REFORMING RUSSIA’S CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM

AN EXAMINATION OF RUSSIA’S CHILD ABANDONMENT CRISIS

BY

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ABSTRACT

Today in Russia there are 800,000 children living in state-run institutions. More than 90% of the children in orphanages and prison centers have living parents. These children are not orphans in the traditional sense; their parents have abandoned them to the state to be raised. These abandoned children are doomed to live in state-run institutions, where they will be separated from other children in society and will receive only the most rudimentary medical services and education.

The Russian government, struggling with its decreasing population, is seeking new ways to keep families together and to reduce the high rate of child abandonment. The government’s efforts, thus far, have been inadequate, ranging from ineffectual information campaigns, to weak tax incentives for women to have more children.

While many factors have contributed to the alarming rate of child abandonment, the most significant contributor is the Soviet Union’s policy of subordinating the family to the state. Soviet legislation regarding child welfare between 1917 and 1991 ultimately weakened the family, often inserting the government into the private sector to such a degree that parents became irrelevant. Furthermore, the pernicious Soviet idea of human perfectibility lingers in Russia today, and continues to contribute to the high rates of abandonment among children with even slight birth defects.

Post-Soviet Russia is plagued by several serious problems, including rampant alcoholism, poverty, and poor medical care. Child abandonment is most properly viewed as another symptom of Russia’s larger spiritual and moral crises. As the government attempts to address child abandonment, it is important to understand the historical context and the Soviet government’s intentional attack on the family.

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RUSSIAN TERMS AND ACRONYMS

**baby house:** orphanage centers for children from birth to four years of age

**defectivny:** derogatory Russian name for children with mental deficiencies

**imbetsil’:** derogatory Russian word for “imbecile”; often used to describe children in psycho-neurological internats

**internat:** school, boarding house for children

**Ministry of Education:** manages orphanages for children ages five to seventeen

**Ministry of Health:** manages the baby homes for children up to age four

**Ministry of Labor and Social Development:** manages the orphanages and homes for disabled children

**NGO:** nongovernmental organization

**orphan:** used to describe traditional orphans, as well as “social orphans” who have been abandoned by their parents

**psycho-neurological internat:** homes and centers for children with extreme psychological and mental problems
A revolution does not deserve its name if it does not take the greatest care possible of its children – the future race for whose benefit the revolution was made.¹

-Leon Trotsky

CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

When Sasha was four years old his mother abandoned him. The Moscow police found him eight months later, living in a sewer with other street children. Social workers took him to an orphanage in the southwestern administrative district of the city, which is where he lives today. Sasha’s story, unfortunately, is common in Russia. Young parents frequently choose to abandon their children to the state, which they incorrectly believe has the resources to provide for every child’s educational, emotional, and physical needs. Unlike in most other cultures, Russian parents often consider the state to be a suitable alternative to the family.

Today in the Russian orphanage system there are more than 800,000 children. Of these children living in state-run institutions, it is estimated that nearly 95% have at least one living parent. These children, then, are not orphans in the traditional sense; the government has coined the phrase “social orphan” to describe children whose parents have relinquished their parental rights. In fact, child abandonment in Russia has become such an extreme problem that the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) now runs a program Assistance to Russian Orphans (ARO) “to stop the unprecedented growth in child abandonment.”

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2 Not his real name. Actual story based on 4-year old boy in Moscow who was discovered living in the sewers.
4 Ibid.
5 For information on USAID’s ongoing programs to provide assistance to Russian orphans, see USAID’s website: www.usaid.gov. For more information on the programs in Russia that USAID now sponsors to combat abandonment, see IREX: www.irex.org. The official position of USAID is that this humanitarian crisis in Russia is the result of the rapid transition to capitalism, rather than a consequence of Marxist ideology.
Child abandonment in Russia is a complex challenge that has resulted from a variety of social problems that occur at all levels in Russia. Cultural factors, including high alcoholism and drug abuse rates, strongly contribute to the breakdown of the Russian family, as do historical causes, including the Soviet assault on family life. In discussing child abandonment in Russia, it is important to understand that the abandonment crisis is a symptom of a much larger problem. Political scientist David Satter summarizes the lack of human dignity in Russia that resulted from the Soviet Union’s utilitarian view of human life:

During Russia’s more than seven decades of Communist rule, human beings were treated as raw material in the service of some “higher” social goal. Hundreds of thousands of slave laborers died to build the White Sea Canal, and millions were sacrificed to win World War II. The lives of individuals did not matter. What mattered was the system.6

Satter explains that the capitalist reformers who flooded Russia in the early 1990’s were concerned solely with “economic functions.” As the economists focused exclusively on transforming Russia’s Communist system into a market-based economy, there was no similar focus on social issues. In Satter’s opinion, the exclusive emphasis on the economy led to policies that had “deadly consequences for the population,” including unrestricted sales on alcohol and the elimination of state-funded medical care.7

The rapid transition from Communism to capitalism provided insufficient time to create new social services. The focus of the new Russian government was exclusively on revamping the economic system. In eliminating the state-controlled economy, the state-sponsored social programs were also lost. During this transition period there was little examination of the type of social programs that would need to be replaced. There was a

7 Ibid., 203.
large vacuum in the private sector at that point, and after seventy years of Communism, Russians possessed only limited knowledge of civil society and philanthropy; there was little understanding of how the private sector could perform some of those vital social services previously offered exclusively by the government.8

In the absence of assistance programs, many mothers have chosen simply to relinquish their parental rights. Women in Russia frequently abandon their children if there are alcohol problems in the family, if the child has health problems or birth defects, or if the family has financial difficulties. In a healthier society, these types of family troubles could be addressed in a variety of ways – for example, churches and the local communities in other cultures often provide assistance to troubled families, reducing the risk that parents will abandon their children. Unfortunately in Russia’s case, however, the Soviet system destroyed that type of private assistance within society.

Today the child abandonment crisis reflects a failure of the Russian government to address child welfare in light of the country’s transition to capitalism. Unfortunately the current child welfare system maintains the worst aspects of Soviet culture – the decrepit orphanage buildings, poor medical care, and the mentality about human worthlessness have been preserved from Communism – without the benefits of private sector innovation from the emerging capitalist system.

The orphanages and other state-run institutions for children are unfortunate holdovers from the Soviet era. The physical structures have undergone little repair and are often dilapidated buildings, frequently lacking warm water and heat. The orphanages

8 The Russian Orthodox Church in the past ten years has increased its efforts to provide social services, as have foreign missionaries affiliated with the Catholic Church and the Salvation Army. These social services through religious organizations are still in their infancy, and the Russian government tightly controls churches’ access to orphanages.
lack sufficient beds for the children, who are usually crowded into cramped living quarters. According to the Human Rights Watch, most orphanages today in Russia resemble prisons, rather than children’s homes.\textsuperscript{9}

This paper argues that the child welfare crisis in Russia today is chiefly the product of the damaging Soviet family policies, which simultaneously weakened the family and strengthened government involvement in all aspects of private life. Family policy was an important legislative topic in Soviet Russia, and the Communist regime rewrote the family laws numerous times between 1917 and 1991. The Communists recognized that the conservative family unit that had existed in tsarist Russia would hamper their revolutionary agenda. With this perspective, the Communist Party intellectuals, especially Leon Trotsky and Vladimir Lenin, published numerous articles on the topic of transforming the family in the new regime.\textsuperscript{10} The Bolsheviks, who aimed to create not simply a new form of government, but actually an entirely new form of human existence, understood that the traditional family would pose a serious challenge to the radical objectives of the new regime.

Furthermore, this paper will show how the Soviet attack on the family exacerbated and heightened many of the social problems that had existed in imperial Russia. While child abandonment certainly existed in tsarist Russia prior to the Russian Revolution, it is worth noting how the Soviet social policies transformed an existing problem into a national crisis.


\textsuperscript{10} Lenin led the initiative to re-shape the family legislation for the new regime. For more information on Lenin’s and Trotsky’s writings on family policies, see Richard Pipes, \textit{Russia under the Bolshevik Regime} (New York: Random House, 1994), 282-336.
The subject of child welfare in Russia is especially relevant today and worthy of study because child abandonment represents a true humanitarian crisis. With 800,000 children living in state-run institutions, the orphan crisis is a tragic phenomenon in Russia. The government provides orphans with only the most rudimentary education, and these children are thus destined to a bleak future. Upon emancipation from these institutions at the age of seventeen, many orphanage graduates begin a life of crime or prostitution because their preparation for adult life has been so inadequate.

Besides the humanitarian aspect, another reason the topic of child welfare is particularly relevant is that Russia is experiencing a drastic demographic crisis. In fact, Russia’s population decline is one of the most severe demographic problems of any country in the world. In addition to murder, alcohol-related deaths, and avoidable deaths resulting from the poor health care system, the child welfare crisis exacerbates the country’s unusually high mortality rates among young adults. Children who are abandoned to state institutions have high mortality rates; 10% commit suicide within five years of leaving the institutions, and another 5% die as young adults due to poor health.\textsuperscript{11} The faltering child welfare system thus contributes to the country’s demographic problems.

Finally, as the Russian, European Union, and the United States governments all devote significant amounts of money to solving child abandonment, it is worth studying and attempting to understand the root causes of this alarming trend. The Russian government, in an attempt to keep families together, recently launched two country-wide information campaigns. The first, which began in 2007, was the Year of the Child, and in

2008, then-President Vladimir Putin launched the second installment, the Year of the Family. Both initiatives aimed to inform parents of the benefits for children to remain with their biological families. A bizarre element of the initiatives was to remind mothers that part of their patriotic duty includes having children to increase the country’s census numbers. It is unclear, however, if these types of appeal to patriotism will have any noticeable impact on Russia’s birthrate or the abandonment crisis.

**Literary Review**

A number of Sovietologists and sociologists have contributed significant works that elucidate the evolving Soviet family laws and their Marxist foundations. These works include first-hand accounts of researchers and academics who went to the Soviet Union and observed the education system, orphanages, and Soviet families. This paper includes an analysis of this available academic research on the Soviet Union’s family legislation, and will rely on these researchers’ projects in the Soviet Union for much of the historical information provided here.

Very few scholars, however, have examined the contemporary collapse of the Russian family in light of the former Soviet family laws, as this paper attempts to do. The majority of academics who study the modern family crisis in Russia ignore the historical explanation and the Soviet policies that paved the way for the present problems. Instead, most scholars today, when writing about the numerous social problems in Russia, view these problems products of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the adoption of capitalism. Few scholars have studied the modern child welfare crisis as the

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12 Signs and billboards throughout Moscow and the Moscow Oblast remind Russians: “The Country needs your child’s registration.” Other billboards in the metro encourage mothers to have a second or third child for the country’s census numbers.
direct consequence of the Soviet Union’s intentional assault on the family, which was no less significant than its orchestrated purge of religion. This paper, in contrast to much of the existing literature, will connect the Soviet family laws to the modern-day child abandonment crisis in Russia.

Over the past fifty years, three main schools of thought have emerged on the subject of the relationship between the Russian state and child welfare. In addressing the impact the Soviet and Russian governments have had on child welfare and social policies, these schools of thought diverge on whether the impact was positive or negative, and on the extent to which government is the solution or the underlying problem in these social policy issues. The first school of thought is the pro-Soviet/pro-government model, which lauds the Soviet model of child rearing, and argues that the Soviet government’s policies strengthened child welfare. The second school of thought argues that Russia’s current child welfare problems are the result of the transition to capitalism in the early 1990’s, rather than the result of Marxist ideology or Soviet policies. Finally, the third school of thought argues that the social problems today in Russia, including the family problem, are the direct consequence of the Soviet Union’s family policies. These authors argue that Communism devastated civil society, and the country has failed to restore the fundamental pillars of civil society.

The first school of thought extols the virtues of Soviet family policies. David and Vera Mace, two American sociologists who traveled to the Soviet Union the 1960’s and

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1970’s to observe Soviet family laws and education policies in practice, are two of the most well-known writers within this school of thought. The Maces believed the Soviet system of child-rearing, which prioritized the collective over the individual, was a superior system to the child-rearing in the United States during this time period.14 The Maces were not alone in their praise of the Soviet education model; during the 1960’s and 1970’s, numerous academic articles were published in the United States, praising the Soviet model of education and family policy. In addition to the Maces, another well-known sociologist during this time was Lewis A. Coser, whose articles praising the Soviet model of child welfare appeared in *The American Journal of Sociology* in the late 1950’s.15 These authors believed children in the Soviet Union benefited from the state’s active involvement in child-rearing and education.

The second school of thought is more modern than the first and argues that the child welfare crisis in Russia today is the product of the transition to capitalism. While the academics associated with this school of thought hesitate to praise the failed Soviet system, they do, nevertheless, argue that however flawed the Soviet family policies were, they were certainly better than the vacuum of social programs created in Russia’s modern capitalist society. One of the most prominent scholars within this school of thought is Clementine K. Fujimura, author of *Russia’s Abandoned Children: An Intimate Understanding*. Fujimura, an anthropologist who spent time living in the orphanages in the early 1990’s, argues that the post-Soviet culture has resulted in the “victimization of

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the weakest.”¹⁶ She views the abandonment crisis in Russia as a unique product of the post-Soviet culture. Fujimura even argues that abandonment is a pervasive problem, not only for children, but also for adults, whom the post-Communist government has also abandoned. While Fujimura and these other scholars correctly identify deficiencies with Russia’s current social policies, they generally fail to address how both the Soviet policies and culture contributed to the current abandonment crisis.

The third school of thought argues that the Soviet family policies and Communist ideology wreaked havoc on the Russian family. More broadly, these academics further argue that the Soviet Union destroyed civil society. One writer who falls in this category is Whitmore Gray, who wrote in the 1970’s on Soviet social policy. While many American writers in the late 1970’s and 1980’s began to criticize Soviet social policies, very few new publications have appeared within this field of thought in the past ten years. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, many academics shifted their focus to the numerous problems that plague present-day Russia, instead of focusing on the root causes from the Soviet Union and the Marxist ideology. David Satter and Richard Pipes are two notable exceptions. Their recent research and publications emphasize the relationship between the current social problems in Russia and the Communist ideology.

This paper will contribute to this final school of thought by analyzing the child welfare crisis today in light of the failed Soviet family policies, and by making policy recommendations that take into account that the Russian government continues to be the underlying problem in the child welfare crisis. This thesis examines the modern orphan crisis in Russia as an example of the breakdown of civil society due to the Communist ideology.

system’s eradication of the private sphere. While many scholars have focused on the consequences of the Soviet attack on religion, very little has been written on the consequences of the Soviet Union’s manipulation of the family. The research presented here fills a gap in the existing scholarship, by examining how the state during the Soviet era continues to be the primary cause of the abandonment crisis.

Organization of the Paper

With only a few exceptions, this paper is organized chronologically. The following chapter focuses on Soviet ideology and legislation, tracing the various Family Law Codes that yielded inconsistent and incoherent social policies. The third chapter describes the current problems in child welfare, including the high rate of child abandonment, the poor physical conditions of the orphanages, and the numerous challenges that confront orphanage graduates upon emancipation from the state institutions. The fourth chapter provides policy recommendations to the Russian government on how to remedy the numerous problems outlined in chapter three. The fifth, and final, chapter offers concluding thoughts and recommendations.
Today the Russian family is in a perilous position. Every year, thousands of children born in Russia are abandoned to the state; as a result, there are now 800,000 Russian children who are wards of the State.\textsuperscript{17} This alarming trend is the unfortunate legacy of the Soviet Union’s social policies. Soviet family law is thus valuable to study, not simply as history, but also because of the insight it provides into a current tragic social phenomenon in Russia. During the Soviet era, family policies evolved significantly to reflect the Communists’ changing priorities. Whereas the early Bolsheviks had attempted to abolish the family for ideological purposes, the later Communists, especially following World War II, crafted family policies for more practical reasons, including reversing the drastic population decline. Regardless of the specific objectives, family policy was often at the forefront of the Soviet domestic agenda because the family unit was intricately connected to many of the Soviet objectives.

As the Soviet Union evolved, the Communists’ objectives expanded and family laws changed accordingly. In 1970 Whitmore Gray remarked on the oscillating family laws: “The radical changes in the norms of Soviet family law over the past fifty years have reflected the convulsions of Soviet society as well as the revisions of Marxism-Leninism-Stalinism.”\textsuperscript{18} The relationship between the state and the family underwent numerous changes during the Soviet Union’s seven decades of existence. The government employed family policies to achieve various political goals, even as those

\textsuperscript{17} Fujimura, Stoecker, and Sudakova, \textit{Russia’s Abandoned Children}, 4-5.
goals changed. The family in Communist Russia was often the means to achieve a variety of political ends, including equality and education. Although there was never a consistent, well-defined family policy, the Soviet government used family legislation as the vehicle to accomplish a variety of its domestic goals.

One of the primary Communist objectives was to recreate humanity. This ambitious goal, often referred to as the “New Soviet Man Project,” aimed to create an entirely selfless form of human being devoted to the collective. The family presented an obstacle to the Communist agenda in the early years because its members tended to care for one another to a greater degree than they cared about the society as a whole. The Bolsheviks understood that family devotion and loyalties, especially those between parents and children, would present a difficult challenge for the Communist regime and could potentially undermine its goals. The early family laws in Soviet Russia, therefore, focused on destroying the family as a social unit.

**The Marxist Mandate on the Family**

Karl Marx, in providing the intellectual foundation for the Soviet Union’s objectives, advocated the abolition of the family. In the *Communist Manifesto*, he outlined the goals of Communism: the top two of which were free universal education for all children and equal distribution of the workload to women and men. These two goals often overlapped and quickly lead to significant changes for family life in Russia.

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20 Ibid, 191.
Marx believed parents posed a serious roadblock to the goal of impressing
Communist values upon young children, and he envisioned universal education as a
useful policy for indoctrinating the new generations. He wrote: “Free education for all
children in public schools [is necessary and there must be some] combination of
education with industrial production….”
24 The public school system simultaneously
provided two benefits to the Communists: on the one hand, universal mandated education
forcibly removed children from their homes and diminished the opportunity for parents to
counter indoctrinate their children, and more importantly, it ensured the Communists
forty hours a week to teach their values to the youth.

For Marx and the early Communists in Russia, the family itself was a poisonous
environment for children. Marx believed families routinely exploited their children by
forcing them to work in capitalist industries to increase the family’s income.
25 Child
labor was, from Marx’s perspective, unacceptable and it clearly demonstrated the
capitalist exploitation the Communists sought to overcome. Marx asked rhetorically, in
defense of his policies regarding children: “Do you charge us [the Communists] with
wanting to stop the exploitation of children by their parents? To this crime we plead
guilty.”
26 The Marxists believed the family unit, which enslaved children, needed to be
abolished as part of the Communists’ human rights agenda.

Marx and his cohort Friederick Engels also wrote about the exploitation of
women within the family. According to Engels, the bourgeois family was a form of
slavery for women, just as it was for children. Engels believed marriage in capitalist

24 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
26 Ibid., 103.
societies was the single most oppressive force against women. Removing children from
their homes for the purpose of universal education and indoctrination served another
practical purpose related to women’s rights – it freed women to pursue labor
opportunities outside the home, thus achieving another Communist goal.

In addition to the attempts to separate children from their families, the
Communists directly attacked the family by calling for its complete eradication. As Marx
wrote in the *Communist Manifesto*:

> Abolition of the family! …On what foundation is the present family, the
bourgeois family, based? On capital, on private gain. In its completely
developed form, this family exists only among the bourgeoisie. But this
state of things finds its complement in the practical absence of the family
among proletarians, and in public prostitution. The bourgeois family will
vanish as a matter of course when its complement vanishes, and both will
vanish with the vanishing of capital.28

In his view, the family structure was intimately connected with capitalism. As a social
unit, it was most prominent in the bourgeois class, and as soon as Communism eliminated
class distinctions, Marx surmised, the family would also disappear.

Engels also wrote about the necessity of abolishing the bourgeois family structure
as a characteristic of capitalist societies. For Engels, the abolition of the bourgeois family
should be a top priority for Communists. In *The Origin of the Family: Private Property
and the State*, the definitive book on Communist family policies, Engels identified the
individual family unit as the beginning of conflict and strife among the economic classes:

> The first class antagonism which appears in history coincides with the
development of the antagonism between man and woman in monogamian
marriage and the first class oppression with that of the female sex by the
male.29

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27 Frederick Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (New York: International
Engels also believed the elimination of the family unit would benefit children and parents alike. Children, rather than being the exclusive responsibility and burden of their own parents would be the concern of the entire community. “The care and education of children [will] become a public affair; society [will look] after all children alike….” Children, in theory, would receive even better care from society than from their parents.

In Engels’ view, “any theory of human society…must be as much concerned with the question of the family as with the question of the means of production.” In other words, economic issues were so intimately connected to family life that the Communists would be required to examine family life to accomplish a transition to Communism.

**Leninist Family Policies: 1917-1935**

While Marx and Engels laid the theoretical groundwork for the Communist approach to the family, Vladimir Lenin was the first practitioner of these ideas in the Soviet Union. When Lenin assumed power after Russia’s Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, his main objective, and, in fact, the entire reason for the revolution itself, was to achieve a Communist state as quickly as possible. Lenin’s first agenda item was to transform the entire society and spread the revolution. The legislation Lenin’s government promoted and advanced demonstrated this purposeful intent to reconstruct society. Legal scholar Donald Barry notes: “Soviet legislation from 1917 to 1935 reflected the main purpose of transformation of society.”

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30 Ibid., 134.
33 Ibid.
In his attempts to revolutionize the country, Lenin focused his attention on the two pillars of civil society – the family and religion. The first Soviet code that the Bolsheviks wrote, the Family Code of 1918, further shifted the “…controls over the family and marriage as swiftly as possible from the churches to the Soviet state and the socialization of child rearing.” This first Soviet family law illustrates how closely related family and religion were, and how the Bolsheviks viewed them as a double threat to the new regime.

One of the most important tasks for the Bolsheviks was to discredit and nullify religion as quickly as possible. Russian tradition held that God appointed the tsars and it was by divine right that leaders ruled. Religious Russians, who were overwhelmingly opposed to the Revolution, posed a serious obstacle for Lenin’s new government. Lenin understood that in order to legitimate his revolution and the Bolsheviks’ seizure of power, he would necessarily have to sever the state’s ties to religion. The family, closely related to religion, was, from Lenin’s perspective, an inconvenient holdover from tsarist Russia that perpetuated religion. Child baptisms, marriage ceremonies, funerals, and other traditional social and familial ceremonies were religious by nature and continued to undermine Lenin’s authority to rule. Lenin thus set out to abolish simultaneously religion and the family, which were both Marxist mandates anyway. “Laws affecting the family

35 Ibid.
36 For more information about the Leninist attack on the family in other parts of the Soviet Union, see Georg Lukacs, Lenin: A Study on the Unity of His Thought (London: Verso Publishers, 1997). Lukacs, who served as the Deputy Commissar for Culture in the Bela Kun regime in Hungary, wrote extensively on the family and social issues. As part of his plans to de-Christianize Hungary, he launched an expansive education program in the schools to undermine the patriarchal family.
37 Pipes, Russia under the Bolshevik Regime, 337-68.
[under Lenin] became weapons against the hold of the privileged, the priests…. Lenin masterfully used anti-family legislation as another wedge between the state and religion.

The Marxist mandate to abolish the family formed the essential theoretical foundation for Soviet family policies in the first decade of the Bolshevik regime. In addition to the Marxist theories, however, there was another factor that significantly influenced family laws in the Soviet Union. The early Bolsheviks, who aimed to completely transform humanity, viewed the family unit as a traditional holdover that would require new legislation to make it conform to the Communist objectives. As part of the Bolshevik attempt to recreate mankind, every prior understanding of humans, including psychology, personal relationships, and religion had to be radically transformed in order to create a new breed of human beings. Vladimir Lenin and Leon Trotsky, the initial intellectual framers of the Soviet experiment, both wrote at length about the Soviet priority to create new human beings, and about the necessity of transforming every aspect of human life, including the family, in the Soviet Union.

Bolshevism under Lenin’s rule boldly attempted to restructure the entire society, and the Communist leaders needed to reshape each human individual who was part of this radically different society. As Richard Pipes notes about the Soviet experiment: “Bolshevism was the most audacious attempt in history to subject the entire life of a country to a master plan, to rationalize everybody and everything.” Indeed, the Soviet architects of society set out to re-design every component of human life. The Soviet political leaders created new government departments to supervise and direct the arts, national education, the daily schedule for workers, and the press, to name only a few

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38 Barry, Ginsburgs, and Maggs, 120.
39 Pipes, *Russia under the Bolshevik Regime*, 511.
areas of government supervision in daily life.\textsuperscript{40} The Soviet master plan, according to Hannah Arendt, was sweeping in its broad application to human activities precisely because the Soviet ideologists were devoted to an abstract idea – the creation of an entirely new human nature.\textsuperscript{41} As Arendt observes, the objective of the Soviet social experiment “…[was] not the transformation of the outside world or the revolutionizing transmutation of society, but the transformation of human nature itself.”\textsuperscript{42}

An important view of human beings that the Bolsheviks held was that human beings were infinitely malleable. This idea further displayed Soviet arrogance and naïveté. Frank Meyer describes this totalitarian “…conviction that human beings can be manipulated and ‘structured’ like beams of steel to satisfy an engineer’s blueprint” as overly utopian and demonstrative of extreme “hubris.”\textsuperscript{43} However naïve this view of mankind was, it was a necessary element of Soviet ideology. A flexible and malleable human nature was a requisite for the objective of recreating the whole of society.

The Communist theoreticians drew heavily upon the ideas of Europe’s Enlightenment. The Enlightenment philosophers, especially Marquis de Condorcet and John Locke, who believed in the power of education to remake humanity, were deeply influential on the early Bolsheviks. Richard Pipes explains the relationship between socialist thinking and the Enlightenment’s optimism about human malleability:

\begin{quote}
All socialist doctrines, from the most moderate to the most extreme, assume that human beings are infinitely malleable because their personality is the product of the economic environment: a change in that environment must, therefore, alter them as well as their behavior. Marx pursued philosophical studies mainly in his youth. When, as a twenty-six-year-old émigré in Paris, he immersed himself in philosophy, he at once grasped the political implications of the ideas of Helvétius and his French contem-
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 500-525.
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{43} Meyer, \textit{In Defense of Freedom}, 174-5.
Both Trotsky and Lenin eagerly applied these Enlightenment ideas about shaping the human environment to bring forth a revolutionized population, entirely transformed from the population under tsarist rule. The Enlightenment ideas of altering the human environment were especially influential on Soviet legislation, including family laws in the early years of the Soviet Union. Family life, after all, constituted a large part of the human individual’s environment, which the activist government sought to control.

The Bolshevik project to recreate humanity placed a heavy emphasis on education and on government regulation to control all parts of human life. The Bolsheviks were confident that by restructuring the human environment, including the work schedule and the leisure activities of each citizen, the government could rapidly create new human beings. Richard Pipes describes in detail the “…total transformation [in the Soviet Union] of the human environment for the purpose of creating a new breed of human beings….”

During the Russian Revolution, the Bolsheviks inserted government bureaucracy into every part of human life, including those areas that had previously been separated from the government and belonged entirely to the private sphere. The Soviet regime, intent upon creating new humans, set out to eliminate any element of human life that constituted a threat to the Communists.

One of the fundamental reasons why the Bolsheviks prioritized creating this new “breed of human beings” was that the human beings in the Soviet Union had been

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46 Pipes, *Russia under the Bolshevik Regime*, 495.
47 Ibid.
unexpectedly resistant to the Communists’ goals. Lenin and Trotsky, therefore, believed reshaping mankind and creating a uniform, homogenous set of human beings was the most natural way to eliminate this opposition. The Soviet regime aimed to destroy human uniqueness and variation because individuals—with their unique personalities and personal demands—posed a dangerous threat to the regime’s absolute power. Hannah Arendt believes the Soviet regime denied individual uniqueness as a tool for achieving more power. In order to achieve “total domination” the Soviet regime treated all human beings “as if all of humanity were just one individual … transforming the human personality into a mere thing.” The Communists needed to destroy one of the most basic aspects of human nature – the diversity of human uniqueness – in order to cling to power.

This radical attempt to create an entirely new form of humans marked the complete reversal of the understanding of human nature that had been held for thousands of years. According to Frank Meyer, the New Soviet Man project was:

…the deliberate rejection of an existing understanding of the nature of the person for the sake of a hubristic determination to dominate reality, to make it over in the image of the human makers.

From Meyer’s perspective, the Bolsheviks displayed a certain arrogance when they asserted that they alone understood how to transform human beings.

Trotsky, perhaps, provides the clearest example of the Bolsheviks’ objective to systematically build a new life in the Soviet Union. He wrote in 1919, “Communist life

48 For more information about Soviet population’s resistance to Soviet policies, including forced collectivization, see Richard Pipes, Russia under the Bolshevik Regime, 500-508. See also Arendt, The Origins of Totalitarianism, 433-465. For more information on the Communist Party’s assessment of the Russian population’s resistance to Soviet policies, see Leon Trotsky, The Revolution Betrayed (Garden City, NY.: Doubleday, Doran & Company, Inc., 1937).
49 Arendt, The Origins of Totalitarianism, 438.
50 Ibid.
will not be formed blindly, like coral reefs, but it will be built consciously, it will be tested by thought, it will be directed and corrected….”

Trotsky further elaborates his description of the new human beings that the Soviet regime would create: “Man will, at last, begin to harmonize himself in earnest…. He will want to master first the semi-conscious and then also the unconscious processes of his own organism.”

According to Trotsky, no previously-held view of humanity, even biological ones, would be maintained in the Soviet Union. As part of the overarching plan to recreate human beings, the Soviets would redesign not only the political aspects of human life, but also the psychological and even physiological aspects.

In the Soviet social experiment to create new human beings, the human individual became irrelevant. Individual needs and desires were routinely subordinated to the abstract needs of the future Communist society. The Soviet regime consistently assumed human beings as individuals were irrelevant in the larger context of the grand objective to achieve a utopian society for future generations. The Bolsheviks nullified individuality, instead focusing on the collectiveness of human beings, or the masses. With the emphasis always on the ambiguous collective, the Soviet government subordinated the individual’s basic human needs in the ambitious effort to realize a new society and a new form of humanity.

Shaping individual human beings, and actually changing human nature, required that the government control every aspect of human life. As Richard Pipes observes, this confidence that humans could be transformed and re-made led to a strong link between

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53 Ibid.
54 Ibid., 137-8.
legislation and morality. Excessive legislation and cumbersome meddling in private life were the mechanisms by which the totalitarian regimes were able to exert this extreme control over human beings. As Meyer also notes, the Communists, “…who look[ed] on [human] existence this way, who conceive[d] that the nature of men can be changed to meet the specifications of a design of earthly perfection, need[ed] perforce some mechanism through which to act.” Legislation, of course, was the necessary mechanism to accomplish this ambitious agenda.

Once the Soviet ideology had incorporated the notion that human beings were malleable and transformable, it was not a far leap in logic to assume that humankind could be perfected. By undergoing an indefinite set of improvements through a process of education, the human race could reach a state of perfection suitable for the utopian society of the future. The Soviet regime erred in thinking, not only that human beings were perfectible, but that the government was responsible for implementing and overseeing this achievement. The belief that it was the state’s responsibility to improve humankind was only possible once the government had assumed that human beings as individuals were irrelevant and could undergo a government-dictated process of transformation. As Pipes notes, this optimistic view that the government could perfect mankind “legitimized the most savage social experiments” in Bolshevik Russia.

Leon Trotsky was another especially ardent supporter of reshaping mankind; he believed that by studying human nature, the Bolshevik government would acquire the unlimited power of changing and reshaping mankind for the improvement of future generations. This faulty proposition provided the Bolsheviks with the theoretical

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56 Pipes, The Russian Revolution, 129.
justification for creating overarching legislation related to every aspect of human existence in order to build a new society.\textsuperscript{59}

Trotsky frequently described how the Bolsheviks could apply the idea of human perfectibility to create a new social order.\textsuperscript{60} In an especially revealing passage, he explains that the Communists intended to re-build each human being in the Soviet Union. Trotsky believed the Soviet man would master “…the unconscious processes of his own organism; breathing, the circulation of blood, digestion, reproduction…[and] subordinate them to the control of reason and will.” He elaborates that the Soviet man would become “incomparably stronger [and] wiser…” through this conscious effort to perfect himself.\textsuperscript{61} Incredibly, these idealistic ideas about human perfectibility laid the foundation for many of the Soviet education and social policies.

As a result of this massive social engineering, the family unit assumed a new weight in the policy sphere. As the social scientist David Lloyd Hoffman notes, “…when social scientists and government officials [in the Soviet Union] began to think of society as an object to be studied, sculpted, and improved, reproduction [and child-rearing] emerged as an important realm for intervention.”\textsuperscript{62}

Education was an integral component of the plan to redesign humanity. The Bolsheviks strove to create a revolutionary education system: laws required all parents to enroll their children in schools with a universal curriculum, which consistently emphasized Marxist and Communist values.

\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., 126.
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., 137.
\textsuperscript{61} Leon Trotsky, \textit{Literatura i revoliutsia} (Moscow, 1924), 192.
As the social scientist Daniel Brower observed during his visits to the Soviet Union in the 1960’s and 1970’s, the Bolshevik leaders were concerned, above all, with the ability of schools to teach Communist values.

For the Bolshevik leaders in the new Soviet state, the significance of education lay above all in its capacity to reshape men’s minds. Lenin himself emphasized the high ethical task of the schools to teach ‘modern youth’ the essence of “Communist morality,” which he saw as the key to destroying attitudes created by “the old exploitative society” and strengthening support for the proletariat, “which is creating a new society of Communists.”63

The childhood education program emphasized one of the most important Communist beliefs: the individual is always subordinate to the collective. In order to teach this value, schools devised games to train children to consider themselves part of a collective. Vera and David Mace, two sociologists who traveled to the Soviet Union, observed this type of education in the nursery schools. Young children were instructed to play games that emphasized their need for others and showed their inability to perform functions without the help of the collective. One such game involved carrying blocks that were too heavy for one child, which thus forced the entire nursery school to play together to construct anything.64

Unfortunately for the Soviet government, the public was largely unsupportive of this overhaul of the education system. The vast majority of Russians, including even those who were enthusiastic about the Communist labor agenda, were perplexed by the mission to indoctrinate children. Trotsky described the resistance: “Those parents and

64 Mace, The Soviet Family, 295.
teachers who are devoted to the old society cry out against ‘propaganda.’ If a state is to build a new society, can it do otherwise than begin with the school?”65

The government attempted to redesign the education system for every citizen, child as well as adult. The expansion of education for the youth was certainly a big part of the education program, but as Lisa Kirchenbaum notes, “…[the] educational program went well beyond its schools, as state-sponsored mass culture aimed to inculcate ‘Soviet’ values, norms, behaviors, and language.”66 The overhaul of the education system extended far beyond the classrooms and included educating adults, training families, and reshaping the culture.

New Soviet Man; New Soviet Family

In order to recreate human nature and achieve Trotsky and Lenin’s vision of the New Soviet Man, each individual needed to undergo a rigorous and uniform education. While the government directed the formal education program mainly toward children, it required every citizen to be educated in Communist teachings. This social experiment entailed an immense program to reform humans.67 As Pipes notes: “Few new states have set out with such great hopes in the reforming capacity of education as the Soviet regime in 1917.”68 Indeed, the Bolsheviks had a great deal of confidence in education as the mechanism to alter humanity.

65 Trotsky, Literatura i revoliutsiia, 192.
Somehow, [the Bolsheviks] felt, they would achieve that new man in a new communist society of which Karl Marx and other European socialists had dreamed. Education had a crucial role to play in this holy cause.⁶⁹

According to Trotsky, this education was necessary to revolutionize the entire country.⁷⁰

The aims were broad, but the primary objectives were to create loyalty to the Communist Party that would be stronger than any loyalties to family or friends, and to teach Marxism as the infallible truth.

Pre-revolutionary Russian families, especially peasant ones, were typically conservative and religious.⁷¹ Families in imperial Russia tended to be large, and marriage and baptisms were religious, rather than state affairs. To a large degree, family life in tsarist Russia had been insulated from government interference and derived its legitimacy from religion. This family structure, of course, was entirely anathema to the Bolshevik vision of the Soviet Citizen because it derived its legitimacy from religion.

As the early Bolsheviks pursued this strategy to transform human beings, family life - the private sphere of human social activity - became immensely important to them. The institution of family, especially as it had existed in tsarist Russia, was an inherently conservative feature in society. Every aspect of family life, including the patriarchal role of the father, the economic “uselessness” of mothers, the “slavish obedience” of children, was contrary to what the Soviet Union strove to teach. Of particular interest to the intelligentsia was the question of whether or not the family was a harmful environment for children. As the wife of Grigory Zinoviev, one of the most influential Communist Party leaders, asked:

Is not parental love to a large extent love harmful to the child?... The family is individualistic and egotistic and the child raised by it is, for

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⁷¹ Richard Pipes, Russia under the Old Regime (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1974), 141-170.
the most part, antisocial, filled with egoistic strivings…. Raising children is not the private task of parents, but the task of society.\textsuperscript{72}

From the Bolshevik perspective, family life, therefore, posed a threat not only to the well-being of the child, but also to the objectives of the regime. As a capitalist holdover, the family undermined the collectivist education the Bolsheviks were implementing elsewhere.

As the Soviet government expanded the Communist education for adults and children through the school system and the state-orchestrated propaganda, the Party leaders began to realize the limitations of their education program. The citizens’ private home life was an area immune to Communist training and provided a shelter from indoctrination programs. Recognizing the importance of family policy, Leon Trotsky insisted in 1919 that the Soviet government begin to regulate family life.

\begin{quote}
We have never thrashed out these questions [about the family] concretely as, at different times, we have thrashed out the question of wages, fines, the length of the working day, policy persecution, the constitution of the state, the ownership of the land, and so on. We have as yet done nothing of the kind in regard to the family and the private life of the individual worker generally. At the same time, the problem is not an inconsiderable one; if for no other reason that it absorbs two-thirds of life, sixteen of the twenty-four hours in the day.\textsuperscript{73}
\end{quote}

In Trotsky’s opinion, the Soviet Union needed to begin to examine the family for the very practical reason that private activities at home consumed two-thirds of daily life.

Whatever successes the Bolshevik regime attained in the workplace or in the schools, the family life had been, up to that point, largely separated from the public policy discussions. Trotsky believed that to achieve the ambitious goal of recreating mankind, it would be essential to govern the individual’s private family life.

\textsuperscript{72} Quoted in Pipes, \textit{Russia under the Bolshevik Regime}, 331.
\textsuperscript{73} Trotsky, \textit{Literatura i revoliutsia}, 192.
Based on the recommendations of Trotsky and Lenin’s wife, the Soviet government passed a series of family laws, which were closely related to the education policies.\textsuperscript{74} As Richard Pipes explains, the Soviet Marxists perceived legislation to be the primary method for restructuring society and reshaping human beings:

Justified by this modified Marxist belief in the power of law to bring about social change, the authors of the new law codes in Soviet Russia attempted to use law aggressively to change and mold human behavior.\textsuperscript{75}

In order to exert its influence over the family, the final sphere of private life, the regime implemented numerous family laws and policies.

The Communists’ family policy objectives evolved drastically over time in response to the changing circumstances and challenges in the Soviet Union.\textsuperscript{76} Their first family policy objective, in keeping with Marxist foundations, was to abolish the family. The Communists sought to instate the government as a complete replacement for the family. As Alan M. Ball notes in his book on family policies in the Soviet Union: “In the heady days of revolutionary triumph, the new Bolshevik government sought to take upon itself the task of feeding, clothing, and even raising a large share of the country’s children.”\textsuperscript{77} Several government agencies were commissioned to develop “…a network of children’s homes that would be capable before long of raising the nation’s offspring.”\textsuperscript{78} The regime assumed parents would become irrelevant once the government had assumed these parental responsibilities. The Bolsheviks between 1917 and 1924 fully anticipated that the state would replace the primary functions of the family.

\textsuperscript{74} Pipes, \textit{The Russian Revolution}, 137-151.
\textsuperscript{75} Pipes, \textit{Russia under the Bolshevik Regime}, 331.
\textsuperscript{77} Alan M. Ball, \textit{And Now My Soul Is Hardened} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 47.
\textsuperscript{78} Ibid.
Before Stalin assumed power in 1924, the Communists viewed the family as an obstacle to the Soviet goal to transform human beings. The Bolsheviks feared that the curriculum, which they advanced in the public schools, would not be strong enough to overcome the dangerous aspects of family life – especially the teaching of inherently conservative ideas and views of religion and work. The Bolsheviks thus:

…advocated the active destruction of the family and its replacement with collectivized upbringing of children through state-run homes and boarding institutions. [They] maintained that the abolition of the family was justified by Marxist ideology. 79

The idea of destroying the family was not considered a radical idea among the Bolsheviks, and it was widely supported in the first two decades of the Soviet Union. “The ideological position that the family as an institution should be destroyed and replaced had many adherents among Soviet educators.” 80 Certainly, the idea that the state could serve as a replacement for the family had wide support from the intelligentsia. An influential Bolshevist, Anatolii Luncharcharskii noted that “…families create the wrong kinds of individuals, that is, not the persons who would make contributions to the social collective, but people who would be egoists.” 81 Familial loyalty and paternal love posed two of the most serious threats to the regime because these family bonds served to undermine the Communist messages of equality and collectivity.

In addition to the contradiction that the family posed to the Communist education, the family was also dangerous to the regime because of the stereotypical positions within the family. Most notable was the role of women. While the propaganda consistently advanced the idea of men and women equally sharing all tasks in society, the division of labor in families was far from equal. Mothers still performed the stereotypical work of

80 Ibid., 894.
81 Ibid.
women: cleaning, cooking, and childrearing, which the regime deemed to be a waste of women’s time. The early Bolshevik objective to promote equality between the sexes necessitated that the state take over many of the functions traditionally fulfilled by women. As Engels wrote about the Communist culture: “Society must assume full responsibility for the traditional female tasks, child-rearing and cooking,” so that women would be able to enter the workforce on equal footing with men.82

While Marx and Engels had believed the dissolution of capitalist systems would have naturally caused the family as a social unit to “wither away,” the Soviet leaders were too impatient to wait for this “withering away” process, and they set out to abolish the family by force. The family policies advocated in the first decade of the Soviet Union focused almost exclusively on the dissolution of the family.

**Stalinist Family Policies as Practical Solutions: 1924-1953**

Stalin, in contrast to Lenin, was much more flexible in his understanding of Marxism. Always more interested in retaining power than in advancing Marxism, Stalin adopted a more conservative approach to the Soviet Union. To solidify his power base, Stalin frequently overlooked Marxist (and even Leninist) objectives.83 While Lenin attempted to reconcile his policies and writings with orthodox Marxism, Stalin was more pragmatic, never allowing abstract ideological aims to stand in the way of his personal aims.

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82 Quoted in Pipes, *Russia under the Bolshevik Regime*, 330.
83 For a more thorough treatment on Stalin’s unorthodox Marxism, including his willingness to subordinate Marxism to his personal agenda, see Robert Conquest, *The Great Terror: A Reassessment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 291-307.
Family policies under Stalin changed dramatically to respond to Stalin’s practical concerns. The ambitious, ideologically-driven family laws in the first ten years of the Soviet Union had led to serious consequences, which he needed to address. Faced with a serious population decline and demographic crisis, Stalin began an initiative to reverse Leninist policies and actually strengthen, rather than abolish, the family. “In 1935-1936 the purpose of family legislation was the replenishment of society.”84 The Stalinist phase of family legislation (beginning approximately in 1935) changed the “purpose of law from mainly the transformation of society to mainly the replenishment of society with new, industrial cadres at the younger generation.”85

Stalin faced a two-part problem related to the family. On the one hand, the ambitious Leninist and Marxist dream of abolishing the family had proved idealistic and impossible. The family, far from being merely a social and economic construct (as Marx had envisioned it), turned out to be a reasonably stable and natural phenomenon that could not be legislated out of existence. On the other hand, to the extent that the Soviet Union had been successful – not in abolishing the family, but in severely weakening it – the consequences were severe. The population was declining, divorce rates were at a record high, child homelessness and child starvation were rampant, and the future of the revolution itself was at stake because there was an ever-shrinking population to train to be the next “cadre” of the revolution.86 In light of the honest assessment that the family was not going to “wither away,” and the glaring consequences of Russia’s weakened

84 Barry, Ginsburgs, and Maggs, Soviet Law after Stalin, 120.
85 Ibid., 121.
86 For more information about divorce rates and declining birth rates, see Glass, “Family Law in Soviet Russia,” 894.
family unit, Stalin established a more pragmatic relationship between the state and the family.

As soon as it became apparent that the destruction of the family was not feasible, the regime began to investigate the benefit to the parents of having their children remain in the home and be used “…as agents of the revolution in their own homes.” In other words, when it became clear that the family was not going to “wither away” as Engels had predicted forty years previously, the Bolsheviks looked for ways to use, rather than abolish, the family structure. One of the best ways to use the family structure was to teach Communist values to children in school and in the Young Pioneers clubs (the equivalent of the Boy and Girl Scouts in the United States) and then encourage children to teach these values to their parents.

An unforeseen consequence of replacing the family with the government was that parents began to abandon their children in large numbers. In its haste to remove women from the home, the government put women to work in various industries, but lagged in providing necessary day care. Because day-care facilities were lacking, parents often neglected their families in order to fulfill their work obligations to the state.

[Child] neglect also occurred as a by-product of parental employment outside the home. The absence of a comprehensive system of day care institutions compelled adults lacking assistance from their own parents or other stand-ins to lock offspring in rooms each day or, more likely, abandon them to the street’s tutelage.

There were certainly numerous factors that contributed to the increased number of abandoned children, including extreme poverty and the increased workload on women, but ultimately it was the government’s meddling with the family that led to this unforeseen consequence. While the Soviet government had actively sought to remove

87 Ibid.
88 Ball, And Now My Soul Is Hardened, 5-13.
mothers from the home, the state quickly proved unable to provide adequate child care, thus leading to a dramatic spike in abandonment.

Closely related to the problem of child abandonment was the demographic crisis that occurred in Russia during Stalin’s rule. As a direct result of the increased work that women were forced to perform, birthrates sharply declined. At the same time that birthrates were declining, child abandonment and neglect began to rise. Compounding this problem, the children who were abandoned by their parents had little chance for survival and often died in the streets.

Stalin, confronted with a dramatically shrinking population, reacted swiftly with a new set of family policy laws. In order to combat child abandonment and the decline in population, the Soviet government in the early 1940s shifted its focus to strengthening the family and elevating motherhood as a vital service to the country. The family legislation following the demographic crisis “…reveal[ed] a purposeful attempt on the part of the Russian policy-makers to strengthen the family as a social institution.”

To encourage families to have more children to replenish the labor supply, Stalin created a reward system for mothers. In a reversal of the Marxist objective to eliminate the role of motherhood, Stalin strengthened the role and even elevated it to a respectable position in society by awarding mothers with ribbons and accolades. No longer was motherhood treated as an irrelevant bourgeois holdover; under Stalin, it was lauded as one of the most important jobs a woman could perform as a loyal Communist. Stalin’s government awarded the “Motherhood Medal” for mothers of five or six children, the “Order of Motherhood Glory” for mothers of seven to nine children, and the title of

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“Heroine Mother” for mothers who had given birth to ten children. In this way, Stalin’s regime reversed the Leninist family policies related to mothers. Especially following World War II, mothers gained even more respect from the government. The policy-makers, in their quest for an increased birth rate, found it necessary to create policies that favored large families. The tax code reflected this new priority; it favored large families in order to further incentivize having more children.

As Richard Pipes observes, one of the reasons Stalin was forced to create a system that would respect mothers is that it had proved unrealistic for the state to raise children. The state was unable to afford round-the-clock nannies for every child in the country.

The social care of children proved unfeasible: for while mothers were prepared to devote countless hours of free labor to care for their offspring, hired caretakers had to be paid, and this required funds that were not available.

Although the leaders had anticipated all of the positive benefits of having the community raise the children as a collective activity, they had not adequately planned for the practical issue of how the government would pay for these childcare services.

During Stalin’s rule, and immediately following his death, the Soviet regime began to view the family as a positive feature worth protecting and maintaining because family life limited people’s social mobility. “The family [acted] as an effective counterweight against social mobility, as a stabilizer of status.” Thus, in the totalitarian Soviet regime, the family was no longer perceived as a threat to the regime, but as a complement to the tight restrictions the government imposed on its citizens.

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90 Ibid., 424-426.  
91 Ibid.  
92 Ibid., 425.  
93 Pipes, *Russia under the Bolshevik Regime*, 331.  
Russian policy-makers [beginning in the 1950s] …realize[d] that the authoritarian family [could act] as a ‘transmission belt’ for the inculcation of the authoritarian norms of the total society.”

Another benefit of strengthening the family as a social unit was that the number of children born to stable families was significantly higher than in troubled families. Furthermore, the children in these families were more likely to grow up to become productive members of the Soviet economy if family life was strong. Thus, the family’s relationship to the state was transposed again during Stalin’s reign, as the state sought to bolster family life as a tool for maintaining the totalitarian grip on power.

Again, however, the regime had to confront new challenges related to its revised family policies. Strengthening the role of the family, with the goal of creating a stable society, necessarily limited the ability to control the details of human life.

This strengthening of parental authority meets with serious obstacles, and a conflict between different forms of social control tends to arise. The totalitarian state aims at direct control over the individual from cradle to grave, from kindergarten via Comsomol and school to job. Only in this way can it hope to ascribe status directly to every individual in the system.

The Stalinist efforts to strengthen the family were in direct conflict with the earlier Leninist policies to supplant the family, and these new policies undermined the Soviet goal to control every aspect of human existence.

This complete reversal of objectives in the family policy sphere was largely due to three factors – the demographic collapse, the government’s financial constraints, and the surprising benefits family provided in a totalitarian regime. As the Soviets discovered in the 1930’s and 1940’s, the family unit served several practical, utilitarian purposes; as

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95 Ibid.
a stable feature in society, it served as a check on people’s revolutionary tendencies and it moderated citizens’ resistance to the government’s oppression.98

**Post-Stalin Family Policies: 1953-1991**

After Stalin died in 1953, the Soviet Union faced a new series of challenges. It had lost much of its Marxist identity during Stalin’s rule; Marxist objectives and ideals, including the withering away of the state, had been systematically ignored during Stalin’s twenty-nine years of rule. To recover the Marxist identity and to distance itself from the brutal authoritarianism of those years, the new leaders attempted to blend many of the Leninist objectives with the Stalinist practical methods.

In family policy following Stalin, this effort to weave together a coherent legislative strategy that included Marxist ideology as well as the Stalinist measures was visible. As Barry notes, the government strove to blend “…family freedom and equality without unduly sacrificing the [Stalinist] purpose of ‘strengthening the family.’”99 The “recodification of the late 1960s and early 1970s” reflects this attempt to combine ideology with Stalin’s efforts to strengthen the family.100 The 1968 Fundamental Principles of Legislation of the Soviet Union and Union Republics of Marriage and the Family (FPLMF) was a “synthesis” of Leninist and Stalinist family law codes and a “…cautious political compromise between revolutionary ideals and pragmatic considerations of public opinion and social needs.”101

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99 Barry, Ginsburgs, and Maggs, 119.
100 Ibid., 121.
101 Ibid., 124-27.
Post-Stalinist laws strove to eliminate the conservative elements that Stalin had introduced, including the restrictions on abortion and divorce. The challenge during the Khrushchev era was for the Communist Party to reintroduce Lenin’s policies, without producing Lenin’s results. A delicate balance needed to be maintained, but the Communist Party hoped to reintroduce Marxism-Leninism to the legal code, but without sacrificing the birth rates that Stalin had achieved. The Cold War provided a new reason for the Communists to be mindful of the USSR’s population decline, but at the same time, the de-Stalinization process during the 1950’s provided the opportunity for the Communist Party to realign itself with its original founder, Lenin.

**Conclusion: The Consequences of the Evolving Family Laws**

The Soviet government consistently employed family policies as the means to accomplish some other end; the family was never the “end” itself. In contrast to numerous family policies in other countries where the government generally acknowledges that the family unit is a natural feature in society and that its strength often directly correlates to the strength of the state, the Soviet Union operated on the premise that the family – an unnatural and corrosive phenomenon – ought to be abolished.\(^{102}\) In family policy law in the Soviet Union, the family was viewed – depending on which time period – as a threat to the Communist Party (during Lenin’s rule), as the mechanism for overcoming the demographic crisis (during Stalin’s rule), and as a necessary evil that

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\(^{102}\) Even among the Communist governments, the Soviet Union was unique in its assault on the family. For more information about the Chinese Communist system of strengthening aspects of the family (in particular, the tradition of filial piety) in order to strengthen the Communist Party, see Stephane Courtois, Nicolas Werth, Jean-Louis Panne, et al, *The Black Book of Communism: Crimes, Terror, Repression* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 463-546.
could be used to help indoctrinate children (which was especially true following Stalin’s death until the collapse of Communism in 1991).

In the Bolsheviks’ view, the family was a malleable construct and was merely the means for other political objectives. Thus, between 1917 and 1991, the Soviet family laws changed from promoting the destruction of the family to later, especially during Stalin’s rule, endorsing the family as a vital mechanism for population growth. These laws were reactionary and volatile and ultimately weakened the family as a social unit, leading it to become overly reliant on the government.

Throughout Soviet history, family legislation was reactive, swinging from one end of the spectrum to the opposite in terms of its purpose and scope. The government was not concerned with the child’s well-being as the end in and of itself. Instead of emphasizing the welfare of children for their own sake, the state stressed children’s role as tools of indoctrination for the parents, as the vanguard of the revolution, as the means to increase the population, and so forth. Soviet family law was thus an incoherent area of policy that shifted drastically during the existence of the Soviet Union. The family as a unit within society also changed dramatically and, at various points during the Soviet Union, was viewed as an obstacle to achieving Communism, a tool for maintaining the USSR’s global position, a facilitator of propaganda and education between generations, and, finally, as a necessary evil to work in partnership with the government.

The relationship of the family to society also underwent radical change during the seventy years of the Soviet Union. Initially Marxist doctrine influenced the family policies, but as the leadership encountered new economic and demographic challenges, it re-wrote the family legislation to account for the new political realities. While Marx
himself probably would have never advocated for many of the family policies, particularly those policies aimed at increasing the birthrate and strengthening the role of mothers, all of the Soviet family policies were nevertheless the product of the Marxist belief that the family was malleable, irrelevant, and intimately connected to economic systems. Although there was no single, consistent family policy in the Soviet Union, each Family Law Code and family edict that the regime issued reasserted the family’s subservience to the state. As William Petersen notes about the perplexing evolution of Soviet family policies, “…the shifts in family life policy have always been in line with the fundamental purpose of maintaining maximum Soviet power.”103 Viewed in this way, it is possible to see how damaging the policies were to the family, even when those laws and policies purported to strengthen it.

Perhaps the most astute observation about the inconsistencies in Soviet family policies was written by David and Vera Mace in the 1970s:

...the Soviet regime exists...for tomorrow. It is moving toward a goal – the goal of Communism. Everything it does must serve the single purpose of bringing that goal nearer to achievement. Nothing must stand in the way of that primary objective. It is quite clear, therefore, that the welfare of the Soviet family is secondary to the welfare of the Soviet state.104

Unfortunately, the Soviet family consistently took a backseat to Marxist ideology and the Soviet government’s practical concerns.

The Bolshevik regime aspired to reshape society and to perfect every aspect of human life. While the Bolsheviks failed to bring lasting Communism to Russia, they were, tragically, successful in profoundly altering the family structure and family life. Child abandonment in Russia, which has again reached the level of a national crisis, is a

104 Mace and Mace, The Soviet Family, 293.
direct and unfortunate legacy of Soviet family policies. Those policies, which consistently emphasized that the relationship between the state and the individual was superior to the relationship between parents and children, have had a destructive impact on families in Russia, and remain a tragic and persistent problem for Russian society.
CHAPTER 3
THE ORPHAN CRISIS IN RUSSIA TODAY

The oscillating Soviet family policies outlined in the previous chapter weakened the family unit, and continue to affect family life and child welfare in Russia today. The Soviet government’s attempts to subordinate the family and elevate the state’s role in raising children have contributed greatly to the current child abandonment crisis in Russia. The current orphan crisis is the direct consequence of the Soviet attitude towards children in general, and orphans in particular.105

As the Russian government struggles to deal with this overwhelming child abandonment crisis, it is worth examining how the Soviet Union’s efforts to replace the family may have caused this problem. At the same time, it is also important to note that the Russian government has retained many Soviet-era policies within the orphanage system.

In discussing how to reform the child welfare system, the Russian government typically focuses on the three stages of orphanhood. The first phase is the origination of orphanhood and neglect (in most cases, parental abandonment); the second phase is the child’s life in the orphanage; the final phase is the orphan’s reintegration into Russian society upon reaching the age of emancipation. This chapter will explore how Soviet policies and mentalities continue to contribute to Russia’s orphan crisis in each of these three phases.

Russia has a long history of child neglect and abandonment, and even before the Russian Revolution in 1917, the country already had in place a 200-year old system of

105 Moscow Department of Youth and Social Policy, Moscow Conference, September 2008.
foster care to deal with the alarming number of homeless children. While child abandonment is certainly not a new phenomenon in Russia, this chapter will focus on the specific aspects of child abandonment today that can be traced back to Soviet laws and traditions.

One of the most basic problems in this area of study is the widespread tendency in academia to view post-Communist Russia as a country struggling primarily on an economic level. Communism was not simply an economic system, yet the majority of scholars choose to study exclusively the economic fallout in Russia, while ignoring the social. However, viewing Russia’s struggles simply in economic terms overlooks the numerous devastating social crises that currently confront Russia. In fact, Russia’s varied national crises are often of a social, rather than economic, nature; the child abandonment crisis in particular, because it intersects with so many other serious social issues, including the population decline and alcoholism, is an important subject for political scientists and Russian policymakers to study.

This chapter is organized around the three phases of orphanhood, from the initial phase of abandonment, to life in the orphanage, to the final phase of emancipation from the state-run institutions. This chapter will describe the challenges that confront children in each of these three phases, and will also explain how the Communist ideology and the Soviet family policies continue to affect the Russian child welfare system.

**Phase I: Abandonment to the State**

The first stage in the orphan cycle is the phase of abandonment. While it is true that a small percentage (roughly 5%) of the Russian orphans are without living parents, the focus here is on the far more alarming trend of abandonment – parents who relinquish their children to the control of the state, which is a problem almost unique to Russia.107 In contrast to other countries, where orphanhood primarily results from poverty or parental death, Russia has one of the highest rates in the world of child abandonment.108

Accurate statistics on child abandonment are difficult to find. As the Human Rights Watch noted in its study on orphans in Russia: “Official statistics on abandoned children abound, [but] the figures gathered from various official sources often do not correspond.”109 The majority of human rights organizations, including Human Rights Watch and the United Nations, indicate that the overwhelming majority of “orphans” in Russia are actually abandoned children. Ninety-five percent of the “orphans” in Russia have at least one parent who is still alive, and the “number of infants and toddlers (from birth to three years of age) living in orphanages has grown by 45% since 1989.”110

Furthermore, according to official statistics, more than 100,000 children are abandoned annually.111 In fact, the phenomenon of child abandonment has become so common in Russia that sociologists and politicians have coined the term “social orphan”

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107 While other countries certainly have higher rates of orphanhood than Russia has, Russia’s rate of child abandonment is one of the highest in the world, according to the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs.
109 Ibid., 19.
110 Domatov, Schulman, and Graves, 201.
for children who are not technically orphans in the traditional sense, but who have been abandoned by their parents.\textsuperscript{112}

The question of why parents in Russia choose to give their children to the state is an obvious one to ask. There are certainly many logical reasons to explain the surge in abandonment figures. Poverty, of course, is a significant factor in determining whether or not parents will abandon their child in any country, not only in Russia. Child disabilities, too, strongly correlate with abandonment. While these easily identifiable factors are certainly large contributors to the child abandonment crisis, they do not completely explain this phenomenon. Beyond these socio-economic and medical issues, there is a more disturbing historical explanation for this problem in Russia. The history of Russia – especially the history of the Soviet period – further sheds light on the orphan crisis today.

\textit{Perfectibility: Humans as “Educable” and “Malleable”}

One of the main ideas that emerged in the Soviet Union, which still persists today in Russia, is the concept that human beings are malleable and perfectible. Because the Soviet government ambitiously strove to create an entirely new political and social order, a requisite for this elaborate social engineering program was a malleable form of humans. According to Leninist doctrine, human value derived almost exclusively from the individual’s ability to be educated or improved, rather than from anything inherent or intrinsic within the individual. This misunderstanding of human worth has had a

\textsuperscript{112} Hunt, \textit{Abandoned to the State}, 3.
significantly negative impact on child welfare in Russia, particularly on children with disabilities.¹¹³

In the Soviet Union, physical and mental disabilities posed a serious challenge to Communist ideology. Disabilities and birth defects forced the government to acknowledge that not all Soviet citizens were equal; at the same time, genetic birth defects and physical and mental disabilities served as a constant reminder that not all human beings were part of the Soviet plan to reach a more perfect state of humanity. These children thus nullified much of the Soviet propaganda. As one Russian scholar has commented, the Soviet government made a concerted effort to conceal these children in state-run institutions precisely because they were such an inconvenient contrast to the official propaganda.¹¹⁴

Sadly, this tradition of concealing disabled children in state institutions is still prominent in Russia. As the NGO Human Rights Watch observed in its study of the Russian orphanage system:

> Time and again people told us, repeating like a mantra, how the Soviet ideology promoted the quest for the perfect Soviet man. As Dr. Severny explained, “All children and everyone had to meet the standard, and if they did not meet the standard, they had to be kept apart and hidden from the rest.”¹¹⁵

Disabled children in Russia are significantly more likely to be handed over to the state than children without disabilities. In 2004, the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) estimated that of the 600,000 Russian children officially registered with disabilities, more than 70% had been abandoned by their parents.¹¹⁶

¹¹³ Hunt, *Abandoned to the State*, 3.
¹¹⁴ Ibid., 83-85.
¹¹⁵ Ibid., 29.
¹¹⁶ Ibid., 17.
The appalling conditions for children with disabilities expose several profound problems of discrimination within the Russian childcare system. International non-profit organizations have raised awareness about the unfair treatment disabled children receive in Russia’s state-run institutions, but the problem persists, in spite of this increased international scrutiny. Furthermore, disabled children are also subjected to horrific forms of abuse and neglect, and are frequently denied access to necessary medical care.

Doctors in Russia today routinely recommend that parents abandon children with developmental challenges, even in cases where the disability is minor or correctible, including dexterity problems or cleft pallets. The U.S. State Department, in funding new programs in Russia to address abandonment, has acknowledged that this common Soviet medical practice is still pervasive today, and contributes to the high abandonment rates. In Soviet times, “[f]amilies were viewed as particularly unsuited to raise children with disabilities.” This tragic tradition continues unabated today, and doctors frequently “…recommend to parents of children who are born with certain visible and obvious impairments that they place their child in an institution.” Further evidence of this practice is corroborated by one study that details the hardship of raising disabled children in Russia. The study finds that “…once the diagnosis of mental or physical

117 The practice among doctors of recommending that parents abandon their children is still pervasive across Russia. This practice is particularly common in rural areas of Russia.
118 Information on the U.S. State Department’s new programs for Russian orphans, and Congress’s financial backing, available at http://www.congress.gov/cgi-bin/cpquery/?&sid=cp106yWjtd&refer=&r_n=sr291.106&db_id=106&item=&sel=TOC_101010&
119 Rosenthal, Bawer, Hayden, and Holley, 94.
120 Ibid.
disability was made, [there is almost universal] pressure [from the doctors] to abandon the child to an institution….”121

Svetlana Goncharenko, a speech pathologist at one of Vladivostok’s polyclinics, describes one of her main responsibilities as preventing child abandonment in the Russian Far East.122 At this polyclinic, many of the parents who learn their child has a speech impediment, no matter how mild, will immediately consider the option of giving their child to an orphanage. As part of Ms. Goncharenko’s job, in addition to helping the child overcome the speech difficulty, she works with parents to explain that these developmental challenges are not serious enough to consider abandonment. One of her patients, a three-year old girl with a mild lisp, was at risk of being abandoned by her parents in 2007. The doctors had encouraged the parents to try to have another baby and to place this child in an institution because she appeared to be a “hopeless case.” After several months of working with the toddler, Ms. Goncharenko was able to convince the parents to keep their daughter. This story demonstrates both the cultural pressure to abandon children with developmental challenges, as well as the need for more early intervention programs to prevent abandonment.

Further exacerbating the abandonment problem is the fact that the Soviet-era aptitude tests are severely flawed. Doctors in Russia still administer decades-old tests to determine a child’s abilities and to indicate the likelihood that the child will be “educable.” However, when international child experts re-tested these children to determine their mental disabilities, an overwhelming 80% of the children deemed by the

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122 Svetlana Goncharenko [speech therapist at Polyclinic #12, Vladivostok, Russia] interview, 23-26 June 2008. See Appendix C.
Russian experts to be “irredeemably handicapped” were found to have few or no problems at all. Considering that these mental and physical aptitude tests are often the single most important determining factor in whether or not the parents will relinquish their parental rights, the Human Rights Watch organization suggests that Russia completely overhaul its testing system to more accurately reflect children’s disabilities and difficulties.

Another unfortunate holdover today is the Soviet notion of redemption through education. The Soviet Union consistently emphasized the power of education to transform human beings into good workers and good citizens. A child’s mental capacity, therefore, was of extreme importance to the government. Children were thus divided into classes of “educable” and “uneducable.” Leon Trotsky and Vladimir Lenin’s wife, Krupskaya, voiced the importance of children’s education for the future of the revolution. They described the kindergartens and elementary schools as “…corners full of joy, full of the morning light portending future socialism.” Children were, quite literally, the future of the socialist revolution, and the government was committed to investing its resources in the children who were mentally competent to undergo the Soviet transformational education process.

Disabled children did not align with the Soviet idea of Utopia with a perfected human race. As scholars frequently observe, the Communist Party was not interested in

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123 Hunt, *Abandoned to the State*, 60-70.
124 Ibid.
126 Hunt, *Abandoned to the State*, 89. For a detailed description of the classification of children into categories of “educable” or “not trainable,” see the Human Rights Watch interview, Dr. Anatoly Severny, Moscow, February 12, 1998.
128 Ibid.
life at the present; the emphasis was on the future and on working towards the goal of socialist Utopia.\textsuperscript{129} Disabled children, unable to take part in this redemptive process of historical progress, were excluded from the promise of the Soviet future. As the Soviet Union adapted an increasingly utilitarian view of people in general, it is little wonder that disabled and handicapped children in particular were neglected on such a large scale. Because the Communist ideology was future-oriented, children had a particularly important role to play. Mentally and physically disabled children were overlooked by the government because they were unable to undergo the essential Communist perfectibility process and training program.\textsuperscript{130}

Today in Russia, much of the Soviet terminology related to disabled children still exists. The notion persists that some children are unable to be educated or “redeemed” and the terms “imbetsily” (imbeciles) and “defectivny” (mental defectives) are still used by professional medical staff.\textsuperscript{131} The Russian school system remains segregated and children with learning disabilities and mental handicaps are prevented from attending schools for “normal” children.\textsuperscript{132}

Orphanage employees report that this Soviet system of assigning worth to children still remains in place. Indeed, one of the reasons parents are often so willing to part with a disabled child is that they know the Russian culture will not respect this child; many parents even report their belief that a disabled child will be “doomed” in the

\textsuperscript{129} For a more thorough treatment of the future-oriented emphasis in Soviet teaching, see Hannah Arendt, \textit{The Origins of Totalitarianism} (San Diego: Harcourt, Inc., 1969), 469.


\textsuperscript{131} Ibid., 471.

\textsuperscript{132} Hunt, \textit{Abandoned to the State}, 89-90.
future. As Clementine Fujimura notes in her study of child abandonment in Russia, not all children in Russia are valued as equals with intrinsic worth.

The Soviet concepts of “educable” and “capable of improvement” continue in Russia today and have had an unfortunate impact on child abandonment. The Soviet-era system of classifying children reinforces negative stereotypes that some children are irredeemably worthless. Rather than providing treatment, special education programs, or family assistance for these children, the Russian government and medical community have retained the Soviet approach of encouraging parents to turn these children over to the state-run institutions.

**Paternalism: The State as Caregiver**

In addition to the Soviet notion of perfectibility, another unfortunate Soviet concept that lingers in Russia today is the idea of paternalism. The state, of course, in the Soviet era was commonly believed to be able to perform many functions better than private citizens, and that idea also applied to parents. The public often believed the state was a better caregiver for children than parents.

The government intentionally transferred many of the child-raising responsibilities from the parents to the state. The 1918 Soviet Code on Marriage, the Family, and Guardianship stated: “Our state institutions of guardianship…must show parents that social care of children gives far better results than the private, individual,

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133 Iarskaia-Smirnova, “What the Future Will Bring I Do Not Know,” 75-79.
inexpert and irrational care by individual parents,” who were deemed to be “ignorant” in the field of child-rearing.\textsuperscript{135}

The Soviet mentality that the state could provide a better environment for children continues to affect family decisions in Russia. Russian parents today often believe the state can provide for their children’s educational, emotional, and physical needs. As one example, parents who are struggling financially often consider abandonment a reasonable option. Poverty is strongly correlated to child abandonment, particularly in Siberia and the Russian Far East. “[S]taff at [orphanage] institutions report that ‘troubled families’ frequently place their children in institutions because they cannot afford to provide adequate food.”\textsuperscript{136} Parents often incorrectly assume that the state possesses adequate resources to provide better care for children than families can offer.

\textit{Phase II: Life in the Orphanage}

The second phase of orphanhood is the child’s life in the orphanage. According to official statistics, orphans spend, on average, more than ten years in state-run institutions.\textsuperscript{137} Numerous human rights organizations and international government bodies, including Human Rights Watch, the United Nations, and the U.S. State Department, have documented the horrific conditions for Russian orphans in these state-run institutions. In spite of the negative international coverage of these state institutions, there remains a widespread lack of human dignity in these institutions, which is directly attributable to Soviet policies.

\textsuperscript{135} Rosenthal, Bawer, Hayden, and Holley, 92.
\textsuperscript{136} Ibid., 91.
\textsuperscript{137} Moscow Department of Youth and Social Policy, 2008.
The orphanage system in Russia is comprised of an intricate bureaucracy that involves federal and local government departments. Orphans and “social orphans” are housed in this labyrinth of inefficient state-run facilities until the age of seventeen.

Soviet-era policies persist in Russian institutions. Renowned for its centralized control, the sprawling system of internaty for abandoned children was inspired by the Soviet philosophy favoring collective organization over individual care, and the ideal that the state could replace the family.138

The bureaucratic child welfare system is ill-equipped to take care of children’s individual needs. As Natalia Vladimirovna, a social worker and NGO director in Moscow, notes, the sprawling bureaucracy has created a massive system of paperwork and government inefficiency, and the result is that most children go through the bureaucratized system without receiving adequate medical or psychological help.139

The orphanages are, in almost every locality, under-staffed and under-funded. Ms. Vladimirovna describes how the state funds for orphanages are unfortunately often mis-directed to cover salaries for bureaucrats in Moscow, rather than to pay salaries for the orphanage employees or to purchase supplies for regional orphanages. In fact, the majority of orphanages are so impoverished that the children only possess a single outfit that they must wear each day, and very few of the children are given coats, despite Russia’s harsh winters.

The conditions in orphanages across Russia, while certainly better today than in 1991 when the Soviet Union collapsed, are still abysmal. Children are routinely denied access to sunlight, and they are crowded into small rooms. Orphanages in rural areas, Siberia in particular, often report food shortages. The children usually eat porridge or

138 Hunt, Abandoned to the State, 23.
139 Natalia Vladimirovna [Director of NGO, Women & Children First, Moscow], interview, 30 June 2008. See Appendix C.
oatmeal, and rarely receive fruits and vegetables. Structural problems with the facilities are also commonplace in the rural orphanages. Many of the orphanages have plumbing problems, cracks in the windows, and heating problems. According to one social worker, in many Russian orphanages, several children are bathed together to conserve water.

Another tragic element of life in the orphanages is the lack of emotional and educational care these children receive. As one employee pointed out, many of these children will never receive a hug or any sign of affection the entire time they remain in these state-run institutions. Furthermore, the children will not learn adequate verbal skills and their education, which is completely separate from the normal Russian schools, is sub-standard.

Numerous international non-profits have begun to investigate why life in these state-run institutions remains so bleak. While there are several underlying practical limitations, including shortage of funding and scarce supplies for the orphanages, the Soviet mentality towards orphanages is perhaps the most pernicious remnant of the Soviet Union that continues to have a devastating impact on the orphanages and other state-run institutions for children. In particular, the Soviet Union’s utilitarian view of human life, the Soviet shame surrounding orphans, and the Soviet emphasis on the collective, rather than individual care remain three of the strongest features of Russia’s orphanage system.

140 Ibid.
141 Katya Nonieva [child psychologist in Moscow], interview, 9 December 2008. See Appendix C.
142 Ibid.
The Utilitarian View of Human Life

One of the primary Soviet holdovers evident in the orphanage system today is the utilitarian view of human beings. As in the Soviet era, orphans are often considered “useless” and “hopeless.” Disabled children, in particular, are considered to be of very little value to Russian society, and these children suffer numerous indignities in the orphanages because of their official sub-human designation. The Russian government’s classification of disabled children as imbeciles and idiots has had an overall devastating effect on the care that these children receive in the orphanages. “Russian orphans classed as imbetsily and idiocy are subjected to a lifetime of malign neglect, deprived in some cases of their most basic right to life.”

Further demonstrating the pervasiveness of this attitude in Russia today, orphanage employees often regard disabled children’s conditions as “unalterable.” According to a Human Rights Watch study, orphanage staff members often “lack any kind of training to provide appropriate rehabilitation for [the children], and are largely gripped by a deterministic view that the children’s physical and mental condition” cannot be changed. Even when a child has been placed in a state facility specifically designated for children with disabilities, neglect and abuse often persist. A team of researchers and psychiatrists from the United States traveled to Russia in 1999 to examine facilities for disabled children and they wrote about the gross neglect and widespread abuse in these orphanages.

Because money is so severely limited for state-run institutions in Russia, employees at the orphanages are often in the difficult position of choosing which children

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143 Hunt, *Abandoned to the State*, 108.
144 Ibid., 91.
145 Rosenthal, Bawer, Hayden, and Holley, 84.
will receive medical care and necessary surgeries. Not surprisingly, given the widespread disregard for disabled children, “special needs children” are most often overlooked for life-saving surgeries. As child welfare specialist Valentina Balobanova observes about her work in St. Petersburg, children with disabilities in state institutions are frequently denied medical care because it is too expensive to “waste” these treatments on “idiots.”

**The Soviet Stigma of Orphanhood**

In addition to the Soviet Union’s utilitarian view of human life, another prominent Soviet holdover that negatively affects life in the orphanages is the sense of shame associated with orphanhood. Orphans continue to be treated as second-class citizens, both by the government and society.

The government’s inadequate interest in orphans’ welfare is reflected in the low salaries for orphanage employees. Furthermore, in addition to the low salaries, the stigma associated with orphans has the unfortunate consequence of attracting mostly low-skilled workers into the field. Very few specialists, including medical professionals, want to work with these children deemed hopeless. The government’s lack of funding further dissuades many altruistic professionals who would consider working with abandoned children. One child welfare employee in Moscow complained that her wages

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146 Ibid.
147 Valentina Balobanova, [child welfare specialist in St. Petersburg], interview, 21-22 June 2008. See Appendix C. For further evidence of this attitude among parents, also see Hunt, *Abandoned to the State*, 107.
in the orphanage are roughly one half of the wages of employees in the Moscow metro who sell tickets or sweep floors.\footnote{Katya Nonieva [child psychologist in Moscow], interview, 9 December 2008. The average monthly salary for unskilled laborers in Moscow is $800. Orphanage employees average 600-900 USD per month. See Appendix C.}

The orphan stigma also contributes to abuse within the orphanages. Orphanage employees “…really don’t treat the children as if they’re people. These children are viewed as hopeless.”\footnote{Hunt, \textit{Abandoned to the State}, 106.} Malnutrition, beatings, and sunlight deprivation are regular features of life in Russia’s orphanages.\footnote{Ibid., 106-109.} The stigma associated with orphans has the overall effect of creating a fatalistic perspective of these children’s future. Orphanage employees, who often believe that these children were abandoned by their parents for a good reason, rarely feel any compassion for the children in their care.\footnote{Ibid., 106-9.}

\textit{The Collective Prioritized over the Individual}

Another element of Soviet ideology that lingers in the orphanage system is the emphasis on the collective at the expense of the individual. As the Human Rights Watch has written, possessions for the orphan are still forbidden. Every item must be shared collectively.\footnote{Ibid., 63.} The emphasis on the collective is one of the major reasons that these children in state institutions rarely receive individual attention or personal visits with therapists or doctors. The typical Soviet subordination of individuality is extremely pronounced in the Russian orphanages, where some children will not even be spoken to for years.
Phase III: Emancipation from the Orphanage

The third, and final, phase in the orphan cycle is “emancipation” from the state-run institution. Children graduate from the orphanages at the age of seventeen. At that point, after years of systematic neglect and abuse, and with very little practical education for adult living, these teenagers enter Russian society, where 10% commit suicide and 40% end up involved in crimes or addicted to drugs. The Soviet Union’s long history of treating orphans as inferior citizens, hidden from society has greatly contributed to Russian orphans’ inability to integrate into society today.

The Soviet Union, which strove to create a Utopian society consisting of perfect individuals, deliberately concealed orphans and disabled children from society. As Richard Pipes has noted, many of the everyday experiences in the Soviet Union contradicted the official position, and the government thus attempted to restrict the public’s access to those elements of Russian society that contradicted Soviet propaganda. Children who failed to embody the Communist ideology’s notions of human perfectibility were included in that category. These children, by virtue of their physical disabilities or the simple fact that they had been abandoned, were irrevocably labeled as useless and worthless, and were to be avoided by members of society.

Today, not surprisingly, Russian society at large still maintains the Soviet government’s official position towards orphans. The government continues to mark all orphans’ official paperwork with official stamps that provide evidence of orphanhood and abandonment. An orphan carries these official documents into adulthood, signaling to all prospective employers that he or she possesses an irrevocable stigma.

155 Hunt, Abandoned to the State, 89-108.
Most significantly, the fact of abandonment and orphanages stigmatizes them for life, a stigma that is memorialized in official identity documents and from which they cannot escape as they seek employment and a normal life in the community. The stigma of abandonment is reinforced and compounded by the popular assumption that such children must have inherited mental deficiencies and deviant personalities to have caused their parents to abandon them.\(^{156}\)

Prospective employers are, predictably, often unwilling to hire anyone with this government seal identifying orphanhood. While international organizations continue to work to remove this stigma from orphanhood, the Russian government has maintained this system of labeling orphans.\(^{157}\)

Furthermore, these children, after years of neglect in the orphanage, are unprepared to enter independent adulthood. Most of the children lack basic life skills, including how to write a résumé, find an apartment, or cook for themselves. With such an inadequate education, and having been completely isolated from the Russian society, these children are unable to perform even the most basic daily functions. Orphanage staffers in St. Petersburg and Moscow report that these children are usually unaware of basic personal hygiene, and often do not know how to brush their teeth properly.\(^{158}\)

These three primary problems – the government’s permanent label for orphans, the orphans’ lack of life-skills, and the widespread social stereotypes – continue to challenge orphans once they have graduated from the orphanage system. Without a more humane system of reintegration for orphans, the Russian government will continue to maintain a system of child prisons, rather than a network of children’s homes.

\(^{156}\) Ibid., 33.
\(^{157}\) Ibid., 89.
\(^{158}\) Natalia Vladimirovna [Director, NGO Women & Children First] interview, 3 July 2008. See Appendix C.
Conclusion

Child welfare in Russia continues to be affected by the Soviet approach to family and child policies. The three phases in the child welfare crisis are the products of the Communist ideology. Abandonment, the first phase, is often the result of the Soviet mentality of human perfectibility, which prompts parents and doctors to consider abandonment for children with disabilities. Furthermore, the Communist idea that the state can replace parents and provide a preferable environment for children also leads many parents in Russia to abandon their children. In the second phase, life in the orphanage, the Soviets’ utilitarian view of human life and the Communist preference for the collective over the individual contribute to the harsh conditions that confront children in the orphanage system. The third phase is the emancipation stage, when the orphans graduate from the state-run institutions. In this phase, the Soviet system of labeling and identifying people haunts orphans throughout their adult lives, as they must carry passport stamps that identify them as unwanted.
CHAPTER 4
POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE RUSSIAN GOVERNMENT

With 800,000 children currently in the orphanage system, child abandonment and neglect clearly need to be addressed by the Russian government. Since 2006 the Russian government has made attempts to reform child welfare, but these efforts have been weak and have enjoyed only minimal success. As the government actively seeks to remedy the economic devastation caused by seventy years of socialism, the social welfare system receives far less attention in Russia. The country, struggling with a drastically declining population, should now turn more of its attention and resources to the social problems.

While the previous chapters outlined some of the historical causes of today’s child welfare crisis, it is now worth examining some of the steps the Russian government could take to decrease the rate of child abandonment. The policy recommendations outlined in this chapter are the result of the author’s interviews with child welfare specialists in the United Kingdom, the United States, and Russia, as well as Russian government officials at the Youth and Social Welfare Department, the Department of Education and Social Policy, and the Child Welfare Council at Moscow State University.

Russia’s Cultural Challenges

Given the deep historical roots that have led to this current child abandonment crisis, there is no simple solution or “quick fix” to this problem. The deep-seated cultural disrespect for human life and the seventy years of Communism have led to widespread hopelessness and social malaise.\textsuperscript{159} Child abandonment is only one symptom of the larger societal breakdown that resulted because of Communism. Other symptoms include

\textsuperscript{159} Satter, \textit{Darkness at Dawn}, 248-256.
rampant alcoholism, lack of respect for human life, and widespread corruption.\textsuperscript{160} Child abandonment, therefore, will not be solved in isolation from the other social problems in Russian society. However, in the interim, as Russian society begins to heal from the failed Soviet experiment, there are concrete steps that the government can take to mitigate the current abandonment crisis.

\textit{Phase I: Abandonment}

The first phase in the child welfare crisis, the abandonment phase, has posed problems for the Russian government for the past three hundred years.\textsuperscript{161} Russia today has one of the highest rates of child abandonment of any nation in the world. This high incidence of child abandonment, however, is not simply a modern problem; abandonment was prevalent during the reigns of Peter the Great and Catherine the Great, and then reached its height during Stalin’s rule in the 1930’s. Over the past three centuries, Russia has employed, with varying degrees of success, numerous child welfare policies. Before examining Russia’s own child welfare policies throughout history, it is first helpful to examine the child welfare policies in Great Britain, a nation with virtually no cases of child abandonment today.

\textbf{Imperial Russia}

In examining the modern crisis of child abandonment, it is important to consider how Russia has historically dealt with this problem. As early as the 1680’s, the Russian government was writing new child policies. Both Peter I and Catherine II initiated

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{160} Ibid.
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unsuccessful programs to reform the child welfare system in Russia and to curb infanticide and neglect.

Beginning with the reign of Tsar Peter I (Peter the Great) in 1682, Russia began to address child welfare as a policy issue at the federal level. Prior to Peter the Great’s rule, children held no legal status and infanticide was legal in almost all cases.\footnote{Ransel, \textit{Mothers of Misery}, 8-9.} During Peter’s rule, however, public sentiments began to change; Peter personally began to recognize that the loss of human life due to child neglect negatively impacted his workforce. At the same time, there was also an emerging “appreciation of infant life and sensitivity to children generally.”\footnote{Ibid., 22.} During the 18\textsuperscript{th} century, largely in response to the population decline, the Russian government began providing public services for neglected children.\footnote{Ibid., 7.}

Peter the Great created orphanages and foundling homes in Moscow and St. Petersburg to address an immediate humanitarian crisis – the killing of thousands of unwanted children. Their bodies were often discarded on the streets by their parents, prompting Peter the Great to issue a decree in 1712 “deploring the needless waste of human life.”\footnote{Ibid., 8.} “Children of shame,” as he called them, were left to die in various places throughout the major Russian cities. He ordered the establishment of hospitals in every province, where mothers of illegitimate children could deposit them in secret and thus avoid “committing the still greater sin of murder.”\footnote{Ibid.}

After Peter the Great, the next major reformer in child welfare was Catherine the Great. Intrigued by the ideas of the Enlightenment, Catherine set out to refashion Russia...
to be more western, particularly modeled on France and Germany. Her reforms in education and the arts are well-known, but lesser known is her unsuccessful attempt to overhaul the child welfare system. Whereas Peter the Great had wanted simply to remove abandoned children from the streets, Catherine had more ambitious plans, which foreshadowed the Soviet Union leaders’ project. Catherine wanted to remove children from their homes in order to control their education and remold their behavior.

Ivan Betskoi was the chief child welfare policy expert and advisor to Catherine the Great. A student of Enlightenment thinking, Betskoi aimed to create an entirely new class of people. As Betskoi attempted to refashion students to be “entirely different from their parents,” he discovered that boarding schools and state institutions were the best way to remove children from their parents, thereby allowing him to reshape the children.

One of the most important Enlightenment thinkers was John Locke, who believed that humans were blank slates requiring education to mold and shape them. For Locke, there was no innate human nature, and education was paramount for and reshaping and molding human behavior. Catherine the Great was heavily influenced by Locke, and she applied his ideas to her education reform in Russia. Toward that end, she “envisioned the [foundling] homes as incubators of an entirely new type of individual.” Betskoi, too, viewed these foundling homes and new orphanages more as laboratories to conduct human experiments, rather than to meet a humanitarian need. In fact, as David Ransel notes, “Betskoi’s plan for creating a new generation of enlightened citizens required the

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169 Troyat, *Catherine the Great*, 205-217.
kind of controlled environment that could be achieved only in a closed setting.”¹⁷¹ The education programs for children were based on the Lockean belief that the human mind at birth was simply a “…blank slate possessing no inborn inclinations to evil or vice. Accordingly, Betskoi saw the tightly controlled environment of a boarding school as the logical means of raising the cultural and ethical level of his pupils.”¹⁷²

The objective of Betskoi’s child welfare plan was to “forge the good citizen, a person…with a cultivated moral awareness, who would actively promote the welfare of his country and his fellow citizens.”¹⁷³ The design of the schools and internments was directly based on the Enlightenment ideas about child-rearing and education, especially those associated with Comenius, Locke, and Voltaire.¹⁷⁴ The same Enlightenment ideas that would later inspire Trotsky and Lenin, were first tried out in Russia by Catherine the Great’s government.

Perversely, Betskoi believed that his experimental homes did not have enough “raw material” to conduct the human experiments. As Ransel notes, “He seemed to fear that not enough women would deposit babies and he would then lack the material to fulfill his promise to create a new class of people.”¹⁷⁵ He needed more children in the houses to launch his full-scale re-education and recreation of a new class of people. In order to get more children into the homes for these Enlightenment experiments, Betskoi decided to offer incentives for child abandonment to encourage parents to leave their

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 45.
¹⁷² Ibid., 36.
¹⁷³ Ibid., 35.
¹⁷⁴ Pipes, The Russian Revolution, 137-139.
¹⁷⁵ Ransel, Mothers of Misery, 40.
children at the foundling homes. Betskoi devised a system in which the government would award parents two rubles per child that they deposited in the foundling homes.\textsuperscript{176}

A significant lesson can be gained from imperial Russia’s and the Soviet Union’s similar experiments with child welfare policies: there are often unintended and serious consequences when the government inserts itself into family policy and attempts to replace family relationships. As historian David Ransel notes:

\begin{quote}
It seems beyond doubt that the social changes wrought by the reforms of Peter the Great and [other imperial rulers] increased the incidence of infanticide and the visibility of the victims. The efforts to open up the old Russian family and put its individual members to work for the state led to the uprooting of large numbers of people and their detachment from their familial nests, with attendant increases in illegitimacy.\textsuperscript{177}
\end{quote}

In the end, the foundling homes were a dismal failure. “[T]he local facilities proved deadly for the children; the mortality rate in many of them ran to nearly 100 percent.”\textsuperscript{178}

With unexpectedly high death rates in the foundling homes, Catherine the Great was forced to abandon her ambitious plan for the government to perform the child-rearing services instead of parents.

\section*{The Russian Government’s Response Today}

Due in part to the population decline, the Russian government has taken a new interest in child welfare and the orphanage system. The government has designed a series of initiatives aimed at reforming the orphanage system and reversing the population decline. These strategies reflect the government’s new realization that child abandonment has had a devastating impact on Russia’s demography.

\begin{footnotes}
\item[176] Ibid.
\item[177] Ibid., 30.
\item[178] Ibid., 43.
\end{footnotes}
Russia’s population is declining at one of the fastest rates of any country in the world. One Russian demographer has noted how quickly people in Russian academia reach consensus when “…Russians assess the seriousness of their country’s demographic problems.” Numerous factors have contributed to the demographic collapse, including alcoholism, violent deaths among men, and Russia’s low birthrate. In the year 2000, for example, the Russian birth rate was lower than in any developed country in the world. David Satter has commented on the gravity of the population decline. He writes:

…in some ways the most serious danger facing Russia is that of depopulation. Russia has one of the lowest birthrates in the world and the death rate of a country at war. According to Igor Gundarov, the head of Russia’s State Center for Prophylactic Medicine, if current trends continue, the population of Russia will be reduced by half in eighty years, to about 73 million, making the Russian state as it now exists untenable. Of course, further contributing to the demographic decline is the fact that so many children are abandoned to the streets or to the state, and of those children, fewer than 50% will survive to adulthood.

Furthermore, the government is now aware that graduates of the Russian orphanage system are significantly more likely to commit suicide than other populations. Official statistics indicate that more than 10% of graduates of state-run institutions commit suicide. The high suicide rate is likely due to the fact that orphans are subject to widespread discrimination and are often unable to find jobs.

The Russian government, eager to address the embarrassing child abandonment crisis, has launched a series of initiatives. These government-sponsored programs

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180 Ibid., 952.
183 Domatov, Schulman, and Graves, 202.
include information campaigns about the value of family life and the gravity of Russia’s declining population. The government’s proposed solutions, however, have been extremely unsuccessful in reducing the number of children who are abandoned each year.

The first strategy of the government has been to appeal to the public’s waning sense of obligation to the state. The government has paid for thousands of advertisements on Moscow billboards and in the metro to inspire people, particularly women, to keep their children. One large advertisement on a Moscow billboard between an international airport and downtown shows a baby with the words “I need a mother.” In almost every metro stop in Moscow there are now signs that describe the importance of family life and display quotes from Tolstoy about the parent-child relationship.\(^{184}\) More explicit banners and signs directly state that the Russian government needs more baby registrations for the census. These types of advertisements are aimed at invoking the Soviet-style devotion to the State, where patriotism notably changed people’s behavior.

In addition to the information campaign, the Russian government has also led two year-long initiatives aimed at focusing money and attention on children and families. In 2007, then-President Vladimir Putin declared that year as the official “Year of the Child,” and he followed it up with 2008’s “Year of the Family.”\(^{185}\) These two initiatives were designed to strengthen the family and to help focus attention on the benefit of family life.

These government-led efforts to reverse abandonment, including information campaigns and appeals to Russians’ sense of national pride, are woefully inadequate to

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\(^{184}\) Moscow metro stops, including Okhotny Ryad and Oktyabrskaya now have large signs displaying the benefits of family life. In June 2008, the government also paid for large billboards on the Moskva River, near Red Square with pictures of babies. The message simply reads, I need a mother!

\(^{185}\) For background information on the “Year of the Family,” see the Moscow Government’s online bulletin “Moscow and the World,” no. 111. http://moskvaimir.mos.ru/off-line/_files/10208/mim_111_eng.pdf
combat a problem of this magnitude. As child abandonment becomes a more serious problem for Russia, the government continues to struggle to find realistic solutions to combat the alarming trend of parental neglect and systematic abuse within the orphanages. The orphan crisis has widespread implications for Russia’s demography and economy; if the Russian government hopes to reverse its population decline, the government will need to seriously address the pervasive problem of child neglect and orphan mortality.

Policy Recommendations to Reduce Child Abandonment

The Russian government today should be taking concrete steps to address child abandonment. Child abandonment is preventable, as Great Britain has proven. Rather than spending money on ineffective information campaigns in the metro about the benefits of family life, there are two immediate actions that the government could take, which would drastically reduce the number of abandonment cases each year.

The first step the government could take is to improve medical care for pregnant women. One of the primary reasons that women abandon their children in Russia today is birth defects. Many of the birth defects and child health problems are easily preventable or correctable. Correcting cleft palate, for example, is a simple procedure that would eliminate many instances of child abandonment. Furthermore, one of the most common reasons that families decide to give up a child is the recommendation of the doctor. The government should discontinue funding for hospitals, maternity centers, and polyclinics that advise parents to abandon unhealthy children.186

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186 Hunt, *Abandoned to the State*, 144.
Another simple step the government could take is to inform the public of the effects of alcohol during pregnancy. Fetal alcohol syndrome is rampant in Russia, and these children are abandoned in most cases. The government could save money by providing for physical therapy and minor surgeries, rather than paying for years of care for the child in the orphanage system.

These simple steps, aimed at reducing child disabilities, would be a better use of government funding than paying for these children to spend up to seventeen years in state institutions. Furthermore, improving prenatal care in Russia would advance the Russian government’s objective to increase the population by increasing the number of live births, while also promoting women’s health. In addition to helping meet the government’s fiscal and demographic goals, these improvements would also improve the overall quality of life for Russian children, particularly those who would be spared preventable physical disabilities.

**Phase II: Life in the Orphanage**

The second phase in an abandoned child’s life is life in the orphanage. The orphanages in Russia today remain similar to prison centers, rather than homes for children. While the government attempts to reduce the number of children entering these orphanages, every effort should be made to make these centers more hospitable for children.

While the Russian government has attempted to implement a series of reforms in the country’s orphanages, the homes are still plagued with problems. The orphanages have high death rates because of poor sanitation, including mice and rat infestations. The

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187 Ibid., 26-8.
orphanages frequently lack adult supervision, particularly at night. Additionally the majority of orphanages have water and heating problems. Food is scarce in the state-run institutions, and the children often go months without fruit or vegetables. The children have very little clothing and are rarely allowed to keep their own possessions.

As one example of the deterioration of the orphanages, Baby Home #12 in Vladivostok is representative of the problems affecting orphanages throughout Russia. The lights in most of the rooms of the building do not work. The rooms are rarely cleaned, with dirt piles on the floor and rust forming on the heating pipes. The children have no personal possessions, and there are very few toys in the center. According to the director of the center, no significant repairs have been made to the building in the past forty years. Unsafe electrical wires are exposed and hang from the ceiling.

As an example of what other countries have done to improve child welfare within institutions, America in the 1920’s provides a clear case study. The United States in the early 1920’s began the process of deinstitutionalizing orphans. Confident that family care was better for children than life in the institutions, the progressive reformers in America began the ambitious project of closing down state-run orphanages. As political scientist Matthew Crenson notes, Americans were “distinctive [in the world] for the vigor with which they dismantled the orphanages.”188 At the same time, however, the reformers also devoted more funding to the orphanages for the children who were left within the system. These reformers, as Crenson has observed, decided to improve the overall environment of orphanages and make them as “homelike as possible.”189

189 Ibid., 14-15.
Today the Russian government, unfortunately, has chosen to make adoptions, particularly foreign adoptions, more difficult. Adoptions by international families accounted for 70% of all adoptions in Russia before 2007, but the Russian government has added bureaucratic processes and made it increasingly difficult for foreign families to adopt Russian children. In 2004 the Russian government decided that Russian children should be raised in Russia; the impact of this misguided decision is that many children who could be raised in families in other countries are instead doomed to spend their lives in state-run institutions in Russia.190

In addition to the new restrictions on foreign adoptions, another unfortunate policy in Russia that remains from the Soviet era is the decision to isolate Russian orphans from the larger society. Russian orphans are segregated from the wider population, not being allowed to enter normal schools for “regular” children. The education these children receive in these institutions is inferior to normal schools. Furthermore, the act of hiding these children contributes to the life-long stigmatization that these children will experience after they leave institutional life.

Policy Recommendations in Orphanages

In this second phase, after the child has already been abandoned, the government should work aggressively to remove children from institutions and place them in families, whether in Russia or abroad. Additionally, the physical structures of orphanages should be repaired. Efforts should be made to make these institutions feel less like prisons and

190 There are many reasons why Russia has made it more difficult for foreigners to adopt children. The top reasons the government has provided are that Russian children should be raised in Russia and that western parents are negligent with children. Recent examples of child abuse in the United States have fueled the debate in Russia about whether or not Americans should be able to adopt in Russia. (See, for example, the Russian government’s April 12, 2007 decision to suspend all foreign adoptions.)
more like family environments. The government should commit more funding for toys and learning devices; the children’s diets should be improved; finally, every effort should be made to integrate orphans into society, especially by allowing them to attend regular schools.

Families have proven in other countries and in Russia’s history to be the best environment for children. The government, therefore, should place children in families. Not only is the family environment cheaper for the government, but children placed with families, unlike orphanage graduates, often go on to become productive adult members of society.

**Phase III: Emancipation from the Orphanage**

When orphans are emancipated at the age of seventeen, a new set of problems confronts the young adult. Having spent, on average, ten years in the state system, these orphans emerge with no job skills, very few social and survival skills, and they carry the stigma of orphanhood into adulthood.

Orphan graduates frequently lack social skills, including personal hygiene. These young adults also lack job skills and have very few marketable skills to assist in finding a job. Basic job requirements, including typing skills and rudimentary writing skills are completely lacking. With very little ability to find a job, many of these orphan graduates remain unemployed and many of the graduates enter a life of crime. Many of the girls become prostitutes, and official estimates suggest that almost 30% of female graduates from the state-run institutions will end up selling their bodies as prostitutes.\(^{191}\) The unfortunate result of this prostitution is a vicious cycle in which these orphanage

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\(^{191}\) Natalia Vladimirovna [Director of NGO, Women & Children First], interview, 30 June 2008. See Appendix C.
graduates go on to give birth to children they are unable to care for, who then also end up in the orphanage system.

Today Russia maintains many of the damaging Soviet policies regarding orphans. For example, orphanage graduates must still carry around their passport stamps that indicate that they are “unwanted.” The orphanages do not provide any type of counseling for orphan graduates and there are no jobs training programs in the orphanage system.

Policy Recommendations for Emancipation Phase

In the final phase of the abandonment crisis, the Russian government should be taking immediate steps to eliminate the stigma surrounding orphans. An easy way to reduce the stigma associated with orphans would be to stop requiring orphans’ passports to contain “orphan identifiers.” These passport stamps have the effect of making it difficult, and often impossible, for adult orphanage graduates to find jobs or get apartments.

Furthermore, the government could save money in the long run by providing incentives for companies to hire orphan graduates and by providing free technical training and jobs training courses for orphan graduates. Helping orphan graduates find jobs and become productive members of the labor force would save the Russian government money in the long-run by keeping these children out of crime.

Russia’s troubled past with child welfare offers numerous examples and warnings – from Catherine the Great’s disastrous attempts to replace the family with the foundling homes, to Lenin and Trotsky’s attempt to recreate mankind by supplanting the family. As Russia begins to address the breakdown of the family, it is important for the
government to review successful models from the United States and England, while also using Russia’s troubled history with child welfare as a guide.
CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSION

Russia has struggled with child abandonment and neglect for centuries, but the situation worsened due to the Soviet family policies. For the past three hundred years, the government in Russia has attempted to address the child welfare crisis through legislation and financial incentives for families, often to no avail. Russia’s child welfare history demonstrates how ineffective the government has been at solving family problems; in fact, in many cases, the government has only exacerbated the situation.

While child abandonment existed during imperial Russia, the deleterious Soviet family policies transformed that existing problem into a rampant crisis. The Soviet Union’s other policies, including the systematic assault on religion and the devastation of the private sphere, also negatively affected the family. At the same time that Soviet families’ financial problems increased, churches and community service social programs disappeared, leaving many families with the difficult decision to abandon their children.

The child abandonment crisis in Russia today is a symptom of a much larger problem - namely, the demoralization of an entire population, which was caused by the Communist government’s policies. The Communist system that existed for more than seven decades emphasized that humanity was striving forward toward a better society; the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, however, demonstrated that all of the human sacrifice of the past generations had been a waste, not producing the anticipated Communist Utopia. The resulting spiritual crisis, which is evident in nearly every aspect

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of Russian culture today, is the most significant contributor to the child abandonment crisis.193

When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, the western reformers who assisted Russia in its transition to capitalism focused almost exclusively on economic issues. The totalitarian regime of the Soviet Union, however, had been more than a simple economic system. The regime attempted to tightly control every aspect of human life – from religion to personal relationships - and Russia’s rapid transition to capitalism ignored many of the social ills caused by Communism.

The child abandonment crisis and, more broadly, the weakening of the family unit in Russia are directly related to the Soviet Union’s policies. The harmful medical practice of encouraging families to forfeit their parental rights is still common today, particularly in rural regions. Similarly, another legacy of Soviet child welfare that continues in Russia is the bureaucratic state-run institutional system, which de-emphasizes the individual and focuses almost exclusively on the collective. The Soviet obsession with human perfectibility and educability is also a root cause of abandoning children with disabilities.

At the same time, there are also many subtle holdovers from the Soviet Union that indirectly contribute to child abandonment today. For example, the spiritual vacuum among the population has caused families to despair and give up their children. According to Women & Children First, a Moscow-based non-profit organization, a sense of hopelessness is the most common reason why mothers abandon their infants.194 This pervasive feeling of hopelessness in Russia has affected several areas of society,

193 Ibid.
194 Women and Children First staff, interview, 22-24 June 2008. See Appendix C.
including the mortality rate among young people, alcoholism, and criminal activity. Child abandonment is most appropriately viewed as another product of this devastating and widespread spiritual crisis.\textsuperscript{195}

The Soviet architects launched a systematic attack on civil society, particularly emphasizing the family and religion. Yet, when the Communist system was replaced with capitalism in the early 1990’s, there was no similar devotion to restoring these elements. The economists and other reformers in 1991 assumed – incorrectly – that the elimination of Communism would automatically usher in social reform and would eliminate the problems associated with the Communist system. There was an expectation that after replacing the oppressive economic system, the restoration of civil society would naturally follow. The result, however, was an abrupt transition to capitalism and a large vacuum in civil society.

Additionally, the Soviet attack on religion resulted in a significant loss of churches and faith-based groups. Even as churches in Russia begin to re-establish themselves, the seventy-year absence of faith-based and community-oriented services has had a profound impact on families. Without these vital private social networks and community assistance programs for teen mothers and young families, many Russians have nowhere else to turn but the state to take care of their children.

While the family in Russia has experienced numerous turbulent transitions over the 300 years since Peter the Great, the situation that arose during and after the Soviet Union is unique in history. The Soviet attack on the family was a systematic attempt to undermine it and to transform the relationship between the family and the state. The

\textsuperscript{195} For more information about Russia’s mortality rate, see David Satter, \textit{Darkness at Dawn: The Rise of the Russian Criminal State} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 248-256.
resulting abandonment crisis in Russia today is the tragic outcome of the Soviet Union’s idealistic and misguided notions about human nature and the family, firmly rooted in Enlightenment theory.

The breakdown of the modern Russian family can be traced back to the Soviet Union’s theoretical architects, Lenin and Trotsky. Trotsky, in particular, was convinced that destroying the conservative family unit was a necessary element in creating the ideal society. Trotsky was certain that a new state-centered approach to child welfare was the key to advancing the Communist movement. Children represented the future of the revolution, and Trotsky was, therefore, very concerned that they receive Communist education, apart from their families. His writings on the topic of family life were instrumental in developing the early Soviet family laws, especially those written in 1918 and 1919 about the collective upbringing of children in place of parenting.

The first decade of the Soviet Union witnessed a dramatic attack on the family and the intentional attempt to abolish it. Financial constraints ultimately made it impossible for the new Soviet regime to implement its ambitious plans to remove all children four years or older from their homes. However, the new liberal Soviet laws weakened the family for generations to come by legalizing frivolous divorces, encouraging children to be raised in state-run institutions, and outlawing adoption.

During Stalin’s rule between 1924 and 1953, the Soviet government sought to reverse many of the negative consequences of the Leninist policies. As a direct consequence of the early Soviet laws, birthrates had sharply declined. Stalin hoped to strengthen the family in order to increase the population and to replenish the labor force. While the specific legislative policies during the Stalinist era purported to bolster family
relationships, the reality is that this government-orchestrated manipulation of the family further weakened familial ties. Stalin’s family legislation and social policies reduced the role of motherhood to a mere form of service to the state. Furthermore, Stalin’s plan to increase the birthrate had the effect of cheapening the value of children’s worth by consistently teaching that children were important to the government, not because of any inherent value they possessed as human beings, but because they would be able to fight for the country in foreign wars and to carry on the socialist revolution.\textsuperscript{196}

The Soviet government intentionally manipulated the family unit over the course of its seventy-year existence; the family was frequently a vehicle to accomplish other Soviet policy objectives. Significantly, the Communist government in the Soviet Union was the first large-scale social experiment in history that set out to abolish the family. While the Communists were unable to eliminate the family, the new family policies and the intentional manipulations of the family unit weakened the relationships between parents and children.

The inconsistent Soviet family laws – first advocating the dissolution of the family, then later attempting to increase birth rates, and finally using the family as a propaganda tool to retrain parents – established that the family was subordinate to the Soviet state. Regardless of the specific political objective, the family was almost always a means to an end, rather than an end itself. The Communists viewed the family in the same way they viewed individuals – as malleable constructs that could be shaped and manipulated to achieve the abstract goal of Utopia.

Child welfare in Russia has been a serious issue for policymakers since the early 1700’s when Peter the Great ruled. Child abandonment, neglect, and cruelty have

\textsuperscript{196} Barry, Ginsburgs, and Maggs, \textit{Soviet Law after Stalin}, 120.
plagued Russia for the past three centuries. Even before Marxism’s attack on the family, the Enlightenment ideas of child-rearing had already begun to change family life in Russia. The Enlightenment-inspired ideas of molding children apart from their parents, which were prominent both during Catherine the Great’s rule and the Soviet era, have had a profound effect on the family, and resulted in the transference of child-rearing responsibilities from parents to the state.

While the family unit did not dissolve as the early Communists had hoped, their plans to weaken familial relationships were, unfortunately, successful. The child abandonment crisis in Russia today is a testament to the Communists’ successful assault on the family. In the same way that political and social scientists today view the decline in religious faith among Russians as the direct legacy of the Communists’ assault on religion, the current family crisis should be viewed as a direct product of the Soviet Union’s intentional destruction of the family unit.

The utilitarian view of human life that was so pronounced in the Soviet Union continues in Russia. Humans in the Soviet Union were not valued as such; they were valued only in so far as they could contribute to the collective objectives of the Soviet Union. The oscillating family policies that were written in the Soviet Union first focused on replacing the family and then later focused on increasing the population. Today this utilitarian view of family and children is still present in Russia. When the Russian government conducts information campaigns emphasizing that children should remain in families because the country needs higher census numbers, or because the country needs a bigger workforce, it is reminiscent of the Soviet Union’s request that

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citizens have more children to increase the labor force in the fight against capitalism. The message from the Russian government today is similar to the Soviet government’s message: the family is not respected as an end in and of itself, but merely as a tool for the government’s larger objectives.

While this paper has attempted to provide the historical context for the current child welfare crisis, the scope of this paper was confined to Russia, rather than the entire former Soviet Union. Future researchers wanting to expand on this topic could explore why Russia was affected more negatively by the Soviet laws than countries such as Ukraine or Estonia. It also would be interesting to examine how the religious communities in some of the other Soviet countries, notably in Ukraine and the Baltic countries, have been able to address child welfare apart from the government.

Furthermore, this paper, given its exclusive focus on child abandonment, was unable to consider some of the other social problems that lead to the high incidence of social orphanhood, particularly alcoholism and child abuse. A future study on this topic could examine the relationship between alcohol abuse and child abandonment, which would certainly be of interest to the Russian Federal Ministry of Health and other government agencies.

As the Russian government begins to explore minor policy changes to prevent child abandonment, it is important to remember that the present family crisis is the product of seventy years of the government subordinating the family to the Communist agenda. It is, therefore, unrealistic to expect this current child welfare crisis to be solved in the near future. However, in the interim, the government should take concrete steps to provide support for families with young children, medical care for children with
disabilities, and better care within the institutions for children who have already been removed from their families.

While the Russian government alone is ill-equipped to reverse the child abandonment crisis, there are many steps the government could take immediately to address this serious crisis and to improve conditions for children already in the orphanage system. This paper has argued that the problem of child abandonment is largely the product of Soviet and Russian policies; the policy recommendations provided in this thesis, therefore, emphasize discontinuing harmful practices and policies, rather than inserting the government even more in the family realm. In order to reform the overall child welfare system in Russia, the government should address each of the three phases in abandoned children’s lives – from abandonment to emancipation from the state system, and discontinue its harmful practices in each area.

In the abandonment phase, the government should devote new resources to work with at-risk families and provide social services to single mothers. Community organizations and universities also should be encouraged to play a more active role, transferring some of the responsibility of keeping families together from the government to the private sphere. By allowing the private sector to help curb child abandonment, more families would be reached. The government has proven unable to provide adequate services to at-risk families.

In the medical field, the government should take immediate steps to discourage doctors from promoting abandonment. Doctors in Russia frequently employ the Soviet tactic of advising parents to abandon their newborn babies at the hospital. Doctors have thus contributed to child abandonment by normalizing this phenomenon and encouraging
vulnerable families to give up their parental rights. Instead of recommending that parents abandon their children, doctors could instead play a constructive role in family preservation by providing recommendations for family psychologists and other early intervention services. Furthermore, maternal care should be expanded and improved, and medical services should be provided to reduce preventable birth defects.

The government, while seeking to reduce abandonment, must also make serious efforts to address the needs of the hundreds of thousands of children already in state-run institutions. In Soviet fashion, orphans today remain hidden from society. These children are given inadequate schooling and medical care and are deprived of basic human rights. The fact that the government continues to segregate children in orphanages from other children in society exacerbates their social problems and compounds the stigma and shame associated with orphanhood. An easy solution would be to integrate orphans into the public school system, allowing these children to receive a better education and to improve their social skills. For the orphans who have mental difficulties, the government should devote funding for psychiatric medical help. The Russian government should also encourage foster parenting. Allowing children to live in families, rather than detention centers or orphanages would drastically improve orphans’ lives, as other countries have learned.198

When orphans reach the age of seventeen, they are released from the state system and forced to begin life with minimal job and social skills. Orphan graduates are also forced to carry “orphan identifiers” in their passports and official documents, which notify potential employers that the young adult has received an inferior education. The

198 According to official estimates from the Ministry of Internal Affairs, 30% of abandoned children between 2004-2008 were placed with foster families in Russia.
government should immediately discontinue the harmful policy of requiring orphans to possess “orphan-identifying” documentation. This step would greatly assist in orphans’ integration in society as adults.

Nearly twenty years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russian government continues to exacerbate, rather than improve, the child welfare crisis in the country. From discouraging foreign adoptions to forcing orphanage graduates to carry stigmatizing identifiers in their official documents, the government continues to be part of the problem and to hamper progress in the area of children’s well-being.

Russia’s future is bleak without major social reforms. As David Satter has described in recent articles and his book Darkness at Dawn: The Rise of the Russian Criminal State, Russia’s social problems have the potential to overwhelm the government and to exacerbate the demographic crisis.199 The current child welfare situation is an especially troubling social crisis because it intersects with so many of Russia’s other problems – from alcoholism to the rise of the mafia, to the larger breakdown of civil society, and the inability of the new private sector to address private citizens’ needs. The challenge for the Russian government today is to reverse the negative effects of the Soviet family policies and to begin a new era in child welfare – one that values children and families.

199 Satter, Darkness at Dawn, 248-256.
## Appendix A: Soviet Family Laws

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Name of Soviet Family Code or Law</th>
<th>Details of the Law</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1918</td>
<td>Code on Marriage, the Family, and Guardianship</td>
<td>The 1918 Code on Marriage, the Family, and Guardianship aimed to eliminate Russia’s patriarchal system. The new code was based on the theory of individual rights and gender equality. It also nullified religious weddings and gave legal status only to civil marriage.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1919</td>
<td>Family Law Code</td>
<td>Outlawed adoption; provided a new, liberal divorce policy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1934-36</td>
<td>Family Law Code</td>
<td>Attempted to stabilize the family by outlawing easy divorce. It also required stricter alimony payments and established an extensive system of maternal care and child care for mothers in the workforce.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1944-45</td>
<td>Family Law Code</td>
<td>Provided a more traditional definition of family. Enabled women to leave the workforce and encouraged larger families.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1968</td>
<td>Legislation on Marriage and Family</td>
<td>Reduced the requirements for divorce; legalized all abortions.</td>
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## Appendix B: Objectives of Soviet Family Policies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>GOAL OF THE FAMILY POLICIES</strong></td>
<td>- To recreate humanity.</td>
<td>- To indoctrinate children to be pro-Soviet/pro-Stalin.</td>
<td>- To provide indoctrination to children and adults.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- To ensure that capitalist exploitation “wither away” (includes the state and the family).</td>
<td>- To increase birth rates.</td>
<td>- To enable women to work outside the home.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- To abolish religious ceremonies.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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## Appendix C: Surveys and Interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DATE</th>
<th>LOCATION</th>
<th>NAME</th>
<th>TOPIC OF INTERVIEW</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<td>August 18, 2000</td>
<td>Novosibirsk, Russia</td>
<td>Polina Petrovna</td>
<td>Salary for child welfare specialists; child abandonment in Siberia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 21-23, and June 26, 2008</td>
<td>Vladivostok, Russia</td>
<td>Valentina Balobanova</td>
<td>Child welfare in rural Russia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 22-24, 2008</td>
<td>Vladivostok, Russia</td>
<td>Women and Children First staff</td>
<td>Early intervention programs in Russia; child care in orphanages for disabled children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 23-26, 2008</td>
<td>Vladivostok, Russia</td>
<td>Svetlana Goncharenko, speech therapist at Polyclinic #12</td>
<td>Child abandonment in Russian Far East</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 30 and July 3, 2008</td>
<td>Moscow, Russia</td>
<td>Natalia Vladimirovna</td>
<td>Russia’s efforts to combine government resources with private sector resources in child welfare; adapting child welfare policies for Russia from Western Europe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 17, 2008</td>
<td>Moscow, Russia</td>
<td>Russian Federal Ministry of Youth and Social Policy</td>
<td>Early intervention methods to keep families together; the government’s interactions with the private sector, including universities;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 9, 2008</td>
<td>Moscow, Russia</td>
<td>Katya Nonieva, child psychologist</td>
<td>Child welfare specialists in Moscow and rural Russia</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Appendix D: The Child’s Life in the Orphanage System

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Orphanage</th>
<th>Birth – 4 years old</th>
<th>5-17 years old (with disabilities)</th>
<th>5-17 years old (with no disabilities)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dom Rebyonok (Baby Home)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Internat (Orphanage for Disabled Children)</td>
<td>Dyetskii Dom (Children’s home)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Minimal education provided for disabled children. All schooling for these children is conducted at the orphanage.</td>
<td>Children are usually allowed to attend “normal” schools in the community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of Schooling</td>
<td>None</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managed by</td>
<td>Ministry of Health</td>
<td>Ministry of Labor and Social Development</td>
<td>Ministry of Education</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Appendix E: SUMMARY OF POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Phase I: Abandonment

- Begin to expand the foster care system in Russia.
- Improve pre-natal and maternal care for women in Russia.
- Adapt a multi-disciplinary approach to working with families at risk of abandoning their children.
- Create incentives for larger families and make it easier for single-income families to survive.

Phase II: Life in the Orphanage

- Improve the physical infrastructure of orphanages, including the water, heating, and building structures.
- Provide life skills training for orphans, including personal safety and hygiene.
- Improve training for orphanage employees.
- Integrate orphans into the public school system.
- Encourage adoptions (both foreign and domestic) by reducing the bureaucracy involved in the adoption process.

Phase III: Emancipation from the Orphanage

- Eliminate the requirement that orphans carry “orphan identifiers” and other stigmatizing documentation in their passports.
- Assist orphan graduates in finding jobs and apartments.
- Offer tax incentives for Russian businesses to hire orphan graduates.
Bibliography


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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Shonda Werry is a consultant for Russian non-profit organizations. She divides her time between Moscow, Russia and Washington, D.C., where she lobbies both the U.S. and Russian governments on issues related to child welfare and women’s health.

Werry has published articles for international publications on the topics of HIV in Russia and human trafficking in the former Soviet Union. Recent interviews with her have appeared in The New York Times, The Times (London), and The Moscow Times on the topics of AIDS prevention and child exploitation.

A Detroit native, Werry holds a B.A. from the University of Chicago, where she studied international studies and Russian. She also holds two degree certificates from Moscow State University in Soviet history and Russian philology. This work marks the completion of a Master of Arts in Government from Johns Hopkins University.

She currently serves as an advisor to Assistance for the Children of Russia, a non-profit organization based in Irkutsk, Russia, that provides humanitarian aid to Siberian orphans.