The Refusal of Russian Motherhood

I began this project as an analysis of Bolshevik Feminism and its interaction with Socialist ideologies during the Bolshevik Revolution. In a book about European women’s movements, I discovered that in 1920, Russia had become the first nation to legalize abortion. With my knowledge of feminist history, I was quite shocked to come upon this fact. I decided this would be a perfectly narrowed topic with which to begin my project. After reading secondary literature on the topic, I developed my primary question: was this legislation revolutionary for the women it affected? Was it revolutionary in its political context? The secondary literature available had not answered this question directly, so I pieced together various scholarly sources and four primary documents from translated Russian writers to deduce my conclusions.

I found that the law was an attempt at a drastic social change, but it ultimately did not affect the lives of Russian women as a whole. I found that abortion has been historically perceived as the primary form of birth control in Russia, so the only way for it to disappear would be mass education on other forms of contraception. Whether the practice was legal or illegal, its frequency did not change. This legislation was politically revolutionary, albeit merely in the sense that its condition ended in the way it began: abortion was made illegal less than twenty years after its legalization.

Primary Sources


This Decree, originally written in Russian in *Izvestiia VTsIK* and addressing the “Workers and Peasant’s Government,” was reprinted in German by *Die Kommunistische Fraueninternational* (*Communist Women’s International*) in April 1921. Socialist newspaper *Women and Revolution* translated the version from *DKF* into English in its Spring 1988 issue titled “How The Bolsheviks Fought for Women’s Emancipation.” The Decree is the official document regarding the 1920 legalization of free abortion in Bolshevik Russia. It begins by addressing the “evil” of rising abortion rates, as well as the dangers possible when women seek abortion by illegal means. The Soviet government writes that this legalization is a temporary change, only necessary while “the remnants of the past and the difficult economic conditions of the present compel some women to undergo an abortion.” The measure is meant “to preserve women’s health and protect the race against ignorant or self-seeking profiteers.” Therefore, the Decree says that free abortion will be offered in state hospitals without any discrimination, and those providing abortions outside of state hospitals are illegally practicing and will thus “be handed over to the People’s Court.”
This is the central document in my project. The blunt reasoning of the Decree is worthy of a word-by-word analysis in the effort of answering my questions. Since I speak German, I could also go to the original 1921 article by DKF and decipher it, since it is once removed from the original language instead of twice removed. Even though anything different from the original Russian is sure to have changes dependent on the translator, the printings in DKF and W&R are for the purposes of promoting the original document in its historical context, so a translation bias is not as likely.


Lenin, writing a letter to the editors of Pravda (the official newspaper of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union), explains his reactions to the discussion of abortion at the Pirogov Doctors’ Congress in 1913. This article was translated by George Hanna and published as public domain in the multivolume Lenin Collected Works, which I accessed via the Lenin Internet Archive. Lenin wrote many letters to Pravda, and they were all directed at the Bolshevik party, which he was the leader of at the time. According to Lenin’s writing, it appears he did not attend this medical convention, but he had received secondhand knowledge of the event through various sources. He takes a very defensive approach to discussing the discourse of the congress, using the phrase “so-called” and passive voice in order to generalize the people he was criticizing. Neomalthusianism defined in this context was the belief in popular use of contraceptive measures in order to empower women. This perspective was popular amongst Mensheviks such as Aleksandra Kollontai, but Lenin and the Bolsheviks heavily condemned it. In this article specifically, Lenin is dismissive of the petty bourgeois/peasant/handicraftsman/intellectual train of thought that, in a strain of “banal liberalism,” had been protesting their “torments and hard toil” by insisting that less children should be born into the world. Lenin understands that the problems of his time are more severe than they used to be, but he invents the mantra “We have begun to learn and are rapidly learning to fight” to make an inspirational outlook of this environment. He ends his analysis with a clarification: “It goes without saying that this does not by any means prevent us from demanding the unconditional annulment of all laws against abortions or against the distribution of medical literature on contraceptive measures, etc. Such laws are nothing but the hypocrisy of the ruling classes. These laws do not heal the ulcers of capitalism, they merely turn them into malignant ulcers that are especially painful for the oppressed masses. Freedom for medical propaganda and the protection of the elementary democratic rights of citizens, men and women, are one thing. The social theory of neomalthusianism is quite another.”

Lenin being the leader of the Bolsheviks, his stance on abortion is necessary when evaluating the decriminalization of the act under the Bolshevik regime prior to his death. Lenin’s opinions also give an example of the working discourse surrounding abortion that eventually led to the 1920 legislation. In this article, Lenin makes a point of distinguishing “real proletarians” from dissenting Socialist opinions, which exemplifies the tension between Russian Socialist groups during this time. It’s interesting that he considers both “peasants” and “intellectuals” as non-proletariat, because in other writings of his we read during class he considered the proletariat
class a peasant class led by intellectual Bolsheviks. I compared this article to those class readings to provide the larger revolutionary context in which his influential arguments took place. I’ve noticed that the quote “the unconditional annulment of all laws against abortions or against the distribution of medical literature on contraceptive measures” is often taken out of context in certain secondary literature to imply that Lenin was undoubtedly pro-abortion decriminalization, but in the context of the original source writing, his stance is mostly overshadowed by his criticism of the neomalthusians.


Trotsky wrote to Pravda in 1923 to discuss the disintegration of the family in Russia following the revolution in 1917. He explains that the church and other traditional institutions had become defunct, therefore those ceremonial bonds tying families together were nonexistent. Though he does show pity for the state of the family, as he writes that Bolsheviks are fighting for a “new culture” through their hardships. Trotsky then finishes the article with ideas regarding the reconstruction of family in Russia, such as public facilities towards the improvement of “the collective.” Trotsky believes that the family will reach a heightened state of “freedom” once the Socialist state has improved its public welfare policies.

Trotsky’s wrote this article after abortion had been legalized, at the beginning of the era when Bolsheviks felt the family was at risk. This era did not come to a close until Stalin came to power in 1936, when abortion was made illegal again and divorce policies were restricted. The focus of Trotsky’s article is divorce and the separation of families due to the current economic situation of Russia. Trotsky’s writing could be considered one of many reactionary responses to the drastic changes in public morality upon the legalization of abortion. The remarks about the disestablishment of Orthodoxy in Russia following the revolution is similar to Ozouf’s writing about the disestablishment of the Catholic Church in France following the French Revolution. This article does not directly refer to abortion, but the discourse about family and the status of women present in abortion debates is very present in the article.


The Woman Question in Europe: A Series of Original Essays is a collection of writings by European authors, mostly women, that detail facts about women’s liberation movements and the status of women in many European countries before and at the time of its publication (1884). My chapter of focus, “Russia,” describes the sociopolitical factors (primarily concerning marriage, property, education, and employment) that affected the lives of Russian women in the late 19th century. Most of the information in the chapter is centered around how women fit into the laws of local and state governments, while the social demands of Russian people often came into conflict with said established laws. Marie Zebrikoff, a home-educated Russian scholar and writer, originally wrote this essay in English for the purpose of its placement in this book. She
served as a member of an executive committee for aiding the higher education of women, and was published in many educational periodicals.

Zebrikoff’s essay is a portrait of her time that provides the background for women’s lives immediately preceding the Bolshevik Revolution. Instead of analyzing this history from some scholarly lens, she writes about the objective experiences of Russian women from all classes, gained through her life’s experience and anecdotal accounts. This is a solid background for the focus of my topic, since analyzing the issue of abortion during the Bolshevik Revolution requires an actual grasp on women’s and family issues at the time. The chapter also nicely portrays how a comparison to U.S. or British women’s movements is not effective in analyzing the Russian movement. Zebrikoff stresses both the progressive and digressive natures of Russia’s sociopolitical structures regarding women. She explains how women’s educational opportunities and property rights were relatively advanced in Russia, but employment restrictions and marriage laws limited the extent of those rights.

However, my use of this essay is limited in that it only regards history up to the year of its publication, which was about 35 years before the Bolshevik Revolution. Also, it does not mention abortion, as the law had not been passed by the time the essay was written. It does, however, mention the importance of babki (midwives and women health care professionals) in the lives of Russian women. The commonality of babki providing abortion procedures was one of the largest influences in the passing of the 1920 law, so understanding their cultural influence preceding the law is essential in answering my research questions.

Secondary Sources


This scholarly article was published in an English compilation from the French demographic journal Population. All of the authors are from the Institut National d'Etudes Démographiques, a world-renowned demographical institute in France. It contains a huge amount of information about the abortion legislation of 1920, the illegalization of 1936, and other eras that correspond to abortion in Russia. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the abortion statistics that had just become available to the public in 1989, amidst the fall of the USSR. It describes how most statistics before 1924 are unreliable as they were not regulated en masse. From 1924 to 1936, abortions were carefully registered by the doctors that administered them so the government could regulate the practice. Statistics between the years of 1936 and 1953—between Stalin’s illegalization of abortion and Stalin’s death. Because the article was published in a French journal, it also touches on the discussions of abortion in France throughout these times.

This article contains the bulk of statistical information that I used in my project. It also features graphs and tables that I used in my PowerPoint. The comparisons between France and Russia are unique to this article, and since I wanted to connect the French ideals we studied in class to the Russian ideals, it is key to my project.

Carleton’s book details the Russian “sexual revolution” (see Kon), focusing on the Bolshevik contribution during the 1920s and 30s. Most of the book is a historical analysis of Bolshevik literature concerning sexual themes, though there is also an analysis of primary and secondary sources regarding political discourse on the topic. Abortion is a common motif amongst Carleton’s analysis. Carleton first observes the arguments in favor of the legislation, which were tied directly to the change in marriage customs. He views the decriminalization as “the most salient achievement in the Soviet’s social policy,” yet his praise quickly turns to scrutiny. Carleton believes one of the most extreme effects of laws about women’s such as abortion were their impacts on men: “Ironically, new laws and programs intended to liberate women were part of the problem, since men could take advantage of legalized abortion and elimination of divorce restrictions. ‘Don Juans’ (a term popularized by Lenin) could more easily shake responsibility for impregnating women and with fewer pangs of conscience. After all, a woman now had access to free abortion, and if she bore a child she could theoretically receive some state support,” (page 33). Carleton also notes that in Russian fiction after the legislation, abortion was always portrayed in a negative and horrific light. Carleton details the direct impact of the law: “It was in part for this reason that abortion had been legalized and why it remained central to so much of the period’s literature. To raise a child while remaining a fully functioning member of the Komsomol or party was portrayed as a fundamental problem for women. The demands of motherhood could lead to bourgeois self-absorption, another dangerous possibility. At the same time, abortion was expressly denounced as a solution to this predicament, no matter how men or material necessity might pressure women into having one,” (page 186).

Carleton’s analysis is more humanitarian than sociological, which provides a fresh perspective on my topic. The entire book is about the time period of my focus, so it is more in depth than a chronological book like Kon’s. The concise denunciation of the 1920 law is something I directly quote in my presentation.


This book a biographical account of the influential Menshevik Aleksandra Kollontai’s life, so it focuses more on events that happened to her than general ideologies. However, it does have an interesting account of the abortion legalization that seems to shed it in a positive light. Clements states that the Zhenotdel “carefully crafted” the “Decree of the People's Commissariat of Health and Social Welfare and the People's Commissariat of Justice in Soviet Russia” to curb the number of illegal abortions. She also says the Zhenotdel leaders “felt that the procedure must be made safe in a period when so many were suffering already and when the number of illegal abortions was rising,” 169. She says that after the legislation, abortion became the primary means of birth control in the Soviet Union, mostly because the straining conditions of the Socialist state made having more than one or two children difficult for women.
Clements’ brief argument is interesting when contrasted with Carleton’s book and Engelstein’s article. Perhaps the historiographical evidence at the time Clements published this book was not clear enough for her to make a correct judgment. On the other hand, Clements could very well have another perspective that is justifiable in the light of her contemporaries’ arguments.


This book is a compilation of stories from Russian women during the 1920s and 30s, but the part I focused on was the introduction written by Engel and Posadskaya-Vanderbeck. In the introduction, they summarize the effect of the 1936 law illegalizing abortion. They describe the “fearsome price women had to pay” when abortions became illegal, much similar to the arguments used in favor of its legalization pre-1920.

This introduction provides an abridged version of women’s issues to preface the women’s stories in the book. I reference the information on the 1936 legislation when discussing debates before the 1920 decree, pointing towards the quote about “reversed” arguments referenced in Avdeev’s statistical research.


This essay is from a book of compiled writings on various topics surrounding Russian women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Engelstein, a Professor Emerita of Russian History at Yale University, explores the medical and judicial debates around abortion preceding the Russian Revolution of 1917. She gives equal weight to every perspective on the issue, including those against its decriminalization as well as for it. Engelstein’s thesis for this essay is found on page 187: “What is of interest in the Russian discussion is the way in which medical and legal issues were mapped onto the local political and cultural terrain. The implications of the question were not narrow. To listen to the Russians argue over abortion is to hear an exchange on basic principles of public authority and civic life. Opinions on women’s control over their reproductive lives constituted not only a critique of the existing political order but also a blueprint for a new and better one. Indeed the physicians, criminologists, and jurists engaged in this exchange examined three distinct models of social organization: one in which the state imposes norms of private conduct through the representative action of the law; one in which society exerts preemptive restraint through the exercise of professional expertise; and one of individual self-regulation, in which private decisions determine personal choice.”

Out of all my secondary sources, Engelstein’s piece provides the most in-depth examination of the professional meetings that commenced before 1920 to discuss abortion. She is clearly a highly reputable historian, and she uses a multitudinous variety of primary sources that serve to
verify the conclusions of her essay. She makes a good balance of providing historical evidence and pointing back to her thesis. Engelstein’s article is the largest piece of English-written historiography I have found specifically concerning the predetermining factors of the abortion legislation in Russia, so it is vital to my project. However, I did not rely too heavily on this essay, so my conclusions didn’t become muddled with Engelstein’s. Also, Engelstein does not delve into the actual demographics of Russian abortion so much as the people who discussed the issue, so I focused on demographics more to balance my own argument.


Hadley, a sociologist from England, was an ardent pro-choice activist during the women’s liberation movement of the 1970s and 80s. She wrote this book as a means of analyzing the past and present state of abortion all over the world. Russia’s abortion history is mentioned several times throughout the book, mostly in the context of how high its abortion rates were (higher than any European country or the U.S.) and continue to be. In a chapter titled “Russia: A Parody of Choice,” Hadley details the horrible conditions of abortion in Russia throughout history, criticizing the lack of education about other contraceptive measures in the country. She calls Russian abortion “a parody of choice,” because Russian women are said to have a freedom of “choice” to abort when they are actually pressured to abort by the domestic and industrial spheres of Russia. Hadley considers a poetic quote by reformer of British abortion Janet Chance “women do not enjoy abortions—they snatch at them in despair” to reflect the attitudes of Russian women concerning abortion.

Hadley’s book is mostly about abortion in the 1990s, but she does a good job of portraying a vivid historical backdrop for her analysis. The phrase “parody of choice” adds an emotional context to my presentation. Hadley’s life focus was on abortion, so her analysis is credible as an activist much like the activism towards legalization in pre-1920 Russia.


Heer, while a professor of sociology at Harvard University School of Public Health, published this article in the population journal *Demography* amidst the Cold War with the Soviet Union. His thesis is to analyze the population policy of the Soviet Union during the time the article was written. In the light of my project, Heer’s background on the abortion legislations of 1920 and 1936 are relevant. He describes a “Leninist doctrine” behind abortion that prompted the 1920 and 1953 legalizations of the practice that decrees “no woman should be forced to bear a child she did not want,” (page 531).

Heer wrote this article within a widely changing political context, as Stalin had died and the U.S.S.R. was reconstructing its policies as a result. Heer considered the 1920 and 1936 important to the analysis of the Soviet Union’s population policy in the 1960s. I also quote the line about the Leninist doctrine in my presentation.

Professor of demography at University of Groningen Inge Hutter provides a demographical approach to current and past abortion behavior in Russia in this chapter. She focuses primarily on the time period of the late 1990s, but she also provides a brief historical background for her research. She does a pristine job of neutrally summarizing the political aspects of the 1920 legalization, using other secondary source literature as the basis of her historiography.

Hutter’s chapter does not address the 1920 abortion law very in depth, but her summary is adept in bringing together demographics and other sociological information to better understand the big picture of the ordeal. Hutter does with her essay what I am doing with my project: making a point of analyzing the history of abortion in Russia before the time period of our actual focus. The reliance on numbers and statistics in Hutter’s essay is helpful when researching a topic that is highly politically and socially charged.


Kon, a Russian psychologist and sexologist, wrote this book (translated by James Riordan) as a sociological examination of Russian culture surrounding sex in the twentieth century. He discusses the 1920 abortion legislation in two places, once in the context of all psychosexual discourse in the Bolshevik era, and another as a part of the timeline of abortion and contraception in Russia. Kon evaluates the reasoning behind the “choice” that Bolshevik legislators made in 1920 using statistics before and after the decriminalization. On page 61, he says that “impending economic ruin” pushed the Bolshevik government to ensure safe state-regulated abortion as opposed to life threatening illegal procedures. He states “social considerations outweighed moral principles,” as most Russians thought abortion as an evil (as is evident in the Decree by the government) that was made necessary by severe economic troubles. Kon believes the Russian state achieved its written goals when executing this legislation, because the number of unsafe nonhospital abortions fell after the law was introduced. Kon also provides statistics to compare the popularity of abortion across class and geographic lines. About 70% of abortions were in cities (40% of which in Moscow and Leningrad), and 16% in small rural towns. Women in the countryside accounted for 83% of Russia’s female population, yet they received fewer than 15% of all abortions. These class distinctions are crucial in the Russian context, as Lenin and the Bolsheviks believed urban petty bourgeois populations to be selfish in their eagerness to adopt contraceptive measures. Kon ends his analysis of the abortion legislation with a question: “Was it more important for the state to safeguard the woman’s health as a mother, a procreator of the human race, or as a worker realizing herself in social life?” This question was at the front of the Russian Socialists’ minds when arguing for or against abortion.

Kon’s details provide a specific sociological context in which to answer my questions. He does not focus only on the Bolshevik era in this book, but there is plenty of information from that era to provide to my project. As a native Russian and renowned expert in his field, he is doubly
qualified to discuss the abortion legislation from an analytical context. He draws from many sources as well as his own memory to portrait the arguments and solutions surrounding abortion. Kon concisely summarizes the ideological questions and answers that set the stage for this law, and he discusses the demographic statistics that made these ideas concrete. He views the usage of abortion as the primary form of birth control tragic, and harshly criticizes the Russian sociopolitical strains that made the legislation a reality.


In the section of this Encyclopedic compilation of historical events in Russia’s female liberation movements titled “Reproductive Rights (1985-),” Noona and Nechemias provide a succinct summary of the abortion laws of 1920 and 1936 as a parallel to the social environment in the 1980s.

I don’t delve far past the 1930s for my project, so I only use the part of this chapter that focuses on the 20s and 30s. However, the theme of historical parallels concerning abortion in Russia is common in my project, and since this book is a large overview of women’s issues in Russia throughout the last century, it is clear that these parallels are meaningful.


Stites, who was a historian of Russian culture and professor at Georgetown University, wrote this book that “opened up a new era of Russian Studies.” The book is a semi-chronological exploration on a wide variety of subjects that affected Russian women within the last two centuries, and abortion is among those subjects. He discusses Aleksandra Kollontai’s approach to abortion amidst her politics of love and socialism, which ultimately is a side effect of her immense impact on maternity policy in the future Soviet state. Stites later gives focus to the 1936 law prohibiting abortion, particularly Stalin’s justification of the law. The law was enacted alongside stricter policies concerning divorce, which to Stites is an indication that the state of the family in Russia was perceived as deteriorating after the decriminalization of abortion. In another section, Stites details the 1920 legislation and the attitudes surrounding abortion during that time, particularly the contrast between the perceptions of men and women. The Russian negativity towards contraceptives that Kon also discussed was another large factor in abortion’s legalization.

Stites’ book provides a broad overview of Russian women’s movements throughout history, which is another context to provide clarity to my topic. His summary on Kollontai and Stalin’s thoughts is invaluable, because a memoir book about either figure would not be as concise or unbiased. Since Stites provided an index for every time “abortion” was mentioned in the book, it was easy to track the progression of the topic throughout the history of women’s movements. I also use the information on Kollontai to shed light on the Lenin primary source, and the information on Stalin to shed light on my Trotsky source. This source is well-rounded, but it
does make correlational conclusions at times that I shouldn’t rely on too heavily. This was also one of the sources that took Lenin’s quote of abortion out of the context of the primary source.


Wood, professor of Russian Studies at MIT School of Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences, wrote this book to describe the political discourse on women during and after the Bolshevik Revolution. In a section titled “Abortion and Motherhood,” Wood goes into great detail about the decree that I use as a primary source. She explains how the decree was formulated and sent into print, an interesting detail being that it was not published many places other than *Izvestiia VTsIK* out of the consideration that it might influence women to receive too many abortions. Wood discusses the “important contradictions” in the decree, particularly how it lowered the availability of abortions to women outside of cities by making trained abortion doctors in Soviet hospitals the only people legally qualified to provide abortions. She says that the law is against “mass propaganda” of anti-abortion media while the government promoted propaganda against other forms of contraception. Wood also briefly mentions the Lenin article I am using as another primary source, uniquely discussing his opposition to Neomalthusianism in the article. Lastly, she explains the stipulations restricting access to abortion not too long after the Decree and the subsequent additions to state maternity services in order to support fertility.

Wood’s chapter is an in-depth policy analysis, which is a large component of my project, as well. Therefore, I have developed alternate arguments to hers as a means of maintaining originality. Her book’s focus is not abortion in the first place, so her research on the topic is not so extensive that I need to rely on her writing too much. I incorporated some comments of hers concerning the two of my primary sources she mentions, so I therefore had scholarly justification for my conclusions.
The Refusal of Russian Motherhood: Decriminalization of Abortion under the Bolshevik Regime

Talera Jensen

On November 18, 1920, the Bolshevik state legalized abortion, making Russia the first country in the history of the world to decriminalize the procedure. This monumental legislation was one of many drastic changes brought forth by the revolutionary zeitgeist of the Bolshevik era. But was this a significant change for the women it concerned? Many Russians were critical of the legislation as detrimental to the already dissipating state of the family in Russia, which led to abortion being made illegal once again under Stalin’s jurisdiction in 1936, not to be relegalized until Stalin’s death in 1953. For this project, I analyzed the historical evidence and ideological debates surrounding the 1920 abortion decriminalization in the Soviet state in comparison to the 1936 law that reversed it, determining its impacts on Russian women. I argue that the 1920 decree was made as the result of poor education on contraceptive measures, an economic crisis, and the experimental cultural atmosphere of the post-revolutionary state. During its lifetime, the legalization temporarily benefited some women, but its ultimate purpose of decreasing the prevalence of abortion had failed.

There is no secondary literature extant focusing solely on the 1920 abortion legislation, but there are many books by qualified individuals that briefly mention it in the context of Russian women’s liberation or cultural changes as a result of revolution. Scholarly conclusions on the topic remain varied or stunted by a lack of evidence. Expert of twentieth-century Russian culture Gregory Carleton views the 1920 decree as “the most salient achievement in the Soviet’s social policy,” yet his praise quickly turns to scrutiny. He details the lack of medical facilities to provide abortion as well as the predatory men that took advantage of abortion availability and the
lessened divorce restrictions to get away with abandoning pregnant women. This was such a large problem that Lenin himself denounced these men as “Don Juans.” Carleton states “after all, a woman now had access to free abortion, and if she bore a child she could theoretically receive some state support.” On the other hand, women who were unable to access safe abortion procedures would resort to back-alley treatments, which according to Russian sexologist Igor Kon created a risk of death due to abortion-related infection 60 to 120 times higher than the risk of death while giving birth. Though the legislation passed, historian of Russian culture Richard Stites says the Russian public was still ambivalent about abortion until the mid-1930s, when opinion became almost unanimously negative. The most obvious difference in conclusions I found was between Yale professor emeritus of Russian history Laura Engelstein and British sociologist Janet Hadley. Engelstein said abortion was “the product of choice, not of desperation” for women in Russia, while Hadley considered it a “parody of choice” as women were pushed to abort by both the domestic and industrial spheres. Despite these conflicts, all scholars agree that abortion, whether by legal or illegal means, remained the most popular form of birth control in Russia, mainly because there was a severe lack of education about or interest in other forms of contraception.

The first primary document I analyzed was the “Decree of the People's Commissariat of Health and Social Welfare and the People's Commissariat of Justice in Soviet Russia,” the official document printed in Izvestia (the new official newspaper of the Soviet Government) outlining all formal details of the abortion legislation. The women’s department of the Bolshevik party, the Zhenotdel, drafted this decree during several meetings with representatives of the Commissariat of Maternity and Child Care health and the Commissariat of Justice. It begins with an overview: “During recent decades the number of women interrupting pregnancy by abortion
has risen both in the West and in our country.’’ The measure goes on to describe its purpose, which is “to preserve women’s health and protect the race against ignorant or self-seeking profiteers.” These “profiteers” were babki, midwives trained as physicians that, according to an 1884 essay by home-educated Russian scholar Marie Zebrikoff, provided abortion and other vital services to rural women. However, the government was disdainful of babki (which literally translates to “old woman”) because their services were unregulated and typically dangerous.

Finally, the Decree says that free abortion will be offered in state hospitals without any discrimination, and those providing abortions outside of state hospitals (mostly babki) are illegally practicing and would thus “be handed over to the People’s Court.” The decree makes a point of calling abortion an “evil,” but it is necessary to legalize as the capitalist “remnants of the past” are to blame for pushing women to abort in the first place. In fact, the decree expresses that abortion will eventually disappear as Socialist women would theoretically no longer be burdened by hardships that lead them to abort pregnancies. According to MIT professor of Russian studies Elizabeth A. Wood, these extreme words were mostly a measure of preemptively combating charges that the Bolsheviks were “baby-killers.” However, the Decree still failed to mask its faults, as Wood also says it “made a point of emphasizing women’s weak position and their status as ‘victims’” rather than their ability to make conscious choices.

Laura Engelstein contrasts the creators of the abortion law with their stance on other woman’s issues, noting that though these Bolshevik leaders believed in equal rights for women before the law, almost none of them thought women should receive their suffrage. Though the article written by Zebrikoff provides evidence that Russian women had relatively advanced opportunities concerning education and property rights, employment restrictions and marriage laws limited the extent of those rights. Soon after the revolution, the Zhenotdel along with the
rest of the Bolshevik government debated the rapidly changing structures of Russian society. These included a review of women’s role in a Socialist society, particularly their shift from their traditional role in the domestic sphere to the public realm—but according to Gregory Carleton, limited economic resources amidst the turmoil of civil and international war made this a utopian promise. This, Carleton says, was in part the “reason that abortion had been legalized. To raise a child while remaining a fully functioning member of the [Bolshevik] party was portrayed as a fundamental problem for women. The demands of motherhood could lead to bourgeois self-absorption, another dangerous possibility” according to Carleton’s research.

Prior to the 1920 legislation, organizations of law and medicine held meetings to discuss abortion and its effectiveness. In 1913, Lenin wrote a letter to the editors of the Bolshevik newspaper Pravda responding to one of the recent medical conferences by the Pirogov Society. He takes a very defensive approach to discussing the discourse of the congress, criticizing what he dubbed the “Neo-Malthusian” proceedings of the conference on the topic of abortion. Malthusianism defined in this context was the belief in popular use of contraceptive measures in order to empower women and prevent overpopulation. This perspective, condemned by Bolsheviks, was popular amongst elite Mensheviks such as Aleksandra Kollontai, the leader of the Zhenotdel before it became a part of the Bolshevik party.

Kollontai stressed motherhood as essential to being a woman, in fact her demands became the blueprint of the future maternity welfare program in Soviet Russia, but she also viewed the choice of abortion and other contraceptive measures as necessary expressions of women’s empowerment. Lenin is dismissive of this non-proletarian thought he calls a strain of “banal liberalism,” as he explains it as selfish and reactionary to the troubling socioeconomic situation at the time. He ends his scathing analysis with a clarification: “It goes without saying
that this does not by any means prevent us from demanding the unconditional annulment of all laws against abortions or against the distribution of medical literature on contraceptive measures, etc. Such laws are nothing but the hypocrisy of the ruling classes. These laws do not heal the ulcers of capitalism, they merely turn them into malignant ulcers that are especially painful for the oppressed masses.” In some secondary literature, I have noticed scholars taking the first sentence of this concluding statement out of its context to imply that Lenin was in full support of abortion as a practice, when the rest of the article considers a more conservative approach to the practice. Although Lenin was typically critical of the Mensheviks, there were actually many similarities between him and Kollontai in their arguments for the legalization of abortion.

In 1923, Leon Trotsky wrote an article in *Pravda* discussing the huge changes to Russian cultural values as a result of the revolution. His focus was on the family, not abortion, but his arguments reflect those posed before the 1936 law banning abortion. Trotsky mentions that the dissolution of tradition and introduction of a proletariat regime were tearing families apart. He proposes improved public welfare policies as a solution to this crisis, through which the family will reach a heightened state of “freedom.” Avdeev called the 1936 law “one of the most symbolic legislative changes in the family domain,” justifying this conclusion by describing the divorce restrictions enacted in the same year as well as the addition of family welfare services. *Pravda* writers repeated public opinion after the 1936 law was enacted, saying “The removal of the right to abortion was simply the first step in putting an end to unbridled passion, causal pregnancies, automatic abortions, and the general disrespect for women, love, motherhood, and the family.” According to Avdeev and Barbara Engel, this exclusive ideological argumentation was strikingly similar to that supporting the 1920 decriminalization except the logic had become reversed. Nonetheless, the 1936 law did not stop women from receiving illegal abortions
afterwards. Engel describes the failure of the 1920 law to prove its purpose: “Despite the pronatalist policies of the government and the absence of reliable contraception or trustworthy sources of information about controlling fertility, family size did not increase in the 1930s

…These interviews tell us the fearsome price that women paid to control their fertility after 1936… They resorted to back-alley abortions, learning of abortionists from their female friends, extended family members, and colleagues.” Once again, abortion was only available through dangerous means, and the traditional structures of the Russian family were reinstated.

In light of the turmoil of the revolutionary age, Lenin wrote an optimistic mantra, “We have begun to learn and are rapidly learning to fight” to insist that Socialism would overcome the ills of the present. The Bolsheviks were looking forward to a radical change that would benefit human progress as a whole. Giving women the ability to terminate pregnancy with no discrimination was highly controversial and drastic in the eyes of the rest of the world. By the time the Soviet government reversed this legislation, it had accomplished one of its goals of reducing deaths by dangerous abortion procedures. However, abortion had not disappeared as promised by the Decree. Despite a push by feminist and Bolshevik leaders, the Russian government and its people had been stubborn when educating the public about other forms of contraception, so abortion remained considerably more prevalent in the Soviet state than in any other industrialized country. The free programs were also inaccessible to most women living in rural areas, who still could only terminate pregnancy through dangerous and unregulated means. The decriminalization of abortion had provided one choice, but that choice was not enough to ensure the revolutionary freedom and empowerment of heavily-burdened Russian women.
THE REFUSAL OF RUSSIAN MOTHERHOOD
DECRIMINALIZATION OF ABORTION UNDER THE BOLSHEVIK REGIME

INTRODUCTION
1920 – made legal by Bolsheviks
1936 – made illegal by Stalin

HISTORIOGRAPHY
- First focused analysis of the 1920 legislation
- Widely varying opinions in secondary literature

“DECREES OF THE PEOPLE’S COMMISSARIAT OF HEALTH AND SOCIAL WELFARE AND THE PEOPLE’S COMMISSARIAT OF JUSTICE IN SOVIET RUSSIA”
- Izvestia, 1920
- Zhenotdel
- “profiteers” – babki
- Marie Zebrikoff, 1884
- “evil”
- “remnants of the past”
- Women’s rights
- Domestic => Public

LEVIN, "THE WORKING CLASS AND NEO-MALTHUSIANISM"
- Pravda, 1913
- Pirogov Society meeting
- Malthusianism
### MENSHEVIK VS. BOLSHEVIK IDEAS ON ABORTION

**ALEKSANDRA KOLLONTAI**
- Maternity reform first
- Women’s empowerment

**VI. LENIN**
- Right of men and women
- Byproduct of capitalism

*Both saw as social concern, rather than personal*

### TROTSKY, “FROM THE OLD FAMILY TO THE NEW”

- Pravda, 1923
- Overthrow of tradition
- “Freedom” through public welfare
- Reversed logic

### CONCLUSION

Lenin: “We have begun to learn and are rapidly learning to fight”

The revolution had come full circle.