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Communism; and idea or system in which every person shares everything equally be it work or reward. However to an older generation whom lived through the cold war years, communism is viewed as a regime ruled by tyranny and terror. This essay will look at primarily the Lenin and Stalin years and their political parties affect on women in the USSR. In theory living within a communist society, women within the USSR should have lived lives of equality. When looking at the sources I found a large amount of primary based account, and they mainly revolved around Stalin, which personally I believe is due to people's recollection of his terror and the war years. The overall focus of this essay will explore the Lenin years and the Communist Soviet Union Party's attempts to liberate women from the shackles of the previous tsarist suppression by opening safe and legal abortion clinics, allowing women to divorce their husbands and join the work force, were all great steps towards women becoming equal to men within the Soviet Union. Some of the legislations implemented, however, were rushed and poorly thought through and often didn't achieve the goal they set out to. When Stalin rose to power the essay will show a shift in women's rights, as his party often spoke of equality, but their actions reflected differently, such as removal of Lenin's abortion laws, and restrictions were put back in place on both a woman's work life as well as personal life. This essay will delve into different aspects of women's lives that were affected by party changes, such as family, health and the work force, and will show that although certain party members of the USSR spoke and tried to improve the position of

women within the USSR, often the policies fell short of their goal, and in some cases, had a negative impact on women within the USSR.

Lenin himself seemed in his writings to be an advocate for women's rights. He described housework as "the most unproductive, the most savage, and the most arduous work a woman can do."^[1] He believed "petty housework crushes^[2]" and "degrades^[3]" women. For the emancipation of women to happen within the USSR, he knew changes had to be made to all aspects of a woman's life. These changes soon started to appear. In 1918 they introduced the code on marriage, the family and guardianship. Women could now not only file for a divorce, but the new legislation gave equal rights to children born to married or unmarried parents, legitimising all children. Women could now keep their property in a divorce. Divorces were now easier to apply for and cheaper to complete. This legislation backfired and research shows in 1920 that 70% of divorces were being filed by the men and only 7%^[4] of the wives had agreed to that divorce. Not only that, but the men were fleeing their parental responsibilities, and women were struggling to feed their children. Within two years a study showed that the USSR had nearly 8 million starving children on its hands, most of them orphans roaming the countryside^[5]. By 1936, Stalin began to panic at the effects the war was having on the soviet population. The family code legislation began to make divorces difficult once more. This increased the chances of families staying together and producing more children for the future of the soviet regime, and therefore benefited the party more than the women in the USSR.

Mary Buckley argues the first laws that were passed to emancipate women caused panic amongst the peasant population. "Family meant security...lack
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of education and high levels of illiteracy made it hard for them to obtain skilled jobs,"[6]and therefore peasant women relied on the men. There was a lack of education for women wanting to work and the laws on divorces meaning women would have an uncertain future. The Communist Party seemed to have rushed into the emancipation of women with policies on work and family and, rather than improving women's positions in the early years, instead made their position within the home and within the public sector uncertain.

In *Women and Russia*, Exaterina Alexandrova writes about why women in the USSR still wanted to marry, despite the assumption that women in the USSR no longer needed to marry within the new laws. She writes about her German friend, could not understand why she was so excited to announce her engagement. Exaterina writes that "equality between Soviet men and women is observed primarily on paper and that the assertion that women have the same opportunities as men for any type of work is pure nonsense." [7] Despite the early revolutionary changes to the status of women, Exaterina believes that the traditional patriarchal ideology thrived more than ever. After the initial freedom of the 1920s, by the 1930s policies had changed. [8] During WW2, "the Government quietly encouraged extramarital relations while it officially condemned them." [9] Stalin wanted the next generation of communist children. Men were at war, birth rates were already low, and the only way to increase it was to try and encourage "extramarital relations". [10] Exaterina also wrote about the changes in marriage laws, from 1926 to 1936-44. Previously, marriages did not need to be registered, and illegitimate children had the same standing as legitimate

children. The '36 and '44 acts removed the progress made on women's divorce rights. They turned " divorce into a difficult and expensive process,"[11]meaning once again that the position of women in the USSR had returned to a point in time where they were often trapped in marriages because divorce was inaccessible to them. Despite many of the men being away for war, once again under Stalin the position of women returned to the idea that women had to be married, and their natural place was at home as a wife and mother.

Lenin also encouraged women to join the workforce. During the revolution, women had stepped up as the men took to arms. During his interview with Clara Zetkin he states " in Petrograd, here in Moscow, in other towns and industrial centres the women workers acted splendidly during the revolution. Without them we should not have been victorious. Or scarcely so. That is my opinion. How brave they were, how brave they still are!"[12]Alongside the abortion and divorce laws, women were given equal pay and opportunities to enter work areas that had been male dominated for years. It could be argued that Lenin passed these laws less for the emancipation of women and more because he saw an opportunity to utilise thousands of women within the work force, and believed passing these legislations would free them from their duties and allow them to contribute to the Soviet economy. It could be argued increasing the number of women in the work force is one of the few ideologies that Stalin and Lenin agreed on, as by 1928 the portion of women within the labour force had risen to 24% of the total workforce and rose again to 27. 4% in 1932[13]. Towards the end of the Second World War they made up 56% of the labour force[14]. In 1936 the USSR created article 122

which read “ women in the USSR are accorded equal rights with men in all spheres of economic, state, cultural, social and political life.[15]” Stalin seemingly wanted the public to at least believe that he was supporting women’s rights just like his predecessor. The article offered “ state protection of the interests of Mother and child, pre-maternity and maternity leave with full pay and the provision of a wide network of maternity homes, nurseries and kindergartens.” However, this was received alongside the reinstatement of the abortion ban, showing it was not so much to help those women in work, but to encourage those working women to restart their families and continue to produce the next generation.

Gail Warshofsky Lapidus considers the Stalin years, and the effect that had on women within the work industry. By 1937, 9. 4 million women were employed[16], yet there had been a drop in rates of wages forcing women to find work to support their family as one wage was no longer enough. Stalin’s deportation and the deaths of accused kulaks also led to many women being left alone and forced to find work to survive. The increase in women within the workforce had now led to a decline in births and an increase in the use of abortions. Stalin made an “ attempt to encourage reproduction by portraying motherhood as the supreme obligation of Soviet women”[17]which, after the legislations of Lenin granting women the freedom to make their own choices, was a regressive step in the rights and the position of women in the USSR. Benefits were offered to women who had more children; “ seven was his favourite number”[18]Lapidus wrote. With more children, responsibility would once again fall to the woman to stay at home to raise her family. The

children were needed to build a new generation of Soviets and, in later years, increase the work force.

Alla Sariban writings support Lapidus' findings of women both having to find work to make ends meet, and returning to the expected role of motherhood which had a negative impact on the position of women in the USSR. Sariban asserted " Soviet women's main work begins after their official working hours are over." [19] Women, now working the same hours as men, were still expected to play the " patriarchal role" as well and do the shopping, cleaning and take care of the children. " Women not only do not receive any respect for their work but rather are subjected to social contempt as creatures of a lower order whose very nature dictates that they should do the dirty work." [20] With Stalin's attempts to increase the population, the position of women within the USSR has become one of hard work, a triple shift, where women are left exhausted working, being mothers and housewives. The triple threat is something neither Lenin nor Stalin seemed to recognise. Women who wanted to work and wanted families were struggling to do both. Sofia Nikandrovna Pavlova, a woman interviewed stated " Mama did absolutely everything in the house." [21] When asked if her mother had any time to relax she exclaimed " No, she never did, because there was so much work to be done." [22] Women in soviet Russia regardless of class, if they had a family and worked they never had a moment to rest. The Communist Party did not understand that even when working Soviet women returned home to men still believing that women should do the house work, the cooking, the cleaning and caring for the children. Makismova overheard a conversation in the Party itself about women no longer using the communal washing

facilities. Confused, the chairman of planning commissions was asked if women were supposed to use them along side working to which he said “ what do you mean? They’re women, aren’t they?”[23]This attitude alongside the propaganda being pushed surrounding larger families showed the Communist party no longer seemed to care for women’s equality, as attitudes within the party showed engrained misogynistic thinking was active, and the idea that women belonged at home cleaning and producing children was strongly returning. This can be interpreted as showing that soviet policies within the USSR surrounding the position of women were not aimed to benefit women but to benefit the soviet state, which at the time the USSR needed both workers and children and this burden fell upon the women.

Alexandra Kollontai wrote a “ *Sexually Emancipated Woman*” which gives a narrow but important insight into a woman, who was at the centre of the changes happening in the early years of the USSR and how her experiences differed from the ordinary people. “ Appointed People’s commissar”[24]she was “ the only woman in the cabinet”[25]and described the first few months of work as “ the real romanticism of the revolution”[26]and focused on those injured in the war, orphanages for children, removal of religious teachings in schools amongst other things. By 1918, “ there were differences of opinion in the party. I resigned from my post.”[27]Despite resigning Kollontai was still very active in women speeches and party life and often came under criticism when publishing papers to do with the emancipation of women; such as where she states marriage have to be separated from the church. “ My theses, my sexual and moral views, were bitterly fought by many party

comrades of both sexes.”[28]She was fortunate to have had a place in the party. Research showed that although article 137 gave women the same right as men to stand in parliament[29], soviet schools were implementing much more traditional lessons. Boys were pushed towards politics, whereas girls were steered to home economics, cooking and sewing lessons.

[30]Although her position within the party means her experiences cannot be generalised to all women in the USSR, I think her autobiography gives us a unique insight the Communist Party. Despite many of the laws working towards equality for women, behind the scenes the party was divided, and as a woman, her life was often threatened for speaking out for women’s rights. Beatrice Brodsky Farnsworth wrote about Kollontai’s proposals to the party concerning women. Wanting to create a small tax to “ make possible the establishment of day nurseries and homes for children,”[31]and although this was a reasonable idea, the party was “ particularly scornful of Kollontai’s innovative marriage contract.”[32]Again, Kollontai found herself separate from the party in believing the laws with marriage and women’s rights were still lacking compared to other western countries and she tried to offer solutions only to be mocked and turned away by the men in power.

In 1920 the decree of healthcare was passed, legalising abortions for women. Clinics were opened with to give safe and sterile operations. Now women under Lenin’s leadership had the right to divorce, work and had access to safe abortions. However, to enforce this new idea of a Soviet family, the abortion laws were revoked in 1936, and now legal abortions “ could henceforth be performed only when pregnancy endangered the life or

the health of the potential mother.[33]" Rather than increasing the birth-rate, it led to an increase in illegal, underground abortions.

Natasha Maltseva's experience with an abortion clinic in the USSR does not inspire a picture of an emancipated free woman, supported in her decision by the Communist Party. " If a woman has made up her mind to have an abortion, she is in for a round of tortures...talked to with unconcealed scorn...in a huge waiting room, without almost any light or air, women with depressed and worried faces sit on benches." [34] This bleak description supports the writings of Mary Buckley, and further show that despite the laws on abortion's being improved, those within the medical profession made clear their disapproval to the women who walked through their doors. " Two and sometimes six women are operated on at the same time...can see everything that is happening to the women who have gone before them. They can see the faces distorted in torment and the bloody mess flowing from the women's wombs." [35] The choice to keep or to abort a child is never an easy one, especially for women who when seeking help find themselves alone and scared. The feeling of relief that you can safely make that choice with the help of your government, only to arrive and witness disdain from the medical staff and witness the horrifying procedure on other women really highlights the true position of women in the USSR. In his 5 years as leader of the USSR, Lenin seemed to be trying to aim towards a future of equality and liberation for women, but his changes had very little time to make a difference to women's lives. Not only did the medical profession oppose the changes, but again by 1936 the abortion laws were revoked, and women were once again encouraged, if not forced to be part of a family. This

included propaganda such as a poster titled “ Children are happiness for a soviet family[36]” shows a mother and father walking and smiling with 6 children surrounding them, promoting large families leading to happy lives. Within *A Revolution of their own*, an interview with Anna Akimivna Dubova gives a new perspective on women’s position in the USSR. Currently, the laws and legislations within the Lenin era, although flawed, have worked hard to create and equal existence for women. Yet this interview comes from a woman who did not see the benefits of emancipation as her family was branded kulaks. “ First of all, we were deprived of the vote,”[37]Anna states. In 1928, due to her father running a small shop of goods, Anna’s mother, father and elder sister could not participate in any political votes or meetings. By 1929, Anna’s family faced a grain tax, which by “ the fourth time we didn’t deliver the grain, and so my father was put in prison.”[38]Anna’s family were not rich; they were peasants. The shop her father ran only existed as the larger stores were far away, and they sent produce to her father so that he could sell it for them. Yet, under Stalin’s reign, people the party deemed to be well off were suffering. After her father’s release, more quotas were enforced and he was once again arrested. “ They wanted to deport us- a mother and her children- to Solovki... (place of exile, internment, and forced labour).”[39]By the age of 13, Anna had missed the benefits the Lenin years had for women, and instead had seen her father arrested twice, and witnessed her life stripped from her. “ Mama sat down and cried when they took away the cow.” Their horse was confiscated and their household possessions stripped and sold. Yet this brand didn’t stop with them. No one would give them shelter for fear of being a sympathiser and being branded a Kulak as well. Everyone her

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mother went to; Anna's grandparents, brother and the church, " they, too, were branded kulaks and dispossessed." [40] Life did not get easier under Stalin's reign, and Anna lived in a crowded room with her sister and her sister's husband. Desperate to improve her life, she turned to education and cake decorating, yet forever fearful of her past as a kulak catching up to her, she married. " My first marriage was a kind of camouflage," [41] who worked and " it was his job to identify and dispossess kulaks." [42] Hiding in plain sight, Anna didn't feel the same sense of freedom that the women G. N Serebrennikov wrote of. Her position in the USSR was one similar to many women branded kulak because of their family, who could never reveal their past due to the fear of being stripped once again of their lives and having to relocate and start all over. Anna also spoke of the removal of the abortion laws, and spoke of her own back street abortion. " It was terrible, absolutely terrible," she said. " We were interrogated. I remember after I had the abortion I was lying there, weak from the loss of blood, and they kept questioning me." [43] The way Anna describes abortions after they were made illegal shows the horrors women went through when they were left with no choice. Often unsanitary, the women would receive infections and sickness from the procedure, but would have to maintain a brave face and continue with their lives or risk being caught and interrogated or arrested.

An interesting source which came to light was a book by author G. N Serebrennikov. The book praises Lenin and the party's changes to women's rights in the USSR. She wrote Lenin had " always devoted much attention to the problem of women's life and work." [44] The author continues " the soviet authorities took as their aims the conquest of age-long inferiority" [45] and "

equal pay for equal work.”[46]Serebrennikov also looks at the number of women in different sectors and demonstrates the growth of the percentage of women workers from 1913 to 1926. For example, the female workforce in the coal mining industry grew from 3.6% to 8.3%. Wood-working grew from 9.9 to 15.2%.[47]The laws allowing women to choose their occupation created by the Communist Party had significant impacts on the position of women. The increase of wages to equal pay meant that women who wanted to be independent now had a chance. This was the true meaning of communism, and for women this was a step towards a brighter future in the USSR. When first looking at this source I thought I had found a gold mine of information; a firsthand account of a woman who lived through the changes to women’s rights within the USSR. When writing up the information on the book however, I noticed it was published in 1937, during the years of what is now known as the Great Terror. This book was a propaganda piece for Stalin. The aim was to highlight the party achievements both before and during Stalin’s reign and take focus away from all the acts of violence happening across the cities. The original publisher before Camelot Press was Victor Gollancz, an avid left wing advocate and communist. This just reaffirms the provenience of this book being unreliable as a firsthand account of women’s positions in the USSR as again, the source’s writer and publisher were supporters of the soviet policies and are unlikely to criticise the regime or highlight negative aspects of the party’s influence on women’s lives.

Overall, I believe that the CPSU had great ambitions when starting out to improve the quality of life for women, but the policies were ill thought out and rushed which often lead to more problems, such as the orphans or

decline in population. When Stalin rose to power, the position of women within the USSR returned once again to a stereotypical patriarchal role with women staying at home and working, contributing to the Soviet system both economically and in the production of the next generation of Soviet workers. Although certain aspects such as being able to join the workforce seemed positive, and articles implemented spoke of equality, women were still underpaid and underrepresented within higher positions. An example to illustrate thus is in Leningrad in 1936 there were 328 factory directors, 23 of them were female.[48] This was a common occurrence across the USSR. Women on paper, as Exaterina wrote, were emancipated and free, yet in reality they were pawns within the soviet regime, policies only changing to fit the current soviet agenda. Sarah Ashwin writes “ the policy of the Bolshevik state was never directed at the liberation of women from men, it was directed at breaking the subordination of women from to the patriarchal family in order to free both men and women to serve the communist cause.”[49] Again, as long as the policies bettered the soviet state, they stayed. Women joining the workforce helped the economy, especially when the men were sent off to war; however the abortion laws had a negative impact on the population and were revoked. Therefore the position of women within the USSR was to benefit the soviet regime, be it by working or baring children.

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