

# WOMEN IN THE SOVIET UNION

Lilith HAYAAPETIAN,

from Moscow State Linguistic University.

Specialization: International Relations, Russian Federation.

**Abstract :** Women born in the 20th century were different from their grandmothers. Throughout the world women raised their voices, as they sought to prove to men and to themselves that they deserved equality with men in all aspects of life. The Soviet Union was one of the first countries in the World to equate men and women in rights and provide the same opportunities for both sexes. Yet it is to be mentioned that it was not done due to the humane ideals. The USSR saw women's great potential in both production and expansion of the communist ideology. The legacy of the Soviet Epoque still lingers in the post-Soviet space and Eastern Europe and in order to apprehend the essence of the existing problems, a look back is required. This article tackles the gender issues and difficulties of Soviet women as well as emphasizes the achievements and failure of the Era. In order to write the article, the author analyzed a vast number of secondary sources, visual arts of the epoque, used comparative method to compare the difference in cultures and its implications for women of that specific culture on the Soviet territory as well as statistical data of nowadays, which is closely tied to the results of the Soviet legacy .

**Key words:** Soviet women, gender issues, communist legacy, ideal communist woman.

## **“Young communist, athlete and last but not least, a beauty” or women in the Soviet Union**

The 20th century has witnessed unprecedented changes in all aspects of life, including gender issues. Women born in the 20th century were not like their grandmothers. The devastating experiences of 2 world wars, revolutions and crises in the midst of war-ravaged cities and wrecked economies urged women to voice their rights and achieve independence. The path to emancipation varied from country to country, depending on cultural, religious and historical origins of the given country. This paper's focus is on the women in the Soviet Union and their path to emancipation and self-affirmation. The article examines the ideal communist woman's behaviour, role and duties during all 7 decades of the existence of the Soviet Union.

The USSR emerged on the ruins of the Russian Empire, in the aftermath of the 1st world war, in the mid of political, economic, social and cultural disintegration of the whole region once called the Russian Empire. Each historical period has its own philosophy and political ideology which is imposed on the population and has a particular long-term impact on the society. A glance at the Soviet society from the gender equality perspective is rather challenging given the political censorship and cultural diversity existing in the Soviet republics. Literature in three languages (Russian, Armenian and English) has been analyzed while collecting information on the topic. Therefore a combination of primary and secondary research has been used to write the article. A thorough analysis of a vast number of modern literature, movies, trends in fashion industry, statistical data (e.g. the number of employed or educated women) and cultural heritage led to the conclusions which will be highlighted in this article.

The foundation day of the USSR was 30th of December, 1922. 1922-1932. The first decade of its existence, marked by harsh political and economic conditions, suggested revolutionary transformations within the society. The Soviet citizen arose on the ashes of old prejudice and stereotypes. Consequently, the two main actors of the society; men and women, were obliged to alter their roles and behaviours to fit the new system of values. Who was the new Soviet woman? What was her role in the society? What clothes did she have to wear? What type of men was she supposed to marry? How was she supposed to look like? The answers to these questions explain the transition from ordinary man and woman to comrade. The woman, who temporarily lost her femininity and became comrade, was portrayed as young, enthusiastic, hard-working, courageous, yet modest and loyal to her principles(communist ideology) to the point of being ready to sacrifice herself for them. Wearing a soldier's blouse or tunic with a red kerchief on her head (red as the symbol of rebels) she articulated her willingness and ability to fight for the benefit of the society. By putting aside makeup, hairpins, jewelry the new comrade type of woman demonstrated no signs of sexuality. The man beside her was a true fighter for workers' rights and here comes a subtle issue regarding the balance of love and duty. If the man somehow betrayed their principles, she was supposed to get rid of him as the concept of love was tightly intervened with the concept of communist ideology. Her main duty appeared to be at first the comrade in arms of the man then the companion of man in building socialism. In the literature and visual arts, she was depicted next to the man, equal to him, yet guided by him. If we take a look at the famous sculpture Worker and the Kolkhoz woman made by V.Mukhina we will see the man is holding a hammer, the driving power of building communism, whereas the

woman is only assisting him with a sickle. However, even such a curtailed equality was a considerable step forward in terms of progress and emancipation of women as officially they acquired the same rights as men and for the first time in history women were granted the chance to openly play an active role in the society. They got the opportunity to take part in the social life of their communities, shape views and get engaged in something more than household and birth giving. Clear are the reasons of such a policy. The newly formed government in a war-torn country needed minds and hands to build a new country based on unprecedented concepts and the best audience it could address to were those who possessed less of everything: education, privileges, power, opportunities. Accordingly, the communist party took advantage of women's overwhelming ignorance and striking susceptibleness to the new ideology to root itself in the most remote areas of the country. Enlightened and empowered women acted as missionaries persuading other women and demonstrating by their own example that their only way to emancipation, thus better life, was in adherence and loyalty to communist ideology. Time passed and the new generation of young communist girls and boys grew up, their heads filled with communist postulates and Lenin's quotations. In the beginning of 1930s the idea of bringing up revolutionaries and genderless comrades was dismissed as outdated. The communist party's new policy encouraged young women to serve both their country and their families, while often not working officially but being a socially active person and committing herself to her community. Thus an ideal woman of the early 1930s was not employed officially, yet she was actively involved in community building, which was, by the way, nonmarket work. With regard to the politicization of all aspects of life, the visual arts of the Epoque depicted modern women as hard-working, modest and decent. Early Soviet culture rejected sexuality's dominance in female beauty as petty bourgeois. The communist party made an attempt to create an opposing to the consumerist culture image of women. The excessive zeal resulted in the propaganda of ascetic life and rejection of any type of makeup, the use of the latter considered a sign of easiness in the best scenario, or imperialist in the worst. Remarkable source of information are the decrees about family and women issued in the late 20s which entitle us to assume that in the dawn of its existence the communist propaganda of purity and chastity could compete in its strictness only with medieval Catholic church. Sex, as an unconditional means of reproduction, was only praised for reproduction causes and even a married couple had to abstain from performing too many sexual acts .

1932-1945. Stalin's omnipresent control of citizens' lives reflected upon the fashion as well. Health, natural beauty and hygiene became the

cornerstone ideas of the new image of a communist woman. Makeup and beauty treatment regarded as provocative sexual behaviour, pushed to the foreground elegance as the subtle balance between vulgarity and imperialist consumerism. With the development of industry and the USSR's transition from an agricultural country to an industry-based, women's physical abilities converted into national property. For instance the lack of manpower pushed even pregnant women to take up tractor or tramway driver's work, with little regard to their physical condition or the harm it could do to the foetus. WW2 made women's burden even heavier. With the outburst of the war, the propaganda of a Heroine Mother with ten children, working both in the factory and at home, getting almost no support and bringing up her children communist patriots appeared on the pages of all newspapers and journals. Mass mobilization of men, shortages of food and first-necessity goods added to the hardships of women quadrupling their workload. Literary heroines of the Epoque represent a curious and impressive combination of strength and humility. In addition to the literature, manipulation of printmaking considerably influenced the mass conscience. The street walls, covered with posters, delivered two major ideas to the masses: it was men's moral duty to go to the war and every Soviet woman was a heroine. Posters of the wartime present a particular interest as the woman portrayed on it is highly fertile, with hardened hands, holding a baby in one hand and embracing a toddler with the other. She is surrounded by her multiple children, among who can be noticed a future soldier, sailor, social activist, presumably a future party member, and a couple of hearty girls, who will apparently be just like their mother. This type of imaging circulated even after the war, praising the toughness and heroism of Soviet women. The word combination Heroine Mother has been widely used from that time onward.

1945-1955. The end of war lighted a hope in the hearts of millions. For a second it seemed to people that the misfortunes of the past were left behind forever, yet a dire disappointment was lingering in front of the Soviet citizens. The repressions of the past resumed and the ubiquitous ideology was enforced even more zealously. Despite the shortages of basic goods, young girls and women rediscovered their long gone femininity. Many made their own dresses as clothes were unaffordable or simply lacked. The light industry, adjusted to the production of war uniforms, failed to meet the necessities of the civilians long after the end of WW2. The lack of clothes, shoes, basic accessories, for instance scarves, hats or gloves made women sew and patch up their clothes, until the end of 1950s, when mass production of clothes was back on the rails. In the total absence of food and the presence of ration cards, plumpness became the synonym of well-being, especially for fertile women. The

abolishment of ration cards in 1947, massive inner migration from villages to towns, the economy's gradual return to the pre-war production revived city life. The main trend in women's fashion became decency, the exact meaning of which varied depending on the point of the person who used the word. The examination of soldiers' diaries represents a unique source of Soviet people's moral sense and conditions of life. When the Red Army made its way to Europe, Soviet soldiers and accompanying medical staff (mostly female) were both fascinated and repelled by the loose morality of European women. Brought up in a society where love was of a derivative of duty, commitment and marriage, soldiers accentuated the fact, that European type of love, free of ideological load and communist ideals, was exotic to them. Clear as it is in the most abject scarcity of all types of resources, including human resources, the Party's only way to keep the war devastated population in leash was to appeal to their sense of patriotism and puritanism. The post-war generation continued living with the pre-war concepts and morals until the shift in the USSR's policy which became possible only in 1953, after Stalin's death.

1955-1965. Doubtlessly, Stalin's death was a blessing for the country, though many thought that the era of the USSR's grandeur fade away with him. Stalin, as any dictator, left a heritage of unsolved problems, including the most pressing ones, like food supplies and housing. The country's new leader, N. Khrushchev, introduced a policy that is named by historians the thaw. Gradually the Party began to loosen its grip on social aspects of life and, thanks to Khrushchev's efforts, the quality of life greatly improved compared to pre-war time. The thaw had a particular effect of women of the USSR. Under Stalin's rule women were, although officially equal to men, yet de facto removed from the political sphere of life. Stalin was extremely patriarchal and conservative and he would not tolerate a woman to be in a leading position, either in a factory or in politics. Consequently, women were again considered mainly housewives and mothers who yet, had to fulfill her Soviet citizen's duty and additionally work for the benefit of the society. Khrushchev, although milder than Stalin, was also conservative in his policy towards women. Proclaiming a policy catch up and surpass (the USA), Khrushchev undertook a bunch of measures, all geared to alleviation of Soviet people's everyday hardships, including housewives' difficulties. As a part of the Communist party's efforts to balance the number of men and women in the legislative body a 33-40% gender quota, compelling the to have at least 33% of women represented in the Supreme Council. Inarguably a positive and progressive step, this kind of measures did not improve female's role in the society as these women were mostly kept away from decision-making processes and their presence in the Supreme Council was more symbolic than executive.

The decade of the thaw can not be called a prosperous one, yet the most pressing problems like food, housing and basic goods' demands were met and the victorious nation earned the right to eat something more than potatoes and milk and move from barracks and vaults to, perhaps tiny and by far not luxurious, however, their own apartments. As for Soviet women's issues, the situation of work conditions, motherhood, the Party's, i.e. the society's attitude towards working women remained pretty much the same. On the one hand the policy of positive discrimination had been adopted by the Party to boost birth rate and help thousands of women, who lost their husbands at war, raise their children in more or less humane conditions. Its essence was in providing women, especially mothers of large families, with all types of care and social benefits. Such methods were of ultimate importance for reducing child mortality, yet, they were insufficient to increase natality, decreasing from 1950s and continuing till the collapse of the USSR.

A modern woman in all 15 republics of the long gone USSR faces the dilemma of combining housewives duties and work, a heritage of the Soviet era. In the Academy Award winning Soviet movie "Moscow does not believe in tears" the hero Gosha states an idea that clearly expresses the Soviet society's patriarchal system. The hero Gosha helped out his beloved woman's daughter in a fight and when the girl thanked him for acting like a real man, he answered "...Don't thank me, any man would do that. Making a decision and protecting that's a man's duty". Then he added the crucial part "...You wouldn't praise a woman just because she does housework, would you?"

The permission to perform abortions granted in 1955, empowered Soviet women with the most essential right of having control over their own bodies. Women were supposed to work both at home and in the workplace, raise children and they could expect no help or support from their husbands who considered doing housework or playing with kids inappropriate pastime for a man. Additionally, women's wages were by 30% lower than men's. No discrimination existed in the same work either for men or women, however, many considered that women, due to their psychophysiological peculiarities, could perform only a limited number of work. The most common jobs for educated women were those of a doctor, teacher and librarian, however, women were not exempt of hard physical work, which could lead to unwanted side effects as health issues. That is to say, the jobs, previously performed by men and requiring low qualifications and physical strength, passed on to women. As for women in villages, no one abolished their lot of doing slavish physical work, which in the absence of machinery or even animals included harnessing themselves to till the land. Hence, the USSR's hypocritical attitude

towards women and the claim of female emancipation in the socialist country lay somewhere between rhetorics and forgery.

1965-1985. It would be unfair not to give credit the Soviet system for its achievement in gender issues. Even with all the misgivings and errors that have occurred, Soviet women developed social and civil rights earlier than most of the countries of both developed and developing worlds. Although officially abolished, religious and cultural diversity of the country played a substantial role in shaping the attitude towards women. In the second half of the 20th century it became evident that the communist ideology was not capable of subduing cultural differences in a country with 100 nations living within its borders. The Russian language and culture being predominant in most republics of the USSR, it should be acknowledged that several decades would not suffice to annihilate what had been developed and inherited through centuries, thus one can conclude that the state of affairs in all fifteen republics drastically differed from each other. For instance, in the Kyrgyz Soviet Socialist Republic it was (and still it!) a common tradition to abduct a girl and force her to marry the kidnapper. Call it a violation of human rights, but even women, belonging to the aforementioned culture, would deny that there was anything unlawful in such an act. By contrast, in the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic such actions would be regarded as a barbaric breach of law and treated respectively. Another good example is the situation in the Republic of Armenia, where under the communist rule and even nowadays, the women with tertiary education outnumber men, but the social bias towards women and their role in a patriarchal society is so thick, that only 30% of women with higher education prefer to work. Hereby it would not be erroneous to affirm that despite the efforts of the Communist party, women's rights in all 15 Soviet republics were the same only on paper, while in reality the cultural and religious legacy of the dominant nation of the state predetermined the common approaches to the issue.

Brezhnev's era of the USSR is often called the Stagnation, which reflected in every corner of the entire country, at least that is the widespread perception of the period. Nevertheless, due to the government's relative laxity over the society's life and the growing influence of Western capitalist culture, some type of ideological revolution was already looming in the near future. A number of official and nonofficial events contributed to the longed for changes in the society. In the mid 70s, it became evident that the Soviet model of a welfare state was not able to keep up with the time and face the challenges the latter offered. The youth brought up in peace and civilised living conditions grew conscious of the absolute irrelevance of the communist ideology. Western pop culture becoming more popular among the new generation, distrust and regret

arose in the minds of many. It became evident, that in rotten capitalist countries, despite the propaganda of the government, people lived better and freer than in the most glorious socialist in the world. The understanding of Soviet system's failure (compared to Western countries) in many aspects of life, marked the beginning of frantic copying of Western pop culture.

Decades of total mass deprivation had a complex effect on the generation born in 1970-80s. Henceforth the masses could afford to think about something more than their basic human needs which led to a rapid increase in consuming.

The puritan society of the USSR disapproved sex education for young people considering it shameful and inappropriate. The Soviet pedagogical system praised spiritual and nonphysical beauty, emphasising the absolute necessity for young girls to have a kind heart and rich inner world. Naive as it may sound, but it also discouraged any demonstration of physical beauty or feminine behaviour in young girls. It is obvious that this kind of policy was doomed to fail as it opposed the nature in its core values, trying to reduce the differences between boys and girls. Despite the above mentioned efforts, the women in the Soviet countries did their best to follow the Western fashion style and look as feminine as possible. The mass production of makeup, perfumes and other cosmetics as well as the society's relative well-being afforded women to pay attention to their clothes, look, manners and behaviour. The common trend was to accentuate men's attention on the fact that being a woman did not solely mean a mother and a housewife. For the first time in decades, urban women started realizing that there were many other things to do in life apart from giving birth to children and washing their families' clothes. The young generation's ideas varied from extreme liberal to radical conservative, however the mere fact that such ideas emerged was an unknown novelty for a society where there was no room for any other ideas than those dictated by the government. The mass expansion of Western fashion, pop culture and even dances like disco contributed to the development of independent views and consequently generated discontent towards the existing state of affairs.

1985-1991 and conclusion. Some political scientists believe that the agony of the USSR started before Gorbachev's ascension to the post of the Chief Secretary as no revolution could be carried out in reality if it had not existed in people's minds. Speaking of moral prerequisites, it is vital to indicate the moral decay of the society and the growing consumerist tendencies. Everything that was once seen as taboo became fashionable. Sex issues were intangibly tied with gender issues as women sought emancipation through bottomless manifestation of sexuality. Unprecedented movies of the Epoque put us in the picture of the generation gap between the young people and the existing



ideology. Moral values of the past turned futile and valueless whereas the influx of perverted interpretation of freedom conquered the youngsters. Women of the generation found themselves in the middle of the henceforth irrelevant ideology of decency and limitlessness a la mode.

To sum up all the above mentioned and give credit to the positive aspects of the USSR's policy towards women, while not forgetting about the negative ones, it would be appropriate to emphasize the advantages and disadvantages of the Soviet government's policy all along its existence as an actor in the political arena.

**Advantages:** Doubtlessly the Soviet government played an immense role in feminine emancipation at the beginning of the 20th century. It was one of the first countries in the world to grant equal right, at least on paper, to both sexes. This kind of breakthrough in the law seemed promising to the Soviet women and promoted women's active participation in social life and production. The USSR also made education free and available for everyone and encouraged women to work after graduation, providing equal rights with men in production and even favouring positive discrimination which manifested in social benefits and privileges for mothers. It was also one of the pioneers to allow women to do abortions, thus giving women the right to choose.

**Disadvantages:** The conventional wisdom suggests that every coin should have a reverse. The other side of positive discrimination and equality of men and women in the Soviet state was the negation of sexuality itself and suppression of feminine identity as a whole. This idea suggests that a woman can have two options in life: entirely devote herself to motherhood and housewife duties or try to combine everything at the same time: work and family with no support whatsoever and rejection of her own desires as well. The legacy of this policy is still lingering in the post-Soviet countries, where many believe that a woman can choose to work or not, but she cannot expect any support from her husband or family in raising the children or taking care of the house as it is her duty to do it, whereas working outside the house is more for her joy. This leads to the phenomenon of a 16 hour work day of an average woman who is paid half of what the man gets for an 8 hour work day. Thus the burden of women in the post-Soviet space is immense, as many opt to work, proceeding from financial needs or personal ambitions, but the social pressure to get married, have children and take care of them solely has not diminished not in the least. Thus, many women find themselves trapped between the legacy of patriarchal culture and the challenges of the time.

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