HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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THE FAMILY IN RUSSIA

Contents

Post Classical Period : Orthodox Christianity

Research gaps It is generally conceded that less work is available on family history in Eastern Europe, at least until more recent centuries, than is true for the West. It is not clear as a result, for example, whether distinctive Christian ideas about kinship were as salient in the East. Certainly the Byzantine aristocracy developed elaborate kinship ties by the 11th century, but this was not entirely dissimilar to kinship patterns among Western aristocrats. One scholar however argues that kinship definitions became more rigorous in Byzantium, among other things generating an early use of last names (in the aristocracy).

Comparative issues Not surprisingly, Christian practice in Eastern Europe, increasingly separate from those of the West, diverged in several particulars. Divorce was not as rigorously forbidden, though it was frowned upon, as was remarriage. Women had more secure rights to property, and those in the aristocracy might exercise considerable political authority (though this occurred in the West as well). As in the West, brides brought dowries into arranged marriage, but they did not lose all ownership rights in the process. Marriage practices picked up on older regional traditions and involved more elaborate ceremonial parades than was true in Western Europe – though the sacramental quality of marriage was shared between the two branches of Christianity.

Celibacy Eastern Christianity insisted just as firmly on celibacy for monks and nuns as did Western practice. Some monasteries in Greece took elaborate precautions to keep women at a distance (in one case, fortifications were strengthened after a band of prostitutes sought entry). But priests were not required to be celibate – this, along with disputes over papal authority, was one of the big divisions that contributed to the Schism between the two churches in the 11th century. Whether this distinction placed less strain on ordinary family life, lessening the tension between family and spiritual goals, is unclear. Certainly the family was deeply cherished as a religious institution, with strong support as well from the Byzantine state. The codification of Roman law early in the Byzantine imperial period helped clarify rights and roles for family members.

Childbirth Despite some valuation of celibacy, most married women were eager to have children and, as in many premodern societies, often resorted to magical practices (along with prayer) to promote pregnancy. Punishments for abortion were severe in the Byzantine Empire, and church leaders also condemned any attempts at contraception.

Childhood Roman law also set some parameters for childhood, including age of adulthood but also age of sufficient maturity to allow marriage (12 for girls, 14 for boys). Children under 7 were exempt from punishment for certain crimes. Parents were strongly encouraged to provide some education, though social class and urban-rural differentials persisted. Recent work has emphasized the tension between high child mortality and expressions of “anguish” – another common theme for the postclassical centuries generally.

Gender issues in early Russia Gender power structures may have been particularly explicit in the Russian aristocracy, though this may have had less to do with religious conversion than regional tradition. Into the time of Peter the Great, fathers carried a small whip to the wedding ceremonies of their daughters, which they ritually handed over to the groom as a symbol of transfer of power. Peter abolished the practice.

Conclusion Historical work on families in East European history in the postclassical period suggests that Christianity introduced some less sweeping changes than was true in Western Europe, though many approaches were shared including the religious sanctification of marriage.

Study questions

1. How might different policies toward priestly celibacy have affected family life?
2. What are some important questions that might guide further analysis of family history in postclassical Eastern Europe?

Further reading

Arietta Papaconstantinou and Alice-Mary Talbot, eds., *Becoming Byzantine: children and childhood in Byzantium* (Dumbarton Oaks, 2009)

Shaun Tougher and Leslie Brubaker, eds., *Approaches to the Byzantine Family* (Ashgate, 2013)

Nathan Leidholm, *Elite Byzantine Kinship* (Arc Humanities Press, 2019)

Early modern through 19th century

Gender roles By the early modern period Russian families may have been more rigidly patriarchal than their counterparts in the West, even though Russian Christianity, like its Catholic counterpart, sanctified marriage as a sacrament and surrounded it with considerable ritual. Some evidence suggests that religious men were particularly likely to emphasize their authority over wives, even with violence, as part of their sense of appropriate structure. In some cases, bouts of domestic abuse did not preclude a normally friendly spousal relationship, and certainly work cooperation between partners was an essential part of the peasant economy. And it is simply impossible to venture comparisons of domestic violence rates with any certainty. It was revealing, however, that a mid-16th century treatise urged husbands to whip disobedient wives, though this should be done without anger. The symbolic transfer of the whip in marriage, from father to new husband, was accompanied by the phrase, “Should you not behave as you ought toward your husband, he in my stead will admonish you with this whip.” In the upper classes, women were kept fairly secluded, and sometimes veiled in public. Russian Christianity allowed a man, twice, to divorce his wife by sending her to a convent, where she would become dead to the outside world while the husband could freely remarry.

Lamentation A number of ethnographers have noted a custom, perhaps since preChristian times, of female lamentation before a marriage, that persisted until the 20th century. Women would gather prior to a marriage to cry and tear their hair, mourning the loss of the bride’s childhood and the suffering she might endure in marriage.

Petrine reforms Peter the Great’s reforms at the end of the century intended to cut into the pattern at least for the upper class. Aristocratic women gained much more public freedom, and greater latitude in dress. They could attend a variety of public events, such as concerts. Peter also hoped to improve their educational level, if only to improve the domestic context for the education of sons. Peter also in principle abolished arranged marriage; a decree of 1702 held the all marriage decisions should be voluntary and that prospective partners should meet at least six weeks before any engagement, with full freedom to renounce the match. Catherine the Great furthered the process of change, particularly by extending opportunities for education for upper-class women (as with the Smolenyi Institute for Girls of Noble Birth, in 1764). At one point the empress even argued for educational equality but then pulled back with the claim that :the intent and goal of the rearing of girls should consist most of all in making good homemakers, faithful wives, and caring mothers.” These developments were important but they touched only the top level of the social hierarchy; by the later 18th century only 7% of all school students were female.

Feminist voices Despite periods of political repression and limitations on contact with the West in the 19th century, a growing number of women writers, particularly later in the century, began denouncing the subordination of women in the family. Some men joined in, as with a doctor who urged more education for women not only for the sake of the home but also to prepare for other professions such as nursing. For a

few, opportunities opened up in higher education, even medical schools. On the other hand, for better or worse, there was no large movement in Russia to remove women from the labor force in order to focus on the family; through the 19th century and beyond, most women were expected to combine productive work with primary family responsibilities. While an urban middle class began to emerge in Russia, it did not gain the cultural influence of its Western counterpart.

Early industrialization After the Emancipation of the Serfs in 1861, labor mobility improved somewhat, while population growth also reduced access to property for some peasants. Literacy began to increase as well. This led to some developments similar to those in the West a century earlier, and particularly an increase in rates of premarital sex and illegitimacy. Earlier, in a more strictly patriarchal context, women found guilty of premarital sex were severely shamed, and often could not marry. But now things began to loosen up; one observer claimed, with due exaggeration, that it was becoming impossible to find a virgin any more. More young people also defied traditions of arranged marriage, insisting on picking their own partners. Russian family patterns were in flux by the early 20th century.

Study questions

1. What were some key differences between Russian and Western family patterns during the early modern and 19th century periods?
2. What was the impact, but also what were the limitations, of Petrine reforms for family life?
3. Why did a Victorian family model not develop in Russia?

Further reading

Barbara Clemens, Barbara Engel and Christine Worobec, eds., *Russia's Women: accommodation, resistance, transformation* (University of California Press, 1991)

Barbara Engel, *Breaking the Ties that Bound: the politics of marital strife in fin-de-siecle Russia* (Cornell University Press, 2011)

Barbara Norton and Jehanne Gheith, *An Improper Profession; women, gender and journalism in late imperial Russia* (Duke University Presds, 2001)

20th Century : The Soviet Union and Russia

General trends With surprising speed after their revolutionary victory in 1917, communist leaders worked to expand the educational system – at all levels, while also improving maternal and infant health conditions. Schooling soon became the normal childhood experience, and child labor below the age of 14 was abolished at least in principle, while infant death rates fell rapidly. Over time, the acceleration of industrialization and the growth of cities enhanced the emphasis on nuclear families. (Because of housing limitations, many newly-married couples at first lived with parents, but then moved out when children arrived.) Many parents began to reduce the birth rate, another standard feature of industrial family structure. However, a shortage of rubber constrained the availability of contraceptive devices, forcing considerable reliance on *coitus interruptus* or abortion for birth control.

Marxism and the family Many Marxists harbored some suspicious of the family as a "bourgeois" institution that might hold back the achievement of a revolutionary society – particularly because of its roots in private property and inheritance. Many revolutionaries assumed that in a revolutionary society the family would "wither away". These concerns help explain a fascinating experimental period in the 1920s, before Stalinist policy actually emphasized a rather conservative family structure. Even over the longer term, the Soviet state, in expanding youth organizations – notably, the Young Pioneers and *Komsomsld* -- as well as formal schooling, sought to modify parents' hold over their children, and occasionally sought to use children to report on potentially subversive parental views and activities. "The child is the product of state upbringing", one official declared. Extensive efforts to reduce the hold of religion could also create tensions in family life.

The 1920s A dramatic 1918 Family Code greatly expanded opportunities for divorce – "no-grounds" divorces required no rationale. Each spouse would retain property in case of divorce. The category of illegitimate children was abolished: all children were entitled to parental support. Women were recognized

as equals under the law and no longer had to obtain a husband's permission to earn a wage or seek education. A variety of discussions and experiments followed in the effort to loosen the hold of family traditions. Ideas of free loves circulated widely in some circles. In a dramatic move for the time, abortion was legalized. However, a new law in 1926 largely ended this open period, establishing clearer rules for divorce (mainly to provide greater protection for women) while also setting up stricter criteria for paternity and child support.

The 1936 Code Under Stalinism, the experimental mood was replaced by a clearer effort to stabilize the family. Abortions were limited by law, with fines and jail time for those who performed the service. Efforts to promote procreation stepped up – though with limited effect – with payments and child care services for large families. Motherhood was praised. Divorce became more difficult.

Gender The Soviet system generated fascinating tensions for women and the family. On the one hand, the Soviets avoided the Western impulse to remove married women from the labor force: both ideology and the need for labor, often cheap labor, worked against this. The Soviets pointed with great pride to the roles women took on as doctors, factory workers and so on, contrasting this with the narrower opportunities in the West. On the other hand, women unquestionably retained primary responsibility for the family; this could include extensive amounts of time devoted to shopping for necessities, in what was still a limited consumer economy. For many women the dual role proved extremely difficult – one reason, of course, for cutting back the birth rate. Despite propaganda, patriarchal traditions held firm in many ways. As family policy became more conservative, emphasis on the authority of the husband increased; feminist strivings were rigorously suppressed as counterrevolutionary.

Rural-urban Rapid change opened up new regional distinctions in family. Rural families were on the whole larger than those in the city. Extensive kinship networks survived easily, particularly in areas like Central Asia. Ideas of romantic love were downplayed in favor of emphasis on parental responsibility and tradition. Over time, however, some newer motives did begin to affect family life even in the countryside.

After Stalin Conservative family policies eased by the 1960s to some degree. In keeping with what was happening by that point in Western Europe, restrictions on abortions were loosened, though policy continued to oscillate. Another important government focus, from the Stalilnist era onward, involved the organization of annual family vacations for workers, at mass resorts created on the Black Sea coast and elsewhere.

Under Putin After the fall of communism and under President Vladimir Putin, by the early 21st century Russian policy in many ways reaffirmed family conservatism, though without some of the radical restrictions of the Stalinist era. Officials held Russia up as an alternative to the looser family values of the West, for example by opposing homosexual rights and gay marriage. Most dramatically, a new law severely limited opportunities to prosecute domestic abuse. More generally, the trend toward low birth rates and emphasis on nuclear family structures continued, while at the same time the country generated unusually high divorce rates – confirming some of the most fundamental trends in family life in Russia during the contemporary era.

Study questions

1. Why did Marxists harbor suspicions about the family, and did these lead to significant changes?
2. Why and how did family policy change under Stalin?
3. How did women's family roles in the Soviet Union compare to those in other regional societies?

Further reading

Wendy Goldman, *Women, the State and Revolution: Soviet family policy and social life, 1917-1936* (Cambridge University Press, 1993)

Gail Lapidus Warshovsky, *Women in Soviet Society: equality, development and social change* (University of California Press, 1978)

Elizabeth White, *A Modern History of Russian Childhood from the Late Imperial Period to the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (Bloomsbury, 2020)