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Abortion as a Means of Family Planning in Russia in the First Quarter of the Twentieth Century

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In November 18, 1920 Soviet Russia became the first state in the world ever to legalize abortion. The authors of this article summarize the experience of its legalization in the 1920–1936 years. Reveal the socio-economic, health and other reasons that motivate women to abortion, moreover, authors show the interrelation the number of children in the family and mortality, as a result uncovered concrete historical causality adopted in the USSR in 1936 a law banning abortion.

Keywords: law, legal and clandestine abortion, family planning, fertility, mortality.

Abortion – is a form of modern family planning in many countries of the world. For example, in France, abortion was legalized in 1975, in Belgium – 1980, in Poland – 1956, in the UK – in 1967, West Germany – in 1976, in Turkey – 1983, in the U.S. – in 1973. July, 3, 2002 the European Parliament adopted a decision to legalize abortion in the European Community.

In the modern world, there are countries where abortion is severely restricted: Brazil (1991), Chile (1990), Colombia (1989), Mexico (1990), Philippines (2000), Hungary and Poland (2012) and et al.

In Soviet Russia, abortion was legalized in hospitals and banned as a private practice in November, 18, 1920 (Drobizhev, 1987). The Soviet Republic was the first country in the

world where abortion was legalized for medical and social reasons. The purpose of the act was to bring abortion out of the underground state.

This article reviews the history of abortion in Tsarist and Soviet Russia. The complexity of this study is that there are no adequate and reliable statistics on abortion and death in this period, so we can only repeat the general consensus of opinion held by both doctors and researchers and contemporaries that the deaths were an appallingly high percentage of the number of abortion.

The chronological scope of the study covers two periods (the end of XIX century – 1920, 1921–1927). Each of these periods has its own peculiarities and characteristics. Before the 1917 revolution, the tsarist government, as in most

countries, label abortion “a moral and physical evil”. In the Criminal Code 1885 (art.1461–1463) abortion was defined as a “deliberate act” of murder, for which severe punishment for those who did, and those who were subjected to this procedure: the cancellation of any medical license, and long jail finally, and in some cases even the death penalty.

Spiritual foundations of marriage, family, relationships between spouses, parents and children were professed by Christianity. In the Christian religion childbearing was considered as the justification of carnal procreation and it was seen as the ultimate meaning of marriage. The Christian church had negative attitude to birth control. Family law for the peasants had religious and mystical character. All that was sanctified by providence had an exceptional value in the village, “Children are a blessing of God, they support and happiness of the family” – this was the prevailing view of the peasants on children. Children created not only the internal strength of family top and contained an instinctive desire to procreate, but the consciousness of the importance which has in every generation, continuity of work: work for children as their future successors. Most of the peasants considered the expulsion of the fetus as a grave sin, and many saw in it a debauch of young generation. Village public opinion was extremely strict with the girls, who had seen in this offense. Much more likely to get married was the girl who gave birth to a child than the one on which it became known that she produced a miscarriage (Russian folk medicine, 1903).

Peasant families tended to have many children. Researchers differently explain the need for the children. Researchers have differences on the issue of economic efficiency of a large family. The author shares the view of A.G.Vishnevsky, A.N.Chelintseva and B.V.Okushko taking into account the evolving nature and demographic composition of the peasant family.

In the early twentieth century peasant remained primarily biological rather than a social being. Peasants could not afford the fatal risk and luxury not to marry or marry late, to limit the number of children, extend the intervals between births, etc. Therefore, they in the vast majority were married as soon as female (and to a much lesser extent, men) body was allowed to have children (the average age of the first menstrual period of peasant women of Tambov province in the 70–80’s XIX century was 16.3 years. On individual hospital statistics and in the early twentieth century 46 % Tambov peasants were married in the first year after the start of menstruation and another 20–22 % from 1 to 2 years. No posts and the harvest time could become intermission of equal intensity about sexual activity and chart conception. Sexually active peasants were approximately equal in all seasons, with a clear, but a slight increase in the time of weddings, “meat-eating”, and even less noticeable weakening in the harvest season. Another conception occurred as it will save on the full-term and preterm fetal mother’s womb. Given the share of miscarriage in early pregnancy, as well as stillborn or died before baptism, one can calculate that the “average” peasant women “from the metric “ became pregnant in two and a half years, and prior to the expiration of the first year after birth. If a woman’s health in order to remain within the prescribed period, the nature of child-bearing, she gave birth to full-term children at intervals of 12–15 months, giving birth for 20–25 years up to 20 children. Similarly, the largest share – 40–60 % – in the reporting maternity units occupied, “July-October” nulliparous women married to 9–12 months before the birth of first child, while in metrics undercount stretched the interval of two and a half times.

Notorious prolonged breastfeeding has had a very questionable and unnecessary measure to prevent another pregnancy, but it provides an

intense production of prolactin in the female body that are approaching menopause and 4–5 years shortened fertile period (Дьячков В.Л.).

Although the State, the Church and the common law have been fighting the practice of getting rid of unwanted children, but abortion, both in town and country was widespread. In the city abortion performed by – primarily for medical reasons and was the main form of contraception. In a Moscow hospital in 1910, there were 1884, in 1911–1531, in 1913 – 2372 (Ярославский В.М., 186). According to Llewellyn-Jones on the eve of World War I, the hospitals of Moscow and Leningrad were being overwhelmed by waves of women who had undergone some form of illegal abortion (Wheatcraft S.G., 49). As noted at the Pirogov Congress of Russia's leading medical association in 1910, the rate of illegal abortions was growing on in "epidemic proportions." On the eve of World War I, according to the well-known doctor Vigdorichik N., residents of St. Petersburg began to consider a miscarriage as something ordinary and affordable. Addresses of doctors and midwives passed from hand-to – hand, who performed those operations on a specific taxi, not very high (Левина Н).

Pre-revolutionary Russia, according M.Hindus, has always been violent temper students. The first survey for the study of the sexual behavior of students in Russia conducted by V. Favr, was held in 1902. He interviewed in Kharkov about 2000 students of three universities. According to the survey, 73 % of students aged 17–20 years have had sexual experience. According to the survey, conducted by D.N.Zhbakov (1908), almost 90 % of Moscow students and teachers between the ages of 17 and 25 were virgins at the age of 21–25 years – 45.5 %. For those who never have been married in the church, the proportion who had sexual experience was 18 %. I.Gelman in 1914, reported that 11.9 % of students in Moscow had

first sexual intercourse before age 13 and 39, 2 % – 14 to 16 years (Гельман И., 1925).

During the revolution of 1917 and the subsequent civil war, little was done to stop the practice of underground abortions. Besides hunger, deprivation, destruction encouraged more women to seek illegal abortions (Wendy Z. Goldman, 1993). There was an increase in the number of abortions and health care facilities. For example, in one of St. Petersburg's clinics in 1919, there were 1274, 1920 – 1460, in 1921 – 2134. In Moscow, in one clinic in 1910 there were 1, 884, in 1913– 2372, and in 1922–6859 (Ярославский В.М., 186).

Induced abortion was a widespread in rural areas. According to E.P. Dutton, the poor people, to whom he referred the population of pre-revolutionary Russia, there was some complexity in financial support of large families. Frequent women's births were forced to family on the one hand, spending more material resources to raise their children, on the other hand, the family lost for some time worker, her pregnancies cut down still further the family's finances. Russian woman protected herself from a physical and her family from an economic breakdown in the only way she knew-by using abortion to prevent too frequent births (Dutton E.P., 1932). Women knew that they could die from abortion, lose health and strength again pregnant. Often, women perform an abortion on their own, or to help her inexperienced friend or midwife. Using household tools that are completely unsuitable for this purpose, and conditions are unlikely to have ever been hygienic. Those who make such operations generally do not have any idea about the female anatomy and physiology, and therefore, in many cases, the procedure results in death or permanent disability.

Women have used a variety of mechanical devices: pulling stomach towels, ropes; lifting weights unbearable, jumping from a high ladder,

loft; skipping over the barrel or a high fence. From internal means the most common was “drinking gunpowder, saltpetre, kerosene, phosphorus matches, ergot, mercuric chloride, cinnabar, arsenic, ...swallowing a” living “mercury...” women finely received milled glass with water and sand, which is formed at hone iron or steel tools” (Russian folk medicine, 1903). The use of these funds often entailed death.

Before the revolution sexual behavior of rural and urban population has become the subject of wide public discussion. In the last quarter of the XIX century to the various methods of birth control began to resort more and more general population. The newspaper “The Doctor” for 1893 noted that “condoms” have become increasingly common, although condoms, as well as coitus interruptus, were extremely harmful to health (Вишневский А.Г., 40).

Medical community especially actively advocated for the legalization of abortion. At the 3rd Congress of the Society of Russian Physicians in memory N.I. Pirogov in 1889, the authors of reports, recognizing that abortion – the evil, however, called for a softening of the Russian legislation on abortion, in particular, to ensure that reduce to minimum punishment of women subjected to surgery, and to recognize the legitimate medical abortion in the case of some diseases (Вишневский А.Г., 42). Especially intensified demands for the legalization of abortion in 1905 after the main motive for these standards was the growth of underground operations, often ended with an injury, or even death of patients.

The greatest social urgency the legalization of abortion in 1913, acquired at the XII Congress of the Society of Russian Physicians N.I. Pirogov. The majority of participants were in favor of abolition of the ban on abortion (Белобородов И.И.), defining the resolution of the Congress, that the prosecution of the mother in a miscarriage should never occur and doctors, who produced

at her request and insistence, should be exempt from criminal liability.

As a fact, that in these years, a positive attitude to the legalization of abortion has identified and Lenin (Ulyanov) – the future chairman of the Council of People’s Commissars of the RSFSR.

Thus, the law to permit abortion in 1920 was predetermined in the pre-revolutionary period.

The legalization of abortion in Soviet Russia has caused a wide resonance in the Russian Federation and abroad. Domestic and foreign scholars Marianne Githens, Dorothy Mc.Bride Stetson, Dorothy E.Mc Bride, N. Levina wrote that the legalization of abortion in Russia was a necessary health measure, carried primarily to healthcare. The government first sought to deal with the causes of abortion (illness, large families, poor housing) (Marianne Githens and et al).

Most Western scholars (E.P. Dutton, Arthur Newsholme and John Adams Kingsbury) in their studies have focused on the responsibility of physicians. They wrote that, according to Soviet law of 1920, which legalized abortion did so under the following conditions):

1. The operation known as abortion can only be performed by licensed surgeons. All midwives are strictly prohibited from performing abortions.
2. Save in very exceptional circumstances, abortion must be the result of a surgical operation and not the result of medicines or drugs.
3. After every abortion performed, the woman concerned must stay in bed in the hospital, or other place of operation, for three full days.
4. After every abortion or miscarriage, the woman concerned must not be allowed to go to work for two weeks after said operation or illness.

5. An abortion must not be performed for the first pregnancy unless childbirth would seriously endanger the woman's life.
6. Abortion must not be performed if the pregnancy has been continued for more than two and one-half months.*
7. Except as stated in paragraphs «5» and «6» no qualified doctor has the right to refuse abortion, although he is at liberty to discourage it in every way he thinks fit.
8. The State recommends that all abortions be performed in those State hospitals where there is a section definitely for that purpose. All women who carry social insurance or whose husbands are socially insured can receive abortion free of charge in a State hospital. All others must pay the usual medical fees.
9. Private doctors or any other individuals who perform an abortion which results in death of the woman can be tried for manslaughter. Women who perform abortions on themselves are not subject to punishment.
10. It is recommended that abortions be discouraged if the woman concerned has had less than three children; if she has adequate means for supporting another child; if her health would not be impaired by another pregnancy; if her living conditions make a good enough environment for children; and, if, in general, there is no social, physical, or economic reason for the abortion (Arthur Newsholme, 1933; E.P. Dutton, 1932).

E.P. Dutton believed that that soviet methods employed in the struggle with abortion were based on several definite ideas held by the Soviet medical profession, and the State itself. Birth control which expressed in the

main not only their methods of work but also the attitude they adopt towards the problem of women's rights as a whole and such social problems. He identified the following methods of dealing with abortion: raising of the cultural and physical level of the population as a whole; development of an institutional system for the protection of women and children; insurance for mothers, vacations for working women before and after giving birth; defense of deserted women, alimony from husband and State, court trials of fathers who do not fulfill their social obligations; improving the living conditions of all people and the working conditions of all labouring women; general care for women who feed their babies from the breast; by acquainting the population with adequate means of birth control, through clinics and all other medical and social institutions.

This last method of fighting abortion E.P.Dutton, as N.B. Leбина considered the most important, "since due to the high cultural and financial level of a group of persons is raised, there ceases to be so much need for abortion and consequently abortion ceases to flourish" (E.P.Dutton, 1932; Н. Лебина, 1999).

Until the mid 20-s of the XX century Soviet social policy was aimed to create the necessary medical support freedom of abortion. In 1926 it was completely banned abortion for the first time pregnant women, and also made the operation less than six months ago. Family code 1926 approved women's right to induced abortion (Н.Левина). Stressed the temporary nature of the introduction of such a measure, "while the moral vestiges of the past and the present difficult economic conditions are forcing some women decided on the operation". But the operation of abortion in the medical and legal documents the early 20's of the twentieth century qualified as a "social evil", "social anomaly" (N.Levina), "social crime" (E.Dutton).

Expulsion of the fetus recognized as a crime in strictly limited circumstances. Criminal liability for abortion in the Criminal Code of the RSFSR in 1922 was determined by art. 146, and in 1926 the RSFSR Criminal Code art. 140. For these items can be held criminally responsible for the commission of abortion: 1) those who did not have this proper medical training, that is, the person did not possess medical degree, and 2) those who had medical training, but performed abortions in unsanitary conditions.

Under the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation, such persons could be imprisoned or subjected to forced labor for up to one year, or should have to pay up to five hundred rubles. If these steps were carried out in conditions specified in the first paragraph, in the form of business or without the consent of the mother, or have inflicted death – imprisonment up to five years.

The People's Commissariat of Health and Social Welfare since July 1924 the mandatory registration to "cards on abortion" of all the commissions received permission to have an abortion. The same card was filled in the woman admitted to hospital in a state of unsafe abortion.

The card had questions about the age, nationality, occupation, place of residence, marital status, type of housing, number of pregnancies and their outcomes; birth in the sequence number indicating the year, when there were labor, miscarriage and month of this pregnancy. The card should state the reasons that caused a desire to have an abortion, and the Commission's decision to provide free abortions or refusal. The study of these cards was the beginning of a statistical study of the abortion issue, but a mandatory universal registration took several more years. In provincial cities such registration at the time, more or less established, often carried out in the districts and was set slightly in rural areas.

Abortion rate depended on the number of children in the family and of the territorial factor. Women in urban areas choose abortion after the birth of their first child, a peasant woman after 3 or more children (see Table 1).

The rapid growth of abortion was accompanied by falling birth rates. The decline of fertility rates was 2–2.5 % per year, leading to a 12 % reduction in fertility during 1925–1930 and a further 25 % decrease over the period 1930–1935 (Белобородов И.И.). The same trend

Table 1. Family size of women receiving abortions, 1926

Number of children	Moscow and Leningrad		Provinces and District Towns		Other towns		Rural areas		Total	
	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%
None	7,967	21	4,393	16	2,004	13	2,235	15	16,599	17
1	12,988	33	8,925	32	4,498	30	2,686	18	29,097	30
2	9,019	23	6,918	25	3,857	26	3,138	21	22,932	24
3	4,855	13	3,604	13	2,190	15	2,658	18	13,307	14
4	2,221	6	1,921	7	1,234	8	1,858	12	7,234	7
5 and more	1,758	4	1,996	7	1,273	8	2,457	16	7,484	8
Total	38,808	100	27,757	100	15,056	100	15,032	100	96,653	100

Source. Russia's Women: Accommodation, Resistance, Transformation/Ed. by B.E.Clements, B.A. Engel and Ch.D.Worbec. University of California Press, 1991 p. 254.

noted researches A.Gens, W. Goldman, etc. By 1934, the number of reported abortions in rural areas, although it was significantly less than in the cities, however, exceeded the number of births to 1.3. According to the People's Commissariat of Health, in 1934, rural women were noted 243 thousand births and 324 thousand abortions (Урланис Б.Ц., 26). In the Soviet Union the birth rate fell steadily between 1927 and 1935 – from 45 births per thousand people in 1927 to 43, 7 in 1928; 39, 2 in 1930; 36, 9 in 1931; 34, 5 in 1932; 32, 4 in 1933; 30, 1 in 1934 and 30, 1 in 1935 (Clements B.E., 263).

It was noted at the Kiev VIII All-Union Conference of Midwives and Gynecologists in 1928 that the number of abortions exceeded the number of births (Clements B.E., 263). Therefore, since 1930, in the press began anti-abortion powerful campaign. Abortion had been paid, and the prices were constantly rising. In 1931 the cost was equal to 18–20 rubles, in 1933 – from 20 to 60, and in 1935 – from 25 to 300. Since 1935, the price depended on the level of supply of women. If the average income per family member was equal to 80–100 rubles, or for the operation took 75 rubles. This situation forced many women to seek illegal abortions or perform the operation herself, which led to the deterioration of women's health, or death. Many women who asked for operation not the first time (for the residents of Leningrad 30–35 year rate was 06.08 operations), did not think about its impact on the body (Н.Б.Лебина, 286).

As a result, in 1936 it was decided to ban abortions.

As we see, in the 20-s of XX century in Soviet Russia strongly rejected anti-abortion through repression. The legalization of abortion is not eliminated illegal abortions, although there was some decline. Legal abortion was overwhelmingly an urban phenomenon. Women in the cities had greater access to medical care than peasant women, who often had to travel many miles to reach the nearest doctor or hospital. In the early 1920-s rural medical personnel did little to inform peasant women about their right to abortion, feared that the demand for abortion would "swamp the weak regional health care network" (Clements B.E., 249). A trip to the commission, followed by a trip to the hospital, was extremely difficult. Roads were impassable. Even if a household owned a horse, it could rarely spare the animal, and a woman might have to walk 30 or 40 miles to get to a hospital. The commissions required proof of pregnancy, marital status, family size, a workplace. The paperwork and her subsequent absence exposed the purpose of her journey to the entire village (Clements B.E., 261).

One can agree with the findings of researchers I.Kon and A.G. Vishnevsky, before the end of the 20 years of the twentieth century the USSR occupied the leading position in the world in the study of abortion, family planning, birth control.

* Circular from November, 12, 1926 soviet government banned abortion after 3 months of pregnancy, as late abortion posed a serious risk to the health and lives of women. (See V.P.Lebedeva. Maternity protection in the country of the Soviets. Leningrad, State Publishing House, 1934, pp. 130–131.)

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Аборт как средство планирования семьи в России первой четверти XX в.

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18 ноября 1920 г. в Советской России впервые в мировой практике был принят закон об абортах. Авторы статьи обобщают опыт его легализации в 1920–1936 гг., выявляют социально-экономические, медицинские и иные причины, побуждавшие женщин на искусственное прерывание беременности, показана взаимосвязь аборта с детностью в семье и смертностью, вскрыта конкретно-историческая обусловленность принятия в СССР в 1936 г. закона о запрете аборт.

Ключевые слова: законодательство, легальный и подпольный аборт, планирование семьи, рождаемость, смертность.
