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# **A Marxist Analysis of Women's Labor in the Soviet Union**

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## Abstract

This thesis examines the evolution of Soviet women's labor and labor laws through a Marxist lens, emphasizing the contributions of Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, and Vladimir Lenin. It explores the ideological foundations of communism concerning gender equality and the legislative measures taken by the Soviet Union to emancipate women from traditional capitalist oppression. The analysis reveals significant advancements in women's rights, such as legal equality and protection in the workforce, yet highlights the inconsistencies and challenges, particularly under Stalin's regime, where ideological shifts and practical enforcement diverged from Marxist principles. The research utilizes historical documents, legislative texts, and scholarly analyses to trace the trajectory of women's roles in Soviet society from the early 20th century through World War II. Despite progressive laws, cultural and societal norms often undermined these efforts, leaving a gap between theoretical equality and practical reality. This study underscores the complexities of implementing communist ideologies in a patriarchal society and offers a nuanced understanding of the successes and limitations of Soviet women's emancipation. Ultimately, it contributes to the broader discourse on gender equality within socialist frameworks and the intersection of political theory and practical governance.

## **Communist Theory on Gender Equality**

Vladimir Lenin, the Revolutionary, proclaimed a new communist state in 1917, a state belonging to the soviet workers and peasants, completely independent from the oppression of the capitalists and the Bourgeois. However, the ideology of the Soviet Union would not exist if it weren't for the political philosophy of the 19th-century theorists Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels and their creation of what we now know as communism. The idea of the eradication of private property, classes, and overall oppression has been the groundwork for modern capitalism. This political theory was the most significant contribution to Vladimir Lenin's political philosophy for creating the Soviet Union during the Russian Revolution of 1917. The Soviet Union was the first nation in history to declare itself as a socialist state ruled by Vladimir Lenin, who theorized the ideology of Marxism-Leninism, the concept that communism needed two steps to begin: a revolution and a proletariat socialist dictatorship. But why was the Soviet Union a self-proclaimed socialist state rather than a communist state when communist literature was so prevalent in creating the Soviet Union? The reasoning lies with Marx's theory, which states that the first step of communism is socialism. According to Marx, the first step after the abolishment of capitalism still has "bourgeois laws" set in place to gradually and successfully take the means of production and convert private property to common property, thus defining socialism as having remnants of capitalism.

But one remnant of capitalism that Vladimir Lenin refused to "gradually" transform was the oppression of women. The communist ideology, especially that of Lenin, was what inspired the Soviet Communist Party to take steps in emancipating women from their gendered oppression through a prior feudal society where the proletariat, especially women, were

treated horrifically and viewed as a backward society by the rest of Europe. The Soviet Union created the most gender equality in their labor laws through communist theory compared to any other European nation at the time.

This thesis provides a Marxist analysis of Soviet women's labor pertaining to laws and domestic labor in the early 20th century, focusing on the ideologies of Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, and Vladimir Lenin. My main argument is that while the Soviet Union made significant strides toward gender equality through legislative measures and labor policies, these efforts were often inconsistent and fraught with contradictions, particularly under Stalin's regime. My analysis relies on historical documents, legislative texts, and scholarly interpretations to examine the theoretical underpinnings and practical applications of communist principles concerning women's emancipation. The rest of the paper explores the foundational theories of Marx and Engels on women's roles in society, followed by Lenin's implementation of these ideas during the formation of the Soviet state. Subsequent sections turn to the legislative changes and their impacts on women's labor rights, the sociopolitical challenges women faced, and the ultimate discrepancies between communist theory and the lived realities of Soviet women. The goal of this paper is to uncover hidden histories about the Soviet Union's relationship with women's emancipation and the process of emancipation through communism.

### **Karl Marx**

Karl Marx's *Communist Manifesto* was the birthplace of the communist political theory that shaped the foundation of the Soviet Union. In his writings in the *Communist Manifesto*, he

described what women's role was in the capitalist bourgeoisie society as that of instruments for their husbands. Instruments of household labor include cooking, cleaning, unpaid childbirth and care, and sexual availability. In the bourgeois society, women are not seen as equal to men but as tools of production for men to exploit, just as how lower-class men are exploited by the bourgeois and the capitalists. Women are inherently within the proletariat in capitalist society due to their societal oppression, and Marx claims that communism aims to eliminate the modern industry status of women as "mere instruments of production."<sup>1</sup>

A standard critique of Marx's writings is that he shames women who are in the prostitution industry, which doesn't align with many modern feminist movements. My interpretation of his discussion of prostitution is not that it is to shame women who are prostitutes but to call out the capitalist agenda and the exploitation of women and their bodies. Prostitution signifies the exploitation of a woman's body. It exploits the emotional labor of a wife who is a victim of adultery, which is prevalent in bourgeois society and has roots in misogyny. In a communist society, Marx states that no one will be exploited based on their body, no matter if it is prostitution, slavery, or child labor. Despite the lack of explicit mention of women's rights in the *Communist Manifesto*, it is inherent to the foundation of removing society from capitalism and moving it into the phases of communism.

### **Friedrich Engels**

Engels plays a more significant role in Lenin's theory than in Marx's writings due to Engels' more defined conceptions of communism. Based on the state's function, Engels'

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," n.d. p. 10.

writings are more centered on the economics and principles of communism. His descriptions of the economic consequences of revolution and the abolition of private property help visualize the effects of communism that are more applicable than the philosophical communist writings of Marx. When establishing the Soviet Union, Lenin leaned more toward Engels' political theory to describe the intentions of the industrial revolution in Russia.<sup>2</sup>

When it came to women's role in communism, Engels' perspective on women's state in bourgeois society was virtually identical to Marx's view. According to Engels, communism disrupts the prior functions of traditional marriage: "the dependence rooted in private property, of the woman on the man, and of the children on the parents."<sup>3</sup> The abolition of the "community of women" is a distinct consequence of communism, according to Marx and Engels, which suggests the elimination of prostitution and is a prime example of women's exploitation of their production by men. The downfall of the bourgeois brings prostitution and adultery along with it and creates women equal to their male counterparts. "Community of women" does not suggest any group of women who decide to come together but refers to the women who are exploited by bourgeois men, which is a prime example of class oppression that would vanish under communism.

### **Vladimir Lenin**

In Lenin's 1917 *The State and Revolution*, he states that the rest of Europe has grossly misinterpreted, undermined, and hypocritically claimed the writings of Karl Marx. He was

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<sup>2</sup> Vladimir Il'ich Lenin, "The State and Revolution," Penguin Twentieth-Century Classics (London ; Penguin, 1992)

<sup>3</sup> Friedrich Engels, "The Principles of Communism," n.d. p.9.

determined to re-establish the work of Marx and Engels and create a society of their image completely separate from the prevailing ruling capitalist society. Lenin was inspired by Engels' writings when it came to the act of revolution. Engels believed in the "abolishment" of the state rather than Marx's theory of "withering away" the state. Replacing the bourgeois state with the proletariat state was Lenin's interpretation of "abolishing the state as state," which removes the "special coercive force" described as Engels' definition of states. Lenin believed that when the revolution happened, a transition period needed to take place, "the transition from capitalist society to communist society is impossible without a "political transition period," and the state in this period can only be the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat."<sup>4</sup>

Women play a significant role in abolishing the ways of a state that is a "special coercive force." By being a part of the means of production and seizing that from the capitalists as proletarians and peasants, they can be a part of a society without class. Lenin ideally believed that an entire society must participate for the state to be able to wither away. Women in pre-Soviet Russia were a significantly oppressed group, and without the emancipation of women, the transition to communism would not have been legitimate. Lenin found it vital that women were conscious of their connection with communism and removed all legal restrictions that prevented women from having an equal economic basis as men in 1917.<sup>5</sup> Lenin's views on women differ from those of Marx and Engels, which are solely based on his view of women as explicitly part of the labor force.

During the First All-Russia Congress of Working Women, Lenin shared his political

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<sup>4</sup> Lenin, "The State and Revolution," p.13.

<sup>5</sup> Alice Schuster, "Women's Role in the Soviet Union: Ideology and Reality," *The Russian Review* 30, no. 3 (1971): 260–67, p. 260. <https://doi.org/10.2307/128134>.

opinion on the oppression of women around the world:

In all civilized countries, even the most advanced, women are no more than domestic enslaved people. Women do not enjoy full equality in any capitalist state, not even in the freest of republics. One of the primary tasks of the Soviet Republic is to abolish all restrictions on women's rights.<sup>6</sup>

While Lenin urged women to participate in the communist goal of a proletariat regime and complete equality through law, he wanted to keep up men's ideals of a communist revolution. Women were expected to be followers and participants in a communist society but continued to be politically and ideologically ruled by men; decisions were made for women, not by women, which is a controversial aspect of the Russian women's liberation movement. From a feminist viewpoint, women's inability to make labor and law decisions for themselves caused issues surrounding bodily and political autonomy that were not part of Lenin's process of creating emancipation for women in the Soviet Union.

### **Nadezhda Krupskaya and Marxist-Feminism**

Nadezhda Krupskaya was an essential figure within the Bolshevik Party and the wife of Lenin. She tackled the topic of the "woman question," which was the first piece of its kind in Russia. She describes the unique conditions of the working woman who must endure the burden of domestic labor and wage labor that men within the capitalist society invalidate. She emphasizes Marxist theory on women's emancipation by promoting a culture of socialism that creates safe and rewarding work environments and a culture that takes care of the underprivileged by providing education and assistance. To obtain a condition that does not rely

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<sup>6</sup> Schuster, "Women's Role in the Soviet Union," p.261.

on financial dependence while working in the factory and the home, women must include themselves in the proletariat's struggle against the bourgeoisie.<sup>7</sup>

While Krupskaya was an early female writer on Marxism and women, other Marxist theories also focus on combating capitalism through the lens of feminism. Federici, a contemporary Marxist-feminist, critiques Marx: "Marx's analysis on capitalism has been hampered by his inability to conceive of value-producing work other than in the form of commodity production and his consequent blindness to the significance of women's unpaid reproductive work in the process of capitalist accumulation."<sup>8</sup> Marxist theory shows little interest in women's involvement, which Marxist feminists critique since women are dealt with not just in the production of capital but also in the reproduction of labor power through having children, being teachers, and being nurses. These qualities that are framed for women are seen as free labor and underpaid labor that enslave women in capitalist society. Marxism must incorporate reproductive labor to fully revolutionize capitalism and show how it has transformed into the 21st century compared to the 19th and 20th centuries.<sup>9</sup>

### **1910s and 1920s**

The October Russian Revolution created opportunities for legislation granting Russian women legally equal status with their male counterparts. However, there were many different

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<sup>7</sup> Alena Heitlinger, "Women and State Socialism: Sex Inequality in the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia" (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1979). & N K Krupskaya, "The Woman Worker" (Manifesto Press Cooperative Limited, 2017).

<sup>8</sup> "Federici, The Reproduction of Labor Power in the Global Economy.Pdf: SPST: Karl Marx & Rad Pol Thou 002 Spring 2024," accessed May 24, 2024, [https://canvas.pdx.edu/courses/86904/files/10650462?module\\_item\\_id=3926194](https://canvas.pdx.edu/courses/86904/files/10650462?module_item_id=3926194). p. 92.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p. 96-100.

struggles when it came to making an equal society from a harsh history of oppression by the Tsarist regime. Women all across Russia were uneducated and apolitical. The cultural perspectives on women were heavily sexist, and a reluctance of feminism created intense challenges when making laws applicable. Creating a new structure of government in a country defined by poverty, economic crisis, and illiteracy that spanned over 14 million square miles was a daunting task for Lenin and his reconstruction plans after a destructive civil war.

The immediate years following 1917 were the most progressive for women's rights in the Soviet Union and Europe. With the assistance of women's movements in the Soviet Union, such as the Bolshevik feminists, the First Congress of Peasants and Working Women emerged in November 1918. This First Congress had seven objectives on their agenda, which included: "the relationship between the family and the Bolshevik government, the social security of women, the international proletarian revolution and the woman worker, the organizational question, the struggle against prostitution, the struggle against child labor, and the housing question."<sup>10</sup> The work of the Bolshevik feminists is not to be overlooked, as their efforts often were in the women's emancipation movement. However, without their efforts for women's mobilization, Lenin and the entire Bolshevik party would not have put women's rights at the forefront of Soviet legislation.

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<sup>10</sup> Gail Warshofsky Lapidus, "Women in Soviet Society: Equality, Development, and Social Change" (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978).

## Lenin Era Policies

From 1917 to 1924, Vladimir Lenin created many policies regarding women's rights, from the fundamental right to equality and work to the protection of women in labor.

Chronologically, here are some of the most significant legislative changes that occurred during the creation of the Soviet Union:

**Decree of the Council of People's Commissars of November 11th, 1917** - the order of an eight-hour workday for everyone and banning night work, overtime work, and underground assignments for women. This was an effort to protect women and their labor, but it was highly unenforced and ineffective. A proper analysis of the effectiveness of this decree was not accessed, and many employers disregarded this early decree. The decree has been the most revised labor document in the Soviet Union.<sup>11</sup>

**First Soviet Constitution (1918)** - the first Soviet Constitution proclaimed the equality of all Soviet citizens regardless of sex, race, and nationality in Article 22. In Article 64, women had the right to have equal political footing as men to be able to elect or be elected.<sup>12</sup>

**1918 Labor Code** - this legislation gave everyone the right and obligation to work, which meant that non-disabled women were obligated to work unless they were eight weeks before or after giving birth. This code also gave protective measures for women, similar to the 1917 decree that stated that women should not be employed to work nights and overtime or in occupations that negatively affected their health. The 1918 code also gave specific maternity

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<sup>11</sup> Norton T. Dodge, "Women in the Soviet Economy; Their Role in Economic, Scientific, and Technical Development," (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1966), p.57.

<sup>12</sup> Schuster, "Women's Role in the Soviet Union," p. 260.

coverages for insurance and extra work breaks for nursing mothers.<sup>13</sup>

**Zhenotdel (1919)** - A women's section of the Bolshevik party was established to increase communist participation and mobilization amongst women workers and peasants, especially women from rural areas. This organization encouraged women masses to liberate themselves from domestic and family servitude to work in Soviet society and spread communist propaganda to create a cultural standard for women. The Zhenotdel emphasized the need for women to be free from public and private oppression in all forms using legal and social means. Unfortunately, they promoted culturally changing other groups residing in the Soviet Union, disregarding their religious backgrounds, especially Muslims living in the Central Asian part of Russia, due to their perspective of religious oppression of women.<sup>14</sup>

**Decree on Universal Literacy (1919)** - the beginning of eliminating illiteracy in Russia, which initiated the abolishment of payments for all forms of education, including higher education. The decree doubled the number of university students each year, reaching about 117,000, but the dropout rate was high due to the lack of adult secondary education. Special departments were then created to assist young workers in preparing for higher education, and the state gave them grants and food rations.<sup>15</sup>

**All Russia Extraordinary Commission for Eliminating Illiteracy (1920)** - following the Decree on Universal Literacy, this policy opened up more educational facilities across Russia and allocated finances such as supplies, textbooks, and fuel. While enduring civil war and famine, this policy stayed in place to prioritize educating citizens. A common slogan of the time

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<sup>13</sup> Dodge, "Women in the Soviet Economy; Their Role in Economic, Scientific, and Technical Development," p.58.

<sup>14</sup> Heitlinger, "Women and State Socialism," p.58.

<sup>15</sup> Vishneva-Sarafanova, "Soviet Women, a Portrait," p.39-42.

was, "Every person who can read and write must teach someone who can't." This program eliminated Russian illiteracy by the 1930s, even though a Russian periodical in 1912 estimated that it would take 4,600 years to eliminate universal illiteracy in Turkestan and 280 years for women in Russia to become literate. Nevertheless, this policy had a highly impressive outcome for the future of the citizens of the Soviet Union.<sup>16</sup>

**1922 Labor Code** - Similar to the 1918 Labor Code, this code also gave many protections for women that were a staple in Soviet legislation during the pre-World War II era. Women's obligated labor service was shortened to ages 18-40 compared to men, whose age limit was 45. More protections were added for women, including the exclusion of heavy and detrimental work. They revised existing exclusions about night work, unhealthy working conditions, underground work, and the protection of pregnant and breastfeeding mothers. This code also established social insurance covering missing maternity leave wages and supplementary payments for mothers. Unfortunately, the rules on social insurance were written vaguely in the code.<sup>17</sup>

**Reforms** - some of Lenin's reforms include:

(1) the consistent facilitation of working conditions for women and providing them with relatively easier jobs; (2) increased labor protection for pregnant women, nursing mothers, and women with children under one year of age, lower work quotas for them; (3) the constant increase of social maternity relief through allowances, privileges in pension receipts, a widened network of maternity and child welfare institutions, and nursery and extra school establishments; (4) comprehensive legal protection of women's equality in all spheres of social life, systematic supervision and control by the state and trade unions of the observance of legislation on women's labor rights and on special protection of their labor.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid p.39.

<sup>17</sup> Dodge, "Women in the Soviet Economy; Their Role in Economic, Scientific, and Technical Development," p.61-62

<sup>18</sup> K.B. Usha, "Political Empowerment of Women in Soviet Union and Russia," accessed October 24, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1177/002088170404200203>, p. 146.

These labor laws for women were highly progressive during the 1920s during a civil war, but most were more utopian than realistic. As women were considered entirely equal to men on paper and in the eyes of the Bolshevik party, the reality of labor analysis showed very little enforcement of these laws, and many sources have conflicting accounts of women's manual labor. Some describe the process of researching maternal health impacts in working conditions that involve harsh chemicals, heavy lifting, and physically unsafe working conditions. Other sources describe the number of women who worked in mines, agriculture, and factories. Many historical analyses show that women took part in strenuous manual labor and were downgraded to less skilled jobs, especially in the 1930s and during World War II. The economic and cultural state of the Soviet Union was not as accepting of Communist ideology as the Bolshevik party anticipated for their proletariat regime.

### **Lack of Political Power for Women**

While women were given equal labor rights, they were not given equal political rights and opportunities. One of Lenin's failures during his tenure was the lack of political promotion and leadership of women in the Politburo. The Zhenotdel was seen as a separate entity with its own elected committee, but women were not present in the upper positions of the Soviet government. Women's political positions were at a standstill in local and regional governments, with only 9% of personnel being women in 1917. In the early Stalin years, women's emancipation and political participation were put to an end in the political agenda of the communist party because Stalin viewed the "woman question" as resolved and irrelevant. Soon enough, Stalin realized the importance of women in mobilizing all workers in his forced

industrialization through the 5-Year Plan, which resulted in the creation of the propaganda department's Zhensektory (women's sections).<sup>19</sup>

Even though the number of women working increased, women's political participation was disproportionately represented. The communist party itself only had roughly 8 percent female communists in 1922, and women's membership only increased to 13.7 percent by 1929 compared to 86.3 percent male membership.<sup>20</sup> The most controversial aspect of the lack of women in government was the decisions made in legislation by men on behalf of women. Women were not allowed to be a part of the decision-making process on their emancipation and for the laws that directly affected their roles in society and the Soviet agenda.

### **Russian Culture**

The most significant obstacle that women faced, especially in the 1920s, was the culture of Russia. Even though women were seen as equal to men from a legal standpoint, women continued to face oppression in their daily lives. Working men did not see women as equal counterparts in the workforce and were known to harass women workers viciously. As more women entered the workforce, men continued to have the old mindset of male superiority, ensuring they had the highest, most skilled positions. This made it extremely difficult for women to gain leadership positions, even though they eventually comprised over half of the Soviet workforce. Despite the ideology of the communist government, the cultural attitudes superseded the daily lives of Russian women by being seen as the weaker and more

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<sup>19</sup> Usha, "Political Empowerment of Women in Soviet Union and Russia," p. 148.

<sup>20</sup> Heitlinger, "Women and State Socialism," p.105.

uneducated sex.

Even though the Zhenotdel of the Bolshevik party strived to emancipate women from the labor of the home that Lenin labeled as “domestic slaves,” there were not any effective policies to guarantee the equal division of labor behind closed doors. The culture of Russian men was not to help their wives with domestic labor, thus forcing women to work double tasks because they were also expected to work as hard as men in the factories and fields.<sup>21</sup>

According to a paper by Morozova et al., the most oppressive job that a woman could have in the 1920s was that of a rural teacher. Due to the inflation caused by the Civil War, wages dropped to virtually nothing. Still, they were significantly more burdensome for primary school teachers in rural areas who, on average, would make 52-85 rubles compared to the 60-102 rubles inner city teachers would earn. Rural teachers were also impacted by “economic boycotts” from rich peasants who denied Soviet ideologies and state initiatives and refused to sell products to teachers that symbolized the state. Women made up 60% of all teachers in the Soviet Union which made them more vulnerable to harassment and rape in areas that rejected Soviet intentions. The challenges and oppression of women teachers caused a spike in suicide rates and starvation. A heavy revolutionary burden was put on young women who were striving to be independent and liberated, but this was difficult for Soviet-party representative teachers not just due to the disapproval of Soviet governmental and societal changes but because of the negative perspective of femininity as being weak, vulnerable, and subhuman which was still a

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<sup>21</sup> Schuster, “Women’s Role in the Soviet Union,” p. 265-266

primary cultural view in rural Russian areas that were strong with conservative ideologies and illiteracy.<sup>22</sup>

### **1930's and 1940's**

The beginning of the Stalin regime forced women's liberation to take a different approach due to his differing values of women compared to Lenin's. Surprisingly, Stalin's political beliefs about women made women more politically active compared to the early 20s due to the persistent cultural belief that women were a weaker class. During Stalin's reign, World War II had the most impactful effect on women's labor in the Soviet Union. Like most of the world during that time, women occupied the workforce more than ever before due to men being drafted and deployed into war. The Soviet Union experienced a significant decrease in the male population, which made most women stay in occupational positions. This change changed the gender dynamic of labor and continued to increase the female workforce even after the war.

It is also essential to describe the meaning and mechanics of the Soviet Constitution, which is based on the liberal granting of personal freedoms, compared to the intentions of the United States Constitution, which protects citizens against the government. The use of positive rights in the Soviet Constitution is essential when observing Russian women's natural treatment and culture. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, "although the 1936 Constitution ( a new Constitution is planned) provides liberal guarantees of personal freedom to the citizens of

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<sup>22</sup> Olga M. Morozova et al., "Labor as freedom, labor as burden': on the early period of women's professional employment in Russia," *RUDN Journal of Russian History* 18, no. 2 (December 15, 2019): 374–411, <https://doi.org/10.22363/2312-8674-2019-18-2-374-411>, p. 401-408.

the U.S.S.R., its provisions frequently have been disregarded by Soviet authorities".<sup>23</sup> There were many liberating rights in the Soviet Constitution, including rights to rest and leisure, the right to maintenance at an old age, the right to education, equal rights for women, and freedom of conscience. Still, there was also a strong sense of accountability when it came to holding up the societal and cultural standards of the socialist system and leading political parties. Freedom of speech was not to be used to criticize the government and was supposed to be in the interests of the workers; organizations also were not to be formed without the approval of the government, which was later fought against as women created political organizations of their own when Stalin abolished the *Zhenotdel*.

### **Stalin's Forced Industrialization**

The impact of Stalin's forced industrialization showed many contradictions within historical discourse. The 1920s confidently showcased significant improvements for women's "right" to work through legislation and Lenin's ideology of equality but significantly underperformed in the number of female workers and to gain women's trade education to enter the workforce successfully. Regarding Stalin's First Five-Year Plan, historical retellings of the late 1920s and early 1930s started to get blurry with contradicting perspectives on whether or not Stalin's early regime change benefited women.<sup>24</sup> According to some sources, Stalin did

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<sup>23</sup>Anne S. Kahl, "Labor Law and Practice in the U.S.S.R.," BLS Report ; No. 270 (Washington, D.C: U.S. Dept. of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1964), p. 20.

<sup>24</sup> Stalin's First Five-Year Plan was the first of a consecutive cycle of Five-Year Plans that established the rapid economic growth of the Soviet Union with the use of agriculture, steel, fuel extraction, and energy that was first established in 1928. This Five-Year Plan created a high demand for jobs and the participation of women to showcase the economic strength of the Soviet Union. "Industrialization and Collectivization - Adventures in the

not continue the efforts of Lenin to encourage labor equality between men and women by stating that the “woman question” was solved and abolished the *Zhenotdel*, which stopped any female empowerment and organization within the government.<sup>25</sup>

According to other sources, the First Five-Year Plan created a massive labor shortage that encouraged women’s increased employment and trade education and “(planned) to draw 4,400,000 women, formerly not employed, into production”.<sup>26</sup> To promote the success of the Five-Year Plan, a manifesto was issued on September 3rd, 1930, to create jobs reserved for women and raise the quotas for young girls in vocational schools and occupational training.<sup>27</sup> Other legislation in the 1930s showed a demand for women’s participation in industrialization without the explicit intention of women’s emancipation but created more opportunities compared to the early 1920s, which continued to have male hegemony in the workplace. Granted, Stalin wanted to create more male domination in the Soviet Union but was slightly unsuccessful due to women flooding into the workforce and changing the gender dynamic of the workforce, but was still successful by maintaining the male hegemonic ladder within workplace hierarchies. By 1950, 47% of the workforce in the U.S.S.R. were women compared to 25% in 1922, but this is due to several factors unrelated to women’s emancipation through communism.<sup>28</sup>

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Soviet Imaginary: - The University of Chicago Library,” accessed April 2, 2024,  
<https://www.lib.uchicago.edu/collex/exhibits/soviet-imaginary/technology/industrialization-and-collectivization/>.

<sup>25</sup> Engel, “Women in Russia, 1700-2000,” p. 173.; Usha, “Political Empowerment of Women in Soviet Union and Russia,” p. 148.

<sup>26</sup> Vishneva-Sarafanova, “Soviet Women, a Portrait,” p. 53.

<sup>27</sup> Dodge, “Women in the Soviet Economy; Their Role in Economic, Scientific, and Technical Development,” p. 63.

<sup>28</sup> Heitlinger, “Women and State Socialism,” p. 97.

Further into the 1930s, the execution of the five-year plans showed contradictions with the 1922 labor codes that restricted women from doing underground and night work. As Stalin's industrialization plans created more demand for labor, labor unions demanded the relief of restrictions put on women to have more people working. Scientific studies at the time showed results that there were no health discrepancies that affected women's reproductive health, which was the initial reason for not allowing women to do underground or night work. Other sources show that scientific initiatives in 1932 created lists of more than 80 occupations that were made illegal for women to work due to reproductive health concerns (e.g., underground mining, sea fishing ships, chemical factories).<sup>29</sup> Even though scientific studies contradicted each other throughout the 1930s, many sources claim that enforcement mechanisms were almost non-existent. Thus, while documents indicated restrictions on women's work environments, those codes and regulations were often broken. Affirmative action was also set in place to expand women's participation in the workforce and encouraged an expansion of training for women. Unfortunately, as is commonly seen, women were making 60% of what men earned even though discrimination based on sex in wages was outlawed by legislation and the Constitution in the 1920s.<sup>30</sup>

Other essential protections for women included guaranteed wages for six months and guaranteed replacement work when scientific studies take place in occupations that could be added to the list of banned occupations. In practice, however, this protection was questionable, considering the lack of enforcement and Stalin's agenda of forced industrialization. There was

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<sup>29</sup> Vishneva-Sarafanova, "Soviet Women, a Portrait," p. 78.

<sup>30</sup> Dodge, "Women in the Soviet Economy; Their Role in Economic, Scientific, and Technical Development," p. 63.

also an expectation amongst Soviet women that technology would increase at a pace where women would be capable of entering dangerous jobs again without the physical demand and danger of controlling machinery. It was illegal for an employer to fire or refuse to hire pregnant or nursing mothers; this was important for sustaining nondiscriminatory laws and having a larger workforce to grow the soviet economy.

### **Labor During WWII**

World War II drastically changed the dynamic of gendered labor. The Soviet Union experienced significant casualties of men, which created more demand for women in the workforce during and after the war to replenish the Soviet economy. Some scholars have noted the impact of the war on women's emancipation. "The Marxian doctrine of the equality of the sexes was made effective to an extraordinary degree" based on the more significant percentage of women assigned to work as factory workers, construction workers, miners, welders, and in other positions traditionally seen as "male" jobs.<sup>31</sup> Legislation was enacted during the war to lift restrictions on banned occupations such as mining, river transport, and locomotive engineers. This allowed women to replace men as they were sent to conduct military service.<sup>32</sup> 1945 showed the highest percentage of women in the U.S.S.R. labor force, with 56% (15,920,000) of the overall labor force being women. By 1950, 46% of the manufacturing industry was occupied by women.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Schuster, "Women's Role in the Soviet Union," p.263.

<sup>32</sup> Dodge, "Women in the Soviet Economy; Their Role in Economic, Scientific, and Technical Development," p. 67.

<sup>33</sup> Heitlinger, "Women and State Socialism," p. 97-100.

Women were also encouraged to contribute their labor to military service during the war. Women were trained in various military skills like nursing, driving, equipment usage with gas masks and firearms, and were trained for combat. Women made up most of the medical personnel on the front lines of the war and were drafted into the ranks when they graduated from medical school. These women were also trained with firearms and often were more skilled than the male recruits. The Central Committee of the Communist Party formerly accepted women into the military as combatants in 1942. By the end of the war, one million women had served in the Soviet army against the Nazis. There were all-women's militia battalions and even three all-women air regiments; most notable is the 46th Guards Regiment, also known as the *Night-Witches*, who conducted unprotected night-bombing raids behind German lines. Some women were on the ground in Germany as snipers and also worked as military communication troops.<sup>34</sup> Women's roles in World War II were vital for the upkeep of the Soviet economy in industrial labor, agriculture, defense, and front lines, which was unique to the Soviet's role in the war.

While the effects of World War II brought the hope of true socialism, the systemic patriarchal practices remained strong when it came to higher-paid and higher-skilled jobs that kept women in inferior positions both in the workforce and politically. Women took on the burden of reconstruction after the war ended due to the declining population of men and the number of disabled and traumatized veterans who could not return to work. Even though women exceeded men in labor, propaganda was created to illustrate that women should also

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<sup>34</sup> Engel, "Women in Russia, 1700-2000," p. 209-216. This book goes more in depth in the role women had in the military as well as the struggles women and children faced with starvation within Russia.

take responsibility for lifting men and replenishing their “manhood” by taking on all domestic responsibilities and being accessible sexually. This also created wage gaps and poverty for single and widowed women because the post-war Soviet Union emphasized strengthening Soviet men so they received higher pay and higher positions in the workforce.<sup>35</sup>

### **Feminization of Labor**

Due to women participating in the labor force in large numbers due to Stalin’s forced industrialization and the declining male population during the war, the “feminization of labor” occurred, creating male insecurities that influenced post-war propaganda and violence towards women. However, the “feminization of labor” also transformed labor roles that were previously considered “property of men” into predominantly jobs for women. Industry jobs such as railroad workers, construction workers, tractor drivers, miners, engineers, farmers, doctors, and retail workers were primarily women. They became women’s jobs in the eyes of society, even if men tried to take those positions back in numbers. Most of these jobs did not have women as administrators or in other higher positions, which caused wage inequality.

The retail industry was treated differently compared to the labor of women in industrial and agricultural positions because women were seen as a way to legitimize consumerism under socialism across the U.S.S.R. The state adopted a trade campaign in 1931 to feminize the Soviet trade, “the goal was to replace men with women so the men could be redirected to skilled and

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<sup>35</sup>Engel, “Women in Russia, 1700-2000,” p. 224-228. Starvation is also a huge topic during and after the war which caused millions of people to die due to agriculture struggles and elite greediness. Women would get arrested in the late 40s for stealing bread to feed their children (the women’s crime) and would receive harsh punishments by being sent to labor camps for 5-8 years. There were lots of societal issues for women like poverty, starvation, and rape that should not be overlooked.

physically intensive industrial work. The new policy for women's involvement in the labor force was based on the concept of 'integrating through segregation,' that is the (re)gendering of entire sectors of the economy as female".<sup>36</sup> Soviet leaders envisioned a stereotypical woman as the face of Soviet trade to bring virtuous characteristics to retail trade, such as domestic skills, honesty, and rationality, to present an anti-capitalist retail environment.<sup>37</sup>

### **Soviet "Superwoman"**

The Soviet "Superwoman" was an idea that arose during the Stalin era, placing a double burden on women daily. Women were expected to be equal to men in the workforce and fulfill the expectations of a housewife. Stalin initiated state-wide propaganda to enforce this gender norm by using rhetoric like "Mother's Victory," "Mother-Heroine," and the "Motherhood Medal," which glorified a working woman also participating in motherhood to show Soviet strength and durability.<sup>38</sup> Usha quotes Handrahan, who describes the "ideal Soviet woman":

The "ideal Soviet woman" was valued publicly for three reasons: for her childbearing capacity (role of physically producing the nation); for her contribution to labour for the country's development, and for the sexual gratification that she could and should provide to the Soviet man as her duty but not for her sexuality as a woman. Stalin even called for women to fulfill the patriotic duty of keeping the fires burning in their heart and their men happy by taking care of their beauty.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Amy E. Randall, "Legitimizing Soviet Trade: Gender and the Feminization of the Retail Workforce in the Soviet 1930s," *Journal of Social History* 37, no. 4 (Summer 2004): 965-990,1127, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jsh.2004.0062>. p. 969.

<sup>37</sup> Randall, "Legitimizing Soviet Trade," p. 965-980. This article gives an in depth historical recalling of soviet trade and the feminization of trade by the soviet state. This contributes to a side of women's labor that is not discussed in any other source during this thesis and has information on the decision making to feminize retail, the cultural reaction to such change, and the push back from women who demanded managerial positions since women were treated as a commodity for propaganda instead of skilled laborers.

<sup>38</sup> Usha, "Political Empowerment of Women in Soviet Union and Russia," p. 149.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid p. 150.

This was not an expectation for Soviet men; they were only expected to work and maintain their male hegemony in the workplace and the family.

It was also a trend in the United States. World War II brought more women into the workforce than ever before. Still, post-WWII brought a cultural shift in both the United States and the U.S.S.R. that held a social goal of women bearing the load of full-time workers, housewives, and full-time mothers. Both cultures created propaganda to convince women that they were strong and “superheroes” while hyper-masculinity was held in place, now in a socialist perspective. In the late 1930s, legislation began to prohibit abortions, made divorce more difficult to obtain, and “the family” was a protected entity. This ideology was severely threatened during and after World War II as the Soviet Union saw another labor boom for women due to the lowered population of men in the motherland.

### **Women’s Obstacles Throughout Early 20th Century**

While women were perceived as equal to men within Soviet legal documents and through the perception of Lenin and Stalin, complete social, political, economic, and personal equality was far from its communist goal. The Soviet Union was quite progressive with its legal intentions and the number of women in the workforce compared to the rest of the developed world at the time, especially directly after the Tsarist rule that left the Russian people in severe illiterate peasantry. But regardless of the progress of women’s rights, women continued to live through daily inequalities like political power, skill and wage gaps, ingrained cultural misogyny, and inequity with household labor. These critiques on Soviet women’s treatment show the missing links that would create equality under true communism in the eyes of a Marxist.

## Political Power

The *Zhenotdel* was the first women's organization within the government in 1919 that created initiatives to fight for women's equality and political agendas in private and public matters. Still, women were extremely limited to the scope of traditional "female" topics like child care and community food distribution. During Lenin's reign, women were restricted to the *Zhenotdel*, and he did not promote any women to the Politburo even though he encouraged political participation to achieve women's emancipation. Overall, political engagement and party membership were substantially low due to the lack of opportunities for women in politics.

Stalin abolished the *Zhenotdel* in 1929, declaring it unnecessary for women's liberation. However, since women played a vital role in forced industrialization, small sections of the government were dedicated to women. Still, they were of little significance to the more significant influence of Soviet politics. Due to Stalin's ideology lacking women's political involvement, women were keen to create political groups and affiliations to fight for their representation, ultimately making women more involved and party-affiliated than during the Lenin era. This unfortunate reality showed that women had to fight in a political system that falsified their "equality" in society and were never allowed to achieve top political positions of any kind. Politics, inherently being a form of labor, showed inequalities between men and women in executive decision-making positions that were displayed across the board in all workplaces.

It is important to note that the Soviet Union was one of the first countries to consider women equal to men in their constitution. Yet, since the downfall of the U.S.S.R. and the

introduction of the Russian Federation, the constitution of 1918 is rarely mentioned in public sites that provide timelines for women's rights. The U.S.S.R. was one of 3 regions that granted universal suffrage in 1917, including the Baltics and Uruguay. Finland, Denmark, and Norway were the first countries to grant universal suffrage before 1917, and Australia was technically the very first country to grant suffrage in 1893. Still, they denied Aboriginal women the right to vote in 1902.<sup>40</sup> When tackling women's roles in society, the Soviet Union showcased in its written documents the intentions of seeing women as politically equal to men in terms of voting, party affiliation, and participation in local and national politics. The civic duty of voting showed the most participation increase, "from 42.9 percent in urban areas in 1926 to 89.7 percent in 1934 and in villages from 28 percent to 80.3 percent".<sup>41</sup> While the total number of women is represented proportionally in the Soviet political realm, it is essential to acknowledge the progressiveness of a communist society compared to that of the other global superpowers that follow the rule of capitalism.

### **Skill and Wage Gaps**

Women were encouraged to go to trade schools and gain other education, but women were unlikely to receive higher pay or higher skilled opportunities within the workforce. Men were still considered more intelligent and superior to women and could quickly obtain high positions. Many excuses for this attitude include the joint statement that "women do not have the time to be in high positions due to family and household obligations." Yet, the Soviet

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<sup>40</sup> "State of Oregon: Woman Suffrage - International Woman Suffrage Highlights," accessed May 24, 2024, <https://sos.oregon.gov/archives/exhibits/suffrage/Pages/timeline-international.aspx>.

<sup>41</sup> Lapidus, "Women in Soviet Society," p. 204.

leaders perpetuated this “housewife superwoman” image. The traditional values of hyper-masculinity ensured that women would stay in lower positions to be available to keep the Soviet man proactive and pleased. The expectation of all women to bear Soviet children was also a contributing factor to the excuse of not allowing them into higher positions. The lack of women in leadership and skillful positions created many issues for women, like preventing them from being independent and instilling poverty in single or widowed women, especially after the war.

Women who worked in rural farmlands experienced far less labor protection than those who worked in industrialized urban areas. Women collective farmers did not receive (or received limited amounts) of Stalin’s social insurance, giving women maternity leave benefits, old-age pensions, and sick leave.<sup>42</sup> Many sources indicate that women working in agriculture were more vulnerable to unequal treatment, benefits, and opportunities than women in urban areas who worked in retail and factories. The struggles of rural life are similar to those in other countries where educational institutions and basic amenities are more complex to access, creating cultural differences between the rural and urban areas and affecting women disproportionately.

### **Ingrained Cultural Misogyny**

While the Soviet laws guaranteed women equal rights in all aspects of society and the government created propaganda to initiate a cultural change on the perspective of women’s role in Soviet society, women were continuously met with hostile retaliation from a patriarchal

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid p.104.

lifestyle and the culture of misogyny that couldn't be washed away with laws and influence. Women would experience harassment from employers and coworkers in their occupations, especially those previously male-dominated. Male hegemony was an important cultural factor to Soviet men that protected their manhood, which was later encouraged by Stalin. The Soviet Union believed that women were a better symbol of socialism because women were prone to collectiveness while men would embrace the individuality of capitalism. Still, this thought process did not transfer to the everyday experience of women who dealt with the ridicule and harassment of their male counterparts. Men felt a lack of masculinity when skilled women workers were earning the same amount as them and when their wives were not available domestically when they were working long hours. This behavior resulted in many women quitting their skilled jobs to become manual labor workers.<sup>43</sup>

Women who represented the communist government in rural areas were especially vulnerable to mistreatment, harassment, and rape from men. Soviet teachers experienced the most violent treatment in rural areas in the 1920s as the new Soviet government was not a widespread change when it came to the implementation of equal rights. These rural areas had no enforcement of the urban ideologies of the revolution, so women who were sent to teach in these rural areas were faced with intense misogyny and skyrocketing suicide rates.<sup>44</sup> Cultural attitudes were also challenging in the Central Asian regions of the U.S.S.R. as Muslim traditions

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<sup>43</sup> Irina Mukhina, "Gendered Division of Labor among Special Settlers in the Soviet Union, 1941–1956," *Women's History Review* 23, no. 1 (January 2, 2014): 99–119, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09612025.2013.846114>. This article describes the treatment of German women and men settlers that were escaping the Nazi regime. There is a nationalistic attitude that resides within ethnic Russians to give more labor rights to Russian born Soviets. Gender relations changed drastically when looking at the treatment and labor of German settlers and other settlers escaping war. This topic is important to acknowledge when looking at gender relations with labor with non Soviets in the USSR.

<sup>44</sup> Morozova et al., "'Labor as freedom, labor as burden,'" p. 405.

resisted change. Muslim women were usually confined to the home and were not allowed to work any occupations other than agriculture.<sup>45</sup> Indigenous traditions and internalized misogyny were some of the biggest challenges for women and the implementation of their equal social, economic, and political rights.

### **Conflicts Within Household Labor**

The promise of socialist housekeeping functionalities was unrealistic under Stalin's industrialization goals. The expectation of domestic labor transforming into a paid workforce backfired when the demands of domestic labor exceeded the availability of able workers. Even though the revolutionary theories of paid domestic labor would theoretically create equality in the household, the workforce made of women created a gendered division of labor and segregation of gender and labor roles. The function of household labor did not meet Marxist expectations of accompanying economic development. It proceeded to burden women with the responsibility of being fully invested in their industrial jobs and fully invested in household labor while that expectation was not given to men. This issue was exacerbated in rural areas where the cultural perceptions of women were behind those of urban areas.<sup>46</sup>

Housework was not the only form of labor women had to bear; child care and sexual availability to their husbands, as well as their state obligation to be in the workforce, was put onto the shoulders of women as the "Soviet Superwoman" was consistently pressured post-WWII. The early Stalin era pushed for stronger "socialist families" as the birth rates came

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<sup>45</sup> Dodge, "Women in the Soviet Economy; Their Role in Economic, Scientific, and Technical Development," p. 52.

<sup>46</sup> Lapidus, "Women in Soviet Society," p. 103-110.

drastically down due to the lack of initiated social support, crowded conditions in urban areas, and the increased demands on women. Stalin outlawed homosexual acts, made divorce more complicated, and prohibited abortions to increase birth rates, as well as using propaganda to convince women that being a mother was another one of their socialist obligations.<sup>47</sup>

### **Marxist Discussion and Conclusion**

The Soviet Union showed the world the first initiative to create a communist state through the influence of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels' writings of the 19th century. As to whether or not the communist state that Marx pictured was that of the Soviet Union, many scholars would say no. The lack of enforcement of labor codes and the societal mistreatment of women went against the standings of women's total emancipation that is expected to occur under communist society. This should not discredit the impressive progress in women's economic and political rights within the U.S.S.R., which outstripped the efforts of many other developing countries in the West.

The most apparent critique of the Soviet Union was Stalin's propaganda to convince Soviet women to take on the unequal burden of household labor, including childcare, as that goes against one of the most essential aspects of Marxism. Using women for mere household labor such as cleaning, cooking, and childcare enforces the bourgeois society's usage of women as instruments of production that strengthens capitalism. The expectation that was continuously drilled into Soviet society was that of women taking on tremendous burdens and that they participate in the good of society in many ways other than industrialized labor. The

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<sup>47</sup> Engel, "Women in Russia, 1700-2000," p.177-180.

efforts of Stalin's "Soviet Superwoman" went directly against the efforts of women's total emancipation from capitalism and misled the Soviets further away from Lenin's goal of a proletariat dictatorship.

While women's emancipation and equality were guaranteed in the laws and constitution of the U.S.S.R., social practices did not always reflect the words in the rules that governed the Soviet state. This lack of social approval continued to be detrimental to the goals of true communism, the state withering away, and equality was not at the forefront of social change. There were no actual protections for women in the social sphere when the state only wrote down their protections. The Soviet government believed that men inherently followed the social laws of capitalism, whereas women were more eager and able to become the collective that Marx discusses. This logic determined that the Soviet Union would not have been capable of withering away the state without reverting to capitalism due to the social resistance to women's emancipation and the theoretical concepts of communism.

Lenin's laws were the most progressive laws for women after the revolution as women were officially equal to men in the view of the state and enacted laws that, like in the writings of Engels, made divorce more accessible for women and disrupted the image of the traditional family that was declared essential within capitalism for a man to own a woman and her labor. This was one of the closest aspects of Engels' writings that became a reality within the Soviet Union. Still, that essential aspect of a communist family did not last. When Stalin took reign, he encouraged marriages, made divorce more complex, and created propaganda to create more Soviet children, which directly went against communist concepts laid out by Marx and Engels.

Lenin was very public about his beliefs that women were significant assets to the

communist agenda as they had to be aware of their place within capitalism to imagine themselves in communism. No woman could be entirely free unless she were part of the fight against capitalism since the proletariat had to revolt to transition into communism successfully. He also strived to have public catering of household labor and child care since it would only flourish under socialism compared to its profit-making enterprises in capitalism that encouraged cheating, fraud, and speculation.<sup>48</sup> This ideology was put into practice only at a base level and not a systematic level; women were discouraged from pursuing higher-profile and governmental positions. Instead, they continued to be burdened with their “womanly” duties to society within the home as part of a gendered division of labor.

Women were also treated like a separate class in the Soviet Union from societal views and through the acts of banned occupations. While the intentions were to keep women healthy and unharmed from dangerous working conditions, these bans created a class distinction between men and women that would not be tolerated under Marxist analysis. The overarching “protection” from the state concerning women’s working conditions, no matter whether or not those regulations were held up or checked, eliminated women’s emancipation as they were not “allowed” to use their labor in some areas of their choosing. This lack of freedom to choose a profession based on gender was precisely what the U.S.S.R. stated they weren’t doing.

While many aspects of the Soviet Union’s treatment of women were not up to the standard of an actual communist society envisioned by Marx, many advancements were still made for women in the workforce. After the first half of the 20th century, women continued to gradually take over the workforce in numbers and skills never seen before. Medical

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<sup>48</sup> Heitlinger, “Women and State Socialism,” p. 17.

professionals and teachers became the majority of women, and women were still significant in factory and agricultural production. Illiteracy became a thing of the past as women and girls comprised most students in schools, universities, and trade programs.

According to Engels, who wrote the first mention of women's emancipation within socialism, there are two pre-conditions for the emancipation of women: (1) "the abolition of private property and its replacement by social ownership and control of the means of production" and (2) sexual equality, which would occur through the involvement of women in social production and the socialization of domestic work and child care in the private sphere.<sup>49</sup>

The Soviet Union partially initiated these conditions outlined by Engels as they started their first phase of communism: socialism. The Soviet Union immediately legalized women in the workforce to begin the journey of women's emancipation, which would have taken decades. Still, Stalin declared the "woman issue" solved and made no effort to give more opportunities to women until he needed their labor for his forced industrialization plan and to stabilize the economy during World War II. This benefited women's emancipation in socialism more than during Lenin since their labor was in high demand. The transformation of private household labor into a social industry did not take flight as hoped except for the impressive increase of education throughout the U.S.S.R. that eliminated illiteracy.

The Soviet Union shows us a vital historical point: the proletariat revolted against the bourgeoisie to create the first communist state influenced by Marxism's philosophies. The state that lived for almost 70 years had its fair share of controversy and war but also showed its determination to women's equality. Equal rights were an essential part of the doctrine of the

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<sup>49</sup> Heitlinger, "Women and State Socialism," p. 16-17.

Soviet Union within its constitution. They had many accomplishments, such as increasing women in the workforce, banning child labor, eliminating illiteracy, and introducing free education. The Soviet Union was commonly referred to as a dictatorship, but it is essential to understand the progressive legislation they passed in the name of communism. The first Soviet Constitution in 1922 declared every citizen of the Soviet Union equal rights regardless of sex, nationality, and race, while women were still not constitutionally equal to men in the United States. Even though the Soviet Union was not the perfect example of a Marxist vision of a communist society, the attempts towards a more socialized state are apparent in the history of Soviet women and the labor laws of the U.S.S.R.

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