

## Was life better or worse for women under Stalin?

For a short time under Lenin, women had enjoyed a much freer status. In Marxist theory, treating women as second class was a capitalist way of life, and marriage was seen as little more than prostitution with the male head of the house exploiting his wife and then using any resulting children as a workforce to bring in money for the family. In Marxist thought, marriage was an unnecessary arrangement and relationships should be less fixed. Children also did not belong to the family to which they were born but to society.

Life for women after 1917 was a lot more liberal when compared to the 'old days' of tsarist Russia. Among other things, divorce was made a lot more easy to obtain under Lenin. Women were invited to work in "male jobs" such as factory work and to become politically involved in the Communist Party, although few did join. Between Lenin and Alexandra Kollontai (female leader of the Zhenitodet, the women's branch of the Communist Party) marriage was almost destroyed. The idea had been to allow divorce with only one partner requesting the divorce, as opposed to both partners before. This had been to allow women to escape abusive marriages more easily. But in reality, this resulted in more men escaping inconvenient marriages by simply divorcing their wife.

When Stalin came to power, he changed the rules regarding women. Instead of having divorces that were easy to obtain, he put the emphasis on the family as a basic unit of society. He thought that having strong families would produce a stronger and more productive society. There was a reason for this. Many children had been born out of marriage and Moscow by 1930 was awash with a very high number of homeless children who had no family and, as such, were a stain on the perfect communist society that Stalin was trying to create.

Stalin's aims were simple. He wanted control of women, as with other parts of society. But he also wanted to promote a stable society which would produce many children for his workforce and his army. This was mainly an issue of control, but we should not overlook that Stalin also had a view to creating an ideal communist state.

The state paid families a child allowance if they were a married couple. It became a lot harder to get a divorce. Not only was it difficult to gain a divorce, but it became more expensive to buy a divorce if you wanted further divorces. Restrictions were placed on abortions. Ceremonial weddings made a comeback, having been removed in the 1920s as being "too capitalist". However the religious aspects were still banned.

In the work place, women maintained their status and there was effective equality with men. In theory, all jobs were open to women. The idea was that crèches and childcare facilities were provided on collective farms and in factories so that the children could be communally cared for whilst the women worked. There was some success with this. In 1935 women made up 44% of the work force of the USSR, and by 1937, 50%. In reality, however, women all too often found themselves both caring for the home and family in addition to working a full time job in a factory or farm. Women did benefit from the improved health and living conditions provided for workers and their families. But they rarely made it to senior positions. For example, whilst 50-60% of doctors in USSR were female by the late 1930s, there were only 4 female senior doctors in the whole of Leningrad.

**Examples of Lenin and Stalin's policies for women:**

<b><u>Lenin</u></b>	<b><u>Stalin</u></b>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Divorce made cheap, easy and available at the request of one partner. As a result many men (and women) abandoned each other and/or their children and moved to another area where they could not be tracked down.</li> <li>2. Laws passed to ensure fathers paid maintenance for children, but if the father moved towns he was rarely tracked down.</li> <li>3. Abortion legalised, though not actively encouraged.</li> <li>4. Marriage still the normal state of affairs, but people living together without marriage became more acceptable (pre-1917 it would have been unthinkable)</li> <li>5. Government propaganda emphasised the importance of women working in industry as well as at home.</li> <li>6. Childcare provided in many workplaces.</li> <li>7. As a result of the above policies, large numbers of youth gangs roamed the cities robbing and assaulting people to survive.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. 1935 passed a new law lowering the age of legal responsibility to 12. This allowed children to be treated like adults in the law and receive adult punishments, including death penalty.</li> <li>2. 1936 Divorce made more difficult to get. It got more expensive with each subsequent divorce to put people off divorcing. Also both parties were required to attend in court and agree.</li> <li>3. Abortion banned in 1936. In addition newspapers printed horror stories about abortion to put women off it. Although lots of illegal abortions did occur, the birth rate did rise from 25 to 31 per year in every 1000 population.</li> <li>4. Court cases of husbands who forced wives to have an abortion, or of illegal abortionists were given full media coverage.</li> <li>5. The amount of child maintenance rose. This was to discourage divorce as absent parents would lose a huge part of their wage. However in reality it was still hard to track down absent fathers.</li> <li>6. Homosexuality made illegal to promote heterosexual family life.</li> <li>7. Women who had six or more children were paid 2,000 roubles per year for five years as a reward from the State.</li> <li>8. Most factories in large cities set up crèches. In addition, children were taken to the parks to exercise in good weather whilst their mothers worked.</li> </ol>

1

Source C: Soviet girls and women learning to read in a state-run literacy class in the 1930s



Literacy classes were made equally available for men and women. In the 1930s, women had virtually equal access to education as men did, and there was not much discrimination in type of jobs. For example, lots of women trained as engineers and technicians.

2

Source E: Women going to work in a collective farm. Their babies are being looked after in the crèche while they work



This open air crèche, similar at many other factories and collective farms, was provided to allow women to work whilst their children were looked after.

3

Source D: A female machinist in a tractor factory in Stalingrad in the 1930s



Women did technical work alongside men. However, it is worth noting that not many women got to be supervisors.

4



SOURCE 8 A poster with the slogan 'Come and join our kolkhoz, comrade!'

In this poster, the woman is portrayed working alongside the man in equal status.

5



SOURCE 2 Women expressing milk at a factory. Their babies could be given the milk while the women worked

Women breastfeeding before work. They was set up so that they could return to work soon after birth and would not have to take breaks to feed their children.

6



SOURCE 5 Soviet pilots in the 1930s

This propaganda picture shows female pilots. It is true that some women benefitted from a range of jobs that had just not been available to them pre-revolution. But equally, as already noted, such prestigious jobs were still quite rare for women.

7

SOURCE 4 Children  
at a state-run  
kindergarten in the 1930s



This state-run kindergarten was another example of helping the mothers to return to work. In this propaganda photo, the children appear to be on a trip, possibly catching butterflies or other insects to study.

8

**SOURCE 5** From *Pravda* (the Party newspaper), 28 May 1936

*“When we talk of strengthening the Soviet family we mean the fight against [the wrong] attitudes towards marriage, women and children. ‘Free love’ and a disorderly sex life have nothing in common with Socialist principles or the normal behaviour of a Soviet citizen . . . The outstanding citizens of our country, the best of Soviet youth, are almost always devoted to their families. ”*

This is an interesting quote from Pravda. It shows how the Party was trying to fit together Marxist theory of “free love” and not basing communities on families with the new policies of strengthening families. It does so by justifying it as benefit for the Soviet society.

9

**SOURCE 6** Extracts from letters to magazines at the time of the new abortion law, May 1936

**From Tatanya Koval of the Lubchenko collective farm, Kiev district**

*“I can’t find words to express my gratitude to the Party and the Government, to dear Comrade Stalin for his care of us women. I have seven children . . . My children are my joy. I’ve never had an abortion, and I’m not going to have any. I’ve borne children and shall go on bearing them. ”*

**From Nina Ershova, Moscow**

*“If a mother has seven children one has to be sent to school, another to the kindergarten, the third to a creche; and then in the evening Mother has to collect them all, give them supper, look after their clothes, put them to bed . . . Well, then, that mother won’t have much time left for work – in fact, she won’t have a single minute left to herself. This surely means that women will be unable to take part in public life, unable to work . . .*

*This new law undoubtedly has much in its favour, but it is still too early to talk of prohibiting abortion. We must first further develop our communal restaurants so that a woman shall not have to bother about dinners, suppers and breakfast . . . We must have more and better creches and kindergartens, more laundries . . . ”*

These two letters show a division in opinion. The first clearly implies absolute support for the policies.

The second suggests that the scheme is not practical. Yet it clearly states that the scheme is a good idea, and simply needs a few practical preparations. The question is, has the second woman said this because she genuinely believes in the principle of the rules, or because she is scared to oppose directly for fear of being purged? Depending which view we took would radically change our perception of the soviet policies for women.

**1. Complete the following table:**

Ways that women's life would get better under Stalin	Ways that women's life would get worse under Stalin

**2. What do the sources above not show? Why was this?**