conspicuous inconsistency with the general view of Soviet officials of that time on demographic matters. Soviet literature of the 1940s and 1950s is full of frenetic denunciations of the advocacy of planned parenthood, and even observers accustomed to 'the scrurrillity of Bolshevism polemics' were able to find 'the outrageous distortions and bizarre associations [in these writings] something of a new departure' (Petersen, 1964: 113). Until the late 1950s, the Soviets interpreted the law of population for socialism to mandate rapid population growth and high birth rates. In the world generally, rapid population growth was believed to increase political and economic instability, thus producing a climate ripe for proletarian revolution; in the USSR, relatively high birth rates were considered proof of the superiority of communism (Cox, 1976; VonFrank, 1984). A quotation from a public speech delivered in January 1955 by Stalin’s successor N.S. Khrushchev (1894-1971) offers a typical example of the official attitude; it addresses many demographic topics but concentrates on the single one that, in Khrushchev’s view, divided the East from the West:

Bourgeois ideology invented many cannibalistic theories, among them the theory of over-population. Their concern is to cut down the birth rate, reduce the rate of population increase. It is quite different with us, comrades. If about 100 million people were added to our 200 million, even that would not be enough. Under socialism the raising of the birth rate is regarded not only as a matter of providing greater labour power. The socialist state also looks at the matter from the viewpoint of the nation’s future (quoted in Heer, 1965: 77).

How was it possible that a communist government headed by a person with such a view approved a permissive abortion law? It is true that the lifting of the abortion ban happened to coincide with an increase in numbers of persons of childbearing age, because those born in 1936, the first year of Stalin’s pronatalist policy, reached 19 years of age in 1955. Yet it seems doubtful that the probable increase in the numbers of births was a circumstance of major importance. The search for the conditions that produced the decision of 1956 would probably not be complete without speculation...
about the coincidence of the legalization of abortion with the liberal political orientation which Khrushchev's government took after Stalin's death in 1953. Stalin's sudden passing from the scene released in Soviet politics shock and uncertainty. There was considerable maneuvering for power after 1953 and it took some time before the new leadership consolidated its authority. Genuinely committed to leading his country away from the despotism of Stalin, Khrushchev launched a policy of liberalization, which is generally referred to under the rubric of 'de-Stalinization'. As a part of the de-Stalinization program, a less politicized approach to social problems became possible. Given these circumstances, the reinstatement of an earlier Leninist norm concerning abortion may be interpreted as a gesture by which the new and politically still shaky administration wanted to demonstrate that it was more responsive than Stalin had been to public opinion and popular welfare. As Azrael (1975: 100) explained in his review of Khrushchev's policies:

Given the nontransferability of Stalin's charisma, any Communist in this [Khrushchev's] position would have found it expedient to turn to the patriotic sources for authority, and to sponsor reforms which could be touted as historic breakthroughs. Furthermore, any such successor whose investiture had become the occasion for an expose of Stalin, and hence for the outbreak of a grave domestic and international legitimacy crisis, would probably have been especially eager to demonstrate the 'purity' of his Leninism and the direct continuity between his policies and those of the Founding Father.

Among those who followed the demographic policies of the Soviet Union, the new Soviet abortion law evoked a feeling 'as if the regime, with a shrug of shoulders, chose what seemed to be the lesser of two evils' (Mace and Mace, 1963: 230). In the West, the law was received with surprise and it was predicted that the Soviet government, at any time, might change its mind and prohibit abortions again (Field, 1956). This, however, never happened, and during the ensuing years the fairly permissive abortion system became one of the firmly established features of Soviet social policy. For example, in the late 1960s and early 1970s Soviet statesmen began to consider the low rate of population growth an important political issue, Soviet demographers proposed various political actions to correct the unfavourable population trends and raise the national birth rate, but nobody dared to seriously discuss changes in abortion legislation. We simply cannot agree with some suggestions, such as a proposal to prohibit abortion ...; wrote a leading social scientist in his contribution to the debate on family policy in those days, apparently echoing the problematic effects of the 1936 Soviet abortion prohibition (Valentei, 1971: 28). This pragmatic argument was probably closely associated with the legal one: obviously, it was felt that the evasion on a large scale of the 1936-55 restrictive Act, visible in the form of growing numbers of illegal abortions, undermined respect for the socialist law. The noncoercive approach to shaping family choices prevailed also in the 1981 policy reform, the last of the direct pronatalist Soviet policies which, on a regionally differentiated basis, increased family grants, extended maternity leave, and raised monthly allowances, but left intact all the provisions of the liberal abortion legislation.¹⁰

Even though Soviet abortion policy after 1955 moved closer to some compromise between the ideal and the practical, closer to a reflection of public attitudes, Soviet family legislation and medical policy remained inconsistent. For instance, the Fundamentals of Public Health Legislation of the USSR, issued in 1969, entitled the woman to decide whether she would have a child, thus enforcing the statement in the preamble of the abortion law of 1955. A woman, it was said, should feel neither material need nor shame when deciding on motherhood in Soviet society (Juvelier, 1978). On the other hand, 1968 Soviet legislation on marriage and the family enjoined the state to protect and encourage motherhood (Smirnov, 1983). In practice this meant that the state neither paid for a woman's abortion nor allowed doctors to treat her legal abortion at a state hospital as a professional confidence. Not only did the hospital officials know the purpose of a woman's visit; her employer would also know that she had had an abortion because, in order to explain her absence from work, the woman had to show her supervisor a certificate of disability from the hospital specifying the reason for her visit (Chalidze, 1977). Criminal abortions, defined as procedures performed outside the hospital or by an operator who did not meet the required standards of medical education, were punishable by up to eight years in a labour camp, but illegal abortionists were often tolerated by the legal authorities or given only mild penalties (Popov, 1993). Consequently, abortions were frequently performed illegally by people ranging from skilled doctors to quacks, for various fees and under many levels of medical care (Ryan, 1987). Finally, to reduce the apparently still high levels of unsafe illegal abortion, the Ministry of Health decided in December 1987 on a step that was rather exceptional in a global perspective: it published an order that permitted the performance of abortion up to the 29th week of pregnancy on juridical, genetic, or broad medical grounds, and, after authorization by a commission of local physicians, even on request (USSR, 1987).

Badly neglected was the area of contraceptive services (Desfosses, 1981; Popov, 1991, 1993). Decades after the realignment of abortions, Soviet medical authorities were still not able to provide widely available contraception. Supplies of contraceptives, like most Soviet consumer goods, were subject to perennial shortage and distribution problems. Moreover, modern forms of contraception were never promoted by the Soviet medical propaganda. Thus, the intra-uterine device was described in a 1958 Soviet medical handbook as unconditionally harmful, and a 1963 volume stated that its use must be forbidden. In 1962 the Ministry of Public Health published an order 'On measures to be taken to fight against abortion', but in 1974 the same Ministry published a letter of instruction 'On the side-effects and complications of oral contraceptive use' that de facto prohibited use of the pill for contraceptive purposes. The policy of discouraging the use of contraception was also incorporated in the law 'On measures of improving state financial assistance to women with

children' enacted by the Presidium of the Supreme Council of the USSR in September 1981. In the 1980s, the most significant innovations of Soviet medical policy were the introduction of new technology for safe, early abortion on an outpatient basis and the provision of post-coital contraceptive services; preventive family planning strategies, however, were hardly introduced.

Only towards the close of the pre-Gorbachev era did social problems related to sex and reproduction become more visible; consequently, the 'pros' and 'cons' of Soviet abortion legislation were echoed more openly in the popular press. The high abortion rate was implicated in the problem of rising infant mortality. Reducing the amount of abortion (without, however, suggesting any restriction) came to be frequently presented as an important prerequisite for an improvement of the country's demographic situation, by which was meant presumably an increase in the birth rate.

B. Uurlania, a distinguished Soviet demographer, may have been reflecting some official thinking along these lines in his article of December 1980 which deplored abortion not only as a health hazard but also as a lost conception:

At present, all women in our country are allowed to have abortions - as long as the necessary conditions are met, of course (as regards the length of the pregnancy, how long it has been since a previous abortion, etc.). No medical statements are required. Only one thing is required - that the woman wants it. Yes, the right to have an abortion is an important right. Every woman may exercise it. But I want to emphasize: exercise it, not abuse it. After all, this operation, which can appear harmless only to the uninformed, is fraught with serious consequences. First of all, the artificial termination of pregnancy affects the woman's health. Secondly, in a good many cases the woman who has an abortion completely loses the ability to become a mother. ... In the third place, we must not forget about the economic loss to the country: even if the operation goes well, the woman is away from the workplace for some time... Finally, abortions are a blow to the economy and to the future labor resources. ... Of course, we cannot compel married couples to have the number of children that the country's population has to have if it is to grow. We merely have to create the conditions, both moral and material, in which the family itself will want a second child, and then a third. ... And if the woman still doesn't want to have any more children? ... In these cases, major responsibility will fall to the family services..., to the family counselling centres and to the psychologists and sexologists.... Their job is not to impose a ban, not to try to persuade her, but simply to have a heart-to-heart talk, to explain the possible consequences of a mistake, to help her realize the importance of the step she wants to take.... Only when the specialist sees that all possibilities have been exhausted should he say: 'All right, you can exercise your right' (Uurlania, 1981: 10-11; italics in original).

Finally, abortion came to be labelled a social problem or, in the official terminology, a phenomenon alien to socialism. In 1983, after many years of an almost total reticence by Soviet politicians in the matter of abortion, this view was openly expressed by E. Shevardnadze, then a member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, in a speech delivered at a meeting of the Party officials:

... reluctance to have a child is more often than not based on thoughtlessness and egoism. Certain medical practitioners not only fail to prevent such situations but flagrantly violate the law and engage in this dubious practice at home. Moreover, even if everything is done according to the rules, it's no different, comrades - there is an undesirable moral coloring in it. We must exercise the utmost caution. When this becomes a mass phenomenon, to a certain extent it assumes - and I'm not afraid to say these words - an antistate, antisocial nature, and one should combat this evil - tactfully, of course, but persistently (Shevardnadze, 1984: 4).

These statements describe well the complex and not completely consistent arguments to which the issue of abortion law gave rise in the Soviet literature. They indicate that, as a practical matter, Soviet women were not entirely free in obtaining legal abortions. The tension between legality and official immorality demonstrated that individual rights with respect to abortion were seen exclusively as legal rights granted by the state, not human or natural rights. Expediency, pure pragmatism, and practicality, rather than the ideal of a good society, lay behind the practice of welfare and social security. After all, for the regime the best guarantee of a disciplined and reasonably healthy labour force was to have a sound family structure in which all would find security and a basic living standard. In what Fukuyama (1992: 169) aptly calls 'a Faustian bargain', the Soviet regime offered substantial social provisions and guarantees, requiring in return that nobody became involved in any action against the current order. And in accepting this bargain, people living under this regime became not just the regime's victims, but its beneficiaries and perpetrators as well. Durkheim's words capture the essence of the attitudes that prevailed under those conditions:

Each in his sphere vaguely realizes the extreme limits set to his ambitions and aspires to nothing beyond. At least if he respects regulations and is docile to collective authority... he feels that it is not well to ask more. ... The equilibrium of his happiness is secure because it is defined... (Durkheim, 1897/1968: 250).

**Conclusion**

Abortion legislation had a controversial and varied history in the Soviet Union. The development of the Soviet government's involvement in abortion policing should be viewed as a chain of related events which had their source in the Bolshevik revolution of 1917, inspired by the Marxist belief that the collectivity can demand that individual desires take second place to its priorities. From being a society that relied heavily on traditional arrangements, the people of the Russian Empire were thrust into the most radical social experiments attempted to that date. In the Bolshevik era, social policy was infused with egalitarianism and abortion was permitted for any reason. The
Stalinist period, with its brutal economic determinism, brought a liberalization in social matters and made legal abortion very difficult. After Stalin, the law was relaxed, the availability of abortion improved, but the right to abortion was not glorified as a gain of the socialist system and the official attitude to it remained ambiguous.

One could argue at length whether the laws relevant to abortion influenced demographic developments or reflected them. In all probability they did both. Similarly, one could emphasize either how far Soviet policy-makers came toward liberation, toward freedom of choice and equality, or how far they failed to go. Secularists and feminists may find Soviet policies on abortion, if not women's position in the society at large, to have been advanced and enlightened. In fact, the picture is neither white nor black; ultimately, what we see depends on where we stand. However, it is worth noting that within the context of totalitarianism the right to abortion was scarcely ever an individual right, at least not in the Western sense. Rather, policies on reproduction were a part of the larger design of creating a fully manageable society, though they were embodied in legislation pertaining to individuals. A related point is that in the Soviet Union the concept of population policy, and for that matter of legally available abortion, was not humanitarian but essentially political. In totalitarian conditions population policy became a direct instrument of social and political control over individual behaviour, indeed an instrument which could be employed by the regime for any purpose it saw fit. Thus, communist rulers on the one hand favoured restrictive abortion laws to moderate the demand for relevant health services or to induce the growth of the future working force, or on the other hand used permissive abortion policies as well as other 'social rights' to affect group psychology and to compensate for the absence of material welfare and political rights.

There is probably a universal tendency for governments to downplay any demographic ambitions they may have and to conceal their intentions 'behind a smokescreen of more lofty humanist aspirations' (Besemeres, 1980: 260). Certainly the Soviet authorities were often less than fully explicit about the political motives in their policies. The history of Soviet abortion legislation offers a good deal of evidence to support the view that these were major motives (if not the major motives) of the decisions adopted by the Soviet regime in demographic matters. Given the great brutality and suddenness of some of the measures that were taken, it would be naive to accept the repeated official claims that the principal purposes of abortion legislation were always philanthropic, irrespective of the direction of the shift. Soviet policies on abortion may be viewed as an important element of the totalitarian social structure, indeed an indication of the character of the Soviet policy.

Probably a more general lesson that may be learned from the Soviet experience with abortion legislation is that demographic policies are seldom free of ideological and political influence. Demographers might well note more carefully than they have done so far that ethical, religious, and humanitarian considerations, though they play an important role in discussions about population policy, do not make this type of policy essentially different from others. In any form of public policy one may perceive the consistent element of state control for state ends; in authoritarian political settings, then, population engineering tends to be used to foster economic stability, to eliminate the possibility of social rebellion, and to secure the durability of ruling elites. This perception may well be added as another item to van de Kaa's (1978) list of the most fundamental objectives of governmental policies mentioned in the introduction to this essay.

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Sources: a - estimation by Biraben, 1958  
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