FEATURES OF THE DEMOGRAPHIC POLICY OF THE SOVIET ERA

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Abstract: This article analyzes the main features of demographic policy in the Soviet era. The Soviet state treated population not only as a statistical category, but also as an object of ideological, economic, social and administrative regulation. Demographic policy changed significantly across different historical stages: the early revolutionary period emphasized women's emancipation and the transformation of family relations; the Stalinist period introduced pronatalist and restrictive measures; the post-war decades focused on compensating demographic losses; and the late Soviet period combined family benefits, maternal protection, urbanization management and labor-force planning.

Keywords: Soviet Union, demographic policy, pronatalism, family policy, abortion law, migration, urbanization.

Introduction

Demographic policy in the Soviet era was closely connected with the general logic of state planning. Population was viewed not merely as a natural social phenomenon, but as a strategic resource for industrialization, defense, labor mobilization, territorial development and ideological construction. The Soviet state attempted to regulate fertility, family relations, women's employment, migration, urbanization and public health through laws, administrative institutions, social benefits and propaganda. Therefore, Soviet demographic policy cannot be understood only through birth and death rates; it must be studied as part of the broader political system that sought to shape society according to socialist principles.

The Soviet Union passed through several demographic stages. The early Soviet period inherited the consequences of war, revolution, famine and social disruption. The Stalinist period was marked by forced industrialization, collectivization, migration control and a conservative turn in family policy.

Materials and methods

One of the first features of Soviet demographic policy was its revolutionary transformation of family law. In the 1920s, the Bolshevik state aimed to weaken the traditional patriarchal family and promote women's legal equality. Marriage and divorce were simplified, illegitimate children received equal legal recognition, and abortion was legalized in 1920. This early policy was connected with the ideological belief that socialist society would liberate women from economic dependence, domestic isolation and religiously sanctioned family hierarchy [1]. However, this liberal approach was not purely humanitarian. It was also linked to the state's attempt to reorganize private life according to socialist principles. Family, reproduction and gender relations became matters of public policy.

The second major feature was the sharp conservative turn of the 1930s. Under Stalin, demographic policy became explicitly pronatalist. The state needed population growth for industrial labor, military strength and social reconstruction after the disruption of revolution, civil war, collectivization and famine. In 1936, abortion was prohibited except in limited medical

circumstances; divorce became more difficult, and the official discourse began to glorify motherhood and large families. The 1936 decree on the protection of motherhood combined abortion restrictions with promises of material assistance to mothers, expansion of maternity institutions and punishment for non-payment of alimony. This policy demonstrated a typical Soviet contradiction: women were expected to participate in paid labor and public life, but also to fulfill an intensified reproductive and maternal role [2].

Results and discussion

The third feature of Soviet demographic policy was the instrumental use of motherhood. Motherhood was not treated only as a private family role; it was ideologically elevated into a form of service to the socialist state. The Soviet woman was represented as a worker, citizen and mother at the same time. In the Stalinist period, maternal heroism became part of official political culture. This tendency intensified after the Second World War, when the USSR faced catastrophic human losses. The 1944 family law increased state aid to mothers of large families and unmarried mothers and introduced honorary titles and awards such as “Mother Heroine,” the “Order of Maternal Glory” and the “Medal of Motherhood.” The purpose was not only to support women, but also to encourage higher fertility and restore population losses [3].

A fourth feature was the unstable and contradictory regulation of abortion. The Soviet Union was among the first states to legalize abortion, then banned it in 1936, and legalized it again in 1955 after Stalin’s death. The post-1955 legalization did not mean that the state fully accepted modern reproductive autonomy. In practice, contraception was poorly developed, sex education remained limited, and abortion often functioned as a widespread method of fertility regulation. This situation revealed a structural weakness of Soviet demographic policy: it tried to influence fertility through law and ideology, but did not consistently create modern reproductive health infrastructure. As a result, women’s reproductive behavior was shaped by a combination of state pressure, inadequate contraceptive access, economic constraints and family planning needs.

The fifth feature was the connection between demographic policy and labor policy. Soviet modernization required mass female employment. Women were mobilized into industry, education, medicine, agriculture, administration and science. Formally, the Soviet model promoted equality between men and women in work and public life. However, the domestic division of labor changed much more slowly than women’s employment status. Women frequently carried a “double burden”: full participation in the labor force and primary responsibility for household work and child care. The state tried to reduce this contradiction through maternity leave, kindergartens, nurseries, workplace protections and family allowances, but these measures did not eliminate the structural tension between production and reproduction.

The sixth feature was regional differentiation. The USSR was not demographically homogeneous. Fertility patterns, family size, urbanization rates, mortality levels and age structures differed sharply between republics. European parts of the USSR experienced earlier fertility decline and population ageing, while Central Asian republics retained higher fertility for a longer period. This created a complex demographic balance within the Soviet state. Anderson and Silver showed that Soviet population growth and ethnic composition changed unevenly, with higher growth in several non-Slavic republics [4]. These differences had political and economic significance because they influenced labor supply, military recruitment, education planning, migration policy and the ethnic composition of the union.

A further feature was the ideological framing of demographic issues. Soviet discourse rarely treated demographic behavior as a private matter. Fertility, marriage, divorce, child upbringing and women’s roles were interpreted through socialist morality, collective duty and state interest. Large

families were praised when population growth was needed; women's employment was promoted when labor mobilization was necessary; family stability was emphasized when the state sought social order. This ideological flexibility shows that Soviet demographic policy was pragmatic as well as doctrinal. It adapted to economic and political needs, even when this meant reversing earlier revolutionary principles.

Conclusion

The demographic policy of the Soviet era was characterized by centralization, ideological control, pronatalist interventions, women's labor mobilization, regional management, migration regulation and the close connection between population and state planning. Its development was not linear. The early Soviet period promoted radical changes in family law and women's rights; the Stalinist period restored conservative family norms and restricted abortion; the post-war period glorified motherhood and large families; the late Soviet period relied more heavily on social benefits and family-support measures. The Soviet experience shows that demographic policy can influence reproductive behavior, family relations and migration, but its effectiveness depends on broader social conditions. Legal restrictions, propaganda and benefits cannot produce stable demographic results if they are not supported by housing, health care, gender equality, reproductive services, economic security and respect for personal choice. The main contradiction of Soviet demographic policy was that it declared social emancipation while frequently subordinating individual family life to state demographic objectives.

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