

Stalin's "New Soviet Woman"

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Abstract

The goal of this paper is to evaluate the extent to which Stalin has used the ideology of communism to promote feminism in Soviet Union in the 1930s and early 1940s. In order to do so, this paper focuses on one of the central notions of Stalin's domestic policies, the "New Soviet Woman." This concept stresses on two major elements, industrial productivity and reproductivity at home, and praises women's roles as workers and mothers. After a series of study on the propaganda Stalin has used and the legislations he has enabled to fulfill these two goals, I come to a conclusion that Stalin uses the emancipation of women as a pretense to mobilize women mainly for economic development and military preparation. To prove that Stalin has failed to promote feminism, the paper is structured as followed. First, there is a specific definition of feminism, which is constituted of two parts: equality and freedom. For each of them, the paper lists out some of Stalin's policies that are evidence of positive but limited feminist progress to explain the definition and also to qualify the main argument. Then, there are two major sections, which correspond to the two focuses of the "New Soviet Woman." Within each part, there are two subparts that discuss how Stalin's policies have violated the two fundamental principles of feminism, equality and freedom, respectively. With this paper, I distinguish opportunities from equality, prove that public expectations restrict freedom, and thus challenge the conventional view of the absolutely positive relationship between a communist regime and the growth of feminism under it.

Keywords

Communism, Feminism, Equality, Free Choice of Life, Opportunity, Propaganda, Appearance vs. Reality, 1930s and 1940s

1. Introduction

Feminist movement didn't emerge as a worldwide phenomenon until the 1960s.

In response to this new idea, many conservative opponents tend to consider feminists as radicals and associate feminism with ideologies like socialism and communism, both of which advocate for gender equality. However, history has proved that communism is not promoting feminism as positively or largely as many people would predict. Despite high percentage of employment and enrollment at educational institutions ([Zhenshchina v SSSR, 1936](#)), women's rights are still being abused under communist regime, which inclines towards using partial achievements of gender equality as a pretense in order to mobilize women for the needs of the nation. With all of these research and analysis, I aim to correct some people's wrong perspective of what many feminists are struggling for, raise public awareness on the destruction that many seemingly feminist policies can result in, and bring attention to a gap of history, that is, the history of women.

During the process of research, I've come to notice that the Soviet Union under the rule of Stalin is a very typical example for this case. As the first communist country ever stood on earth, the Soviet Union successfully opened up new economic and educational access for the long marginalized women after it formed in 1922. When Stalin came to power in 1924, similar goals could still be seen in his domestic policies. However, these opportunities did not necessarily translate into freedom or equality. Despite his emphasis on the importance of women's contribution and the encouragement of women's employment, Stalin actually impeded the growth of women.

Many previous studies have already revealed to us the real life situation of the Soviet Women Professor Usha's "*Political Empowerment of Women in Soviet Union and Russia: Ideology and Implementation*," ([Usha, 2005](#)) for example, well demonstrates to us the actual political power held by women in the Soviet Union. She illustrates that despite the measures passed to empower women politically, there was a continuously low political representation of women. While acknowledging the high percentage of employment and education among Soviet women, she argues that the CPSU failed to bring out enough social or structural changes to challenge the male-dominated culture long existing on the land. Similar arguments can also be seen in the work, "*Resilient Russian Women in the 1920s & 1930s*," ([Hutton, 2015](#)) by Marcelline Hutton, who approaches this topic by focusing on a group of female leaders in this time period. She detailedly describes their lives and careers, rises and falls, honors received and persecutions endured. Her book successfully proves to us that an undermined social and political position was the final outcome regardless of all these new opportunities opened to women. She thus suggests that a patriarchal culture of the nation has never disappeared with the new regime coming to power.

However, there is barely any writing piece that starts with and concentrates on a cultural icon. Just like "Rosie the Riveter," the image of "New Soviet Woman" must have represented both the social and political trend back then, so its complexity is certainly worth exploration and interpretation. More importantly, there is not much work that closely examines the relationship between com-

munism and feminism, which people usually presume to be correlated positively. Most of the researches have studied the extent of changes for Soviet women by comparing the same group at different points and under different historical contexts. It is thus very rare to use the elements of feminism as measurements to evaluate the progress that the CPSU has made regarding women's issues. Therefore, this paper is going to assess feminist progress promoted by Stalin by focusing on the cultural icon of "New Soviet Woman" (Clements, 1994). First, the paper defines feminism to contain two fundamental principle: equality and freedom. For each of them, there are examples under Stalin's era to acknowledge some of his policies that have at least promoted some limited positive feminist progress. Because the "New Soviet Woman" has two major focuses, industrial productivity and reproductivity at home, the paper then evaluates women's situations in these two fields back then one by one strictly based on the early definition to prove Stalin's failure in promoting feminism despite of some of his accomplishments on the surface.

At the end, a conclusion can be drawn: under Stalin era, although Soviet women certainly enjoyed more rights and opportunities, it's still undeniable that the notion of "New Soviet Woman" forcibly moulded the life of Soviet women and severely restricted their free choices of life with its exclusive focus on industrial productivity and reproductivity at home. Especially when it came to the 1930s and early 1940, Stalin mainly focused on the nation's economic growth and military preparation and utilized women simply as tools to achieve his greater goals. With his policies and use of propaganda, he violated both the principles of equality and freedom of feminism.

2. A Specific Definition of Feminism and Examples Explaining It

As mentioned above, feminism is a newly rising ideology. Unsurprisingly, people define and interpret it differently. To avoid future confusion, a clear and unmistakable definition of feminism is needed here. Unarguably, equality and freedom are two of the most major and crucial components of feminism. Specifically, equality refers to the same and unbiased opportunities opened to both men and women; freedom refers to being free from assigned gender roles and being able to choose one's own way of life.

Examples of policies promoting gender equality can be guaranteed equal payment, universal education, and so on. As for Stalin, he did not simply ignore the need of this kind of policies. During the early time of his reign, Soviet Women enjoyed protections against discrimination at workplaces with the help of the zhenotdel, a department established to secure equal rights for women (Stites, 1976). At the same time, we can also see a rising percentage of educated women as education became increasingly accessible to women. In 1935, an impressive percentage, 38%, of Soviet women were enrolled in higher educational institutions compared to Germany of 13.6% in 1935 and England of 25.7% two years ago. However, considering the fact that Stalin later dissolved the zhenotdel

(Racioppi & O'Sullivan, 1995), which will be discussed later in details, we can't conclude that he met the criteria to promote equality here.

Freedom, compared to equality which is frequently mentioned and discussed, is a trickier term due to its abstract nature. Other than by actual legislations, gender freedom could be secured only when the public does not impose particular expectation on only women, that is, when the government does not over-encourage a specific role of women or suppress the growth of another new identity of women's. On the surface, Stalin appeared to devote himself to free women from old-time oppression and exploitation and offer them absolute freedom. For example, an article "*On the Path to a Great Emancipation*" found on newspaper *Pravda* on March 8, 1929, the International Women's Day, directly stated that the government and its people would endeavor to "prevent the complete liberation and emancipation of working women from any kind of exploitation, from material need, from lack of culture, and from barbarism" (Pravda, 1929). *Pravda* was very representative of Stalin's attitude towards women's issues, since it was the central organ of the Central Committee of the CPU (Merrill & Fisher, 1980). Evidently, Stalin and his administration did not deny the need to emancipate women or disacknowledge the difficulties they would encounter on this path. Nevertheless, although what Stalin said in words seemed very positive and attractive, whether his actions lived up to his "principles" was arguable.

Examples above aim to help us understand what kinds of policies can promote true feminism and also demonstrate to us that Stalin has achieved some, though very limited, accomplishments in this field. Then, in the rest of the paper, I would like to focus on overthrowing people's misconception of the so-called equality and freedom that were enjoyed by women in a communist country.

3. Stalin's "New Soviet Woman": A Violation of Principles of Equality and Freedom of Feminism

Under his reign, Stalin has enabled many legislations regarding women's issues. But what is more significant than those laws is a female cultural icon that rose up during his time. The "New Soviet Woman" emerged together with the "New Soviet Man" and became a popular societal trend starting in the 1920s (Clements, 1994). Before any further discussion, it is necessary to clarify that no evidence shows that Stalin himself coined the phrase "New Soviet Woman" alone. What we know for sure is that he and his administration created this cultural icon and spread it out with massive use of propaganda (Engel, 2004).

The concept of "New Soviet Woman" contained two major elements: productivity and reproductivity. Productivity specifically refers to industrial productivity including efficiency of manufacture industries, production of heavy metal, and more importantly, assembly of military weapons. In other words, Soviet women were greatly encouraged to get actively involved at workplaces like factories. As for reproductivity, only reproductivity at home is emphasized. It suggests that in order to be a new Soviet woman, one has to bear the duty as a mother

and demonstrate the virtues of being a mother by raising multiple children up to be the hope of the country's future.

Although this new image was created by the CPU, because no cultural icon can stand by itself without the public support, the popularity of the "New Soviet Woman" indicates that the idea of the dual roles of women was welcomed by the Soviet people back then. In fact, many people were convinced and determined to sacrifice personal goods for the sake of the nation and for the sake of the global revolution of the working class. Given the ideological commitment among the Soviet people, we can easily understand how Stalin took advantage of this mindset and successfully exploited women without being noticed much. Nevertheless, Stalin's decision is understandable. He knew how urgent the nation needed industrialization and a higher birth rate when a war was on the brink (Harrison, 2008) clearly. Although whether Stalin was an indispensable leader for the Soviet Union's development was very debatable, it is undeniable that he guided this giant nation to defeat the well industrialized Nazi Germany in WWII. We may argue that Stalin did not intend to destroy feminism; instead, he was simply using the notion of the "New Soviet Woman" as a tool to accomplish his greater goals.

3.1. Productivity vs. Equality

To prosper the economy, Stalin demonstrated a clear intention to mobilize women only to meet the need of labor force for the national industrial development by appealing mainly to working women. Such mobilization, however, failed to provide women either equality or freedom. Stalin intentionally chose to ignore gender discrimination at working places to focus all his attention on gathering as many as women as possible by the assembly lines. His indifference towards gender discrimination certainly violated the fundamental principle of equality of feminism. An article published on a local newspaper in 1931 described a situation in which "many older women workers, who have worked for a long time at the factory, have been assigned to work not requiring qualifications and thus have not progressed any further" (Minkin, 1931). The author stated that there was a lack of "master skills" among women workers, and it could be explained by the fact that few women were fairly trained or promoted. At this particular factory, the author found out that only 14% of women workers had received awards, and only 2% of them ever participated in activities requiring higher skills. These two numbers were unusually low; especially when it happened in a country where the percentage of women education was relatively high. Similar conclusion was also drawn by professor Hoffman, who argued that research has shown that employment patterns relegated women to lower status and lower paid positions within Soviet industry. He pointed out that the persistent sexual division of labor was actually intensified by Stalin's policies (Hoffmann, 2000). But how? In response to these unequal access to training and promotion, Stalin actually eliminated the women's department, the *zhenotdel*, which devoted to improve the living conditions of women and committed to struggle for gender equality (Ra-

cioppi & O'Sullivan, 1995). The zhenotdel was not the only victim, for the only women organization survived was the the Soviet Women Committee (successor to Stalin's Anti-Fascism Committee), which concentrated on struggling against fascists overseas. Stalin justified his decision by declaring women's issues, a phrase coined by Lenin, were solved. In her book, professor Racioppi pointed out that Stalin's statement implied that there was no longer discrimination against women and the zhenotdel was thus unnecessary. Nevertheless, his declaration obviously contradicted the case described lines above that displayed the persistent inequality at factories. In fact, Stalin's top priority, argued by professor Racioppi, was always to have the giant nation self-sustained in preparation for a very likely war in the future. She stated that women's treatments were never on Stalin's agenda, for he concerned only whether the nation's industrial development was constantly accelerated. Therefore, although Stalin kept encouraging women to go out and work, he ultimately failed to secure them with equality.

3.2. Productivity vs. Freedom

Moreover, to mobilize as many working women as possible, Stalin displayed a detestation towards other ways of life, which violated the principle of freedom of feminism, since he imposed restrictions on women's free choices of life. With extensive use of propaganda, Stalin successfully confined Soviet women in a small sphere. There was a cartoon titled "*Old Way of Life*" (Figure 1) published on *Izvestiia*, the second largest newspaper in the Soviet Union back then in 1930 (*Izvestiia*, 1930). The cartoon was, again, introduced to the public on the

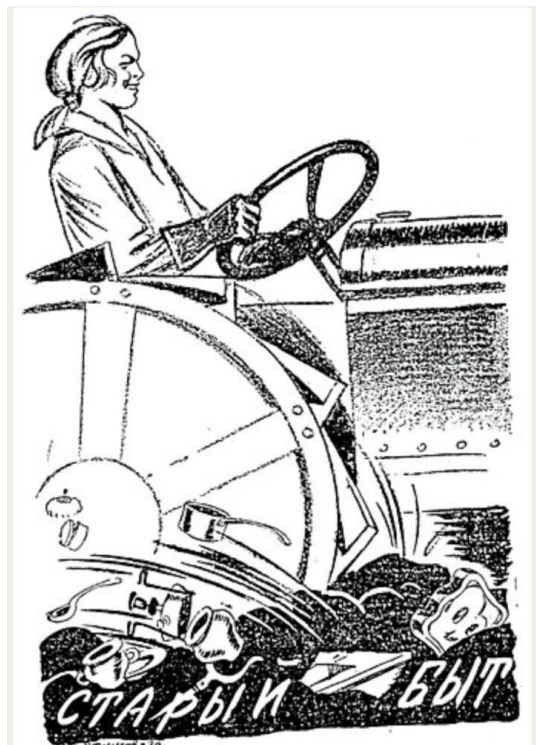


Figure 1. Old way of life.

International Women's Day, which meant it arguably represented the expected mainstream view of women set up by the government. What is interesting about this picture is that the main character had a genderless appearance. Nothing could indicate her gender except her long hair. There was no feminine depiction; instead, the whole picture was full of masculine elements. In the lower half of the cartoon, symbols of a domestic life, the "old way of life", such as spoons and tea-cups, were destroyed and despised. The cartoon demonstrated the government's purpose to encourage women as labor force to work at heavy industry factories and construction sites. More importantly, it displayed the government's attempt to erase an "feminine" identity, which it viewed wrong. Although most women back then might be unaware, but the CPSU was intentionally imposing an already pre-designed way of life on them. Forcing ever single women to go out and do the "men's work" destroys the idea of freedom as severely as confining all women in the domestic sphere. In fact, the article "*On the Path to a Great Emancipation*," which we have already talked about, did more than it seemed. It particularly displayed a scorn on the middle class, in which people were described to enslave women and live an evil life. The article proudly claimed that "only we in the Soviet Union have at hand all of the preconditions and foundations for the complete emancipation of working women" (Pravda, 1929). The wording here was tricky and interesting: it included only the "working women." In fact, no other women group was ever brought up, and phrases like "working women" and "women workers" were mentioned so frequently that we could reasonably doubt that the government wanted to have this particular role of women as manual workers embedded in its people's minds as a cultural icon. By doing so, Stalin could attain his goal of industrial development regardless of whether freedom was properly valued. He thus fundamentally failed to promote the true feminism, which does not exclude any single woman. The CPSU under Stalin waved the giant of flag of "emancipating women under communism" when they were actually excluding and restricting women.

3.3. Reproductivity vs. Equality

Other than industrial productivity, Stalin's "New Soviet Woman" also displayed an almost exclusive focus on reproductivity at home. Women's role as mother was increasingly emphasized by the CPSU; especially when the nation was on the brink of a brutal war. In order to increase the nation's birth rate, Stalin enabled a series of legislations and elevated the purpose of reproduction up to a level vital to the survival of the entire nation. Stalin's policy was unarguable against feminism. First of all, he violated the principle of equality by enabling the Family Law of 1944. The law was very controversial. On one hand, it sanctioned illegitimate children and provided financial aid to unmarried mothers. But on the other hand, argued by professor Randall in her paper, it made divorce hard for women and freed men from taking up any responsibilities for making unmarried women pregnant (Randall, 2011). She stated that the law indirectly encouraged unequal family relationships and approved immoral and irresponsible

sexual behaviors of men, since they were not required to support children whom “they did not want.” In fact, the law specifically stated that unmarried but pregnant women shall not ask for child support from the fathers. This law thus made men and women unequal in front of the issue of pregnancy because with abortion being banned, which we will discuss later, women were now totally subjective to pregnancy. As a result, they were then more likely to be burdened by the task of children bearing; the worse thing was they had to deal with it alone this time. Therefore, they would be much less competitive in job hunting, while men would not be affected by their children at all. When women and men had to pay different prices for the same consequence, the government then ultimately failed to provide an equal platform for women as men. Stalin’s policy thus impeded the growth of feminism. Similar logic could also be seen in professor Hoffman’s book (Hoffmann, 2000). He suggested that the CPSU undercut familial rights unequally and tipped the balance in favor of men with the Family law of 1944. He highlighted that Stalinist policies certainly reinforced women’s subordination at home. Furthermore, professor Hoffman made another convincing point that the government was increasing the state’s intervention in private life and describing children bearing as a civil obligation not a personal one. The idea that raising children would be a vital to complete the revolution was used to justify the inequality indicated in the law. At the same time, all the financial aid and improved infrastructure were introduced to throw dust in the eyes of the Soviet people who failed to notice the law’s rotten root.

3.4. Reproductivity vs. Freedom

The worst aspect of Stalin’s notion of “superwomen,” (Usha, 2005) an equivalent term of “the new Soviet Woman,” laid in the fact that women were deprived of the right to control their own bodies and thus confined by the role of mother. Stalin severely violated the principle of freedom of feminism with the abortion ban passed in 1936 (*Izvestiia*, 1936). The document declared a nationwide ban on abortion regardless of all kinds of circumstances. It specifically pointed out that the nation had been “rebelling against abortions as a social evil” since the time of Lenin who was described as being compelled to legalize abortion due to the “economic breakdown of the country” at that time. The document emphasized every Soviet women’s role as “a mother and a citizen who bears the great and responsible duty of giving birth to and bringing up citizens.” Interestingly, they chose to put “mother” before “citizen.” In addition, the whole document was titled “Protection of Motherhood.” Therefore, we can see the CPSU’s obvious intention to highlight women’s domestic gender role as mothers. And the connotation of the phrase “the great and responsible duty” formed a sharp contrast with “abortions as a social evil.” Undoubtedly, the CPSU attempted to shape its people’s attitude towards abortions with a desired mould. Professor Usha, who worked at the Center for Russian and Central Asian Studies of the Jawaharlal Nehru University, stated a very similar point. She argued that Stalin clearly was ready to return to pre-revolutionary family values when the nation was facing a

low birth rate (USha, 2005). She suggested that Stalin chose to sacrifice women's right for the sake of his country when the need for a growing population became extremely urgent after the war broke out between the USSR and Nazi Germany. She made an excellent argument that "the core of the concept of empowerment lies in the ability of the woman to control her own destiny." There has been a consensus among feminists that the control of body should be the fundamental freedom right of women's as independent human beings. Stalin, nevertheless, after he deprived Soviet women of their fundamental right, did not stop his massive use of propaganda to spread out his desired portrait of women. He issued policies to honor mothers in the same year he signed the Family Law. The award Mother Heroine was thus set up to recognize women who raised a large family (Legal Library of the Soviet Union, 1944). The poster (Figure 2) was created at the same time with the award. It illustrated an unusually large family--arguably too large for most women to handle. We need to notice two facts here: first, the father was not present, which corresponded to the lack of maternal responsibility to raise children of the Family Law of 1944; second, the only two grown-up sons were both dressed in military uniform, one army, the other navy. Therefore, the purpose of the government was self-explanatory. The government aimed to use women as "tools" to produce enough manpower to support the nation's military actions so they restricted women in the small domestic sphere by honoring their roles as mothers of multiple children. In other words, women's freedom was not put at the top of the priority list of the CPSU under Stalin.



Figure 2. Mother heroine.

3.5. A Short Summary

In short, the four subsections above aim to prove that when we break down the elements contained in the cultural icon, the “New Soviet Woman”, encouraged by Stalin and his administration, we can find that they used raising up the social position of women as a pretence to achieve their goals in economic and military fields. Based on our definition of feminism, as we examine Stalin’s policies, it becomes evident that the unsaid and unnoticed connotations of these policies all directed people away from true feminism.

Stalin failed to provide either equality or freedom to Soviet women at either workplaces or home. Or, to be more accurate, women’s situation was never on the top of his agenda. It is then a bit misleading to describe his policies as a failure, since we can argue that he has not even attempted it at the first place.

4. Conclusion

It may seem controversial to some people who figure that Stalin’s encouragement of reproduction contraindicated his early emphasis on the importance of working women. In fact, this controversy is exactly what is hypocritical about Stalin’s policies regarding women. His notion of the “New Soviet Woman” required women to carry out the dual roles as both mothers and workers, while men were only expected to be the latter group. Although this new concept appeared to be a praise of women’s capabilities and contributions, it was nothing different than burdening women with double expectations and restricting them into a small world made of only “factory and kitchen.” Soviet women under Stalin were deprived of both equality and freedom, because most of Stalin’s policies regarding women shared a common starting point, which, instead of helping promote or secure women’s rights, aimed to mobilize them only to facilitate national economy and better prepare the nation for the war. However, this core is sophisticatedly wrapped around by the attractive fruit of “the emancipation of women” and thus goes unnoticed by many back then and even now.

This paper challenges, if not overturns, the conventional view of the relationship between communism and feminism. More importantly, it aims to raise a public awareness on women’s history, which has always been deemphasized in classes and our daily conversations. While it is necessary for us to recognize women’s contributions to our society both in the past and at the present, we should not, at anytime, forget how much they have struggled to their current place.

However, it should be pointed out that this paper has not done sufficient work to explain Stalin’s policies in a broader and more detailed context. It does not talk about many of the significant historical events such as the collectivization and the Great Terror that took place in the 1930s. Moreover, this paper lacks a reliable discussion of the people’s true response to the new cultural icon due to the extreme difficulty of finding such primary sources and the limitation of information from common Soviet people. The whole argument will display a

higher complexity if we can compare and contrast people's response back then with the contemporaries' interpretation of the same event or policy. After all, the study of feminism in various historical contexts is a relatively new field for us. At the same time, the once-formidable presence of communism in the world is still attracting many researchers and historians to explore deeply. We expect to see more innovative works in the future.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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