

# Women in the Stalin Era

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- 27 *Ibid.*, l. 80.  
 28 *Ibid.*, ll. 103–4. See also Lenau's speech, l. 230.  
 29 *Ibid.*, l. 36.  
 30 *Ibid.*, ll. 23–4.  
 31 *Ibid.*, l. 87.  
 32 GARF, f. 5451, o. 15, d. 359, l. 54, 55–63.  
 33 GARF, f. 5451, o. 15, d. 357, l. 28.  
 34 GARF, f. 5451, o. 15, d. 363, l. 67.  
 35 *Ibid.*; and GARF, f. 5451, o. 15, d. 362, l. 159.  
 36 *Trud*, 3 March 1931.  
 37 GARF, f. 5451, o. 15, d. 362, l. 32.  
 38 *Ibid.*, l. 70.  
 39 *Trud*, 10 July 1931.  
 40 *Ibid.*; and GARF, f. 5451, o. 15, d. 362, l. 86.  
 41 GARF, f. 5451, o. 15, d. 361, ll. 15–15ob.  
 42 GARF, f. 5451, o. 15, d. 362, l. 85.  
 43 GARF, f. 5451, o. 15, d. 361, l. 15.  
 44 *Ibid.*  
 45 *Trud*, 10 July 1931.  
 46 *Trud*, 7 July 1931.  
 47 *Trud*, 24 March 1931.  
 48 GARF, f. 5451, o. 15, d. 361, ll. 21, 22.  
 49 *Ibid.*, ll. 25–25ob.  
 50 *Ibid.*, ll. 34–5.  
 51 GARF, f. 5451, o. 15, d. 362, ll. 3–6.  
 52 *Ibid.*, ll. 84–5.  
 53 GARF, f. 5451, o. 15, d. 361, l. 1.  
 54 *Trud*, 10 July 1931.  
 55 GARF, f. 5451, o. 15, d. 361, l. 15ob.  
 56 GARF, f. 5451, o. 15, d. 363, l. 12.  
 57 GARF, f. 5451, o. 15, d. 361, l. 9.  
 58 *Ibid.*, l. 15ob.  
 59 *Ibid.*, l. 21.  
 60 *Trud*, 24 March 1931.  
 61 *Ibid.*  
 62 See *ibid.* for example of women's use of this word.

## 5 'A Mother's Cares': Women Workers and Popular Opinion in Stalin's Russia, 1934–41

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One of the more intriguing things to emerge from the Soviet archives since 1991 is evidence of independent popular opinion in the Soviet Union even at the height of the 'Great Terror' of the 1930s. This evidence, in the form of letters, diaries and confidential Communist Party and NKVD reports on the 'popular mood', establishes that propaganda, censorship and the threat of prosecution for the crime of 'anti-Soviet agitation' could not prevent ordinary people from continuing to express opinions critical of the policies of the Stalin regime. This chapter examines what these sources on popular opinion reveal about the particular concerns and modes of expression of Soviet women workers in the period from the mid-1930s until the war. Did these differ significantly from the concerns of men? Did women employ a gender-specific language to express their concerns? What was the relationship between gender and class in this period?

The study draws heavily on party and NKVD *svodki* (summaries) on the popular mood. These reports, compiled for top party leaders on the basis of information supplied by informants, are not a neutral window on to the thoughts of women workers. Informants were instructed to pay particular attention to certain types of opinion, their reports were coloured by their own preoccupations and priorities, and no doubt some occasionally included fabricated information. Nevertheless, there is enough consistency in the reported opinions to suggest that they are representative of actual trends in popular opinion. Indeed, the comments they report are often replicated in other sources used in this study, such as letters. The *svodki* include both positive and negative opinion. I have chosen to focus on critical and unorthodox views since these have received less attention in the literature. However, it is

clearly not the case that all women workers were dissatisfied with the policies of the Stalin regime.<sup>1</sup>

The analysis will concentrate primarily on the views expressed by women workers in Leningrad. The city had always boasted a high proportion of women workers, and their numbers increased with the onset of Stalin's industrialisation drive. On 1 January 1935 women constituted 44.3 per cent of all workers in all branches of labour, and 44.7 per cent in industry alone (25.7 per cent of the metal and electrical industries, 55 per cent of the chemical industry, 78.5 per cent of the textile industry, 83.8 per cent of the sewing industry and 66.6 per cent of the food industry). Many of these women had entered the labour force during the first five-year plan. For example, the overall proportion of women in the metal and electrical industries expanded from 11.1 per cent in 1930 to 26.6 per cent in 1934. Throughout the decade the numbers of working women continued to rise so that by 1937 49.6 per cent of Leningrad blue-collar workers, 21.4 per cent of engineering-technical workers and 66.1 per cent of white-collar employees were women. By 1940, after the introduction of military conscription for men, women took on men's jobs, particularly in the factories, where they constituted almost 60 per cent of the labour force.<sup>2</sup>

What impact did the expansion in the numbers of working women have upon ideas about gender? As a result of both popular attitudes and the state's own propaganda and policies, the notion of distinct roles for men and women remained strongly in force in the Soviet Union in the 1930s despite the fact that, or perhaps *because*, so many women were now going out to work. Doubtless partly in reaction to the quite sharp disruption to traditional roles, both men and women responded by trying to preserve and indeed reinforce these roles. In most cases, domestic duties were still considered the preserve of women, while to men fell the responsibility of chief breadwinner. Women's wages were often regarded as merely a supplement to the family income. The implication of this was that if women did not need to work, they would not want to.

The Soviet regime itself fostered this understanding, sending out rather contradictory messages: on the one hand continuing theoretically to espouse sexual equality in the workplace and public life, while on the other advocating (from the mid 1930s) a strongly pro-family and pro-natalist agenda which contrasted quite markedly with the more radical Soviet visions of the 1920s. Parenthood, and especially motherhood, was extolled. Women were encouraged to be both workers and mothers:

'Every girl must be treasured not only as a textile worker, a bold parachute jumper or an engineer – but as a future mother. The mother of one child must be treasured as the future mother of eight.'<sup>3</sup> The status of non-working 'wives' was also elevated through the *obshchestvennitsa* movement, which promoted the very bourgeois-seeming idea of engineers' and managers' wives doing useful charity work, as well as supporting their husbands and model families.<sup>4</sup>

The prevalence of such ideas at all levels of society meant that in what were traditionally defined as 'male' spheres of work and politics women remained disadvantaged. In the workplace they experienced harassment and discrimination from men, especially in male-dominated industries. Male co-workers felt threatened by women, male managers did little to promote them or encourage them to raise their qualifications.<sup>5</sup> Literacy levels were much lower among women workers. According to one study, in 1935 more than half of all female workers at Leningrad textile factories were only semi-literate. Nor were women as involved in technical education. Of 20 615 women at the Krasnyi Treugol'nik factory, only 598 were taking technical courses. Even those women who had completed the necessary training often earned less than men with equivalent qualifications and experience.<sup>6</sup>

Not surprisingly, few attained high positions: of 328 factory directors in Leningrad in 1935, only 20 were women, 17 of whom worked at the traditionally female textile and sewing factories. In the food industry, where women formed the majority of workers, only one of the 50 directors was female. The situation was similar outside industry: 50–60 per cent of doctors were female, but there were only four women head doctors at hospitals, compared with 55 men.<sup>7</sup> The party appears to have been concerned about this state of affairs, and in the second half of the 1930s it launched prominent, but in many respects symbolic, campaigns to try to promote more women in the workplace.

Politically, women made few advances either. With the abolition of the women's departments, systematic attempts to encourage women into politics evaporated. Few women had the time, energy or inclination to get involved in political study or attend meetings. As one put it at the end of 1939, women at their factory were too busy to attend local soviet election meetings: 'We've no time for studying. There's nothing to eat. The girls queued from six o'clock to nine o'clock last night to get sausage. Our heads are full of how to eat and get hold of meat.'<sup>8</sup> In 1935, of 1400 non-party women workers in the first galoshes shop at the Krasnyi Treugol'nik factory, a mere 51 were engaged in

political study. Only a minority of party members were female and the few female party activists were concentrated in Leningrad's textile factories.<sup>9</sup>

Party investigations attributed women's lack of political progress to structural problems, such as the absence of opportunity for political and general education and difficulties with childcare. Clearly the issue was also related to deeply-engrained cultural stereotypes about gender and politics. Party and NKVD reports on the popular mood did not attach much significance to attitudes on this question, but the few comments which were recorded are indicative of the tenacity of traditional patriarchal notions. For example, the 1936 Constitution was explicit about guaranteeing equal rights to women, which provoked one male worker to comment that 'Soviet power is bad to confirm the Constitution and thereby give women lots of rights. Now you can't do anything at home, the wife drives you out of the flat.' Misogynist feelings also emerged during the 1937 elections when a worker from the Kirov works said that he would not vote for women, since they were 'useless', while another protested against women being allowed to participate in elections: 'In the old days women were not allowed anywhere and that was right because women are beneath men.' A few women also used stereotypical language in relation to female electoral candidates. One, significantly a peasant, agitated against a woman standing in local soviet elections, arguing that she had been chosen as a candidate because 'she is a girl. Previously they chose women so they could go out with them, and now it's the same, not to decide questions, but to go out with them.'<sup>10</sup>

How did all these circumstances affect women's input into popular opinion? It should be remembered that for both men and women opportunities for political discussion were circumscribed in this period. It was far less risky for men and women to discuss relatively 'safe' topics connected with domestic and/or local issues, than to broach more controversial questions about the nature of the political system, ideology, elections, political leaders, foreign policy and so forth. However, party and especially NKVD opinion reports give the impression that on the occasions when such broader political issues were raised, it was usually by men. It is possible that informants were primed to pick up on and take more seriously the views of men. Some party activists certainly believed that women did not hold any serious opinions. At one party meeting it was observed that 'many women are *meshchanski* (bourgeois, philistine); they love their comfort, are not

interested in public life, don't worry about production'.<sup>11</sup> This stereotype may have influenced the reporting of women's opinions.

However, despite its condescending tone, the observation about women's indifference to 'public life' contained some truth in that women's attention was in fact focused on issues pertaining directly to the home and family. This was hardly the result of a love of 'comfort', however. Women were simply obliged to deal with domestic matters because of the enduring assumption that the wife should take on the bulk of the responsibility for shopping, childcare and housework, despite the fact that she was now often also involved in full-time paid employment. This double burden inevitably meant she had less leisure for reading, political education and discussion than her more carefree husband.<sup>12</sup>

While some men might debate what was meant by socialism or the implications of party congresses, women were more likely to talk about family policy, their children's needs, queues or fluctuating prices,<sup>13</sup> and to protest against policies which threatened the economic well-being of the family. This is, of course, a generalisation. It is frequently difficult to differentiate the opinions of men and women workers. A poor working man and a poor working woman shared very similar concerns. Some women discussed theoretical political questions avidly, many men also talked about prices and the cost of living. However, certain issues do stand out as 'women's issues', and it is these which will be considered in the following discussion. Firstly, the chapter will examine women's concerns about providing for and nurturing their families and how this shaped their perceptions of economic policies. Then it considers reactions to the conservative shift in family policy in the mid-1930s.

### Family and food

The worker-mother has her view of the social regime, and her 'consumer's' criterion, as the functionary ... scornfully expresses it, is in the last analysis decisive. (Trotsky, *The Revolution Betrayed*, p. 177)

*Segodnya den' yasnyi*  
*Veselye deti*  
*Igraiyut i plashut*  
*Ne znayut zabot*

Today is a clear day  
Merry children  
Play and dance  
Know no cares

*A doma mamasha  
Khlopochet ne znaet  
Chego na obed  
Im svarit'*

But at home mummy  
Toils and knows not  
What to cook them  
For dinner

*Odet' i obut'  
Svoikh detok rodimykh  
Ne znaet mamasha  
Gde obuvi vzyat'*

How to clothe and shoe  
Her own children  
Mummy doesn't know  
Where to get shoes

*Im nado pal'tushki  
Im nado sapozhki  
Zabotitsia  
Bednaia mat'*

They need coats  
They need boots  
Worries  
Poor mother.<sup>14</sup>

This poem, 'A Mother's Cares', written by schoolchildren in 1935 in their wall newspaper, encapsulates many of the concerns of women in this period. Most women were perceived by themselves and others as providers for and protectors of their families. The identity of 'worker' was still very important to women workers, but this class identity acquired a distinct colouring when it overlapped with the identity of the wife and mother. When women did express critical views on matters of public concern, these were frequently voiced in terms of the needs of children.

At the end of 1934 when people were asked to make suggestions in connection with forthcoming soviet elections, both men and women brought up issues such as improving transport, food supplies and so forth. However, women in particular constantly raised the question of children's welfare. A characteristic suggestion was: 'We must struggle decisively with [the problem of] children who stand and beg at bread shops. We must improve children's food. Children's shoes are too expensive. We must, along with our achievements, eliminate our weaknesses.'<sup>15</sup>

Likewise, at a meeting on 9 December 1934 of a department of the Khalturin textile factory, where women formed the majority of employees, a very lively discussion took place among women workers, who also demanded better food and clothing for their children. Smirnova stated that it was impossible to look after children on their wages: 'a child goes to school hungry and doesn't eat there either. Children do without boots, which are impossible to buy.' The women also requested better accommodation for themselves and their families. Korotkova said 'I have seven people in my family, we live in a small

room, we can't get accommodation.' As their requests were enunciated in fairly critical terms, another worker, Gudkova, retorted:

It's good that the workers are making suggestions. We ought to speak about our achievements, in particular, about what we have achieved at our factory, for example: the surgery has grown into a strong medical department, and our canteen has also expanded and improved. Wages have gone up recently, supplies for workers have improved, life has become easier.

Other women did not agree with this attempt to gloss over problems and argued that, on the contrary, all was not well. Savel'eva maintained strongly:

We are in a crisis, and we know it, and it's fine for Gudkova to talk, she has an easy life, but I have a sick child, he's in hospital, they give him porridge without butter, and pay no attention to my comments. There are many injustices, for example, the hospital is supposed to give the children butter, but they don't get it.<sup>16</sup>

The overriding priority throughout this discussion was the welfare of children. This theme coloured interpretations of a whole variety of issues. During the Spanish Civil War, whereas some men discussed the issue of Soviet support for the communists in Spain in ideological terms, women raised the question of children. At the Krasnaya Znamya factory, Seregina protested to other female workers about the policy of sending food to Spain: 'Your children don't see chocolate and butter, but we're sending it to Spanish workers.'<sup>17</sup>

The responsibilities of motherhood made women particularly sensitive to issues which involved feeding and providing for the family. Women's involvement throughout history in action to defend the household economy has been well-documented.<sup>18</sup> Women have long taken advantage of the stereotype of their sex as essentially passive and prone to irrational behaviour, and therefore less vulnerable to repression. In Russia, Barbara Engel has shown how women played a prominent role in peasant resistance in the pre-revolutionary period. When the livelihood of the family and community was at stake, they were at the forefront of often violent confrontation with the authorities. During the disturbances of 1905-7, they also took an active part in seizures of food and property.<sup>19</sup> Famously, the February revolution of 1917 began with women coming out onto the streets to demand bread.

Peasant women were at the forefront of protest against the threat to the traditional family and village economy represented by collectivisation.<sup>20</sup> In the period of particularly severe food shortages in the early 1930s, large strikes over food-related issues occurred in factories dominated by women workers, and women also were involved in violent incidents in queues in this period.<sup>21</sup>

In the mid to late 1930s living standards were low in absolute and relative terms. Wages did not keep pace with price rises, and food, clothes and housing were all in short supply. There were also periodic economic crises, such as the bread shortages of 1936–37. As the scope for political action narrowed, women were less inclined to resort to strikes and violence when these circumstances seemed to jeopardise family well-being. However, they did express themselves in ways that were significant given the context of the Stalinist terror – speaking out and protesting about policies such as the end of bread rationing, price rises, loan campaigns, queues and shortages.

Women had ample opportunities to exchange views and formulate an opinion on these issues in a public way. As well as meeting on the shop floor, they were regularly drawn together when engaged in shopping, particularly in the ubiquitous queues. The queue served as a breeding ground for all sorts of rumours and complaints. It was a relatively anonymous forum, occupied by large numbers of people (usually women), who were often angry and impatient. Indeed, the queue was one of the few arenas in this period where violent disturbances did sometimes occur. For example, during the severe bread shortages of early 1937, NKVD reports and ordinary people's letters relate stories of people being crushed and injured in queues, of doors and windows in bread shops being smashed, and of an upsurge in murders as people were killed for bread. A letter of March 1937 described the dire situation in Belozersk, a town in Leningrad *oblast'*: 'We have terrible bread queues, people queue from nine in the evening and there's a terrible crush. Quite a lot of people were crushed and taken to hospital. One girl was crushed to death, while as for the pregnant women – it goes without saying.'<sup>22</sup> This type of atmosphere was clearly conducive to the spread of opinion critical of state policy.

#### Rationing, prices and state loans

How did women respond to state economic policies? The policy of rationing bread from the late 1920s until the end of 1934 was an issue of everyday concern for most women. For all its faults, the ration

system did ensure that industrial workers and their families were provided with bread relatively cheaply. Workers with large families were particular beneficiaries of the policy, as rations were allocated according to the number of dependants. At the end of 1934, a decision was taken to end bread rationing from 1 January 1935 and to raise basic bread prices with some (usually insufficient) financial compensation for workers.

The newspapers portrayed the measure as a sign of the country's economic achievements. The public's reaction was mixed. Certainly there were people who welcomed the idea of free trade. Yet there were also many others who were concerned about the initiative, knowing that it was bound to affect the poorer workers and those with large families most severely. Party informants reported that women were particularly anxious, especially those with large families.<sup>23</sup> At the Voroshilov works it was noted that while the men wholeheartedly accepted the policy, among women the mood was 'passive'. Similar responses were encountered at other factories staffed mainly by females. Women often expressed their opposition to the measure in terms of their children's welfare. For example, at a soviet electoral meeting in December 1934 one housewife spoke up: 'Our children don't get any fats, they are hungry and weak, get tuberculosis. My husband earns 150 rubles and we have two children. After the end of rations, poor workers and their children will get neither butter nor bread.' Other women greeted this speech with applause, prevented a woman from rebuking her, and sent up notes to the chair asking why their children were so badly provided for.<sup>24</sup>

Subsequent policies on rationing also elicited concern from women. For example, in September 1935 the rationing of meat and other food was abolished and prices rose. Once again, reports highlighted the dissatisfaction of female workers and housewives in particular. On this occasion, the main concern was that only the highest quality, expensive meat was on sale in Leningrad.<sup>25</sup> Cafeteria prices also went up and it appears that women responded to this quite rationally by boycotting cafeterias and devising their own coping strategies. There was much discussion among women about the advantages of bringing food from home instead: 'Bread and butter have become cheaper, one can do without the cafeterias, bring bread and butter, drink tea, and that'll be fine.'<sup>26</sup>

Throughout this period women were always at the forefront of protest about price rises and calls to reintroduce rations. The logic of the market made little sense to women faced with hungry mouths to feed.

Periodic campaigns to raise revenue through the use of state loans also encountered considerable resistance from women. Although these loans were termed 'voluntary', in practice people were expected to contribute a minimum of one month's salary. Great propaganda campaigns were conducted on the theme of personal sacrifice for the good of the state. Although both men and women were often reluctant to sacrifice what represented quite a significant sum, women seem to have been especially unwilling, and they could demonstrate considerable solidarity during the campaigns. For example, during the 1936 campaign all the women workers on the third floor of a shop at the Veretano textile factory collectively decided to refuse to subscribe more than 50 rubles each.<sup>27</sup>

Women's reluctance was partly attributable to the fact that they tended to be paid less than men, but it was also because they were inclined to place the immediate needs of their families, and in some cases, themselves, above the more abstract needs of the state. During the 1935 loan campaign, party officials noted that many of those who refused to subscribe to the loan were low-paid women workers at textile and sewing factories, especially those whose material circumstances were difficult because they had several children or because their husbands had left them. For example, at the Khalturin factory, a woman earning 128 rubles refused to subscribe. Her husband had died in the civil war and she had a 14-year-old son.<sup>28</sup>

Some women workers without children appear to have resisted the campaign for more selfish reasons. Clearly the interests of childless women were rather different from those of mothers. During the 1935 loan campaign, a few younger girls refused to subscribe, such as a 20-year-old Komsomol member who said 'I'd rather buy another dress, I won't subscribe to the loan.' Two other Komsomol girls refused because they wanted to dress better.<sup>29</sup> During the 1936 campaign Klosova, a worker at the Bol'shevichka factory earning 350 rubles, with a husband and no children, only subscribed 10 rubles, saying that she would not give more because of her 'desire to dress herself'. Another worker refused on the grounds that she would rather plaster her walls.<sup>30</sup> Such statements presumably merely reinforced party stereotypes about women's, especially young women's, 'philistine' nature, their preference for 'comfort' over 'public life'.

#### Queues, shortages and speculation

As well as being concerned about the cost of living, women were also particularly worried about the queues and shortages which became

increasingly persistent towards the end of the 1930s as the combined effects of the terror and the onset of war made themselves felt. Some women voiced their complaints to leading party figures in letters in which they shielded themselves behind the official rhetoric on the family and motherhood, the leader cult and 'speculation'.

During the bread crisis of early 1937 a woman wrote to Krupskaya (Lenin's widow) trying to elicit sympathy as one woman to another. She claimed that she was writing not only on her own behalf but on behalf of all those with children: 'it's already really hard to survive a bread crisis with children'.<sup>31</sup> This use of the 'mother' discourse is also evident in a women's letter to Leningrad First Secretary Zhdanov which raised the question of the shortage of goods in 1938. It began 'We, all mothers from Udel'ninskii raion, appeal to you with a large request. Recently we have not been able to get hold of even one metre of material'.<sup>32</sup>

These letters did not blame party leaders for the shortages. On the contrary, the *vozhd'* (Stalin) was often represented in the terms of the leader cult, as a saviour who would intervene to punish the real culprits. Echoing the official line, the culprits were identified as 'speculators' who were allegedly buying up products and reselling them. In the letter of 1938 cited above, the women wrote:

Usually there is a queue of 100–200 people, they shove and shout as they stand in the queue and three to four size 44 suits are brought out; the lucky ones seize them, usually speculators, well that's the way it always is. Meanwhile the children are naked and we don't know whom to turn to and we thought of you, comrade Zhdanov.<sup>33</sup>

This theme recurs in a 1938 report on the mood of workers before the November holiday. It noted much complaint about queues and the difficulties of getting hold of things for the holiday, especially at the textile factories dominated by women. At the Rabotnitsa factory women said,

there are such huge queues that we women workers cannot buy anything for the holiday, the struggle with speculation is very weak. Speculation should be ended; at least introduce a ration system for manufactured goods or open a closed shop for manufactured goods at the factory, so that we factory workers could get something for our needs.<sup>34</sup>

Here the problem was identified as speculation, and the solution as increased state intervention in the form of rationing.

In some cases, the speculators were identified specifically as housewives. The 1938 letter to Zhdanov complained about 'housewives and such like speculators, they don't have anything to do, so from morning to night they stand in queues, buy up everything and then sell it at the market'.<sup>35</sup> Although women workers often used gender identity ('we women', 'we mothers') to create a sense of solidarity with other women workers, this solidarity evidently did not extend to women who were perceived as not needing to work and as profiting from other working women's misfortune.

No doubt this antagonism towards non-working women was partly related to the way the 'wives movement' was represented in public discourse. The bourgeois connotations of the movement were all too obvious to some women workers. Their resentment emerged especially in 1936, when the movement received intense publicity. In May, a party agitator reported that after the award of the order of the Red Banner of Labour and the honour badge to wives of captains of industry, several women workers had complained that 'they're being given medals. What have they done especially?' Likewise, factory women had little sympathy for the rich housewives' practice of keeping servants. In July 1936 workers asked what ought to be done in the case of housewives who had a servant, but no children: 'We don't have non-workers, but why are there wives ... who have a servant and don't themselves work?' Also in July 1936, low-paid housekeepers wrote to the Leningrad soviet to complain about their employers, the wives of engineers, some of whom even kept cooks and maids. According to these women, the wives were worse than the former 'ladies'.<sup>36</sup>

Obviously there was a difference between the well-off wives of engineers and the non-working wives of industrial workers who were forced into 'speculation', but evidently the whole concept of a non-working 'housewife' became tainted in the minds of some women workers desperate to find scapegoats for the dire economic conditions of the late 1930s.

### Regulating the family

Another important area of concern for women was the state's policy towards the institution of the family which underwent significant modification in this period. In 1934–35 a propaganda campaign began to promote traditional family values. The new official line was in part a reaction to the demographic havoc wrought by crash industrialisation, manifested in a steep rise in abortion and a decline in the birth rate.

The abolition of the women's departments had not helped, since these had been active in the struggle against terminations. Abortions were relatively cheap – about 28–32 rubles – and in the first half of the 1930s they far outstripped births in Leningrad (see Table 5.1).

Table 5.1 Abortions in Leningrad (per thousand people), 1930–34<sup>37</sup>

Year	Births	Legal abortions	Illegal abortions
1930	21.2	33.7	
1931	20.7	36.3	
1932	19.9	32.0	
1933	17.2	39.4	4.0
1934	15.9	43.2	5.0

Source: TsGAIPD, f. 25, o. 2, d. 80, ll. 63–6.

Similarly, after the introduction of 'postcard divorces' (which allowed one partner to divorce the other unilaterally provided their spouse was informed – often by postcard) in 1926, the number of divorces had escalated. In Leningrad in 1926 there were 3.61 divorces per thousand people. In 1927 this almost trebled to 9.84, and numbers reached a peak of 11.48 in 1928. After this the rate declined a little, but was still at a high level in 1934, when there were 5 divorces per thousand people (compared with 15.5 marriages).<sup>38</sup>

Pro-family propaganda on its own was unable to combat these trends and in 1936 more drastic measures were adopted. A draft decree on abortion and divorce was published on 26 May 1936. As well as outlawing abortion in all except potentially life-threatening cases, it envisaged greater maternity and nursery provision, more difficult and expensive divorce, and a crackdown on fathers evading alimony payments. The publication of the draft was followed by a public 'discussion', some of which was printed in the newspapers.<sup>39</sup> This was probably the most genuinely free public discussion in the period 1934–41, since as well as the usual enthusiastic endorsements, the papers also printed negative views, albeit in small numbers.

### Divorce and child support

The new draft decree proposed to increase the cost of divorce to 50 rubles for a first divorce, 150 for a second, and 300 for subsequent ones. It also required both partners to appear at the registry for the dissolution of their marriage and laid down strict rules on alimony payments. The proposals seem to have elicited much popular support,



especially among women, who usually suffered most from the breakdown of marriages, since they were left with children to support on a low or non-existent income. One survey of broken marriages from the end of the 1920s indicated that in 70 per cent of cases, divorce proceedings had been initiated by the man, and only 7 per cent by mutual consent.<sup>40</sup>

The reports on the discussion indicate that the clause on alimony was particularly welcomed by women. It required the parent to contribute a third of his/her income for one child, half for two, and 60 per cent for three or more. One woman said that her husband was always threatening to leave her and give 20 rubles for each of their three children. Now he would not go because he would have to pay a considerable sum. She ended, 'Thank you, Stalin, for caring for us and our children.'<sup>41</sup> Stalin, she implied, cared for women and children in ways that husbands and fathers did not. However, many were anxious about how the new system would work in practice. At all the factories similar questions were posed about the specifics of the draft decree: who would pay for the children when a father was imprisoned for two years? What would happen in the case of two or three women supposed to be receiving alimony from the same man? According to the draft, each should get a third to half his salary. Would this proportion have to be reduced? Would those already receiving maintenance have their current levels reviewed? Reflecting the cynicism many Soviet people felt about the implementation of laws in their country, most suggestions focused on the need to make the new law effective – it was one thing to make a law, and quite another to chase up all the errant fathers.<sup>42</sup>

Evidently the discussion had some impact on the drafting of the final version of the law. The proportion of income which had to be paid in alimony was reduced (a quarter rather than a third for one child, a third rather than a half for two and 50 per cent rather than 60 per cent for three or more). As a result of the new regulations, divorce declined in Leningrad, but so too did marriage. By 1939, the rates were not much better than in 1934 – about 3.5 marriages for every divorce.<sup>43</sup> The price of divorce was clearly not a sufficient deterrent. In 1944, new legislation was introduced to make the process more complicated and prohibitively expensive.

#### **Material provisions**

The draft decree also contained a package of measures designed to promote larger families, including new maternity leave regulations,

promises to extend childcare and maternity homes provision and increase state aid to mothers. Mothers of seven or more children were to be rewarded with generous allowances. Inevitably, some women workers argued that the provisions did not go far enough. In particular, it was felt that aid should be given to those with four or five children, and not just to those with seven or more (in the final law, the number was actually reduced from seven to six). Others volunteered suggestions: that food prices should be reduced to make things easier for families with many children; that pensions for children whose fathers had died should be increased; that the newborn's layette should be cheaper; and that payment for childcare should vary according to the size of the family.<sup>44</sup>

Hostility towards the new maternity leave regulations was expressed from some quarters. Previous legislation had entitled industrial workers and white-collar employees with physically-demanding jobs (an elastic category) to 16 weeks maternity leave, as opposed to the 12 weeks allotted to ordinary white-collar employees. Throughout the 1920s increasing numbers of white-collar employees had tried to argue that their jobs qualified them for the extra leave, and in practice increasing numbers of them were awarded it. Partly in order to formalise this, and partly because of the new general policy of eliminating affirmative action policies in favour of workers, the decree equalised maternity leave for all women in employment at 16 weeks.<sup>45</sup>

Doubtless this measure would have been welcomed by white-collar employees, but some blue-collar workers appear to have been less enthusiastic. One of them, Mitrofanova, argued that blue-collar workers should continue to be entitled to longer maternity leave in view of the arduous nature of their work: 'There's no point equating their work with ours. You shouldn't even compare them. I'm against giving white-collar employees 56 days maternity leave before the birth.' This reaction echoes many similar complaints about the shift from pro-worker affirmative action policies in this period. The abolition of rationing and of quotas for the children of workers in higher education elicited very similar responses.<sup>46</sup> Once again, class identity proved to be more resilient than that of gender.

#### **Abortion**

The most controversial aspect of the draft decree was the criminalisation of abortion. Clearly there were people, including women, who wholeheartedly endorsed the proposals for a variety of reasons. Some women evidently viewed the draft decree as empowering, as a weapon

to be used against their husbands. One worker said that her husband had always reproached her for not having abortions – now she would be able to pressurise him with the law.<sup>47</sup> Others advocated making the regulations even stricter, increasing the punishments for illegal abortion to five years; strengthening state surveillance of underground abortionists and lengthening their imprisonment; and taking legal measures against women who performed abortions on themselves.<sup>48</sup>

Another group of women, while not objecting to the principle of the draft decree, suggested modifications: allowing terminations in certain cases – when there was a risk of the transmission of hereditary diseases; after the fourth child; when a woman conceived again immediately after giving birth; and in the case of insufficient living space or low wages or an alcoholic husband. It was also suggested that girls who were not in registered marriages should also be allowed to have abortions.

Those women who objected to the draft decree usually did so on economic grounds. Women were driven to abortion in ever-increasing numbers mainly because of low wages and inadequate housing. The end of bread rations was an added disincentive to bear large families. One woman worker from Krasnyi Treugol'nik objected to the draft decree saying, 'I have four children and they are hungry. I've had abortions and will carry on having them by some means or other regardless of any bans.' Another, from Bol'shevichka, argued, 'How can you say no to an abortion when your family consists of five people and you have 14 metres living space?' Some denied that abortions were harmful, and argued that the material advantages they brought far outweighed any disadvantages. One said she had had 14 abortions with no ill effects. She was finding it hard to feed the two children she already had, and would not be having any more. Nazarova, from Krasnyi Treugol'nik, said: 'I think abortions even bring some benefit: I've had six abortions, don't have any children, my husband and I earn enough and we live in clover.'<sup>49</sup>

These women workers all approached the question pragmatically, defending their arguments on material grounds. Such an approach contrasted with that of some women members of the intelligentsia, who regarded the matter rather as one of principle. According to one, the draft decree 'enslaved women', for a big family would demand all the woman's time and deny her the chance to work like a man.<sup>50</sup> It is also striking that many of the critical letters published in the newspapers were from female students and members of the intelligentsia, who thought the criminalisation of abortion would prevent women from entering the world of work, and thus impede their liberation.

These opinions seem to be class specific – it is unlikely that working-class women viewed their work as anything more than a source of income.

Despite the criticisms and suggestions, the new legislation was enacted with only minor modifications (the suggestion to allow abortion in the case of a risk of the transmission of hereditary diseases was incorporated, for example). The number of both legal and illegal abortions declined immediately afterwards, but started to rise again later as the situation of women deteriorated, partly because of the shortages and preparations for war, but also because the new labour legislation of the pre-war period curtailed the rights of mothers. The 1938 labour decree specifically reduced maternity leave from 16 weeks to nine, and made it contingent on a prior period of seven consecutive months of employment. This seemed to fly in the face of all the pro-family propaganda and was resented by women workers, some of whom reacted by stating that they would not have any more children. One woman declared that Stalin must have gone mad to issue such a decree. Two female engineers expressed this general astonishment more eloquently: 'How disgraceful it is, after all the fuss that was made about the abortion law. Now thousands of women will mutilate themselves, deform themselves, as they are unwilling to give birth. What will happen now after this decree? Of course, the birth rate will fall sharply and there will be more torture for women.'<sup>51</sup> This prediction proved accurate.

The 1 September 1939 law on mobilisation obliged many women to take over men's places in the factory. However, little extra provision was made for children, and the lack of nursery places caused dissatisfaction. Two workers said, 'before issuing decrees like that, they should have made sure there were crèches for the little children'.<sup>52</sup> The June 1940 labour decree also made few allowances for women with children. Appalling cases were reported of women, who, unable to find places for their babies in crèches, or with sick children, were forced to leave work, were sentenced for doing so and were sometimes even sent to prison together with their children.<sup>53</sup>

In these unfavourable circumstances, abortions continued in the back streets. The figures vary a little from source to source, but provide a general impression of the dynamics of abortion of Leningrad in this period (see Table 5.2). Other statistics give slightly higher figures for the same years. They also show that the number of abortions, including those performed legally (there was a tendency to define the medical criteria necessitating abortion more broadly) continued to rise to 39 598 in 1939, falling slightly to 37 880 in 1940. The number of deaths from illegal abortions also increased, and in 1940 the press began to publicise the problem

Table 5.2 Abortions in Leningrad, 1936–38

	1936	1937	1938
Completed	43 999	1 879	3 728
Incomplete <sup>a</sup>	18 073	23 859	27 902
Died from abortion	114	160	238
Total	62 072	25 738	31 630

Note:

<sup>a</sup> Incomplete abortion refers to one begun outside the hospital, that is, in the majority of cases, an illegal abortion.

Source: TsGAIPD, f. 24, o. 2v, d. 3538, l. 107.

of backstreet abortions.<sup>54</sup> From 1938, the birth rate began to fall, and by 1940 it had reached its 1935 level again.<sup>55</sup>

## Conclusion

Women workers' attitudes to the policy of criminalising abortion, and to a range of Stalinist policies, were shaped by a recurrent theme: poverty and need. In this respect their attitudes did not differ markedly from those of many male workers in a similar economic position. It would be a mistake to try to differentiate too sharply the views of male and female workers. Both had limited opportunities for the expression of political opinions in the conditions of Stalinist Russia, both tended towards the discussion of relatively 'safe' local and everyday issues, both suffered similar economic privations.

What stands out in women's opinions, however, is the consistent reference to the welfare of the family. For a number of reasons, the family was seen as women's special realm, and women were aroused to comment on state policies when these appeared to have immediate repercussions for their families. They were thus more interested in consumption than production. Their main priorities were always how to feed, clothe and house their families.

Given that the legitimacy of the Stalinist system was based partly on its capacity to satisfy such basic needs, these were intensely political questions. Although women were not interested in politics in the way the regime defined it (they were reluctant to attend meetings, study Marxism-Leninism and so on), they were far from being apolitical. Indeed, their regular contact with the everyday realities of Stalinist

socialism made them particularly aware of and inclined to speak up about its shortcomings.

When addressing these shortcomings publicly, women exploited (consciously or unconsciously) the regime's own rhetoric of motherhood. This doubtless helped protect them against charges of being disloyal or anti-Soviet. Portraying themselves as mothers, they asserted certain responsibilities and rights which increased the legitimacy of their complaints and requests.

The available evidence suggests that when they referred to themselves as 'we women' or 'we mothers' their solidarity was with other women workers, rather than with white-collar employees or non-working women, whom they dismissed as 'speculators' and 'housewives'. In a society where the language of class had such resonance, gender identity reinforced and overlapped with class identity rather than superseding it.

## Notes

- 1 For a discussion of the sources used, see the introduction to S. Davies, *Popular Opinion in Stalin's Russia* (Cambridge, 1997). This chapter is a slightly revised version of chapter 3 of that book.
- 2 TsGAIPD, f. 24, o. 2v, d. 1366, ll. 82–90; *Leningrad v tsifrakh* (Leningrad, 1935, 1936 and 1938)
- 3 Cited in J. Evans, 'The Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the Women's Question: the Case of the 1936 Decree "In Defence of Mother and Child"', *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 16, no. 4, 1981, p. 766.
- 4 S. Fitzpatrick, *The Cultural Front: Power and Culture in Revolutionary Russia* (London, 1992) pp. 231–3. See also Chapter 1 by Carmen Scheide and Chapter 8 by Mary Buckley in this volume.
- 5 D. Hoffmann, *Peasant Metropolis: Social Identities in Moscow 1929–1941* (London, 1994) pp. 119–24. See also Chapter 4 in this volume by Wendy Goldman.
- 6 TsGAIPD, f. 24, o. 2v, d. 1366, ll. 83–4.
- 7 *Ibid.*, ll. 89–90.
- 8 TsGAIPD, f. 24, o. 2b, d. 548, l. 34.
- 9 TsGAIPD, f. 24, o. 2v, d. 1366, ll. 84–5, 87.
- 10 TsGAIPD, f. 25, o. 5, d. 83, l. 7; f. 24, o. 2v, d. 2286, l. 77; f. 24, o. 2v, d. 2282, l. 66; f. 24, o. 2v, d. 3634, l. 24.
- 11 TsGAIPD, f. 1200, o. 3, d. 129, l. 98.
- 12 Hoffmann, *op. cit.*, p. 144.
- 13 D. Koenker, 'Men against Women on the Shop Floor in Early Soviet Russia: Gender and Class in the Soviet Workplace', *American Historical Review*, vol. 100, no. 5, 1995, p. 1443, notes that in the 1920s women were also more likely to speak up at factory meetings about questions of everyday life.
- 14 TsGAIPD, f. K598, o. 1, d. 5407, l. 22.

- 15 TsGAIPD, f. 24, o. 5, d. 2286, l. 10.  
 16 TsGAIPD, f. 25, o. 5, d. 46, ll. 62–3.  
 17 TsGAIPD, f. 24, o. 2v, d. 2064, l. 46.  
 18 For example, T. Kaplan, 'Female Consciousness and Collective Action: the Case of Barcelona, 1910–18', *Signs*, vol. 7, 1982, pp. 545–66; O. Hufton, 'Women and the Family Economy in Eighteenth-century France', *French Historical Studies*, vol. 9, no. 1, 1975, pp. 1–22.  
 19 B. Engel, 'Women, Men, and the Languages of Peasant Resistance, 1870–1907', in S. Frank and M. Steinberg (eds), *Cultures in Flux* (Princeton, New Jersey, 1994) pp. 34–53.  
 20 L. Viola, *Peasant Rebels under Stalin* (New York, 1996) ch. 6.  
 21 E. Osokina, *Za fasadom 'Stalinskogo izobiliya'* (Moscow, 1998) pp. 81–3; J. Rossman, 'The Teikovo Cotton Workers' Strike of April 1932: Class, Gender and Identity Politics in Stalin's Russia', *Russian Review*, vol. 56, no. 1, 1997, pp. 44–69.  
 22 TsGAIPD, f. 24, o. 2v, d. 2487, passim; f. 24, o. 2v, d. 2490, passim; f. 24, o. 2v, d. 2491, l. 130ob.  
 23 L. Rimmel, 'Another Kind of Fear: the Kirov Murder and the End of Bread Rationing in Leningrad', *Slavic Review*, vol. 56, no. 3, 1997, pp. 484–5.  
 24 TsGAIPD, f. 24, o. 5, d. 2286, ll. 45–6; f. 25, o. 5, d. 48, ll. 52–3; f. 25, o. 5, d. 45, l. 73.  
 25 TsGAIPD, f. 24, o. 2v, d. 1373, l. 2.  
 26 *Ibid.*, l. 43.  
 27 TsGAIPD, f. 25, o. 5, d. 83, l. 5.  
 28 TsGAIPD, f. 24, o. 2v, d. 1366, ll. 27–8.  
 29 *Ibid.*, l. 8.  
 30 TsGAIPD, f. 25, o. 5, d. 83, l. 6.  
 31 TsGAIPD, f. 24, o. 10, d. 255, l. 11.  
 32 TsGAIPD, f. 24, o. 2g, d. 149, l. 129.  
 33 *Ibid.*  
 34 TsGAIPD, f. 2, o. 2, d. 618, l. 245.  
 35 TsGAIPD, f. 24, o. 2g, d. 149, l. 129.  
 36 TsGAIPD, f. 25, o. 10, d. 27, l. 42; f. 25, o. 10, d. 35, l. 49; f. 24, o. 2v, d. 1607, l. 213; f. 24, o. 2v, d. 1748, l. 166–7.  
 37 Abortion statistics, especially those for illegal abortions, are notoriously unreliable.  
 38 TsGAIPD, f. 24, o. 2v, d. 1180, l. 54.  
 39 Evans, *op. cit.*, pp. 757–75.  
 40 R. Stites, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Russia* (Princeton, New Jersey, 1978) pp. 371, 384.  
 41 TsGAIPD, f. 24, o. 2v, d. 1598, l. 237.  
 42 *Ibid.*, ll. 243–4. Some men objected to aspects of the draft decree, arguing that women could abuse it by demanding alimony from several 'fathers'. Workers at Pechatnyi dvor also suggested that women should be required by law to stay with their children: 'In the draft decree there is nothing about the mother's responsibility for the fate of her child. Tarasova, the storeman's wife, left him with four children and has disappeared.' *Ibid.*, ll. 242–4.  
 43 TsGAIPD, f. 24, o. 2v, d. 2500, l. 94; f. 24, o. 2v, d. 3540, l. 63.  
 44 TsGAIPD, f. 24, o. 2v, d. 1598, l. 240.

- 45 See M. Ilic, *Women Workers in the Soviet Interwar Economy* (London, 1999) ch. 5 for a review of the legislative changes.  
 46 See Davies, *Popular Opinion*, p. 71.  
 47 TsGAIPD, f. 24, o. 2v, d. 1598, l. 238.  
 48 *Ibid.*, l. 240.  
 49 TsGAIPD, f. 24, o. 2v, d. 1598, l. 246.  
 50 *Ibid.*, ll. 237–46.  
 51 TsGAIPD, f. 24, o. 2v, d. 3721, l. 137; f. 2, o. 2, d. 618, ll. 346–7; f. 24, o. 2v, d. 3547, ll. 117–18.  
 52 TsGAIPD, f. 24, o. 2v, d. 3499, ll. 113–14.  
 53 TsGAIPD, f. 24, o. 2v, d. 4313, ll. 238–9.  
 54 TsGAIPD, f. 24, o. 2v, d. 4829, ll. 3–5 (this same report recommended producing more condoms to fight abortion. In 1939, 10 425 condoms were sold in Leningrad, compared with only 2591 in 1940); *Leningradskaya Pravda*, 21 July 1940.  
 55 TsGAIPD, f. 25, o. 2a, d. 110, l. 3; f. 24, o. 2v, d. 4285, l. 59; W. Goldman, *Women, the State and Revolution* (Cambridge, 1993) p. 293.