

**“A WOMAN SHOULD BE GIVEN THE RIGHT TO DECIDE
HERSELF”:**

The Role of the Soviet Women’s Committee (1945-1992)

in Gender Policymaking in the Soviet Union

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Abstract

This dissertation explores the history and impact of the Soviet Women's Committee (SWC) from its origins in the Second World War through its dissolution in 1992, with a focus on its role within the Soviet state. The study challenges dominant historiographical narratives that dismiss the organization as a mere “puppet” of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

The research was guided by five questions. First, what was the SWC and who were its members? Second, how did the SWC as an organization shape its members' perception of their role in the Soviet state? Third, how did SWC members participate in Soviet policymaking regarding women's rights? Fourth, to what extent did SWC members continue what has been called “Bolshevik feminism” and to what extent, and when, did they divert from it, or adapt it? Finally, what do my findings add to the existing scholarship regarding the SWC, the history of Soviet gender policies, and broader, of state feminism under state socialism?

Based on archival research in the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF), the Russian State Archive of Contemporary History (RGANI), and the Central State Archive of Moscow (TsGA), and drawing on the state feminist framework, this dissertation focuses on three policy areas that influenced women's status in the Soviet Union: the decriminalization of abortion in 1955, the labor legislation of the 1970s—1980s, and International Women's Year (1975). To examine the SWC's role in policymaking in the Soviet Union also required research on other state institutions in which SWC members were involved: the Central Committee of the Communist Party, the All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions and the Soviet Supreme Soviet.

My dissertation demonstrates that the SWC served as a platform for forming Soviet women as an interest group within the Soviet political system and that SWC members to a certain extent managed to shape the policy debates and outcomes in the analyzed cases. It also shows that SWC members, while adhering to the conventions of official Soviet discourse,

nonetheless sometimes reshaped it through their participation in policymaking. SWC members actively relied on the many thousands of letters they received from Soviet women, letters from which they derived legitimacy and, often, agenda points for their work. However, “ordinary” Soviet women themselves did not get direct access to the policymaking process via the SWC. Thus, the dissertation concludes that the Soviet Union’s case fits the concept of “partial state feminism” (one of five forms on a scale or spectrum of state feminisms) and had serious limitations.

A brief comparison of the SWC with its successor, the Union of Women of Russia, also highlights what socialism has achieved for women. Promises of Bolshevik feminism kept their traction for most of the duration of the Soviet Union, giving SWC members legitimacy to advocate for women’s rights, even in the authoritarian and heavily militarized state that was the USSR.

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List of Abbreviations

AUCCTU—All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions

CEDAW—Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women

CPSU—Communist Party of the Soviet Union

CC CPSU—Central Committee of the Communist Party of Soviet Union

IWY—International Women's Year

RNGS—Research Network on Gender and Politics and the State

RSFSR—Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic

Sovinformburo—Soviet Information Bureau

SWAFC—Soviet Women's Anti-fascist Committee

SWC—Soviet Women's Committee

UN—United Nations

UN CSW—United Nations Commission on the Status of Women

USSR—Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

UWR— Union of Women of Russia

WIDF—Women's International Democratic Federation

WPA— women's political agency

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Introduction

“A woman should be given the right to decide herself” was the striking quote from a 1955 meeting of Soviet medical professionals on the issue of abortion that historian Mie Nakachi used as an epigraph to her 2021 book *Replacing the Dead: The Politics of Reproduction in the Postwar Soviet Union*. The quoted speaker was Maria Kovrigina, Soviet Minister of Health (1954-1959), who, notably, underlined the quote in her copy of the meeting stenogram.¹ In a transformed way, this phrase made it into the 1955 legislation that decriminalized abortion in the USSR. Nakachi used it as the point of departure for her research on the Soviet politics around reproduction after the Second World War and asked the following question: “In the absence of a feminist movement, how did the idea of a woman’s right to abortion emerge in the Soviet Union?”² Nakachi did not clarify how she understood the term “feminist.” Given that Maria Kovrigina was a member of the Soviet Women’s Committee and took part in the founding congress of the Women’s International Democratic Federation, I pose another question in response: Was there really no women’s movement or organization in the Soviet Union that promoted policies that could be identified as “feminist”? I discuss how I will use this term in the section on “state feminism” below.

This dissertation explores the history of the Antifashistskii komitet sovetskikh zhenshchin (Soviet Women’s Anti-Fascist Committee, SWAFC hereafter), which was the official women’s organization of the Soviet Union. It was launched with the Women’s Anti-Fascist Meeting in 1941 and existed until 1992 (from 1956 as Komitet sovetskikh zhenshchin, the Soviet Women’s Committee, or SWC hereafter).³

¹ Mie Nakachi, *Replacing the Dead: The Politics of Reproduction in the Postwar Soviet Union* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 177, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190635138.001.0001>.

² Nakachi, 5.

³ Recent English-language scholarship refers to them as the “Committee of Soviet Women,” which is a literal translation from their name in Russian, and hence uses a different abbreviation — CSW (see, for example: Yulia Gradskaia, “From Defending Women’s Rights in the ‘Whole World’ to Silence About Russia’s Predatory War? The (Geo)Politics of the Eurasian Women’s Forums in the Context of ‘Traditional Values,’” in *Post-Soviet Women: New Challenges and Ways to Empowerment*, ed. Ann-Mari Sätre, Yulia Gradskaia, and Vladislava

The SWC was founded during the Second World War as a part of the new Soviet propaganda apparatus known as Sovinformburo (Soviet Information Bureau). The latter was a new Soviet information agency that was established on June 24, 1941, two days after the German invasion of the Soviet Union, to reach out to Western media and to fight the widespread negative image of the USSR. As historian Nina Petrova wrote, Sovinformburo's resources and personnel show that "this direction of ideological work was of great importance."⁴ Immediately after its foundation, Sovinformburo began preparing meetings of different groups: Slavs, Jews, scientists, women, and youth. These five meetings became the founding events for five committees: the Pan Slavic Committee, the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, the Soviet Scientists' Anti-Fascist Committee, the Soviet Women's Anti-Fascist Committee, and the Soviet Youth's Anti-Fascist Committee.⁵ The Pan Slavic Committee and the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee were the most successful in immediately establishing contacts with corresponding groups in Western countries. The meeting of Soviet Youth caused a huge wave of reaction in the West. By contrast, as Petrova noted, the Sovinformburo management evaluated the impact of the First Women's Anti-Fascist meeting, which took place in Moscow on September 7, 1941, as rather insignificant.⁶ From this first meeting until the official establishment of the SWC in May 1942 (the exact date is unknown), Sovinformburo led SWAFC's work.⁷

Of those five committees, only the Soviet Women's Anti-Fascist Committee and the Soviet Youth's Anti-Fascist Committee (reorganized into the Committee of Soviet Youth

Vladimirova (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2023), 29–49, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-38066-2_2; Christine Varga-Harris, "Soviet Women and Internationalism in Socialist Travel Itineraries in the 1950s and 1960s," *Diplomatic History* 46, no. 3 (2022): 486–504, <https://doi.org/10.1093/dh/dhac016>.) I speak of the Soviet Women's Committee, the English name they used themselves, and therefore I abbreviate their name to SWC (see, e.g., N. Fedyushova, *Soviet Women's Committee*, Agentstvo Novosti (Moskva, 1987).).

⁴ Nina Petrova, *Antifashistskie Komitety v SSSR: 1941-1945 Gg* [Anti-Fascist Committees in the USSR: 1941-1945] (In-t rossiiskoi istorii RAN, 1999), 20.

⁵ Petrova, 21–22.

⁶ Petrova, 68.

⁷ Petrova, 80–81.

Organizations in 1956) continued their work up until the dissolution of the USSR or after. The Pan-Slavic Committee was reformed in 1947 and existed until 1962. The Soviet Scientists' Anti-Fascist Committee was closed in 1948.⁸ The Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee's key figures were persecuted and the committee was shut down in 1948.⁹ The SWC grew considerably during the Soviet period and, notably, survived for a substantially longer time than its predecessor, the Zhenotdel (Women's Bureau, the women's department (*zhenskii otdel*) of the Secretariat of the Central Committee of the All-Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks)), about which I will write in detail later in the Introduction.

After the war, the SWC gained the status of *obshchestvennaia organizatsiia*, i.e., that of a public organization.¹⁰ Despite such seeming autonomy, it was funded by the Soviet Ministry of Finance¹¹ and during the half century of its existence meticulously reported on its activities to the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. The SWC members were appointed by local party committees.¹² The SWC annual plans and reports demonstrate that the SWC's main task was international propaganda of the Soviet Union in the field of women's rights, that is, to represent the country that considered itself the forerunner in this field, a view that was widely shared in the international community until the 1980s.¹³ Over the years, the SWC established relationships with 300 women's organizations in 137 countries.¹⁴ The SWC published the magazine *Sovetskaja zhenshhina* (Soviet Woman), which in 1987 had

⁸ Petrova, 266.

⁹ Petrova, 288.

¹⁰ According to the official Soviet definition, it was a free union of citizens, based on principles of self-governance and democratic centralism. In reality, however, it was neither free and democratic, nor self-governed, as I show in Chapter One. For the official definition, see C. Yampolskaya, "Obshchestvennye Organizatsii [Public Organizations]," in *Bolshaya Sovetskaya Encyclopedia [Big Soviet Encyclopedia]* (Moskva: Sovetskaya Encyclopedia, 1965), <https://www.booksite.ru/fulltext/1/001/008/083/368.htm>.

¹¹ GARF, F.7928, Op. D. 86; Op.4, DD. 9, 69, 81, 91, 100, 108, 117, 126, 136, 144, 151, 160.

¹² Для обеспечения наиболее представительного состава Комитета просим дать указание Центральным Комитетам партий союзных республик, крайкомам и обкомам КПСС рекомендовать в состав Комитета советских женщин представителей республик, краев и областей. Список областей и городов, из которых желательно меть представителей в составе Комитета, прилагается.

¹³ Donna Harsch, "Communism and Women," in *The Oxford Handbook of The History of Communism* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2014), 488.

¹⁴ Linda Racioppi and Katherine O'Sullivan See, *Women's Activism in Contemporary Russia* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997), 74.

a print run of 2.5 million copies in 14 languages.¹⁵ The SWC represented the Soviet Union in the international arena, such as in the United Nations, and it organized dozens of international women's events and received hundreds of women's delegations in the USSR. This was all part of its official task of international propaganda. However, and importantly, the SWC was also active in the domestic Soviet policymaking process, as the SWC itself wrote in its official publications, for example, in an official 1987 SWC brochure and in an official account of its history in the book, *Komitet sovetskikh zhenshchin: stranitsy istorii* (1941-1992) (The Soviet Women's Committee: Pages of History (1941-1992)), which was published in 2013 by its co-chair Galina Galkina (1990–1992).

Because of the domestic aspect of the SWC's work, I posit that the Committee resembled what the literature calls a "women's policy agency" (WPA), an institution established in many countries during the UN Decade for Women (1976–1985). According to scholars Gary Goertz and Amy Mazur, a women's policy agency was a "state-based agency, at all levels of government – (national, subnational or local) or in any type of organ (elected, appointed, administrative, or judicial) that has been *officially assigned* [emphasis added] the responsibility of promoting the advancement of women and gender equality."¹⁶ There is no evidence that the SWC had been "officially assigned" such a task, but that did not prevent some of its members actively promoting the advancement of women and gender equality nor achieving significant results. One reason they managed to do so, as this dissertation intends to demonstrate, is that they made effective use of the Soviet Union's self- and international image of being a champion of women's rights.

There is a lack of a proper historiography of the SWC, in particular, its involvement in the Soviet policymaking process is almost completely unknown, as I will discuss below in the

¹⁵ N Fed'yushova, ed., *Komitet Sovetskikh Zhenshchin* [Soviet Women's Committee] (Moskva: Agentstvo Novosti, 1987), 17.

¹⁶ Gary Goertz and Amy Mazur, *Politics, Gender, and Concepts: Theory and Methodology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 257.

section on historiography. Therefore, this dissertation seeks to explore the role of the SWC in Soviet policymaking and, in doing so, contribute to (1) the historiography on Soviet gender policies, and (2) the ongoing academic debate on state feminism under state socialism.

My research was guided by five questions. First, what was the SWC and who were its members? This encompasses how the SWC was structured and how it functioned and developed over time. Second, how did the SWC as an organization shape its members' perception of their role in the Soviet state? In particular, what role did the Plena play for the SWC members? Third, how did SWC members participate in Soviet policymaking in relation to women's rights? The pertinent sub-questions here are: What were the governmental and party structures through which they managed to influence the policymaking process in the USSR and to what degree were they able to frame political discussions and outcomes in the fields relevant to women's rights and status in the Soviet Union? Fourth, what might be the reasons for considering the SWC the successor of the Zhenotdel, as I indicated above, and more broadly, to what extent did the SWC members continue with what has been called "Bolshevik feminism" and to what extent and when did it divert from it, or adapt it? Finally, what do my findings add to the existing scholarship regarding the SWC, the history of Soviet gender policies, and more broadly, of state feminism under state socialism?

To answer these questions, I first explore the SWC's structure and way of working via the resource mobilization theoretical framework. This is followed by a close reading of the SWC's Plena transcripts and the biographies of some of its members in an effort (1) to establish whether their political activities were influenced by their belonging to the SWC; and (2) whether, based on that, we can conclude that the SWC created an opportunity for Soviet women to participate in policymaking as an interest group, that is, whether it functioned as a space where they were able to bond and form such a group. After that, following the state feminism framework, I examine three fields of policy making that SWC members were actively involved

in, namely, the decriminalization of abortion, reproductive and productive labor, and International Women's Year (IWY). I analyze whether or to what extent SWC members managed to influence the framing and outcomes of the relevant debates, and to what degree they included in their work the voices of "ordinary Soviet women", or of the short-lived underground feminist movement (1979-1982).

Regarding the analytical concepts, in addition to "state feminism", which I discuss in detail below, I will also employ the concepts of "speaking Bolshevik" and, consequently, of Soviet subjectivity. The relationship between what people said publicly and what they actually thought was for a long time one of the key problems in interpreting Soviet sources.¹⁷ Because of the severe censorship by the authoritarian state, historians generally believed that Soviet citizens had to behave in the public sphere in accordance with what was expected of them, while keeping their "true" thoughts private.

This dichotomy, however, has become challenged as more documents, including ego-documents, have become increasingly available. In 1997, historian Stephen Kotkin suggested a different approach by stating that "concentrating on the rule articulation process in the encounters of daily life involves shifting the focus from what the party and its programs *prevented* to what they *made possible*, intentionally and unintentionally."¹⁸ Kotkin put the ways of inhabiting the system and people's tactics of resistance¹⁹ at the center of his analysis. In particular, he paid attention to the ways in which people adapted to the state system, inhabiting the identities that were produced by the official discourse, thus surviving the practices of surveillance and control. Kotkin proposed the concept of "speaking Bolshevik" to describe the condition when "all of these ways of speaking about oneself came to be refracted through the

¹⁷ Igal Halfin and Jochen Hellbeck, "Rethinking the Stalinist Subject: Stephen Kotkin's 'Magnetic Mountain' and the State of Soviet Historical Studies," *Jahrbücher Für Geschichte Osteuropas*, no. 3 (1996): 456.

¹⁸ Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain. [Electronic Resource] : Stalinism as a Civilization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 23.

¹⁹ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

inescapable political lens of Bolshevism.”²⁰ This proficiency in using the official discourse allowed Soviet citizens to “play [...] the game according to the rules and yet constantly violating them.”²¹ In addition, Kotkin maintained that “[i]t was not necessary to believe. It was necessary, however, to participate as if one believed.”²²

This reservation about belief was questioned by research on Soviet diaries. Soviet historian Jochen Hellbeck suggested that through multiple “subjectivizing practices,” i.e., education, compulsory autobiography writing, introspection, and diary writing, etc., Soviet citizens were brought into being via their self-inscribing into the new system of power/meaning. In other words, Soviet subjectivity, as defined by Hellbeck, was a product of a citizen’s participation in the dominant discourse through the internalization and reiteration of its main tenets. According to Hellbeck, this process encompassed self-regulation and emancipation, as becoming a subject always compounds subjectivization and subjection. In his words: “by engaging in practices of self-transformation and self-perfection, and by thus appropriating the language and mechanisms underlying the workings of the Soviet order, individuals created for themselves the possibility to actively intervene in the Soviet project and also contest policies.”²³ The latter point sounds counter-intuitive regarding the widespread image of the Soviet Union under Stalinism. According to Hellbeck, the aim of the Soviet regime was to turn Soviet citizens into politically active and conscious builders of socialism. The dominant discourse provided the means for active engagement with the political process (but with severe restrictions—following only the particular direction of political participation defined by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union).

²⁰ Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain*. [Electronic Resource], 222.

²¹ Kotkin, 221.

²² Kotkin, 220.

²³ Jochen Hellbeck, “Self-Realization in the Stalinist System: Two Soviet Diaries of the 1930s,” in *Russian Modernity: Politics, Knowledge, Practices* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000, 2000), 237.

When examining the work and practices of the SWC, I will build upon this understanding of subjects under Soviet state socialism as simultaneously empowered to participate in, navigate, and contest politics, but at the same time having a very limited horizon of political possibilities, as they were being brought into being through their participation in official Soviet discursive practices. I also adopt historian Anna Krylova's argument that "as early as the mid-1930s, Soviet society, in the process of industrializing, began speaking more than one—still socialist—language of modernity right at the centre of its political and popular culture."²⁴ Drawing on media and popular culture analysis, Krylova detected the development of a new, individualizing discourse of Soviet modernity, which "posits the individual and the social as being *a priori* distinct dimensions in a person's life and offers a way to articulate a relationship (not a 'merger', to use the Bolshevik vocabulary) between the two."²⁵ According to Krylova, this relationship was quite often articulated through the ideas of "usefulness", "debt" and "responsibility."²⁶ Historian Anatoly Pinsky has similarly argued that already in the 1930s traces had emerged of what he calls "epistemological autonomy," i.e., a belief that one's personal experience, emotion, and reason could be a valid source of knowledge production and truth, competing with the one produced by the Party elite, even if one did not abandon the tenets of Marxism-Leninism.²⁷ Building upon this perspective, I will analyze the SWC members' grounds for their political demands and activities, tackling the question of to what degree their work was what the Party wanted or what they had developed as their own "truth", informed by their lived experience and refracted through the language of Marxism-Leninism. Thus, I will not interpret their use of official Soviet discourse as possible examples of what the historian

²⁴ Anna Krylova, "Imagining Socialism in the Soviet Century," *Social History* 42, no. 3 (July 3, 2017): 318, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03071022.2017.1327640>.

²⁵ Krylova, 318.

²⁶ Krylova, 337.

²⁷ Anatoly Pinsky, "The Origins of Post-Stalin Individuality: Aleksandr Tvardovskii and the Evolution of 1930s Soviet Romanticism," *The Russian Review* 76, no. 3 (2017): 458–59.

Wang Zheng has called the “politics of concealment,”²⁸ but explore whether the SWC members were able to change or reframe the official Soviet discourse in the sphere of women’s emancipation.

Based on extensive archival research, I will advance the following five arguments. The first and key argument of this dissertation is that the SWC, which has often been dismissed in scholarship as a mere propaganda tool of the Communist Party, played a more complex role in Soviet policymaking than is currently known or understood.

Second, it did so by serving as an important platform for forming Soviet women as an interest group within the Soviet political system, even if this was not part of the SWC’s official task of representing the USSR. I will show that the 1958 SWC Plenum, which followed Khrushchev’s secret speech in 1956, became a crucial space for the articulation of the demand to launch women-only groups on the local level across the USSR, groups that became known as “*zhensovety*,” or “women’s councils”, and about whose origins the scholarship is vague and equivocal. I will also analyze how SWC members’ experiences of international women’s congresses and trips as a part of Soviet delegations informed their actions in different sites of Soviet policymaking (the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, the All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions (AUCCTU), the International Women’s Year Commission of the Supreme Soviet). It remains important to emphasize that the SWC members spoke about themselves and the SWC’s mission as inseparably linked with the Soviet state, which they perceived as a fruit of their own effort.

Thirdly, I will argue that SWC members managed to influence a number of the policies that hugely impacted the lives of women in the USSR, such as the 1955 decriminalization of abortion, the development of state infrastructure for childcare, and labor legislation. I will show that SWC members often presented their goals as consonant with the Party line, yet, in content

²⁸ Wang Zheng, *Finding Women in the State: A Socialist Feminist Revolution in the People’s Republic of China, 1949-1964* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2017), 17.

departing from it and, importantly, often also slightly reframing the official Soviet discourse concerning women's emancipation in line with their own understanding. Thus, unlike what Wang Zheng has called the "politics of concealment,"²⁹ despite following the conventions of official Soviet discourse, to some extent SWC members re-shaped it through their participation in policymaking. The 1955 decree that decriminalized abortion, whose stated goal was "to give a woman the opportunity to decide the issue of motherhood herself,"³⁰ exemplified this reshaping, as I will show in Chapter Three. I also emphasize the limitations SWC members experienced, constantly confronted as they were with patriarchal attitudes and obstacles in the implementation of their proposals.

My fourth argument is based on the finding that SWC members in their policymaking actively relied on letters they received from Soviet women, letters from which they derived legitimacy and, often, agenda items for their work.³¹ Therefore, I maintain that they were able to incorporate Soviet women's concerns into policymaking. Nevertheless, I also accentuate the fact that the SWC was an elite organization whose members were appointed by local Party committees and that, despite receiving of hundreds of thousands of letters from "ordinary Soviet women," the SWC struggled to connect with them. Indeed, many Soviet women did not perceive the Committee as a place for their concerns and actions, which was discussed at the SWC Plena. In addition, the SWC was hostile to the short-lived dissident feminist movement, which emerged in Leningrad in 1979 and existed until 1982.

Finally, based on the analysis of the SWC members' activities, I argue that in the case of the 1955 decriminalization of abortion, AUCCTU policies and IWY we can speak about the presence of state feminism, as the SWC members were able to shape and influence the political

²⁹ Zheng, 17.

³⁰ Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, "On Repeal of the Prohibition of Abortions," November 23, 1955.

³¹ Alexis Peri, *Dear Unknown Friend* (Cambridge, Massachusetts & London, England: Harvard University Press, 2024), 202, <https://www.hup.harvard.edu/books/9780674987586>.

process and outcomes in consonance with their demands and with ordinary women's letters and concerns. The work of certain SWC members, namely, Maria Kovrigina and Nina Popova, continued and developed ideas of Bolshevik feminism, whereas others, such as Aleksandra Biryukova and Elvira Novikova, reconsidered the key tenets of Bolshevik feminism while carving out space for reproductive labor. However, the SWC did not provide direct access to policymaking to ordinary women, therefore, the state feminism was severely restricted and can be characterized as partial.

The remainder of this introduction is structured as follows: First, I will discuss the two main scholarly fields my dissertation will contribute to, namely, the historiography on Soviet gender politics and the scholarly debates about state feminism under state socialism. I will then describe my sources and methods and provide the outline of my dissertation.

Women-friendly policies without women: Historiography of Soviet gender politics

A rich body of scholarship on Soviet gender politics has been developed since the late 1980s, which I build upon and aim to contribute to. In brief, the dominant (not to say hegemonic) narrative in the scholarship on Soviet gender politics tells the following story: that of revolutionary changes for women after the October 1917 Revolution, of the beginning of more conservative politics in the late 1920s, and then Stalin's 1930 abolishment of the Zhenotdel and the declaration that the woman question had been resolved, followed by the 1936 criminalization of abortion; after 1936, it was supposed that neither emancipatory trends nor women's active involvement in defining gender policies existed in the USSR until the period of reforms in the late 1980s known as *perestroika*.³² Any type of women-friendly politics that occurred from the time early Bolshevism has been considered by historians as serving the

³² Anna Krylova, "Legacies of the Cold War and the Future of Gender in Feminist Histories of Socialism," in *The Routledge Handbook of Gender in Central-Eastern Europe and Eurasia* (London: Routledge, 2021), 43–44.

state's interests.³³ Anna Krylova characterized this type of narrative as moralizing Cold War plots, which:

continue to empower gender scholars to charge socialist modernities with familiar flaws: 'failed' or 'incomplete' gender revolutions; socialist states' inadequate or missing breakup with traditional gender norms; and communist feminists' and their organizations' failure to put women's interests ahead of state-, party-, class-identified agendas and, as a result, their ultimate reduction to being just an instrument in male-identified projects. As such, they offer a classic example of the moralizing 'storytelling,' now empowered by gender analysis, that prejudges socialism's emancipatory promise and prohibits the history of socialism from taking place outside its plot lines (White 1987, 2).³⁴

More concretely, the omnipresent narrative tells the story of the first years after the October Revolution of 1917 as a time of dramatic change in women's lives in the Soviet Union, during which women received political and economic rights equal to men, and everyday life was transformed with the new projects of communal life and the abolition of traditional marriage.³⁵ There are two contrasting approaches in the evaluation of these changes: either as a continuation of the pre-revolutionary Russian women's liberation traditions³⁶ or as a way for the state to manage the labor force and utilize the potential of women.³⁷

³³ Krylova, 45.

³⁴ Krylova, 42.

³⁵ Barbara Evans Clements, "The Utopianism of the Zhenotdel," *Slavic Review* 51, no. 3 (1992): 485–96, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2500056>.

³⁶ Richard Stites, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Russia: Feminism, Nihilism, and Bolshevism, 1860-1930* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1978); Irina Yukina, *Russkyi Feminizm Kak Vyzov Povsednevnosti [Russian Feminism as a Challenge of Modernity]* (St.Petersburg: Aleteya, 2007).

³⁷ Lapidus, *Women in Soviet Society*; Zdravomyslova and Temkina, "Gosudarstvennoe Konstruirovaniye Gendera v Sovetskom Obshchestve [State Construction of Gender in the Soviet Society]."

An undisputed milestone in Soviet gender history was the 1919 foundation of the Zhenotdel (Women's Bureau, the women's department (*zhenskii otдел*) of the Secretariat of the Central Committee of the All-Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks)) by Inessa Armand and Alexandra Kollontai, two prominent communists and revolutionaries. The Zhenotdel aimed to increase women's political engagement, reduce illiteracy, and deal with many other gendered issues (such as childcare and improving the social services for everyday life).³⁸ As historian Elizabeth Wood argued, initially created as a way to implement the Party's politics among women, the Zhenotdel "began to breathe a life of their own as more and more of their staff members began to make demands on women's behalf and to criticize the regime for its failings."³⁹ Historian Wendy Z. Goldman characterized the Zhenotdel's activities as a struggle over "working-class feminism."⁴⁰ As an organization generally praised by scholars, the Zhenotdel is an exception in the historiography of women's organizations in the Soviet Union.

In her 2017 chapter in *The Cambridge History of Communism* entitled "Bolshevik Feminism and Gender Agendas of Communism", Anna Krylova summarized the key ideas of the Bolshevik agenda of women's emancipation, referring to it as "Bolshevik feminism." Legal, political and economic equality constituted "the bare minimum" of its demands.⁴¹ The core of the agenda, according to Krylova, was much more radical and consisted of the withering away of the family and the transformation of parenthood based on a new gender contract and the "statization" (*ogosudarstvovanie*) of care, which also prepared the ground for a fundamental reconsideration of womanhood. Motherhood was conceptualized as a social responsibility

³⁸ Elizabeth A. Wood, *The Baba and the Comrade: Gender and Politics in Revolutionary Russia*, Indiana-Michigan Series in Russian and East European Studies (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.ebookbatch.ACLS_batch:MIU0100000000000005401133.

³⁹ Elizabeth A. Wood, *The Baba and the Comrade: Gender and Politics in Revolutionary Russia*, Indiana-Michigan Series in Russian and East European Studies (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 4–5.

⁴⁰ Wendy Z. Goldman, *Women at the Gates: Gender and Industry in Stalin's Russia* (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 33.

⁴¹ Anna Krylova, "Bolshevik Feminism and Gender Agendas of Communism," in *The Cambridge History of Communism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, c1996, 2017), 427, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316137024.020>.

shared between a woman and the state and not as an instinct, or a nature-given predisposition: “the maternal instinct was not a fixed variable but responsive to societal change. Over time, the instinct was expected to diminish as women and men would reconsider the temporal boundaries and meaning of parenthood.”⁴² However, most of the scholarship considered this radical agenda to have been buried with the advent of Stalinism. In Krylova’s apt summary:

The 1936 legislation [“On the Protection of Motherhood and Childhood”] occupies a special place. For decades it has served historians as the cardinal event – the final nail in the coffin of Bolshevik feminism – around which a story of the ‘complete reversal’ of the Bolshevik emancipatory agenda and the return of traditional gender values is built.⁴³

The scholarship generally presents post-1930 state institutions engaged in policies towards women in the Soviet Union within the frame of the *Party-tool narrative*,⁴⁴ i.e., women’s organizations are treated as mere instruments of Party politics without any agency or interest in improving women’s lives. The editors of the famous 1989 volume on gender politics under state socialism *Promissory Notes*, formulated this as follows: “Mass organizations which in the revolutionary period expressed group interests (youth, women, peasants, etc.) in the post-revolutionary state become simply (or complexly) organs through which the vanguard party mobilizes sections of the population to fulfill national goals set by the leadership.”⁴⁵

⁴² Krylova, 430–32.

⁴³ Krylova, 440.

⁴⁴Knopova, “The Soviet Union and the International Domain of Women’s Rights and Struggles.”

⁴⁵ Sonia Kruks, Rayna R. Reiter, and Marilyn Blatt Young, *Promissory Notes: Women in the Transition to Socialism*, New Feminist Library (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1989), 11.

After the Zhenotdel was abolished in 1930, the Vsesoiuznyi tsentral'nyi sovet professional'nykh soiuzov (the All Union Central Council of Trade Unions, AUCCTU hereafter) took on the role of addressing male prejudice against women in the workplace, albeit reluctantly, as Wendy Goldman described in her 2001 chapter on Soviet gender relations on the shopfloor in the 1930s.⁴⁶ According to Goldman, the growing need for women in the workforce pushed both the Party and the AUCCTU to examine local male attitudes and women's experiences, which led to the All-Union Meeting for Work among Women on February 1, 1931, where women working in industry voiced their grievances. Following the meeting, the AUCCTU adopted resolutions to counter the trade unions' apathy toward women, marking a rare moment during the first five-year plan (1928–1932) when Party initiatives, economic needs, and feminist activism aligned to create new opportunities for women. However, according to Goldman, this progress was short-lived, as the dissolution of the Zhenotdel was a signal to local organizations to halt women's initiatives, and by 1932 the Komissiya po uluchsheniyu truda i byta (KUTB, the Committee to Improve the Labor and Life of Women) had also been eliminated, leaving Soviet women without formal representation. After that, economic concerns took precedence, working-class women's voices were replaced by those of economists, and the promise of revolutionary emancipation through paid work and the socialization of reproduction was reshaped into a tool for labor control under the second five-year plan, reducing women's interests to the Party's broader goals of production and accumulation.⁴⁷ The AUCCTU's policies towards women from the 1930s onwards have remained largely unexplored in the scholarship, and my dissertation aims to partly fill that gap.

Scholars who researched groups of wife-activists (*zhena-obshchestvenitsa*), a widespread phenomenon in the 1930s in urban and rural areas, followed the same narrative.

⁴⁶ Wendy Z. Goldman, "Babas at the Bench: Gender Conflict in Soviet Industry in the 1930s," in *Women in the Stalin Era*, ed. Melanie Ilić (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 69–88.

⁴⁷ Goldman, *Women at the Gates*, 275–84.

They provided various interpretations of their activities, referring to them with terms such as “bourgeois philanthropy, a substitute for trade unions, social involvement, Soviet socialization and social mothering.”⁴⁸ Historian Mary Buckley added to these interpretations an emphasis on the encouragement these women received to get actively involved in societal matters from the fact of belonging to a group of wives. Ultimately, “the wife-activist was given an opportunity to participate in constructing the grand socialist project and thereby, in some respects, to transform herself as well as the local community.”⁴⁹ Yet, the scope for transformation was limited, Buckley wrote, because the initiatives of the wife-activists had to serve “the party and socialism.”⁵⁰

It is clear, therefore, that the dominant narrative about Soviet gender policies follows the trope of the “Great Retreat,” or the “Soviet Thermidor,” terms that indicate the divergence from the revolutionary Bolshevik agenda and the strengthening of a bureaucratic stratum, separated from the working class.⁵¹

However, Buckley also remarked that “women’s economic and political roles have been persistent themes in the history of the USSR, although they have been treated in different ways at different times.”⁵² Anna Krylova has pointed out that despite the prevalence of the narrative about the persistence of traditional gender identities, scholars have noted “‘alternative,’ ‘less traditional,’ ‘new,’ ‘empowering,’ or ‘emancipating’ changes in women’s and men’s lives under socialism.”⁵³ This vocabulary, she suggested, signaled the limitations of Western lenses of gender analysis as applied to the Soviet case. Krylova built her argument on a comparison of women’s gender roles as articulated in the 1936 decree “On the Protection of Motherhood

⁴⁸ Mary Buckley, “The Soviet ‘Wife-Activist’ down on the Farm,” *Social History* 26, no. 3 (2001): 286–87.

⁴⁹ Buckley, 298.

⁵⁰ Buckley, 282.

⁵¹ David L. Hoffman, *Stalinist Values : The Cultural Norms of Soviet Modernity, 1917-1941* (Ithaca : Cornell University Press, 2003), 2.

⁵² Mary Buckley, *Women and Ideology in the Soviet Union* (Ann Arbor : Iniversity of Michigan Press, 1989), 227.

⁵³ Krylova, “Legacies of the Cold War and the Future of Gender in Feminist Histories of Socialism,” 48.

and Childhood” and the gender roles constructed in the Stalinist compulsory school program; she concluded that there *was* continuity between “Bolshevik feminism” as it was developed within the Zhenotdel and the Soviet school system shaped in the 1930s. The latter, influenced by the work and writings of Bolshevik revolutionary Nadezhda Krupskaya, “became the largest state-sponsored project of the first half of the twentieth century built on the rejection of traditional gender roles.”⁵⁴

Historian Choi Chatterjee analyzed public representations of Soviet heroines during Stalinism and concluded that, depicted as independent, and economically and politically active, they served as an embodiment of Soviet modernity—a mark of tremendous societal transformation that had turned the Tsarist Russian *baba*, the uneducated village woman, who was perceived as backward, into an enlightened citizen. However, based on an analysis of Soviet media and literature of the Stalinist period, Chatterjee also concluded that “[women’s] power was based on the artificial support extended by the state, not grounded in any fundamental change in popular attitudes or gender relations. Also, since Soviet heroines rarely occupied positions of political power or strategic party posts, they could not form a serious pressure group for women’s rights within the system.”⁵⁵ Thus, despite outlining a new perspective on the gender regime of Stalinism, Chatterjee reproduced the narrative of the exclusion of female citizens from policymaking on their own behalf.

According to Mary Buckley, Party leader Nikita Khrushchev recognized that the problem of women’s reproductive labor remained unresolved in the USSR, that is, as an obstacle to women’s political participation.⁵⁶ During the Brezhnev years, these problems were framed as non-antagonistic contradictions, a term for problems that could be resolved without radical

⁵⁴ Nadezhda Krupskaya, who earlier was directly connected with the Zhenotdel, was the Soviet Union’s Deputy Minister of Education from 1929 until her death in 1939. Krylova, “Bolshevik Feminism and Gender Agendas of Communism,” 441.

⁵⁵ Choi Chatterjee, “Soviet Heroines and the Language of Modernity, 1930–39,” in *Women in the Stalin Era*, ed. Melanie Ilić, Studies in Russian and East European History and Society (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 63.

⁵⁶ Buckley, *Women and Ideology in the Soviet Union*, 146.

economic transformation.⁵⁷ To deal with them, in the late 1950s another structure for women's social engagement was established, *zhensovet* or women's councils, which, as I argue in Chapter Two, received an impulse from the 1958 SWC Plenum. The numerous activities of women's councils have also been caught in the narrative trap of the ghostly presence of women's agency in Soviet gender history; an agency that the scholarship simultaneously acknowledged and denied. For example, in her 1987 book, historian Genia Browning concluded that

the *zhensovet* do act on behalf of women workers. In some cases, this has brought *zhensovet* activists into conflict with management. To support women, they have had to oppose the practice of (male) managers and trade union officials. [...] *zhensovet* do have potential to act as a form of pressure group on behalf of women. [...] any *zhensovet* role as a pressure group is limited.⁵⁸

In her 2009 chapter, historian Melanie Ilić concluded that “women's councils were seemingly less interested in what Soviet women themselves wanted, but were motivated instead more by what the state perceived that women needed in order to participate more fully in the public life of the country.”⁵⁹ Nonetheless, Ilić also established that *zhensovet* made significant improvements to the lives of many women at the local level, such as exposing shortages of goods and services in residential areas and offering both material and emotional support to households and families facing challenges. Although partially acknowledged in the case of the

⁵⁷ Genia K. Browning, *Women and Politics in the USSR : Consciousness Raising and Soviet Women's Groups* (Sussex : Wheatsheaf Books ; New York : St. Martin's Press, 1987., 1987), 10; Buckley, *Women and Ideology in the Soviet Union*, 162.

⁵⁸ Browning, *Women and Politics in the USSR*, 114–16.

⁵⁹ Ilić, “What Did Women Want? Khrushchev and the Revival of the *Zhensovet*,” 117–18.

zhensovety, the role of women-only groups in shaping Soviet gender politics remains understudied.

According to Ilič, the main focus of scholars' interest was "not so much the narrative of Soviet achievements towards women's emancipation and sexual equality as the silences within this narrative."⁶⁰ Scholars tackled this silence with the aid of oral history and biographical research methods,⁶¹ thus exploring the ways women lived through the Soviet system. This body of research made more visible the Soviet repression and the flaws and contradictions in the policy implementation, all of which had drastic consequences for women's lives. These researchers explored the way Soviet people were adapting to, challenging, resisting, or changing the Soviet system in their everyday lives. In her introduction to the 2018 collection of research on gender politics in the Soviet Union, Ilič summarized it thus: "Soviet citizens were both the subjects and agents of change."⁶² As valuable and insightful as the great body of research on the everyday experience of the Soviet gender regime is, it obscures a meaningful part of that past—namely, women's participation in Soviet policymaking and, consequently, its gendered aspects.

A good illustration of that blind spot is the way Russian scholar and feminist Anastasia Posadskaya-Vanderbeck commented on an interview with Sofia Pavlova, who used to work in the International Division of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), the Soviet Women's Committee and the Soviet-French Friendship

⁶⁰ Melanie Ilič, *Women in the Stalin Era*, Studies in Russian and East European History and Society (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 5.

⁶¹ D Khubova, A Ivankiev, and T Sharova, "After Glasnost: Oral History in the Soviet Union," in *Memory and Totalitarianism, International Yearbook of Oral History and Life Stories*, ed. L Passerini and A Kovács, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 89–102; Barbara Alpern Engel, Anastasia Posadskaya-Vanderbeck, and Sona Stephan Hoisington, *A Revolution of Their Own: Voices of Women in Soviet History* (Boulder, Colo: Westview Press, 1998); Robin Humphrey, Robert Miller, and E. Zdravomyslova, *Biographical Research in Eastern Europe: Altered Lives and Broken Biographies*, 2003; Daniel Bertaux, Paul Thompson, and Anna Rotkirch, *On Living through Soviet Russia*, Routledge Studies in Memory and Narrative ; 13 (London ; New York: Routledge, 2004); Iuliia Gradskaia, *Soviet People with Female Bodies: Performing Beauty and Maternity in Soviet Russia in the Mid 1930-1960s*, Södertörn Studies in History ; 6 (Stockholm: Stockholm University : Almqvist & Wiksell International distributor, 2007).

⁶² Ilič, *The Palgrave Handbook of Women and Gender in Twentieth-Century Russia and the Soviet Union*, 5.

Society, in a 1998 oral history book. First, Posadskaya-Vanderbeck stated that she had had doubts about whether Pavlova's story should be published at all, on account of her successful career, but then decided that she "was an extraordinarily interesting person and that she had lived a truly unusual life."⁶³ However, Posadskaya-Vanderbeck and Pavlova had different views on what aspects of her life were interesting, according to Posadskaya-Vanderbeck's description of their dialogue before the interview:

'Are you really interested in these trivial details of my life—my childhood, my family, how I became involved in the revolutionary movement,' Pavlova asked sternly at the start of the interview, when Posadskaya raised the usual introductory questions. 'I could tell you about things that are much more interesting—about my thirty years of involvement in the Committee for Soviet Women and the Soviet-French Friendship Society, about my meetings with people like Maurice Thorez, Palmiro Togliatti, and Louis Aragon. They were my close friends!' [Thorez was a leader of the French Communist party and Togliatti of the Italian; Aragon was a well-known French Communist poet.] It was hard for Posadskaya to convince Sofia Pavlova that we were interested in other parts of her life, too, and that we very much wanted to understand how a working-class girl from Siberia finally ended up in the CPSU Central Committee's International Division, one of its most important sectors.⁶⁴

It is understandable then that the 1990s focus of the research was different and more consonant with the neo-liberal frame of the time, which was oriented towards success stories or resistance

⁶³ Engel, Posadskaya-Vanderbeck, and Hoisington, *A Revolution of Their Own*, 47.

⁶⁴ Engel, Posadskaya-Vanderbeck, and Hoisington, 48.

to the Soviet regime. Also, interviewing political elites can be a challenging task,⁶⁵ and distrust towards official Soviet biographical accounts is well-founded.⁶⁶ However, as a consequence, Sofia Pavlova's thirty years of involvement in the Soviet Women's Committee remained unexplored.

The rare examples of biographical perspectives on women's experiences in the highest echelons of Soviet power uncovered persisting gender inequality and neglect of women's participation, although legal equality was officially declared. An example is historian Zamira Abman's recent interview with Nizoramo Zaripova, a member of the SWC Presidium and a member of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of Tajikistan (1966-1989). In her interview, Zaripova recalled her male colleagues' hostile attitudes to the *zhensovet*, calling them an atavism,⁶⁷ and the additional difficulties she faced as an educated indigenous woman in a high administrative position:

Once my husband's colleague noticed his nicely ironed shirt. My husband immediately and proudly announced, 'Nizoramo irons my shirts every morning.' Our daughters usually did it. But he would tell everyone that I am an excellent cook, that I fix his clothes and take good care of his children. He had to make sure that everyone knows that I am a good wife.⁶⁸

This recollection shows that patriarchal gender relations were simultaneously contested and reinstated, but in a consciously performative way. Examples of this struggle for the definition of womanhood were also evident in my sources. Soviet women in high administrative

⁶⁵ Terry L. Birdwhistell, "The Elite Speak: Political Oral History at the University of Kentucky Library," 1983, https://uknowledge.uky.edu/libraries_facpub/13.

⁶⁶ Bertaux, Thompson, and Rotkirch, *On Living through Soviet Russia*, 10; Melanie Ilić and Dalia Leinarte, eds., *The Soviet Past in the Post-Socialist Present. [Electronic Resource] : Methodology and Ethics in Russian, Baltic and Central European Oral History and Memory Studies* (New York, NY : Routledge, 2016., 2016), 12.

⁶⁷ Zamira Abman, *Coerced Liberation: Muslim Women in Soviet Tajikistan* (University of Toronto Press, 2024), 118, <https://doi.org/10.3138/9781487555252>.

⁶⁸ Abman, 103.

positions often reflected on their femininity. Some developed a particular pride in their femininity, which would be unconventional according to traditional or Western standards, while others consciously worked on the femininity they projected to mitigate the “threat” of dismantling the gender power hierarchy, as I will discuss in Chapter Four. Importantly, the tactics they selected were conditioned by their generation. Their bodies and their approach to their femininity demonstrated the changes in the Soviet gender regime in the same way that the policies they promoted did.

My dissertation contributes to the empirical history of Soviet women’s groups and their political engagement after the Second World War. By adopting a biographical perspective and analyzing the gendered dynamics of debates in Soviet governmental and party bodies, my research will add new dimensions to the existing knowledge on the Soviet gender regime.

State feminism under state socialism

The second body of scholarship this dissertation builds on and aims to contribute to relates to state feminism under state socialism. State feminism as a theoretical framework gained prominence in the 1990s due to the Research Network on Gender and Politics and the State (RNGS hereafter), which was established in 1995.⁶⁹ Political scientist Helga Hernes coined the term in 1987, defining it as “a variety of public policies and organizational measures, designed partly to solve general social and economic problems, partly to respond to women’s demands.”⁷⁰ RNGS proposed state feminism as a comparative framework, detailing it as “the actions by women’s policy agencies to include women’s movement demands and actors into the state to produce feminist outcomes in either policy processes or societal impact or both.”⁷¹

⁶⁹ Goertz and Mazur, *Politics, Gender, and Concepts*, 250.

⁷⁰ Helga Maria Hernes, *Welfare State and Woman Power: Essays in State Feminism*, Scandinavian Library (Oslo : Oxford ; New York: Norwegian University Press ; Distributed by Oxford University Press, 1987), 15.

⁷¹ Goertz and Mazur, *Politics, Gender, and Concepts*, 255.

Despite the widely acknowledged commitment of the socialist states to women's emancipation and the existence of women's organizations and governmental bodies (women's political agencies or WPAs) that focused on women's status, it took decades for the concept of state feminism to enter the field of research on state socialism. According to the authors of the state feminism framework, the political scientists Amy G. Mazur and Dorothy E. McBride, "for women in these [post-socialist] countries, associating 'feminism' with the 'state' is not a desirable outcome. Women's movement actors in the post-communist context are suspicious of the state and its women's policy agencies as potential partners in pursuing a feminist agenda."⁷² For decades this suspicion also overshadowed the work of the SWC, as I will discuss in Chapter One.

Regarding the institutionalization of feminism in state agencies in socialist China, Wang Zheng has shown that scholars mainly used the term "state feminism" to describe the "paradoxical image of a state patriarch championing women's liberation, although with vacillation and inconsistency."⁷³ Thus, paradoxically, when dealing with socialist countries, scholarship on state feminism generally erased women from the history of policy-making, interpreting women-friendly politics as top-down directives from male elites.

This perspective still shapes the research on the Soviet Union. For example, in her 2024 book Zamira Abman wrote: "Like the state feminism campaigns launched in Turkey, Tunisia, Iran, Afghanistan, and Morocco, the campaign in Tajikistan took place without much bottom-up support for change."⁷⁴ Moreover, in her interpretation, these policies led to divisions between Sovietized urban educated Tajik women and ordinary Indigenous women instead of their emancipation: "Urban educated Muslim women professionals in Tajikistan [...] failed to promote social change for their gender. Rather than being a vanguard for

⁷² Goertz and Mazur, 267.

⁷³ Wang Zheng, "'State Feminism'? Gender and Socialist State Formation in Maoist China," *Feminist Studies* 31, no. 3 (Fall 2005): 519.

⁷⁴ Abman, *Coerced Liberation*, 9.

further women's rights, Muslim women professionals who benefitted from the Soviet reforms because of their educational and social transformation became a new and separate category of the population."⁷⁵ This quote clearly shows the connotation the term state feminism had for many scholars from the region, i.e., an emancipation imposed by the state, ("Coerced Liberation" as Abman calls it), which ultimately led to the overburdening of women. Russian sociologists Elena Zdravomyslova and Anna Temkina similarly characterized the Soviet gender regime as etocratic, or state-centered.⁷⁶

Research on socialist women's organizations has begun to challenge this perspective. Wang Zheng's pioneering research on the All-China Women's Federation paved the way for numerous studies on official women's organizations under state socialism within the state feminism framework.⁷⁷ She convincingly demonstrated that the Federation promoted a vision of gender equality in Maoist China, which was based on "an earlier feminist discourse [of the May Fourth movement in China] combined with Engels's theory of women's liberation."⁷⁸ She showed "the agency of Communist women doing women-work."⁷⁹ However, to be able to promote a feminist subversive agenda in an authoritarian state, the female politicians involved, whom Wang Zheng calls "socialist state feminists," had to conceal their actual goals and camouflage them with "the non-gender-specific language of the official mainstream, or related them to non-gender-specific Party programs."⁸⁰ Thus, they had to stage a gendered performance of modesty and subordination to achieve their goals, which shielded them from male resentment or obstruction but reinforced the myth of a unified patriarchal party-state and left their struggles and contributions mainly invisible to the public.⁸¹

⁷⁵ Abman, 14.

⁷⁶ Zdravomyslova and Temkina, "Gosudarstvennoe Konstruirovaniie Gendera v Sovetskom Obshchestve [State Construction of Gender in the Soviet Society]."

⁷⁷ Zheng, "'State Feminism?'; Wang Zheng, "Creating a Socialist Feminist Cultural Front: 'Women of China' (1949–1966)," *The China Quarterly*, no. 204 (2010): 827–49; Zheng, *Finding Women in the State*.

⁷⁸ Zheng, "'State Feminism?'," 519.

⁷⁹ Zheng, 540.

⁸⁰ Zheng, *Finding Women in the State*, 246.

⁸¹ Zheng, 18.

The same issue of *Feminist Studies* that published Wang Zheng's pioneering article also included a contribution by historian Basia Nowak on the League of Women in Poland during the Stalinist period. Nowak did not actively engage with the concept of "state feminism" but concluded that Polish women "sought to create a space for all women by encouraging them to enter the political and economic spheres as active citizens. [...] Women emerge as important actors in the socialist project."⁸² In a 2007 text, historian Natalia Novikova expressed her skepticism towards the terms "communist feminism" and "state feminism,"⁸³ but concluded that "national histories vividly show that women saw different, sometimes conflicting ways to gain their autonomy,"⁸⁴ and that scholars should be aware of their own ideological bias when defining politics of the past as feminist or not. Novikova's article was part of a discussion forum in the first issue of the magazine *Aspasia* on the question of the compatibility of feminism and communism.

The forum's starting point for the discussion was an article by Mihaela Miroiu, a prominent Romanian philosopher. She argued that "communist feminism" was a contradiction in terms, ultimately stating that socialist states had "a state patriarchy, not state feminism."⁸⁵ She built her argument on two premises. The first was that communists had historically dismissed the women's movement as bourgeois and, once in power, abolished autonomous women's organizations—women's autonomy was never a goal per se. The second premise was that gender policies under state socialism in Eastern Europe were state-directed, serving Party interests rather than women's needs or aspirations. In response, historian Krassimira Daskalova emphasized "the critic of feminist 'insiders' who contest the opinion that Nordic democracies

⁸² Basia A. Nowak, "Constant Conversations: Agitators in the League of Women in Poland during the Stalinist Period," *Feminist Studies* 31, no. 3 (2005): 510, <https://doi.org/10.2307/20459043>.

⁸³ Natalia Novikova, "Communism as a Vision and Practice," *Aspasia* 1, (March 1, 2007): 203, <https://doi.org/10.3167/asp.2007.010111>.

⁸⁴ Novikova, 205.

⁸⁵ Mihaela Miroiu, "Communism Was a State Patriarchy, Not State Feminism," *Aspasia* 1, (March 1, 2007): 197–201, <https://doi.org/10.3167/asp.2007.010110>.

‘embody a state form that makes it possible to transform them into women-friendly societies.’”⁸⁶ In this way she underlined the ideological aberrations of historians’ perspectives depending on the region and state structures they were looking at. Sociologist Elena Gapova continued with this line of argument in stressing that the emphasis on autonomy in the definition of feminism should also not be taken for granted but be contextualized and critically reassessed, in particular, with consideration to its connection with capitalism and the market economy.⁸⁷

Subsequently, in a 2010 article, historian Francisca de Haan challenged the prevailing assumptions about the “self-proclaimed political neutrality” of Western women’s organizations and the belief that communist women’s organizations did not contribute to women’s rights.⁸⁸ She invoked Ellen DuBois’s definition of left feminism as “a perspective which fuses a recognition of the systematic oppression of women with an appreciation of other structures of power underlying ... society (what we now most often call ‘the intersections of race, class, and gender’).”⁸⁹ Following this definition, de Haan proposed exploring which terms women in the international left women’s organization, the Women’s International Democratic Federation, used to describe their work and ideas and whether they corresponded with such a definition of feminism.

De Haan’s proposal resonated among scholars of socialist/communist women organizations globally⁹⁰ and fueled research on official women’s organizations under state

⁸⁶ Krassimira Daskalova, “How Should We Name the ‘Women-Friendly’ Actions of State Socialism?,” *Aspasia* 1, (March 1, 2007): 217, <https://doi.org/10.3167/asp.2007.010113>.

⁸⁷ Elena Gapova, “On the Political Significance of the Sexual Division of Labour,” *Aspasia* 1 (March 1, 2007): 231–35, <https://doi.org/10.3167/asp.2007.010115>.

⁸⁸ De Haan, “Continuing Cold War Paradigms in Western Historiography of Transnational Women’s Organisations.”

⁸⁹ Ellen C. DuBois, Eleanor Flexner and the History of American Feminism, *Gender & History*, 3(1), 1991, p.84 in de Haan, 557.

⁹⁰ See, for example, A. Prasad, “Proletarian Internationalism in the Contemporary Women’s Movement: A Perspective from India,” *Agrarian South* 13, no. 2 (2024): 163–86, <https://doi.org/10.1177/22779760241247620>; V. Hearman, “From Travel to Imprisonment: Remembering Cold War Trade Unionism and the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU) in Adam Soepardjan’s Prison Notebooks*,” *International Review of Social History*, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859024000580>; M.M. Seco, “Gender, Communism and Transnational Relations between the Sixties and the Eighties,” *Hispania Nova*, 2024, 7–13,

socialism in Eastern Europe.⁹¹ Despite its obvious productivity for such research, this approach is also constantly contested on the grounds that many women from the official women's organizations were complicit in the reproduction of the authoritarian system or in the regime's crimes (I will elaborate on this further in the Introduction). In addition, conflicting perspectives on how women's emancipation could be achieved contributed to the ongoing contestation of whether it was possible to label official socialist women's organizations "left feminist". Such criticism, as anthropologist Kristen Ghodsee and literary scientist Agnieszka Mrozik have argued, is rooted in epistemic injustice, conditioned by political and economic legacies of Cold War area studies.⁹²

Another line of discussion on official women's organizations revolved around the category of agency. In 2009 feminist scholar Maria Raluca Popa explored IWY in Romania and Hungary, whose representatives actively shaped the international agenda. Popa argued that in the domestic context, IWY "did not change existing institutions or policies; thus, it did not perform a direct transformative function in either Hungary or Romania."⁹³ However, she stated

<https://doi.org/10.20318/hn.2024.8625>; P. Barthélémy and S. Panata, "African Women Activists and International Women's Organizations during the Cold War (1947-1961): Strategic Pragmatism," *Clio: Histoire, Femmes et Sociétés* 57, no. 1 (2023): 23–45; I. Cîrstocea, "Before Gender Mainstreaming: Revisiting Scholarship on 'Global Feminism' (1975-1995)," *Clio: Histoire, Femmes et Sociétés* 57, no. 1 (2023): 209–33; M.S. Roy, "The Call of the World: Women's Memories of Global Socialist Feminism in India," *International Review of Social History* 67, no. 30 (2022): 237–62, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859021000699>; Manuel Ramírez Chicharro, "Radicalizing Feminism: The Mexican and Cuban Associations within the Women's International Democratic Federation in the Early Cold War," *International Review of Social History* 67, no. S30 (April 2022): 75–102, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859022000025>; María Fernanda Lanfranco González, "Between National and International: Women's Transnational Activism in Twentieth-Century Chile," *International Review of Social History* 67, no. S30 (April 2022): 49–74, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859021000687>.

⁹¹ See, for example, Mrozik, "An Unexpectedly Transgressive Subject Of Twentieth-Century History"; Svégl, "Feminist Mobilization for Reproductive Rights in State Socialist Hungary"; Dyakonova, "Through the Dictatorship of the Proletariat in All Countries, Onward to the Complete Emancipation of Women!"; Jarska, "International Women's Year and Women's Activism"; Boergerding, "Women's Internationalism Behind the Berlin Wall: The East German Women's League, East-South Solidarity, and Gendered Globalization during the Cold War, 1947-1989"; Wolf, "Women as Workers"; Varga-Harris, "Feminist in Actions If Not Name"; Lóránd, "International Solidarity as the Cornerstone of the Hungarian Post-War Socialist Women's Rights Agenda in the Magazine Asszonyok"; Bonfiglioli, "Women's Internationalism and Yugoslav-Indian Connections"; Ghodsee, *Second World, Second Sex*; Hearman, "From Travel to Imprisonment."

⁹² Kristen Ghodsee and Agnieszka Mrozik, "Authority, Authenticity, and the Epistemic Legacies of Cold War Area Studies," *Aspasia* 17 (2023): 31–52, <https://doi.org/10.3167/asp.2023.170103>.

⁹³ Raluca Maria Popa, "Translating Equality between Women and Men across Cold War Divides: Women Activists from Hungary and Romania and the Creation of International Women's Year," in *Gender Politics and Everyday Life in State Socialist East and Central Europe* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 70.

that in Hungary it “may have enhanced the implementation of existing policy” to improve the economic and social situation of women, which was adopted in 1970.⁹⁴ IWY was also a moment of “feminist awareness” for some women activists from Hungary and Romania.⁹⁵ However, Popa did not endorse the state feminism framing and stated that “scholars have yet to find a language to describe [women’s] activism under state socialism and a theoretical approach to analyze this political and social practice.”⁹⁶ Popa concluded with the proposal that the “agency” of women’s organizations under state socialism be explored and not stigmatized or denied.⁹⁷ Indeed, agency became the cornerstone of the argument regarding the feminism of official socialist women’s organizations. The focus on and debate around the notion of agency defined the development of the field in the following years.⁹⁸

In 2014, the American feminist philosopher Nanette Funk criticized the research of official women’s organizations engaging with categories such as feminism and agency. Funk suggested distinguishing conceptually four types of agency: reactive, proactive, active and passive. In her opinion, of these types only proactive agency deserves acknowledgment and corresponds with feminist ideas. Funk defined proactive agency as “acting because of one’s own will, policies, commitments or initiatives,”⁹⁹ or, in other words, acting as the subject of emancipation. Funk contrasted it to reactive agency, which means “acting because of the will of another, including authorities’ directives.”¹⁰⁰ In her opinion, only reactive agency was present under state socialism, and therefore does not correspond with feminist ideas. However, Kristen Ghodsee argued in response that everyone is limited in her or his actions by specific

⁹⁴ Popa, 71.

⁹⁵ Popa, 72–73.

⁹⁶ Popa, 61.

⁹⁷ Popa, 74.

⁹⁸ See for example the overview in Sarah Bellows-Blakely, “Review Essay: Disentangling Feminisms from the Cold War,” *Gender & History* 32, no. 1 (2020): 247–58, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0424.12469>.

⁹⁹ Nanette Funk, “A Very Tangled Knot: Official State Socialist Women’s Organizations, Women’s Agency and Feminism in Eastern European State Socialism,” *EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF WOMENS STUDIES* 21, no. 4 (November 2014): 349.

¹⁰⁰ Funk, 349.

institutional rules and existing hierarchies, whether under state socialism or in Western liberal democracies.¹⁰¹ Thus, the fact that limitations to individual action under state socialism were different and, in some ways, more severe (for example, with regard to freedom of expression or the discussion of sexuality) than in Western democracies should not lead to the denial of any possibility of women acting on their own initiatives and convictions. Women's historian Krassimira Daskalova wrote that "the agency these women exercised needs to be carefully contextualized, taking seriously the ways in which their actions were both supported and opposed."¹⁰² This discussion echoed ongoing conceptual debates in feminist scholarship about our understanding of agency, on account of the fact that agency combines a descriptive and a normative aspect, as political scientist Lois McNay has pointed out.¹⁰³ In this regard there is a consensus that agency "is not so much a thing in itself as a vehicle for thinking through broader issues, such as the nature of freedom and constraint."¹⁰⁴

In her 2018 book, historian Katerina Lišková critically assessed the focus on agency as an assumed opposition between the individual and the state; in line with the aforementioned research on how the socialist system enabled a certain type of subjectivity, she wrote: "For a mind shaped by the narratives of Western-style political liberalism, if people are given (let alone decreed) something 'from above', it cannot be liberation. [...] people did feel liberated by policies affecting gender and sexuality in various countries across the communist East."¹⁰⁵

This perspective leaves unanswered the important question of whether these subjects liberated by state politics were able to transform the system or merely reproduced it. According to historian Susan Zimmermann, trade union women in state socialist Hungary in the 1960s and

¹⁰¹ Kristen Ghodsee, "Untangling the Knot: A Response to Nanette Funk," *European Journal of Womens Studies* 22, no. 2 (May 2015): 249, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506815571264>.

¹⁰² Krassimira Daskalova, "Audiatur et Altera Pars: In Response to Nanette Funk," *Aspasia* 10 (2016): 122.

¹⁰³ Lois McNay, "Chapter 2. Agency," in *Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 42.

¹⁰⁴ McNay, 39.

¹⁰⁵ Kateřina Lišková, *Sexual Liberation, Socialist Style: Communist Czechoslovakia and the Science of Desire, 1945–1989* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 2, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108341332>.

1970s “visibly contributed to the women-friendly substance and appearance of the state-socialist system, while simultaneously cooperating [...] with a system of labor policies that continuously produced and reproduced the material injustice weighing so heavily on women workers.”¹⁰⁶ Political scientist Valeria Umanets recently analyzed a wide dataset of women’s political participation in the Soviet Union. She concluded that “the Soviet model of state feminism” followed a dual strategy of promoting women’s political involvement while reinforcing traditional gender roles. Women’s political participation was confined to roles considered “appropriate,” such as local governance, where their “their responsiveness to constituents could be harnessed for the regime’s benefit.”¹⁰⁷ Yet, the fact that women on a local level showed responsiveness to citizens’ concerns suggests that their participation in politics, even if appropriated by the state, should not be erased.

My dissertation contributes to this debate by adding the perspective on examining state feminism of the Research Network on Gender and Politics and the State (RNGS) developed in the late 1990s. They proposed analyzing policy debates within the nation-state on four key areas, which, according to the authors, play an influential role in maintaining or challenging women’s subordination. This can serve as a way of measuring the degree of state feminism, which the scholars suggest should be assessed on a scale. These gendered dimensions are the following: “(1) the division of labor in the home and workplace; (2) human reproduction; (3) sexuality; and (4) citizenship rights and selected specific issues from each – job training, abortion, prostitution, and political representation”, and “the hot issue” of the general national agenda.¹⁰⁸ Thus, I will analyze the SWC’s contribution to the debates about women’s labor

¹⁰⁶ Susan Zimmermann, “‘It Shall Not Be a Written Gift, but a Lived Reality’: Equal Pay, Women’s Work, and the Politics of Labor in State-Socialist Hungary, Late 1960s to Late 1970s,” in *Labor in State Socialist Europe, 1945-1989*, ed. Marsha Siefert, Contributions to a Global History of Work (Central European University Press, 2020), 372, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7829/j.ctv16f6cpk.19>.

¹⁰⁷ Valeriia Umanets, “Political Participation of Women in the Soviet Union and Russia: From State-Sponsored Feminism to Putin’s Machismo” (Ph.D., 2024), <https://www.proquest.com/docview/3097389219?sourcetype=Dissertations%20&%20Theses>.

¹⁰⁸ Goertz and Mazur, *Politics, Gender, and Concepts*, 260.

protection (gendered dimension 1), abortion (2), and IWY (the hot issue). The topic of political representation (which falls under 4) emerged in some of the sources and debates I analyze in the dissertation, but due to space limitations, I do not address it separately. Questions of sexuality (3) were significantly absent from the SWC debates I have seen in the sources.

Instead of focusing mainly on the category of agency, I will follow the RNGS proposal to evaluate the WPAs' activity based on: a) the extent to which they shaped the framing of the gender policy debates and b) whether independent activists were included in the process. With regard to a), I will examine how the SWC attempted and achieved (or not) shifts in the official discourse in relation to women's status; and with regard to b), I will investigate the degree to which their framing was informed by women's letters or women's councils (*zhensovery*), as well as the relationship between them and the short-lived feminist dissident group of 1979-1982. Notably, the state feminist framework as developed by RNGS does *not* include the achievements of the WPAs, i.e., whether the actual implementation of the policies helped reduce gender inequality.¹⁰⁹

Importantly, the authors of the state feminism research framework proposed situating each case “on [a] continuum” consisting of full state feminism — partial state feminism — unsuccessful state feminism — absent state feminism — no state feminism.¹¹⁰ The position on this scale is measured by four key questions:

1. To what extent did the WPA (women's political agencies) promote a micro-frame that matched the feminist movement micro-frame?
2. Was the WPA successful in incorporating the feminist movement micro-frame into the dominant frame of the policy subsystem?

¹⁰⁹ Goertz and Mazur, 260.

¹¹⁰ Goertz and Mazur, 263–64.

3. Did the policy content match the micro-frames of the feminist movement actors?
4. To what extent were women's movement actors in the policy process presenting feminist micro-frames?¹¹¹

Thus, apart from the existence of a WPA, the level of direct access of women's activists to the political process plays a crucial role in evaluating the kind of state feminism that existed in the given cases.

Methods and sources

This dissertation is based on extensive archival research, which I conducted in the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF), the Russian State Archive of Contemporary History (RGANI), and the Central State Archive of the city of Moscow (TsGA) during my fieldwork year of 2019/20.

There are two main categories of archival collections I worked with. The first was the archives of the organizations, Party and governmental bodies responsible for the policies in question. For this research, the two most important organizational archives were those of the SWC and the AUCCTU. The SWC's archive is kept in GARF (Fonds 7928) and includes 10,927 files, the majority of which are related to the SWC's international activities. I do not focus on these, nor do I aim to write a full chronological history of the organization—as useful as that would be. My aim was to focus on the SWC's role in domestic policy debates and policymaking and to understand the SWC and its members' position within the Soviet system. Therefore, I focused on the SWC's administrative documents, which consisted of presidium minutes, financial reports, staffing tables, reports on the visits of foreign delegations, Plena

¹¹¹ Goertz and Mazur, 261.

transcripts, and correspondence exchange with the Soviet Ministry of Finance and the Central Committee. For the latter, I also used collections held in RGANI (see below).

The AUCCTU's archive (Fonds 5451) is also kept in GARF and includes 97,337 files. I focused on the documents of the Komissiiia Prezidiuma VTSSPS po voprosam truda i byta zhenshchin, okhrany materinstva i detstva za 1963-1990 gg. (Commission on Women's Working and Living Conditions, Protection of Motherhood and Childhood (1963-1990, 80 files), selected documents related to women's status in the USSR (information on the state of maternal and child welfare, living conditions and participation of women in the USSR national economy), as well as files of those AUCCTU Secretaries who were also SWC members: Klavdia Nikolaeva and Nina Popova, held in the AUCCTU's archive, and Tatiana Nikolaeva's personal Fonds (10172).

As for documents of Soviet governmental bodies held in GARF, I worked with some documents of the Sovet Ministrov (Soviet of Ministers (Fonds 5446), which contains 379,464 files. I focused on the files of the Secretariat of Comrade Kirill Mazurov (1965-1978), which contains transcripts and documents of the Soviet IWY Commission (1975). I also worked with documents from different collections in the archive of the Supreme Soviet (Fonds 7523), which includes proceedings on women-related legislation and transcripts of meetings of the Commission of Legislative Suggestions.

As for the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Soviet Union (CC CPSU) documents, I worked with documents held in RGANI, with collections of documents of the CC Plena (Fonds 2), the Political Bureau (Politbureau) (Fonds 3), and the International Department (Fonds 5). However, many of my requests were rejected because the files were classified.

The second type of archival collection I worked with consisted of personal documents. I was able to access the personal Fonds of: Maria Kovrigina, USSR Minister of Health (1954-1959) (Fonds 10095), held in GARF; Nina Popova, SWC Head (1945–1968) and AUCCTU

Secretary (1945-1957) (Fonds 389), held in TsGA; and Nina Popova's successor as AUCCTU Secretary (1959-1971), Tatiana Nikolaeva, whose personal papers were generously sent to me by her granddaughter, Tatiana Astakhova (Nikolaeva), that is, in addition to her papers held in GARF.¹¹² These Fonds include pictures, letters, membership cards, diplomas, and, in the case of Kovrigina, the draft of an autobiography, which was dated "the 1980s" in the archive. Published interviews or autobiographies of the SWC members compensate a little for the absence of oral history, yet its absence constitutes one of the limitations of the research.

To a lesser degree, I worked with official media (*Sovetskaja Zhenshchina* [Soviet Woman], *Rabotnitsa* [Working Woman], *Pravda* [Truth]), manuals (*spravochniki*) on labor legislation, brochures and books, as well as the relevant Soviet legislation. My reading of printed sources alongside archival materials allowed me to identify differences between the inner discussions in the Soviet state institutions and practice, and the representation of the outcomes in the Soviet media, for example, in the case of the SWC Plena (Chapter Two) or the IWY Commission (Chapter Five). Keeping in mind that the documents I analyzed were produced in an authoritarian and repressive state, I pay special attention to the gaps between what was discussed, such as in the SWC Plena, and what was published; also relevant were SWC members' books and texts in women's magazines that conveyed ideas and framings that were impossible to voice in contemporary government/Party discussions, or were not yet implemented.

Because this dissertation explores the role of the SWC in policymaking in the Soviet Union, I read the Soviet laws against the drafts, research, and discussions that preceded them. Instead of taking at face value the goals stated in the official documents, I focus on SWC

¹¹² I have acquired scans of some of Nikolaeva's certificates, membership cards, pictures, and speeches.

members' attempts to frame these goals, and their tactics, successes, and failures in the process, following the state feminism framework.¹¹³

In an attempt to overcome the paradoxical absence in the scholarship of “emancipated Soviet women” in the process of gender policymaking in the Soviet Union, following women’s and gender history methods, I attempt to recover actors and networks that have been marginalized in the historiography.¹¹⁴ In this endeavor, I adopted a number of methods. First, I pay attention to the tensions and emotions that left traces in the documents, especially in SWC Plena transcripts. As philosopher Sara Ahmed has indicated, the role of emotions matters in politics: “it is through emotions, or how we respond to objects and others, that surfaces or boundaries are made: the ‘I’ and the ‘we’ are shaped by, and even take the shape of, contact with others.”¹¹⁵ The aim was to get an understanding of how the SWC members thought of their place in the Soviet state.

A second method I used was that of “researching around,” as suggested by labor historian Sherry J. Katz in her research on a network of radical socialist women in early twentieth-century California. Departing from the scarce sources available on the lives and work of the network, she researched “outward in concentric circles of related sources” to reconstruct political trajectories of these women. The sources ranged from socialist newspapers to the varied materials of the organizations these women made an appearance in.¹¹⁶ In my case, although the SWC archive provided rich material on the SWC’s international engagements, tracing their involvement in policymaking in the Soviet Union required research on other state institutions in which the SWC members were involved.

¹¹³ Goertz and Mazur, *Politics, Gender, and Concepts*, 260. This also means that I do not study the implementation of the legislation, as explained above.

¹¹⁴ Ghodsee and Mrozik, “Authority, Authenticity, and the Epistemic Legacies of Cold War Area Studies.”

¹¹⁵ Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 10.

¹¹⁶ Sherry J. Katz, “Excavating Radical Women I Progressive-Era California,” in *Contesting Archives: Finding Women in the Sources*, ed. Nupur Chaudhuri, Sherry J. Katz, and Mary Elizabeth Perry (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 90.

Third, when analyzing the activities of the SWC members' activities, I try to theorize their gender "on its own terms" and in its intersection with other axes of power distribution.¹¹⁷ I examine how SWC members understood their gender identity and argue that the role it played in their affinities and confrontations was meaningful for their contributions to policymaking.

Finally, I want to address the limitations of my research. As noted above, I was not able to conduct oral history interviews, which could have enriched our understanding of the experiences of women in Soviet policymaking and the self-understanding of SWC members. This absence was due to the fact that my fieldwork was conducted mainly during the period of COVID, which, for example, restricted my communication with Nina Popova's daughter, Renita, to phone calls. In February 2022, when COVID was still not yet fully under control, the Kremlin started a war of aggression against Ukraine. My subsequent public anti-war work and my belonging to two "undesirable organizations", the Feminist Anti-War Resistance¹¹⁸ and the Central European University, prevented me from further visiting Russia. This substantially complicated my access to archival data and to possible interviewees, since cooperation with undesirable organizations is grounds for criminal prosecution.

Because my goal is to trace SWC members' attempts, whether successful or not, to influence Soviet policymaking and their understanding of their place as Soviet women in politics, other dimensions of their lives remain unexplored in the dissertation. However, in writing about women in Soviet politics, it is important not to idealize them and forget that some of them were simultaneously complicit in the crimes of the Soviet regime. Examples include Maria Kovrigina, who was active in post-war purges in the Soviet medical community,¹¹⁹ SWC vice-head from 1968 Ksenia Proskurnikova, who had served in Narodnyy komissariat

¹¹⁷ Jeanne Boydston, "Gender as a Question of Historical Analysis," *Gender & History* 20, no. 3 (2008): 574, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0424.2008.00537.x>.

¹¹⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Feminist_Anti-War_Resistance

¹¹⁹ Mie Nakachi, "Replacing the dead: The politics of reproduction in the postwar Soviet Union, 1944–1955" (Ph.D., Ann Arbor, United States, 2008), 52, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/304407583/abstract/FB94AC3FBEDF4DC1PQ/1>.

vnutrennikh del (the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs, NKVD) until 1950s,¹²⁰ and Nina Popova, who during the Second World War was the first Secretary of the Krasnaya Presnya district, which at the time served as the sole Moscow transit point for the management of the labor camps (GULAGs), which dispatched prisoners, including political ones, to labor camps across the country.¹²¹ The acknowledgment of their contribution to the authoritarian system should not mislead us in any direction: neither in the direction of perceiving them as only having been advocates of women's rights in the USSR, nor in that of denying their contribution to improvement of women's lives, given that they did not fundamentally criticize the authoritarian and repressive sides of the Soviet system.

Outline of the dissertation

The dissertation is divided into three parts. The first part, consisting of Chapters One and Two, focuses on the SWC as organization. The second part, consisting of Chapters Three and Four, explores the SWC members' contribution to the 1955 decriminalization of abortion in the USSR and the AUCCTU and asks how these policies converged with or diverged from Bolshevik feminism. The third part explores the SWC's tactic of converting its international propaganda work into feasible benefits for women in the Soviet Union within the Soviet IWY Commission.

Chapter One examines how scholarly views on the SWC have evolved over time. Initially seen as merely a propaganda tool, recent research has begun to highlight its complex role in international diplomacy. The limited literature that exists is based on the unspoken assumption that the existence and growth of the SWC was self-evident. By contrast, I will argue that in order to survive, let alone expand, the SWC had to simultaneously prove its relevance

¹²⁰ Yulia Gradskaia, *The Women's International Democratic Federation, the Global South and the Cold War: Defending the Rights of Women of the "Whole World"?* (London: Routledge, 2020), 55.

¹²¹ Evgeny Natarov, "Krasnopresnenskaia Peresyl'naia Tiur'ma," in *Èto Priamo Zdes': Moskva. Topografiia Terrorsa*, n.d., <https://topos.memo.ru/article/371+82>.

to the CPSU, foreign women's organizations, and Soviet women. However, proving its relevance to Soviet women at large seemed to present one of its main problems: as an elite organization, the SWC repeatedly addressed the necessity to better inform and connect with Soviet women.

Chapter Two focuses on the SWC's Plena as a platform for forming Soviet women as an interest group in Soviet policymaking. The Plena allowed members to voice demands and create solidarity based on their shared experiences of labor (productive and reproductive) and gender identity. Ultimately, I suggest that the Plena served as a space of development of the SWC members' "epistemological autonomy" (Anatoly Pinsky's term, referred to above). I will argue that the SWC's 1958 Plenum played a significant role in launching women's councils in the Soviet Union.

Chapter Three explores the 1955 decriminalization of abortion in the Soviet Union and the agency of two SWC members, Nina Popova and Maria Kovrigina, in achieving this. In addition to highlighting their role (instead of obscuring it by speaking of "Khrushchev's administration"),¹²² this chapter shows that the law was not just a response to demographic concerns but it also framed motherhood as a choice for women, rather than an obligation. Thus, I argue that the SWC women involved managed to frame both the debate and its outcome in a line with the Bolshevik feminist perspective on motherhood.

Chapter Four examines the role of SWC members in the AUCCTU secretariat and their influence on labor policies affecting women under late socialism. The chapter demonstrates that their involvement allowed them to shape protective labor legislation and promote women's reproductive work as no less important than productive labor. It also shows a shift that occurred in the SWC members' attitudes to addressing women's double burden: instead of the earlier utopian horizon of liberating women from domestic labor through the full

¹²² Barbara Evans Clements, *A History of Women in Russia*, 254.

socialization of reproduction, they sought special benefits and lower productivity norms for women. This marked a divergence from the Bolshevik feminism agenda, but it also represented resistance to the dominating state discourse of productivism.

Chapter Five analyzes the SWC's role in the implementation of International Women's Year (IWY) in the Soviet Union. I show that the SWC members managed to influence debates and the outcomes of the IWY Commission in the Soviet Union, although it took years to implement their proposals, even partially.

The **Conclusion** of this dissertation will answer my research questions and indicate relevant directions for further research.

Part One: Analysis of the SWC as an Organization

Chapter One: “Party’s puppets” vs. “state feminists”: a history of the SWC

The SWC does not occupy a significant place in the narrative about Soviet gender politics, or in the historiography of women’s movements, as I showed in the Introduction. This chapter aims to explore this paradox in two ways. First, I will provide a critical analysis of the historiography of the SWC, to trace the reasons behind this gap in the scholarship. Second, I will explore how the SWC as an organization managed to grow and survive in an authoritarian state.

Therefore, the key questions for the first part of this Chapter are the following: What do we know about the SWC’s history from the existing scholarship, what do we not know and why? Has the approach towards the SWC changed over time, and if so, how? The key questions for the second part are: How did the SWC grow and make itself relevant to the Soviet state?

To answer these questions, this chapter is structured in the following way. First, I will overview the existing scholarship on the SWC. Second, I will present the SWC’s in-house history. Finally, I will examine the SWC’s development through the lens of resource mobilization theory, and will base my analysis on secondary sources and SWC archival materials.

1.1. The SWC’s historiography: From a party puppet to an important actor in the global women’s movement

In the following, I will overview the existing research on the SWC in English and Russian, published after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, when the SWC became history.

In 1997, two publications mentioning the SWC were released. Their data encompassed interviews with SWC members and SWC publications but were not based on archival research. Both publications focused on the women’s movement in Russia in the 1990s, the “transition”

period. The SWC history in these publications served as background information for exploring its successor's role, the Soyuz Zhenshchin Rossii (Union of Women of Russia (UWR), in Russia's developing women's movement. The first publication, *Women's Activism in Contemporary Russia* by political scientist Linda Racioppi and sociologist Katherine O'Sullivan See dedicated 3,5 pages, to the SWC history—in the chapter about the UWR.¹²³ Based on some SWC brochures and interviews with its members, they briefly overviewed the SWC's history. Still, they mentioned only a few dates: the founding moment in 1941 to mobilize women at home and internationally for the fight against Nazi Germany, the co-founding of the Women's International Democratic Federation in 1945, the SWC's change of name in 1956, its "formal connection" with the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) in 1961 and it being awarded a United Nations honorable diploma as "Peace Messenger" in 1987. Racioppi and O'Sullivan See characterized the SWC as "the state's chief propagandist on women's issues, explaining how communism had solved the 'woman question' and always connecting it with peace."¹²⁴

The SWC, in this capacity, established relationships with more than 30 international organizations and bilateral relationships with more than 300 women's organizations in 137 countries; its members attended and organized numerous international events, among which the scholars mentioned only four, all from the late 1980s—the International Peace School (Leningrad, 1986); the Forum for a Nuclear-Free World, For the Survival of Mankind; the WIDF World Congress of Women (Moscow, 1987); and the women's roundtable on the Soviet-US Summit in 1988.¹²⁵ According to Racioppi and O'Sullivan See, the head of the SWC from 1987 to 1991, Zoya Pukhova, viewed these activities as aiming to challenge the image of the Soviet Union as an enemy of the Western countries and to foster a relationship based on mutual

¹²³ Racioppi and O'Sullivan See, *Women's Activism in Contemporary Russia*, 73–77.

¹²⁴ Racioppi and O'Sullivan See, 74.

¹²⁵ Racioppi and O'Sullivan See, 75.

trust. However, Racioppi and O'Sullivan See concluded that “there is a little, if any, evidence that these activities [...] had any impact on changing Soviet foreign policy, but they served to legitimate Soviet ideology.”¹²⁶ Racioppi and O'Sullivan See mentioned a SWC 1987 brochure, which stated that the organization had contributed to drafting legislation on labor, marriage and family, housing and public education, the USSR Constitution, and the CPSU program. Nevertheless, they insisted that the SWC's function “was essentially one of propaganda” and while speaking on behalf of Soviet women internationally, “the organization did not seek to analyze and improve the position of women in Soviet society.”¹²⁷ Racioppi and O'Sullivan See also mentioned that the SWC had been an attractive place for professional women because its members had the privilege of traveling abroad and international contacts, which were severely restricted for Soviet people otherwise,¹²⁸ and that during the period of reforms in the USSR in the late 1980s known as *perestroika*, the SWC became a vocal critic of Soviet sexism and shifted its focus to the conditions of women's lives in the Soviet Union.¹²⁹

The second 1997 publication is Mary Buckley's chapter “Adaptation of the Soviet Women's Committee: Deputies' Voices from ‘Women of Russia’,” published in an edited collection titled *Post-Soviet Women: From the Baltic to Central Asia*. Buckley too focused mainly on the 1990s, tracing the change of the SWC's/UWR's strategy. Notably, Buckley indicated the same contradiction between their role in the representation of the USSR internationally and their attempts to change the situation for women in the country: “As an arm of CPSU, it lauded the achievements of Soviet socialism for women [...] the SWC was generally viewed as an apologist for the regime, toeing party lines rather than challenging

¹²⁶ Racioppi and O'Sullivan See, 75.

¹²⁷ Racioppi and O'Sullivan See, 76.

¹²⁸ Racioppi and O'Sullivan See, 73–76.

¹²⁹ Racioppi and O'Sullivan See, 85.

them.”¹³⁰ At the same time, however, she showed that this reputation did not do full credit to the SWC’s work. Buckley underscored that during *perestroika*, that is, from around 1985, the SWC “began to be more critical about women’s lot”¹³¹ and characterized the SWC heads she interviewed, Zoya Pukhova (1987-1991) and Alevtina Fedulova (1991-1992), as

serious and hard-working women committed to making women’s lives better. They may not have savoured the theoretical arguments of feminist debate, nor put issues such as violence against women high enough up their agendas to satisfy their critics, but they did attempt to redefine some discourses on women, particularly more official ones.¹³²

In 1999, Valerie Sperling published the book *Organizing Women in Contemporary Russia: Engendering Transition*, based on her 1997 dissertation. In it, Sperling, a US political scientist, analyzed the development of the women’s movement in Russia in the 1990s, using the opportunity structure model. Again, the SWC was studied only in the context of its meaning for the political transition process of the 1990s, which gave rise to numerous NGOs and independent feminist groups. Sperling presented the SWC as contradictory. On the one hand, “the SWC and, by inheritance, the URW [Union of Women of Russia] incurred the resentment and distrust of many Moscow women’s group activists”¹³³ because of their affiliation with the state. Sperling conducted an interview with Tatiana Ivanova, “who formerly worked for the SWC, [and] readily acknowledged that the SWC had not been a major defender of women’s

¹³⁰ Mary Buckley, “Adaptation of the Soviet Women’s Committee: Deputies’ Voices from ‘Women of Russia,’” in *Post-Soviet Women: From the Baltic to Central Asia*, ed. Mary Buckley (Cambridge University Press, 1997), 159, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511585197.011>.

¹³¹ Buckley, 160.

¹³² Buckley, 160.

¹³³ Valerie Sperling, *Organizing Women in Contemporary Russia: Engendering Transition* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 203.

rights, or even a place available to women.”¹³⁴ Sperling also argued that the SWC’s reputation harmed the emerging feminist movement in Russia—it fed a fear of any umbrella organization or vast union of women’s groups because that could monopolize the women’s movement as the SWC had done.¹³⁵ On the other hand, Sperling acknowledged that “the Communist Party and other state-affiliated organizations (e.g., the Komsomol, the Soviet Women’s Committee) may have acted as incubators for some of today’s women’s movement group leaders.”¹³⁶ One feminist activist, in an interview with Sperling, “praised the URW [Union of Russian Women] for having taken several newspapers to court for running sexist job advertisements.”¹³⁷ Despite the ambiguities hinted at above, the majority of feminist activists Mary Buckley interviewed regarded any SWC/UWR member as “a typical communist *apparatchik* with questionable feminist credentials.”¹³⁸

This problematic reputation of the SWC, which also prevented scholars from inquiring deeper into their activities, dominated the field of Soviet women’s and gender history until the 2010s. For example, sociologist Marina Tuluzakova wrote in 2010 that the SWC was “a pure product of the party-administrative system and only created the appearance of Soviet women’s participation in decision-making at the governmental level.”¹³⁹ The prominent women’s historian Natalia Pushkareva, in the same year, characterized the SWC as “an inactive puppet of the CPSU.”¹⁴⁰ Historian Irina Yukina mentioned the SWC in passing in her 2011 article about gender politics in the USSR and Russia as an “imitational structure [immitazionnaya

¹³⁴ Sperling, 186.

¹³⁵ Sperling, 201.

¹³⁶ Sperling, 189.

¹³⁷ Sperling, 187.

¹³⁸ Buckley, “Adaptation of the Soviet Women’s Committee,” 159.

¹³⁹ Marina Tuluzakova, “Zhenskii Sotsial’no-Politicheskie Organizatsii: Sovetskii Opyt i Sovremennost’ [Women’s Socio-Political Organizations: Soviet Experience and Modernity],” *Vestnik Saratovskogo Gosudarstvennogo Tekhnicheskogo Universiteta* 4, no. 1 (2010): 281.

¹⁴⁰ Natalia Pushkareva, “Zhenskaia i Gendernaia Istoriia: Itogi i Perspektivy Razvitiia v Rossii [Women’s and Gender History: Results and Prospects for Development in Russia],” *Istoricheskaia Psikhologiya i Sotsiologiya Istori* 3, no. 2 (2010): 58.

struktura],”¹⁴¹ i.e. an organization which only imitated activity but in fact did nothing. However, none of these strong statements were based on archival research. This is not to suggest that archives contain “the truth about history” but it is clear that the lack of primary research about the SWC enabled what may have been too easy generalizations and in some cases led some scholars to notable misconceptions about the organization. An example is professor of criminal justice Jo-Ann Della-Guistina, who wrote in a 2009 article in the peer-reviewed *Journal of International Women's Studies* that:

the only women's movement after the 1917 Bolshevik revolution was the Committee of Soviet Women, which was financed by the government and functioned like other Soviet structures. Wives and other relatives of Soviet bureaucrats worked at the organization's headquarters and enjoyed such advantages as food from special shops not accessible to ordinary citizens, vacations at prestigious resorts, and trips abroad. The Committee of Soviet Women had branches in all regions of the country and maintained a close relationship with the women's committees of workers' unions and collectives.¹⁴²

However, as I already showed in the previous chapter, the SWC was not the only women’s organization after the 1917 Revolution, nor did it consist of wives and relatives of Soviet bureaucrats. This is a telling example: in 2009, scholars in international women’s studies did not have proper information about the SWC’s history or membership. By then, only one book and one article had been published based on the SWC archives, and both were in Russian.

¹⁴¹ Irina Yukina, “Dvulikii IAnus Gendernoi Politiki v Rossii[The Two-Faced Janus of Gender Politics in Russia],” *Zhenshchina v Rossiiskom Obshchestve*, no. 3 (2011): 31.

¹⁴² Jo-Ann Della-Guistina, “A Cross-Cultural, Comparative Analysis of the Domestic Violence Policies of Nicaragua and Russia,” *Journal of International Women's Studies* 10, no. 4 (May 2009): 45.

The first was the 1999 book *Antifashistskie komitety v SSSR: 1941-1945 gg* [Anti-fascist committees in the USSR: 1941-1945] by a historian of the Soviet Union during World War II (WWII), Nina Petrova. Based on archival material held in the Russian State Archive (GARF) and the Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RGASPI), she described the development of the Anti-Fascist Committees during WWII, outlining their struggle for an international audience and their place within the Soviet system. Petrova presented the SWC as one of the least influential and thriving among the five Anti-fascist Committees, established in Sovinformburo [Soviet Information Bureau] during the war. Compared to the Pan-Slavic, Jewish, and Youth meetings, the Sovinformburo leadership regarded the impact of the First Women's Anti-fascist meeting, held in Moscow on September 7, 1941 as relatively minor.¹⁴³ According to Petrova, the SWC was one of three committees that were regularly “disgraced,” alongside those of the scientists and youth. In January 1944, the SWC received harsh criticism from the Sovinformburo management for not developing enough contacts with foreign organizations and also because of their complimentary tone in letters to British women.¹⁴⁴ In a 2005 article “SSSR—Latinskaia Amerika: rol' narodnoï diplomatii v organizatsii bor'by protiv fashizma v period Velikoï Otechestvennoï voïny 1941-1945 gg” [USSR—Latin America: the role of national diplomacy in the organization of the struggle against fascism in the period of the Great Patriotic War 1941-1945], historian Vladimir Savin likewise indicated the weak position of the SWC in comparison with that of the other Anti-Fascist Committees during WWII. Savin analyzed the exchange of letters and other contacts between the SWC and women's organizations in Latin America and concluded that the SWC's “ties to women's organizations in Latin America were not as extensive as those of other anti-fascist committees” to their counterparts.¹⁴⁵ In fact, their research for me raised an important question, one that none

¹⁴³ Petrova, *Antifashistskie Komitety v SSSR: 1941-1945 Gg*, 68.

¹⁴⁴ Petrova, 194.

¹⁴⁵ Vladimir Savin, “SSSR — Latinskaia Amerika: Rol' Narodnoï Diplomatii v Organizatsii Bor'by Protiv Fashizma v Period Velikoï Otechestvennoï Voïny 1941-1945 Gg [USSR—Latin America: The Role of National

of the scholarship above addresses, regarding how the SWC managed not only to survive, but even to experience substantial growth over the years to come, despite its weak beginning.

The situation regarding research based on the SWC's archive changed significantly in the 2010s with historian of women's movements Francisca de Haan's 2010 'Iron Curtain' breaking article "Continuing Cold War Paradigms in Western Historiography of Transnational Women's Organisations: the case of the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF)." In this article, she challenged the notion of Western women's organizations' "self-proclaimed political neutrality" and the assumption that Communist women's organizations did not advance women's rights.¹⁴⁶ This article and De Haan's teaching and supervising at the Central European University substantially contributed to a growing body of archival research on the Soviet Women's Committee. In 2011, two of De Haan's students, Yana Knopova and Anna Kadnikova, defended their MA theses, based on the SWC archive in Moscow. Anna Kadnikova explored what role gender equality played in the Cold War rivalry and how the USSR had used the first woman in space, Valentina Tereshkova, and the 1963 WIDF World Congress of Women as an opportunity to showcase the Soviet achievements in women's rights.¹⁴⁷

Yana Knopova focused on the SWC participation in what she called "the international domain of women's rights." Based on the SWC's archive, a wide range of secondary sources, and an interview with Samira Khoury, a leader of the WIDF affiliated Democratic Women's Movement in Israel (Tandi), Knopova showed that the SWC's international work, despite its obvious propaganda aspect, also contributed to the building of a transnational women's

Diplomacy in the Organization of the Struggle against Fascism in the Period of the Great Patriotic War 1941-1945],” *Vestnik Rossiiskogo Universiteta Druzhby Narodov. Seriya: Mezhdunarodnye Otnosheniia*, no. 1 (2005): 99.

¹⁴⁶ de Haan, "Continuing Cold War Paradigms in Western Historiography of Transnational Women's Organisations."

¹⁴⁷ Anna Maratovna Kadnikova, *The Women's International Democratic Federation World Congress of Women, Moscow, 1963: Women's Rights and World Politics during the Cold War*, CEU Gender Studies Department Master Theses: 2011/19 (Budapest: Central European University, 2011).

movement and supporting national women's organizations. The SWC did so through a variety of activities, like:

the sending of experts on the education of women and children to the Third World; the provision of humanitarian aid in case of wars and natural disasters; the organizational support, sponsorship of travel costs for women leaders and activists to international congresses and seminars; the organization of international congresses; the organization and sponsorship of a variety of seminars; and the provision of stipends for women students, the well-being of women leaders. Financial support of organizations of women in the Third World, and more.¹⁴⁸

Knopova characterized the principles of the SWC's international work as "a strong emphasis on representing the Soviet Union's achievements through the structure of delegations, a commitment to rigorous information-gathering, and the establishment of exceptionally warm and friendly personal relations with women within the international arena."¹⁴⁹

Yana Knopova coined the term "women-Party tools approach"¹⁵⁰ to characterize the existing scholarship on the SWC that dwelled on a false dichotomy between serving the Party and advancing women's rights; she argued that the Party's goals and women's emancipation were not mutually exclusive but intertwined. Knopova provided a nuanced picture of the SWC's

¹⁴⁸ Yana Knopova, "The Soviet Union and the International Domain of Women's Rights and Struggles : A Theoretical Framework and a Case Study of the Soviet Women's Committee (1941-1991)" (Budapest : Central European University, 2011), 132, (CEU Thesis Collection Thesis).

¹⁴⁹ Knopova, 131.

¹⁵⁰ Knopova, 35.

agency. Analyzing the SWC's activity in the WIDF, she showed how the SWC fought for its role within the organization. Yet, she argued that:

although the SWC was part of the Soviet foreign policy and diplomacy structure, it was also a separate organizational unit with its own interests and played a role of mediator between the will of the Party, its own interests and needs as those were perceived by the leadership of the SWC, and the will and interests of WIDF' and its organizations.¹⁵¹

Thus, Knopova's research laid the groundwork for further study of how the SWC navigated its position, and negotiated its international tasks and its members' goals, which inspired my dissertation.

Another important publication in 2011 was historian of the USSR Melanie Ilič's chapter "Soviet Women, Cultural Exchange and the Women's International Democratic Federation." She explored the WIDF and two of its Congresses (Moscow in 1963 and Helsinki in 1969) as a platform for women's activists' connections and conflicts across the Cold War divide, based on primary sources: WIDF and SWC publications and archival documents. Ilič paid particular attention to the SWC's engagement in the WIDF, showing that, on the one hand, it created some obstacles for the WIDF due to the "negative image that the Soviet Union had in many countries,"¹⁵² on the other hand, the "emerging second wave feminist movement in the West

¹⁵¹ Knopova, 132–33.

¹⁵² Melanie J. Ilič, "Soviet Women, Cultural Exchange and the Women's International Democratic Federation," in *Reassessing Cold War Europe*, ed. Sari Autio-Sarasmo and Katalin Miklossy (Routledge, 2011), 165, <http://eprints.glos.ac.uk/1259/>.

and around the world [that] looked to the Soviet Union at the height of the Cold War as a model for the advancement of women's rights."¹⁵³

Starting from that turning point, there is a growing body of research on the SWC and its members' international engagements and influence. There are two key topics in the scholarship. The first explores the SWC propaganda as presented in its official magazine, *Soviet Woman*. Historian Alexis Peri, in her 2018 article "New Soviet Woman: The Post-World War II Feminine Ideal at Home and Abroad," analyzed the magazine *Sovetskaja zhenshhina/Soviet Woman* as a fruit of Soviet-American and Soviet-British letter exchange, which started during the war as a part of the SWC's propaganda effort.¹⁵⁴ Peri showed that the magazine's editorial board was highly responsive to the questions and critique they received in letters from abroad and that it struggled to develop a comprehensible image of Soviet femininity to undermine Western accusations "that Soviet women were ugly and masculine."¹⁵⁵ Peri concluded that it led to the contradiction *Sovetskaja zhenshhina/Soviet Woman* was caught in, positioned between two audiences, international (British and American in her analysis) and domestic: the created export image of Soviet women substantially diverged from their lived reality, which caused a wave of dissatisfaction from its Soviet readers.¹⁵⁶ This complex balance and these contradictions were also addressed during the SWC Plena, as I will show in the next chapter. Peri also emphasized the role of the magazine in broadening the space of Soviet diplomacy: "*Soviet Woman*—and the correspondence associated with it—opened a diplomatic space to women who otherwise were excluded from elite politics during the Truman-Stalin era."¹⁵⁷

Soviet historian Christine Varga-Harris, in her 2019 article "Between National Tradition and Western Modernization: Soviet Woman and Representations of Socialist Gender Equality

¹⁵³ Ilić, 169.

¹⁵⁴ Alexis Peri, "New Soviet Woman: The Post-World War II Feminine Ideal at Home and Abroad," *The Russian Review* 77, no. 4 (2018): 625–26, <https://doi.org/10.1111/russ.12202>.

¹⁵⁵ Peri, 623.

¹⁵⁶ Peri, 639.

¹⁵⁷ Peri, 643.

as a ‘Third Way’ for Developing Countries, 1956–1964,” analyzed the role of *Soviet Woman* as a device of the Soviet state to establish relations with decolonizing countries. According to Varga-Harris, the magazine, through its coverage of the negotiation of traditional cultures and socialist modernization in the Soviet national republics, inspired an emancipatory path for women that was an alternative to either the return to traditional roles or Westernization.¹⁵⁸ Based on an analysis of content of the magazine and how it was perceived, Varga-Harris wrote that “*Soviet Woman* was not merely an instrument of persuasion; its mode of socialist outreach encompassed extending moral support to peoples undergoing various stages of decolonization.”¹⁵⁹ She also underscored that the SWC’s working culture was transmitted via the magazine: “The messages of understanding, encouragement, praise, and friendship that permeated the magazine would have had added significance abroad.”¹⁶⁰ Peri’s and Varga-Harris’s publications, thus, showcased the complex dynamics behind what scholars previously dismissed as mere propaganda and service for the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, instead analyzing how the SWC’s messages affected international and domestic audiences, but not always only in a positive way.

Another body of recent research focuses on the SWC’s international activities. Historian Oksana Nagornaya, in her 2020 article “Zhenshchiny v strukturakh sovetskoi kul’turnoi diplomatii kholodnoi voiny: prostranstva mobilizatsii i praktiki souchastiia [Women in the

¹⁵⁸ The Soviet campaign for women’s emancipation in the non-Slavic republics received substantial criticism in the scholarship. See Adrienne Edgar (2006) Bolshevism, Patriarchy, and the Nation: The Soviet “Emancipation” of Muslim Women in Pan-Islamic Perspective. *Slavic Review* 65(2), 252–272.; Elena Gapova, “Liubov’ Kak Revoliutsiia, Ili «Nesmotria Na Gramshi» Poluta Bodunovoï [Love as a Revolution, or ‘Despite Gramsci’ by Poluta Bodunova],” in *Travma: Punkty*, ed. Serguei Oushakine and Elena Trubina (Moskva: Novoe Literaturnoe obozrenie, 2009), 810–32.; Yulia Gradskaia, “‘Emancipation of the nationalka’ - social and cultural politics towards ethnic minorities women (on example of the Volga-Ural region in the 1920s),” *Zhurnal Issledovaniĭ Sotsialnoi Politiki* 9, no. 1 (2011): 45–58, 142; Tatyana Shchurko, “«Zhenshchina Vostoka»: Sovetskii Gendernyi Poriadok v TSentral’noi Azii Mezhdū Kolonizatsiei i Ėmansipatsiei [“Woman of the East”: Soviet Gender Order in Central Asia between Colonization and Emancipation],” in *Concepts of the Soviet in Central Asia*, ed. Georgy Mamedov and Oksana Shatalova (Bishkek: Shtab, 2016), 178–209.

¹⁵⁹ Christine Varga-Harris, “Between National Tradition and Western Modernization: Soviet Woman and Representations of Socialist Gender Equality as a ‘Third Way’ for Developing Countries, 1956–1964,” *Slavic Review* 78, no. 3 (ed 2019): 765, <https://doi.org/10.1017/slr.2019.233>.

¹⁶⁰ Varga-Harris, 765.

structures of Soviet cultural diplomacy of the Cold War: spaces of mobilization and practices of complicity]” analyzed the SWC’s role in the structures of Soviet cultural diplomacy. While stating that the SWC played an essential role in promoting the positive Soviet image abroad, Nagornaya argued that their relationship with the state was not “a one-way street” and that “the SWC functionaries could use all the resources of the powerful party and departmental machine of the USSR for their organizational purposes.”¹⁶¹ As I will show below, “all the resources” is an exaggeration but they did manage to carve out not insignificant resources for women. According to Nagornaya, the SWC’s letter exchange with women’s organizations from decolonized countries showed that these organizations perceived the SWC as a source of financial support and solidarity; the financial support, unfortunately, was not always possible due to the SWC’s scarce resources. Yet, in some cases, the SWC managed to overcome these restrictions. For example, Nagornaya showed, while the Soviet Ministry of Health did not provide any support for Cuba, Soviet female professionals traveled to the island via the SWC. They substantially contributed to the development of the Cuban healthcare system.¹⁶²

Elizabeth Banks, a US historian of the USSR, in her 2021 article “Sewing Machines for Socialism?: Gifts of Development and Disagreement between the Soviet and Mozambican Women's Committees, 1963–87,” also explored mismatches between expectations from the SWC and its capacities in building connections in this case between the SWC and the Mozambican Women's Committee. Banks concluded that the SWC’s inability to provide materially and symbolically what Mozambican women expected and the Mozambican rejection

¹⁶¹ Oksana Nagornaya, “Zhenshchiny v strukturakh sovetskoĭ kul’turnoi diplomatii kholodnoi voĭny: prostranstva mobilizatsii i praktiki souchastiia [Women in the structures of Soviet cultural diplomacy of the Cold War: spaces of mobilization and practices of complicity],” *Noveishaia istoriia Rossii* 10, no. 31 (2020): 457.

¹⁶² Nagornaya, 458.

of the opportunities the SWC could provide prevented the two organizations from developing the degree of cooperation that the Soviet state wanted.¹⁶³

Varga-Harris, in her 2022 article “Soviet Women and Internationalism in Socialist Travel Itineraries in the 1950s and 1960s,” explored the SWC’s work in accepting foreign delegations and adjusting travel itineraries to both visitors’ interests and Soviet propaganda goals, based on the SWC archive. According to Varga-Harris, while serving the promotion of Soviet socialism, these interactions were driven by a genuine commitment to internationalism and encouraged both Soviet women and their visitors to reflect on their own identities. The “article argues, in its outreach to foreign women, the KSZh [SWC] effectively internationalized the Soviet mantra of peaceful coexistence.”¹⁶⁴

Historian Yulia Gradskaeva further explored Soviet women vis-à-vis women from decolonized countries based mainly on SWC files related to the WIDF kept in GARF. In her research on the WIDF, she showed Soviet women’s ambiguous engagements in their solidarity with decolonizing countries. In Gradskaeva’s words, the SWC “was an organization that worked in accordance with the decisions of the CPSU, and cannot be considered an autonomous women’s organization.”¹⁶⁵ Gradskaeva analyzed the SWC engagement in the WIDF through the framework of the SWC as party-tools or instrumentalization of the SWC by CC CPSU. For example, she considered the appointment of Zuhra Rahimbabaeva from Uzbekistan as the Soviet delegate to the WIDF Secretariat in East Berlin in the late 1960s as a way to create an appealing image for women from the Global South for “realization of the ‘Eastern bloc’s’ geopolitical aspirations in the Global South.”¹⁶⁶ Paradoxically, Gradskaeva found that

¹⁶³ Elizabeth Banks, “Sewing Machines for Socialism?: Gifts of Development and Disagreement between the Soviet and Mozambican Women’s Committees, 1963–87,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 41, no. 1 (May 1, 2021): 27–40, <https://doi.org/10.1215/1089201X-8916918>.

¹⁶⁴ Christine Varga-Harris, “Soviet Women and Internationalism in Socialist Travel Itineraries in the 1950s and 1960s,” *Diplomatic History* 46, no. 3 (2022): 489, <https://doi.org/10.1093/dh/dhac016>.

¹⁶⁵ Gradskaeva, *The Women’s International Democratic Federation, the Global South and the Cold War*, 41.

¹⁶⁶ Yulia Gradskaeva, “The WIDF’s Work for Women’s Rights in the (Post)Colonial Countries and the ‘Soviet Agenda,’” *International Review of Social History* 67, no. S30 (April 2022): 155–78, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859022000062>.

Rahimbabaeva played a key role in organizing the significant WIDF seminar on overcoming illiteracy in Africa and Asia in Khartoum in 1970. She did not explore the outcomes of the seminar but instead focused on Rahimbabaeva's instrumental role in reaching certain audiences on behalf of the USSR.¹⁶⁷ While showing how the Soviet Union tried to use the WIDF for its geopolitical purposes, Gradskova's data demonstrated that the Soviet propagandist effort shaped the agenda of international women's rights agenda towards more attention for the struggles of women from the decolonizing countries, even if the Soviet politics towards its republics is characterized by scholars as a colonial regime.¹⁶⁸

Similar contradictions can be found in the sphere of labor rights. While the gender pay gap persisted in the USSR,¹⁶⁹ the SWC head from 1945 until 1968, Nina Popova, advanced the topic of women's equal pay at international fora, as labor historian Johanna Wolf recently showed in a chapter on "'Women as Workers': Discussions about Equal Pay in the World Federation of Trade Unions in the Late 1940s."¹⁷⁰

In her 2024 book *Dear Unknown Friend*, Peri explored the SWC's coordination of the Soviet-American pen-pal program between women. She wrote that while during the war the SWC "heralded full equality between the sexes even as the letters they dispatched pushed against those claims,"¹⁷¹ the situation changed in the 1950s. Peri concluded that although the SWC remained steadfast in its mission to promote Soviet socialism abroad, in doing so, its leaders also advocated for domestic reforms. The SWC's work with the letters they received reveal how the Committee carefully "walked a fine line between championing Soviet policies

¹⁶⁷ Gradskova, *The Women's International Democratic Federation, the Global South and the Cold War*, 109.

¹⁶⁸ Abman, *Coerced Liberation*; Sergei Abashin, *Sovetskii Kishlak: Mezhdru Kolonializmom i Modernizatsiei [Soviet Kishlak: Between Colonialism and Modernization]* (Moskva: Novoe Literaturnoe obozrenie, 2015); Yulia Gradskova, "'Emancipation of the nationalka' - social and cultural politics towards ethnic minorities women (on example of the Volga-Ural region in the 1920s)," *Zhurnal Issledovani Sotsialnoi Politiki = The Journal of Social Policy Studies* 9, no. 1 (2011): 45-58, 142.

¹⁶⁹ Katarina Katz, *Gender, Work and Wages in the Soviet Union: A Legacy of Discrimination* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2001).

¹⁷⁰ Wolf, "'Women as Workers.'"

¹⁷¹ Peri, *Dear Unknown Friend*, 51.

and pushing for them to be reformed.”¹⁷² Not only addressing the criticisms expressed by foreign visitors and pen-pals, the SWC also took action in response to letters from Soviet women themselves—numbering around five thousand annually by the mid-1950s and increasing to forty thousand per year by the 1970s.¹⁷³

To sum up, recent research based on the SWC’s printed sources and archives has indicated the complexity of the SWC’s position, which the CPSU materially and ideologically restricted. Nevertheless, despite these restrictions, SWC members delivered some positive messages and realized changes for women across the globe, including in those spheres in which the USSR’s domestic policies were far from exemplary, like politics towards women in non-Slavic republics or the equal pay. The key point for my thesis is that the historical scholarship has not at all explored the SWC’s role in domestic policymaking, despite the SWC’s public statements about their participation in developing legislation, for example, the 1968 Soviet Family Code.¹⁷⁴ Thus, the existing scholarship has not challenged the widespread assumption that before perestroika, the SWC was inactive in the field of Soviet women’s rights. Based on primary research, my thesis will explore the SWC’s role in domestic policymaking, the extent to which SWC members shaped the framing of policy debates and their outcomes, and what role ordinary women’s voices played in the SWC’s agenda.

1.2. The SWC’s in-house history

Having discussed the scholarly literature about the SWC’s history, what narrative did the SWC’s own publications present about it?

The most exhausting official account of the SWC history is the book *Komitet sovetskikh zhenshchin: stranitsy istorii* (1941-1992) [The Soviet Women's Committee: pages of History

¹⁷² Peri, 202.

¹⁷³ Peri, 202.

¹⁷⁴ “Stenogrammy Zasedaniy Plenuma Komiteta Za 1968g.[Transcripts of the Meetings of the Plenum of the Committee for 1968.],” July 2- 4, 1968, F.P7928, Op.3, D.1888, GARF.

(1941-1992)] published in 2013 by its former co-chair Galina Galkina (1990–1992). Galkina based her book on extensive archival research in the SWC and Sovinformburo [Soviet Information Bureau] funds, kept in GARF, and SWC publications (brochures about the organization and books authored by its members). However, while valuable in this respect, Galkina’s book lacks any critical distance towards the SWC and the Soviet state—it praises the SWC’s service to the state as a patriotic deed, does not differentiate between the SWC’s interests and the state’s, and takes the SWC’s official reports at face value. For example, her Chapter Three opens with the statement, “[w]henver the world was confronted with new provocative actions of the militarists, Soviet women raised their voices against the aggressors.”¹⁷⁵ The following pages only describe SWC’s actions against US military interventions, whereas the Soviet ones are not mentioned. Galkina outlined the four key directions of the SWC’s work: peace, solidarity with decolonized countries, women’s rights, and children’s rights—the main activities she described were participation and organization of international events, petitions, and open letters on different occasions, delegation exchange, souvenirs, publications, and humanitarian aid. With all these activities put on par without any distinctions, Galkina’s narrative indeed creates an impression of the SWC as a dedicated promoter of the Soviet version of women’s emancipation indeed.

However, even this glossy representation did not exclude the SWC’s attempts to address the problems of Soviet women inside the country. Thus, Galkina wrote that the SWC had the right of legislative initiative, which they exercised by developing laws “to improve the position of women, children, and family.” For example, in 1955–1957, “On the Extension of Leave for Maternity Leave for Women,” “On Retirement, Disability and Disease Benefits,” “On the Protection of Adolescents’ Labor,” “On Increasing the Network of Children’s Institutions: Kindergartens and Nurseries for 1956–’60” and others.¹⁷⁶ The SWC also played an essential

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¹⁷⁶ Galkina, 174.

role in the Soviet Commission on International Women's Year in 1975, which, according to Galkina, mainly focused on addressing women's problems in the USSR.¹⁷⁷ I will explore the work of this Commission in detail in Chapter Five.

The same year, the SWC, together with the All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions, organized an All-Union Watch of Women's Working, Living, and Leisure Conditions, which as a series of inspections to control the implementation of legislation and to reveal existing flaws and problems,¹⁷⁸ which I will write about in detail in Chapter Four. Galkina further wrote that the SWC collected women's letters while participating in drafting the 1977 Soviet Constitution. They tried to incorporate issues women had written about into the Constitution draft or submit to the Standing Commissions of the Supreme Soviet on Women's Labor and Everyday Life and on the Protection of Motherhood and Childhood.¹⁷⁹ In 1987-1988, the SWC sent a range of proposals to governmental bodies on improving women's working and living conditions based on discussions with activists of women's councils (*zhensovet*).¹⁸⁰ These activities were also mentioned in the official SWC brochure published in 1987. Notably, they opened "The Main Directions of Committee Work" chapter, which was followed by the SWC's international engagements.¹⁸¹ In addition, one episode in Galkina's book the SWC 1987 official brochure did not mention. Galkina wrote that in the early 1980s, the SWC submitted a proposal to found an alimony fund to support children whose parents refused to pay alimony. The proposal went through, and in 1984, the alimony fund was established.¹⁸²

During 1989—1990, the SWC's legislative activities intensified, as Galkina wrote. In 1990, the SWC came up with the proposal to develop a "Social Justice Law" based on the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, which SWC

¹⁷⁷ Galkina, 155.

¹⁷⁸ Galkina, 158.

¹⁷⁹ Galkina, 175.

¹⁸⁰ Galkina, 177.

¹⁸¹ Fedyushova, *Komitet Sovetskikh Zhenshin* [Soviet Women's Committee], 8–11.

¹⁸² Galkina, *Komitet Sovetskikh Zhenshin: Stranitsy Istorii (1941-1992)*, 175.

head Valentina Tereshkova had signed on behalf of the USSR in 1981; this Social Justice Law would have prohibited all types of sex-based discrimination, but it did not pass¹⁸³ Galkina explained that the intensification of the SWC's legislative activities around this time became possible due to the SWC's quota in the Supreme Soviet during the late 1980s; in 1989, the organization had 75 allocated seats out of 271, to which it advanced activists of women's councils (zhensoveti) and the SWC.¹⁸⁴ In 1987, the SWC organized a seminar of zhensoveti¹⁸⁵ and since then worked to accumulate information about the women's councils' work across the country.¹⁸⁶ In 1990, the SWC also established a women's political club.¹⁸⁷ Overall, these efforts addressed the underrepresentation of women in Soviet politics. Although Galkina did not mention this, it seems likely that the SWC's efforts to increase women's representation in politics contributed to the success of the Women's Block, a political alliance of different women's groups (including the Union of Russian Women), at the first independent elections in Russia in 1993.¹⁸⁸

As said, Galkina presented these SWC's initiatives on behalf of women as being in accordance with the Party line. There is not even a hint of any disagreement between the SWC and male party leaders in Galkina's glorious SWC's history, nor a single SWC failure to achieve its goals. This SWC's in-house history thus strongly contrasts with the scholarship I discussed above: it merely praises the SWC without allowing any doubt, criticism or complexity of its position vis-à-vis the state.

Despite varying attitudes and approaches among the scholarship reviewed above, one commonality remains: all the publications assume that the SWC served the Soviet state without any conflict, that the Soviet state needed the Committee and that foreign women's organizations

¹⁸³ Galkina, 643.

¹⁸⁴ Galkina, 177.

¹⁸⁵ Galkina, 619.

¹⁸⁶ Galkina, 621.

¹⁸⁷ Galkina, 643.

¹⁸⁸ Racioppi and O'Sullivan See, *Women's Activism in Contemporary Russia*, 2.

viewed the SWC as an important women's organization. However, neither of these points is self-evident, as my work below and in the following chapters will elaborate on.

1.3. The SWC history through resource mobilization theory

In the Introduction, I discussed that the SWC's beginnings were relatively unsuccessful. How did the SWC develop from such a difficult start, both in the Soviet hierarchy and internationally, to reach the point where it had contacts with more than 300 women's organizations in 137 countries and a special quota in the Soviet Supreme Soviet?

To answer this question, here I will briefly analyze the SWC's organization building through the lens of resource mobilization theory.¹⁸⁹ The resource mobilization framework suggests analyzing the development of a social movement organization via the mobilization of different types of resources: moral, cultural, social-organizational, material, and human.¹⁹⁰ The SWC's launch with the September 1941 meeting and its status as a public organization in the USSR did not mean that the SWC was an autonomous public organization. Initially, it was part of the Soviet propaganda agency, Sovinformburo, and after gaining independence from it after the end of the war, the Committee became supervised by the Central Committee Department of Foreign Affairs, similar to the other anti-fascist committees.¹⁹¹ I suggest that the SWC's persistence and growth make it reasonable to assume the SWC had a certain agency within the Soviet system that allowed them to find and strengthen their place throughout the years.

As I indicated in the Introduction, due to SWC's tight links with the Party and its official status, I will regard the SWC as a sort of women's political agency (WPA). In line with the state feminism framework, in Chapter Two, I will explore the SWC's relationship with

¹⁸⁹ John D. McCarthy and Bob Edwards, "Resources and Social Movement Mobilization," in *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements*, ed. David A. Snow, Sarah Anne Soule, and Hanspeter Kriesi, Blackwell Companions to Sociology (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2004).

¹⁹⁰ McCarthy and Edwards, 125–28.

¹⁹¹ Petrova, *Antifashistskie Komitety v SSSR: 1941-1945 Gg*, 279.

women's councils and in Chapter Five with dissident feminist group. This section will not provide an exhaustive answer to the question but instead outlines a possible perspective for further research.

1.3.1. Moral resources

Moral resources include “legitimacy, solidary support, sympathetic support, and celebrity.”¹⁹²

As a public organization in an authoritarian state, the most important moral resource for the SWC's existence was legitimacy in the eyes of the CPSU. The Zhenotdel's short-lived history (1919—1930) had shown that the risk of being suspected of “feminist separatism” was high and potentially fatal.¹⁹³ It is for this reason as well, I suggest, that the SWC leadership never uttered any public criticism of the Soviet regime until *perestroika*.

In their reports presented at SWC Plena, the Committee's leaders presented the SWC activities as serving the Party's directives, and they generally ended their reports with the ritual promise to the CC CPSU to “give all the[ir] strength to complete the assigned tasks successfully.”¹⁹⁴ These tasks included propaganda of Soviet achievements in solving the woman question and advancement of the Soviet foreign policy among women's movements and organizations across the globe. The SWC's relationship with Yugoslavian or Chinese women was heavily affected by the Tito-Stalin and the Sino-Soviet splits respectively.¹⁹⁵ From the tribunes of international women's gatherings, the SWC often echoed official Soviet positions on global questions. This position determined their image as a “party puppet” and, in many aspects, damaged the SWC's international reputation, especially in the cases of the Soviet

¹⁹² McCarthy and Edwards, “Resources and Social Movement Mobilization,” 125.

¹⁹³ Goldman, *Women at the Gates*, 41.

¹⁹⁴ «отдадим все свои силы для успешного выполнения поставленных задач.»; “Stenogramma Plenuma KSZH [Transcript of the SWC Plenum],” February 25, 1975, P7928, Op. 3, D.3653, GARF, l. 22.

¹⁹⁵ Gradska, *The Women's International Democratic Federation, the Global South and the Cold War*, 53; Chiara Bonfiglioli, “Revolutionary Networks. Women's Political and Social Activism in Cold War Italy and Yugoslavia (1945-1957),” 2012.

military interventions in Hungary (1956), the Czech Republic (1968), and Afghanistan (1979).¹⁹⁶ Yet, demonstrating loyalty was a precondition for the SWC's survival.

The SWC rigorously collected for the CC CPSU information about women's organizations and activists worldwide and detailed all its encounters. However, they also had to make this service relevant for the state. An example is the SWC letter to the CC CPSU after a SWC delegation participated in the 1973 preparatory conference for the International Feminist Conference of the US National Organization for Women (held in Cambridge, Massachusetts, June 1–4, 1973). In the letter, the SWC justified cooperation with the feminist movement as a way to influence public opinion in capitalist countries: "Contact with the feminist movement opens up the possibility of working with the female population of capitalist countries, and most importantly with female youth, who are clearly drawn to the slogans of feminism."¹⁹⁷

The contradiction was that to fulfill Party propaganda tasks successfully, the SWC had to gain a reputation among women's organizations as not only as Soviet but also as a women's organization—they had to gain the sympathetic support and trust from women across the globe. The SWC worked towards these goals in different ways. The first was its style of work. They answered every letter from women abroad they received¹⁹⁸ and developed a very personal communication style with foreign women both in letter exchange and in real life.¹⁹⁹ This does not mean that they were not sincere, indeed, Varga-Harris and Peri showed that these contacts were meaningful for SWC members.²⁰⁰ The latter often invited women from the foreign

¹⁹⁶ It also affected the Women's International Democratic Federation, which the SWC co-founded and played an important role in. See Yulia Gradskaia, *The Women's International Democratic Federation, the Global South and the Cold War: Defending the Rights of Women of the "Whole World"?* (London: Routledge, 2020), 64.

¹⁹⁷ «Контакты с феминистским движением открывают возможности работы с женским населением капиталистических стран, и что особенно важно с женской молодежью, которая явно тяготеет к лозунгам феминизма.»; "Informacii, Pis'ma, Spravki Otdela, Komiteta Sovetskikh Zhenshchin, Posol'stv SSSR Po Voprosam Razvitiya Mezhdunarodnogo Zhenskogo Dvizheniya [Information, Letters, References from the Department, the Soviet Women's Committee and USSR Embassies on the Development of the International Women's Movement]," December 1973, F.5, Op.66, D.963, RGANI, ll. 69-70.

¹⁹⁸ Galkina, *Komitet Sovetskikh Zhenshchin: Stranitsy Istorii (1941-1992)*, 15.

¹⁹⁹ Knopova, "The Soviet Union and the International Domain of Women's Rights and Struggles," 131.

²⁰⁰ Varga-Harris, "Soviet Women and Internationalism in Socialist Travel Itineraries in the 1950s and 1960s"; Peri, *Dear Unknown Friend*.

delegations to their flats.²⁰¹ Nina Popova had a very warm and close relationship with the French WIDF founding president Eugenie Cotton and with the Republican leader of the Spanish Civil War, Dolores Ibarruri, a long-term WIDF vice president.²⁰²

The second way in which the SWC gained the trust of women's organizations abroad was through its involvement in the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF), whose establishment and work the SWC actively supported. On April 23, 1945, Valentina Grizodubova, the then SWC head, sent a letter to Georgi Dimitrov, the secretary of the International Department of the Central Committee (CC) of the CPSU, proposing to establish an international women's organization through which the SWC would be able to continue its international work after World War II:

The Committee would consider it advisable at this time to consider the question of establishing an International Women's Organization, which would unite the democratic circles of women actively fighting against fascism for peace and freedom. The initiative could come from the Union of Women of France, where Vermeersch (Thorez's wife) presides. The Committee has established the connection with Vermeersch (documents attached).²⁰³

The SWC's contribution to the WIDF was considerable,²⁰⁴ while the WIDF's role internationally was also meaningful.²⁰⁵ It was the WIDF that proposed the UN to hold

²⁰¹ "Stenogramma Zasedaniya Plenuma KSZH. 19 Fevralya 1958 [Transcript of the Meeting of the Plenum of the SWC. February 19, 1958]," February 19, 1958, P7928, Op. 3, d. 1, GARF, l. 62.

²⁰² Knopova, "The Soviet Union and the International Domain of Women's Rights and Struggles," 73–74.

²⁰³ "Dokladnye Zapiski AKSZH Ob Uchastii Predstavitel'nic SSSR v Mezhdunarodnyh Zhenskih Meropriyatiyah i o Rabote Komiteta v Poslevoennyh Usloviyah, Napravlennye v CK VKP(b) [SWAFC's Reports on Participation of USSR Women Representatives in International Women's Events and on the Committee's Work in the Post-War Period, Sent to the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party of Bolsheviks (b)]," 1945, P7928, Op. 4, D. 1, GARF, l. 7 (ob).

²⁰⁴ Gradskova, *The Women's International Democratic Federation, the Global South and the Cold War*; Gradskova, "The WIDF's Work for Women's Rights in the (Post)Colonial Countries and the 'Soviet Agenda.'"

²⁰⁵ De Haan, "Continuing Cold War Paradigms in Western Historiography of Transnational Women's Organisations"; Francisca de Haan, "The Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF): History, Main

International Women's Year, to name just on example.²⁰⁶ At the same time, despite its considerable contribution, the SWC had to navigate its position within the WIDF so as not to feed the prejudice that the WIDF was a Soviet proxy organization. A discussion during the SWC Presidium meeting in 1957 about the WIDF's work, that is, after the Soviet military intervention in Hungary, provides an excellent example of such political choreography. When one of the SWC members proposed, that the SWC should actively speak for disarmament and publicly endorse the WIDF documents, Popova cut her off with the phrase, "It is not us who need to speak now, but others who need to speak."²⁰⁷ The WIDF work occupied an essential place in the SWC's reports to the CC CPSU, simultaneously giving the SWC legitimacy within the Soviet system and creating opportunities for the SWC to contribute meaningfully to the international women's movement.

Its active involvement in the WIDF also helped the SWC to establish contacts with women's organizations around the globe, which was not that easy in the beginning. As Petrova wrote, the SWC struggled with establishing such contacts during its early years, and the resonance of the SWC's first meeting was lower in comparison with that of the other anti-fascist Committees. The SWC's appeal was published in UK newspapers, and it received responses from British, Romanian, and Chinese women.²⁰⁸ It was especially urgent and challenging to reach out to women's organizations in the USA. Petrova quoted a letter from the People's Commissariat for Foreign Affairs to the SWC of May 5, 1943: "Most of the major American women's organizations are reactionary and anti-Soviet. The Embassy asked a significant

Agenda, and Contributions, 1945-1991," in *Women and Social Movements (WASI) Online Archive*, 2012, <https://alexanderstreet.com/products/women-and-social-movements-international-1840-present>.

²⁰⁶ de Haan, "The Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF): History, Main Agenda, and Contributions, 1945-1991," 13.

²⁰⁷ «He нам сейчас надо выступать, а нужно, чтобы выступали другие.»; "Protokoly Zasedanij №№ 1-19 Prezidiuma Komiteta Sovetskikh Zhenshchin Za Yanvar'-Dekabr' 1957 g. Podlinniki. [Minutes of Meetings No. 1-19 of the Presidium of the Committee of Soviet Women for January-December 1957. Originals]," December 10, 1957, P7928, Op. 2, D.1822, GARF, l. 81.

²⁰⁸ Galkina, *Komitet Sovetskikh Zhenshchin: Stranitsy Istorii (1941-1992)*, 13-15.

number of women's organizations to send greetings to the USSR, but these requests often remained unanswered."²⁰⁹ Over time the situation improved.

At least twice in its history, SWC members were invited to join the executive bodies of Western women's organizations. The SWC had to turn down these invitations due to objections or unarticulated restrictions from the Soviet state and their minimal autonomy in building solidarities. First, in 1943 the International Alliance of Women for Suffrage and Equal Citizenship proposed the SWC that someone join their executive board to start a broader cooperation. The SWC even recommended T. Fedorova for that position. However, the Soviet ambassador in the UK collected "additional information about the organization" and "concluded that it is not advisable for a Soviet representative to participate in the work of this Union."²¹⁰ The second invitation was to join a special committee of the 1973 preparatory conference of the US National Organization for Women (to be held in Cambridge, Massachusetts, from June 1 to 4, 1973, mentioned above). Marietta Stepanyants, a philosopher and a SWC member, was elected to the Executive Committee of the Conference to represent the USSR. However, she turned down the invitation because she did "not consider it possible to speak on behalf of the SWC, since the SWC has not yet discussed the question of its attitude to the upcoming conference."²¹¹ These two cases exemplify that, on the one hand, the SWC managed to gain a particular reputation as the key Soviet women's organization. On the other hand, its subjection to the Soviet state severely restricted its room for maneuver.

The third way in which the SWC built its international reputation was the direct material and professional support it provided for the women's movement from the Global South, such as through scholarships, travel support, healthcare provisions, delegations, and professional

²⁰⁹ «Большинство крупных американских женских организаций являются реакционными и настроены антисоветски. Посольство обращалось с просьбой к значительному числу женских организаций послать приветствия в СССР, но эти обращения оставались часто без ответов.»; Petrova, *Antifashistskie Komitety v SSSR: 1941-1945 Gg*, 189–90.

²¹⁰ Petrova, 193. Notably, Galkina wrote that the SWC joined the Union. See: Galkina, 34

²¹¹ RGANI, F.5, Op.66, D. 963, l. 66

exchange.²¹² The SWC archive keeps numerous requests for financial and other types of support from women's organizations in the Global South.²¹³ For example, its annual report for 1977 stated that the SWC provided material support to women's organizations from 52 countries.²¹⁴ However, the SWC could not always meet the expectations from abroad, as Banks' research discussed above showed.²¹⁵

Finally, they had to mobilize the support from Soviet women to be able to speak on their behalf internationally. The SWC organized meetings with women's *aktiv* (active women): informing them about the WIDF activities,²¹⁶ preparing them for joining delegations abroad,²¹⁷ and for hosting foreign delegations.²¹⁸ However, the success of this practice in achieving broad support for the organization is difficult to establish. Moreover, during the 1958 SWC Plenum, one of the speakers addressed the problem of the invisibility of the SWC's work among Soviet women: "Wide circles of Soviet women do not know so well the activities of the Committee."²¹⁹ According to other speaker, it was very difficult or even impossible to subscribe to *Sovetskaja Zhenshchina*.²²⁰ As Alexis Peri has shown, the journal was expensive, and its circulation within the Soviet Union was relatively small.²²¹ The problem of connection with Soviet women persisted. During the 1965 Plenum, Lydia Petrova, the SWC's deputy head, addressed the problem that even women participating in the receiving foreign delegations in the Soviet Union did not often identify themselves as active of the SWC (while being perceived as such by the Committee):

²¹² Knopova, "The Soviet Union and the International Domain of Women's Rights and Struggles," 98–112.

²¹³ "Dokladnye Zapiski, Otchety i Spravki o Deyatel'nosti KSZH, Napravlennye v CK KPSS [Memoranda, Reports and Briefings on the Activities of the SWC Sent to the CPSU Central Committee]," February 25, 1957, P7928, Op.4, D.107, GARF, 1.25

²¹⁴ Galkina, *Komitet Sovetskikh Zhenshchin: Stranisy Istorii (1941-1992)*, 573.

²¹⁵ Banks, "Sewing Machines for Socialism?"

²¹⁶ GARF, P7928, Op. 2, D. 503, 931, 956, 957.

²¹⁷ Galkina, *Komitet Sovetskikh Zhenshchin: Stranisy Istorii (1941-1992)*, 472.

²¹⁸ GARF, P7928, Op. 3, D.1, 1.23.

²¹⁹ « широкие круги советских женщин не знают так хорошо ни деятельности Комитета. »; GARF, P7928, Op.3, D.1, 1.33.

²²⁰ GARF, P7928, Op.3, D.1, 11.79, 96.

²²¹ Peri, "New Soviet Woman," 623–24.

When our guests come to our republics and cities, they look for members of the Committee. When they talk to us, they learn that the Soviet Women Committee unites trade unions, the Central Union [Zentrsoyuz] and many other organizations, unites housewives. And when these guests come to the places and talk to our women there, they ask: Are you a member of the Committee? The women answer: No. ²²²

She called on SWC members to wider spread the information about the SWC and to make sure that “our ordinary women knew that the Committee represented them, too.”²²³

As I will show in the next chapter, the SWC played an important role in the launch and coordination of women’s councils (zhensovety) since the late 1950s, organizations that addressed women’s problems on the shop floor and in the household. These women’s councils developed into a vast network of grassroots women’s groups with various activities.²²⁴ The SWC also received thousands of letters from women across the Soviet Union (for example, in 1974 they received 40,000 letters and 5,000 visits of ordinary women, according to their official report), letters that they usually forwarded to the responsible governmental bodies or addressed on the pages of women’s magazines.²²⁵ Moreover, the SWC’s reports, besides being signs of total loyalty and good service on the SWC’s part, were sometimes used to articulate problems existing in the USSR and, hence, to lobby for improvement. For example, its reports from 1955 quoted remarks foreign delegates had made about the huge lines in stores, expensive goods, bad

²²² «Когда приезжают наши гости в наши республики и города, то там ищут членов Комитета. В разговоре с нами они узнаю, что Комитет советских женщин объединяет профсоюзы, центрсоюз и много других организаций, объединяет домохозяек. А когда эти гости приезжают на места и разговаривают там с нашими женщинами, спрашивают: Вы член Комитета? Женщины отвечают: нет.» ; “Stenogramma Zasedaniya Plenuma Komiteta Ot 12 Iyulya 1965g. [Transcript of the Meeting of the Plenum of the Committee of July 12, 1965.],” July 12, 1965, P7928, Op.3, D.1376, GARF., l. 72.

²²³ “наши рядовые женщины знали, что Комитет представляет и их...”; GARF, P7928, Op.3, D.1376, l. 72.

²²⁴ Ilić, “What Did Women Want? Khrushchev and the Revival of the Zhensovety.”

²²⁵ “Protokoly Zasedanii Prezidiuma KSZh Za 1974g.[Minutes of the SWC Presidium Meetings for 1974.],” January 12 - December 7, 1974, P7928, Op. 3, D.3380, GARF, l.31; “Protokoly №№ 1-5 Zasedanii Prezidiuma KSZh [Minutes Nos. 1-5 of the SWC Presidium Meetings],” January 7-October 15, 1975, P7928, Op. 3, d.3654, GARF, l.4; Peri, *Dear Unknown Friend*, 203.

clothes, monotonous architecture, the bad conditions of the toilets, retirement benefits insufficient to live on independently, the low salaries for doctors, low salaries in general, a significant amount of drunk people, women doing hard physical labor, and medical drugs not covered by health insurance.²²⁶ There is evidence that the SWC members sometimes used these comments to justify their own initiatives. For example, referring to the foreigners' comments after the "International Seminar on Women's Equality in the Soviet Union" in Moscow in 1956, SWC head Nina Popova proposed some legislative changes to address "the critical comments of the Seminar participants."²²⁷

But if these various activities showed an effort to build connections with women across the Soviet Union the SWC was hostile towards the independent women's dissident movement, launched by the almanac "Zhenshchina i Rossiya" [Woman and Russia] in the autumn of 1979, as I will discuss in Chapter Five. In general, the SWC's reputation among women in the USSR was ambiguous. As Racioppi and O'Sullivan See and Sperling showed, many women in the post-Soviet feminist movement were skeptical of the SWC, including some of its own former members. Such distrust was substantiated by the encounters of some feminist activists with the SWC. For example, feminist dissident and editor of the "Woman and Russia" almanac, Tatiana Mamonova, tried to join the SWC in the late 1960s but was rejected.²²⁸ Ol'ga Bessolova, a co-founder of the women's council (zhensovet) at the Central Aerohydrodynamics Institute in 1985, in her interview with Racioppi and O'Sullivan See mentioned that in the late 1980s, she was not approved as a candidate for the Supreme Soviet elections by the local SWC branch.²²⁹

²²⁶ "Otchety, Informacii o Prebyvanii v SSSR Inostrannyh Zhenskih Delegacij, Ch. I [Reports on the Stay in the USSR Foreign Women's Delegations. Part I]," January 11 - August 29, 1955, P7928, Op.4, D. 95, GARF; "Otchety, Informacii o Prebyvanii v SSSR Inostrannyh Zhenskih Delegacij, Ch. II [Reports on the Stay in the USSR Foreign Women's Delegations. Part II]," November 18 - December 9, 1955, 7928, Op.4, D. 96, GARF.

²²⁷ Alexandra Talaver, "Nina Vasilievna Popova (1908–1994): 'Woman in the Land of Socialism,'" in *The Palgrave Handbook of Communist Women Activists Around the World*, ed. Francisca De Haan, Palgrave Macmillan, 2023, 256.

²²⁸ Anna Sidorevich, "The Leningrad Women's Movement (1979-1982): Between Soviet Emancipation and Second-Wave Feminism" (Paris, Centre d'histoire de Sciences Po, 2024), 175.

²²⁹ Racioppi and O'Sullivan See, *Women's Activism in Contemporary Russia*, 120.

The last example is that of Elena Ershova, later a founder of Gaia's Women's Center in Moscow, who worked as a consultant for the SWC from 1970. Starting in 1985, she became active in the SWC, leading a social committee that worked with American and Canadian women. In 1989 she proposed some reforms to the SWC's organizational system but was rebuffed by one of a SWC's deputy heads, according to her interview with Racioppi and O'Sullivan See.²³⁰ These experiences showed the SWC's limitations in the cooperation with women from outside the Committee (even if they were highly educated) the and the rigidity of the SWC as an institution.

1.3.2. Cultural and social-organizational resources

The next types of resource that the resource mobilization framework suggests for analyzing how a social movement organization developed are cultural resources and social-organizational resources. As they are both connected with spreading the message and with mobilization, I will consider them together without differentiation as it would be difficult to delineate them. Cultural resources "include tacit knowledge about how to accomplish specific tasks like enacting a protest event, holding a news conference, running a meeting, forming an organization, initiating a festival, or surfing the web [...] tactical repertoires, organizational templates, technical or strategic know-how encompassing both mobilization and production technologies,"²³¹ and social-organizational "are those that help spread the message [...]: intentional social organization, which is created to spread the movement's message, and appropriable social organization, which is created for reasons other than moving for social change."²³²

²³⁰ Racioppi and O'Sullivan See, 171.

²³¹ McCarthy and Edwards, "Resources and Social Movement Mobilization," 125–26.

²³² McCarthy and Edwards, 125–26.

The main topic of the SWC's mobilizing efforts were peace and disarmament, that is, when these were beneficial for the Soviet state. In its peace campaigns, the SWC successfully used what we call a social movement's repertoire: open letters, petitions, appeals, meetings, and marches. For example, "Peace March 82", a big international event with an impressive route (Stockholm-Helsinki-Moscow-Minsk; and Moscow-Vena), started with the meeting in Stockholm, on July 13, 1982. This March was co-organized by the SWC, the AUCCTU, the Soviet Peace Committee, the Committee of Youth Organizations from the Soviet side and WILPF members from Norway, Sweden and Finland.²³³

None of the SWC's public mobilizing activities aimed at changes within the Soviet Union or in its foreign policy—as mentioned, the SWC did not voice any criticism about Soviet military interventions in Hungary in 1956, the Czech Republic in 1968, and Afghanistan in 1979. While I found no evidence of any critical stance towards Soviet foreign policy, behind closed doors the SWC members did critically address domestic problems, as I will show in the following chapters about the decriminalization of abortion in 1955 and IWY in the USSR. Nevertheless, internationally the SWC consistently promoted the Soviet success regarding the woman question.

One of the key instruments in showcasing Soviet achievements was delegation exchange, which allowed the SWC to expand its network and spread its message. As they reported in 1958, since 1947, the SWC had accommodated 189 women's delegations from 71 countries, totaling 1220 women, among them 149 delegations from 59 "capitalist countries" and 40 delegations from the socialist bloc and Yugoslavia.²³⁴ Between 1945 and 1958, the SWC sent 115 women's delegations to 28 countries, among them 46 to international events, 33 to 17 "capitalist countries," and 36 to the socialist bloc and Yugoslavia. Difficulties in acquiring visas were one of the reasons for the disbalance; Soviet women, for example, were denied British

²³³ Galkina, *Komitet Sovetskikh Zhenshchin: Stranisy Istorii (1941-1992)*, 86–89.

²³⁴ GARF, P7928, Op.3, D.1, l.8.

visas numerous times and Federal Republic of Germany visas in 1957.²³⁵ Despite the problems and high costs, the SWC increased its activities. In 1977 alone, for example, they sent 54 delegations abroad and received 99 delegations.²³⁶

Accommodating delegations look easy only in the SWC annual reports. In fact, the work with delegations demanded enormous efforts and communication, which started with advocating for such activities in front of the CC CPSU. Thus, in the 1955 report, the SWC underscored the “positive work of the delegations upon [their] return”²³⁷ and outlined separate reasons for each delegation, such as “the need for moral support and friendly solidarity”²³⁸ for Algerian women, the fact that British delegates “actively contribute to the dissemination of truthful information about Soviet reality,”²³⁹ and that Argentinian, Brazilian, Cuban, Pakistani, Syrian and Tunisian women had requested the visit.²⁴⁰ For each delegation, the SWC had to calculate the costs and apply for the necessary funds from the CC CPSU, as well as arrange their accommodation, tickets, food, etc. On average, delegations stayed for 3-4 weeks, reported Popova in 1958.²⁴¹ Lastly, the SWC had to plan routes and organize relevant programs. For example, a Danish delegation wanted to see a church in 1955,²⁴² whereas the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) delegation requested to visit a prison in 1956.²⁴³ Varga-Harris’s recent article on the SWC’s work with delegations from South Asia and Africa exemplifies how the SWC attentively adjusted routes in response to special requests or

²³⁵ GARF, P7928, Op.3, D.1, l.11.

²³⁶ Galkina, *Komitet Sovetskikh Zhenshchin: Stranitsy Istorii (1941-1992)*, 573.

²³⁷ «положительная работа делегации в их стране после возвращения»; GARF, P7928, Op.4, D. 95, l.3.

²³⁸ «необходимость моральной поддержки и дружеской солидарности»; GARF, P7928, Op.4, D. 95, l.3.

²³⁹ «активно способствуют распространению правдивых сведений о советской действительности»; GARF, P7928, Op.4, D. 95, l.3.

²⁴⁰ GARF, P7928, Op.4, D. 95, l.3.

²⁴¹ GARF, P7928, Op.3, D.1, l.8.

²⁴² GARF, P7928, Op.4, D. 95, l. 57.

²⁴³ “Dokladnye Zapiski, Otchety o Deyatel’nosti KSZH, Napravlennye v CK KPSS [Reporting Notes, Reports on SWC Activities Sent to the Central Committee of the CPSU],” November 2, 1956, P7928, Op.4, D.99, GARF, l. 28.

propaganda needs.²⁴⁴ The need to expand the list of sites shown to the delegations was discussed during the 1958 Plenum.²⁴⁵

The SWC also organized numerous conferences and seminars. Overall, between 1945 and 1991, they organized at least 23 international gatherings for women.²⁴⁶ This included significant international events like the 1956 Seminar “Equality of Women in the USSR” in Moscow, the first international seminar organized as a follow-up to the UN General Assembly Resolution 926 (X), by which the Assembly established the United Nations program of advisory services in the field of human rights, and involved representatives of UNESCO, the UN Commission on the Status of Women, and the World Health Organization, as well as members of 37 women’s organizations (only 10 out of which were socialist or pro-socialist),²⁴⁷ and the 1963 WIDF Moscow World Congress of Women, which boosted the global struggle for women’s rights.²⁴⁸

Due to the state's patronage and SWC members’ political savvy, the SWC was also able to a certain degree to influence Soviet media and cultural production to carve out space for news and information regarding women’s rights. These included exhibitions, newspaper articles, brochures, radio broadcasts, and cinema productions designed to create convincing images of Soviet achievements in the sphere of women’s rights.²⁴⁹ As the chair of the SWC Commission for propaganda and information, comrade Konyushnaya, stated during the 1960 SWC Plenum that this Commission included representatives of such propaganda organizations as TASS [the key Soviet news agency], radio, television, the Sovinformburo, the All-Union Society for the Dissemination of Political and Scientific Knowledge; representatives of the central media, the USSR Academy of Sciences, the Central Statistical Directorate, the Ministry of Health and

²⁴⁴ Varga-Harris, “Soviet Women and Internationalism in Socialist Travel Itineraries in the 1950s and 1960s.”

²⁴⁵ GARF, P7928, Op.3, D.1, L.42

²⁴⁶ Galkina, *Komitet Sovetskikh Zhenshchin: Stranisy Istorii (1941-1992)*, 450–653.

²⁴⁷ GARF, P7928, Op. 4, D. 99, l. 21

²⁴⁸ Francisca de Haan, “The Global Left-Feminist 1960s,” in *The Routledge Handbook of the Global Sixties : Between Protest and Nation-Building*, ed. Jian Chen, Routledge Handbooks (London ; New York, NY : Routledge, 2018, 2018), 230–42.

²⁴⁹ GARF, P7928, Op.3, D.1, l. 22: “Between 1952 and 1958, 186 different articles and documents dealing with these issues were published in the central press alone.”

other organizations which were important for propaganda work.²⁵⁰ In addition, Konyshanaya mentioned that “we managed to achieve” that in all widely circulated publications of Sovinformburo, there was a person responsible for the “woman’s page.”²⁵¹

The SWC also published the magazine *Sovetskaja zhenshhina/Soviet Woman* and was responsible for the Russian-language version of the WIDF magazine *Women of the Whole World*. In 1958, *Soviet Woman* had a print run of 200,000 copies in 10 languages, of which 150,000 were circulated abroad, and 50,000 in the USSR.²⁵² In 1987, it had a print run of 2,5 million copies in 14 languages.²⁵³ As historian Alexis Peri has demonstrated, finding a way to create a realistic but attractive picture of Soviet women and life was a challenging task.²⁵⁴

1.3.3 Material resources

Material resources are defined as “what economists would call financial and physical capital, including monetary resources, property, office space, equipment, and supplies.”²⁵⁵

In their 1987 brochure, the SWC wrote that they received money from the Peace Fund and sales of the official women’s magazines (21 magazines with a total circulation of 35 million copies).²⁵⁶ Such a funding scheme made them sound like an NGO. However, the Soviet Peace Fund was not an independent or transparent organization. It existed on donations but, in the words of historian Metta Spencer, “never had to give a public accounting of its income or expenditures, nor was it governed by an elected board of directors.”²⁵⁷ The Soviet Peace Fund served as a smokescreen to hide the state’s financial support, to make the SWC looking more like an independent public organization. Before the Peace Fund was established in 1961, from

²⁵⁰ “Stenogramma Zasedaniya Plenuma Komiteta Ot 17 Fevralya 1960 g. [Transcript of the Meeting of the Plenum of the Committee of February 17, 1960.],” February 17, 1960, P7928, Op.3, D.363, GARF, l. 70.

²⁵¹ GARF, P7928, Op.3, D.363, l. 73.

²⁵² GARF, P7928, Op.3, D.1, l. 16.

²⁵³ Fed'yushova, *Komitet Sovetskikh Zhenshin [Soviet Women's Committee]*, 17.

²⁵⁴ Peri, “New Soviet Woman.”

²⁵⁵ “McCarthy and Edwards, “Resources and Social Movement Mobilization,” 126.

²⁵⁶ Fed'yushova, *Komitet Sovetskikh Zhenshin [Soviet Women's Committee]*, 17–18.

²⁵⁷ Metta Spencer, *The Russian Quest for Peace and Democracy* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2010), 20.

1946 to 1963, the SWC received direct funding from the USSR Ministry of Finance; besides their basic budget for salaries, they asked for additional funds for delegation exchanges.²⁵⁸ The negotiations in most cases were successful (with slight cuts) and very fast, the SWC received answers from the Ministry within five working days.²⁵⁹

The salaries paid to SWC employees were much higher than average, even in the state administration. The average salary in the USSR in 1955 was 711 rubles a month, and for employees of the state and public institutions it was 796 rubles on average.²⁶⁰ The SWC's head was officially a voluntary position, but the SWC deputy head and executive secretary received 1800 rubles monthly.²⁶¹ The *Soviet Woman's* Editor-in-chief earned 2500 rubles, and the deputy editor earned 2200 rubles, with these salaries indicating the importance of this journal for the state.²⁶² Overall, in the *Soviet Woman's* editorial board only proofreaders, a stenographer, couriers, drivers and cleaners earned less than the USSR average, whereas the rest earned above 1000 rubles a month. In the SWC, the situation was similar. It was especially beneficial to be the head of a delegation abroad because such a position not only included trips but also a considerable remuneration. For example, in 1955, Nina Popova, as the head of a delegation for a 10-day travel, received 3000 rubles.²⁶³

During World War II, according to Galkina, the SWC had only one tiny room at its disposal,²⁶⁴ but for its meetings and Plena it could use one of the most prominent venues in the USSR—the Pillar Hall of the House of Unions. The SWC held its meetings there throughout

²⁵⁸ GARF, F.P7928, Op. d. 86, Op.4, dd. 9, 69, 81, 91, 100, 108, 117, 126, 136, 144, 151, 160.

²⁵⁹ “Vypiski Iz Postanovlenij i Rasporyazhenij SM SSSR i Perepiska s Minfinom o Finansirovanii AKSZH [Extracts from Resolutions and Orders of the USSR Council of Ministers and Correspondence with the Ministry of Finance on the Financing of the SWAFC],” December 5, 1955, P7928, Op.4, D.91, GARF, I.8.

²⁶⁰ “Statisticheskaja Tablitsa TSSU SSSR «Srednemesiachnaia Denezhnaia Zarabotnaia Plata Rabochikh i Sluzhashchikh Po Otrastiam Narodnogo Khoziaistva SSSR v 1940, 1945, 1950-1955 Gg.» [Statistical Table of the Central Statistical Office of the USSR ‘Average Monthly Cash Wages of Workers and Employees by Branches of the National Economy of the USSR in 1940, 1945, 1950-1955’],” n.d., <https://istmat.org/node/18454>.

²⁶¹ “Shtatnoe Raspisanie i Smeta Raskhodov Na 1956 g. [Staffing and Cost Estimates for 1956],” 1956, P7928, Op. 2, D.18216, GARF, I.3.

²⁶² GARF, F.P7928, Op.2, D.18216, I.4

²⁶³ GARF, F.P7928, Op.4, D.91, I.10

²⁶⁴ Galkina, *Komitet Sovetskikh Zhenshchin: Stranisy Istorii (1941-1992)*, 19.

its history. In 1968, the SWC got its own building in the center of Moscow, on Nemirova-Danchenko street, 6, which was granted upon the SWC head Valentina Tereshkova's request. Besides the building, they acquired their own cars, "high-frequency" communication, and a Kremlin phone.²⁶⁵

In conclusion, the SWC enjoyed greater financial security and prosperity than any other women's organization in the Soviet Union, then or at any time, but its material resources depended solely on the Soviet state.

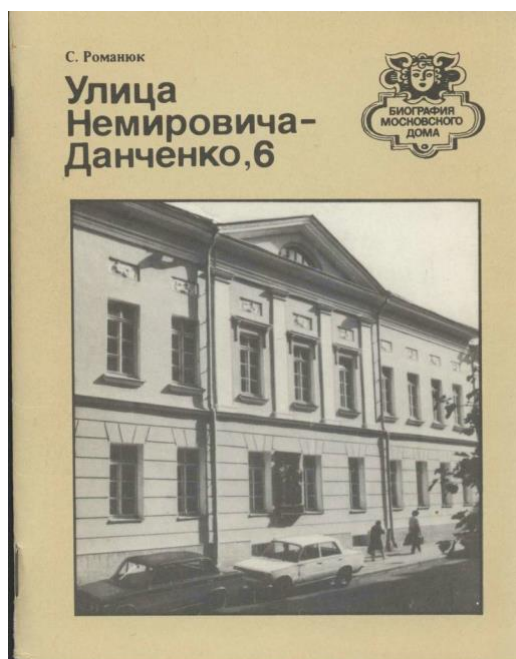


Illustration 1 Book cover with the picture of the SWC's building. 1983. Source: GARAGE Archive

1.3.4. Human resources

Human resources "includes resources like labor, experience, skills, and expertise. We also include leadership in this category because it involves a combination of other human resources included here."²⁶⁶

²⁶⁵ Nikolay Kamanin, "Diary Entry, 1.10.1968," n.d., <https://corpus.prozhito.org/note/30267>.

²⁶⁶ McCarthy and Edwards, "Resources and Social Movement Mobilization," 125–26.

The SWC had paid employees and volunteer members. The paid employees included the SWC vice-head, secretaries, translators, referents, consultants, and technical staff. The salary of the SWC president was not included in its payroll; officially it was a voluntary position. The SWC's staff increased steadily. In 1946, the SWC had 30 employees;²⁶⁷ in 1955 — 46 employees;²⁶⁸ in 1972 — 64 employees;²⁶⁹ in 1976 — 94,²⁷⁰ in 1980 — 105.²⁷¹ As I showed above, the salaries in the SWC were higher than the average in the state service.

The SWC members were volunteers and they had a representative function; they participated in SWC Plena on behalf of the women of their enterprises, cities, regions or republics, they participated in Soviet delegations abroad, hosted visiting foreign delegations, and organized events for local women's *aktiv*. From its very first meeting in 1941, the SWC united prominent Soviet women. In the words of historian Nina Petrova, the resources and personnel of the Sovinformburo, which organized the first anti-fascist meeting of Soviet women, showed that “this direction [propaganda] of the ideological work had a high importance.”²⁷² Those who gave speeches at the founding meeting of the SWAFC/SWC in the Pillar Hall of the House of Unions included pilots Marina Raskova and Valentina Grizodubova, both Heroes of the Soviet Union,²⁷³ singer Valeria Barsova, writer Anna Karavaeva, Dolores Ibarruri,²⁷⁴ the Romanian communist leader Ana Pauker,²⁷⁵ rising Soviet politician Nina

²⁶⁷ “Shtatnoe Raspisanie AKSZh Na 1946 g.[SWAFC Staff Schedule for 1946.],” 1945, F.P7928, Op.2, D.86, GARF, I.2.

²⁶⁸ GARF, F. P7928, Op. 2, D.18216, I.4.

²⁶⁹ “Shtatnoe Raspisanie, Smety Raskhodov [Staffing Table, Cost Estimates],” 1972, F.P7928, Op.3, D.3144, GARF, I.9.

²⁷⁰ “Shtatnoe Raspisanie [Staffing Table],” April 10, 1976, F.P7928, Op.3, D.4203, GARF, I.2.

²⁷¹ “Shtatnoe Raspisanie [Staffing Table],” May 16, 1980, F.P7928, Op.3, D.5296, GARF, I.1.

²⁷² Petrova, *Antifashistskie Komitety v SSSR: 1941-1945* Gg, 20.

²⁷³ Anna Krylova, “Stalinist Identity from the Viewpoint of Gender: Rearing a Generation of Professionally Violent Women-Fighters in 1930s Stalinist Russia,” *Gender & History* 16, no. 3 (2004): 626–53, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0953-5233.2004.00359.x>.

²⁷⁴ Mercedes Yusta Rodrigo, “Dolores Ibárruri, Pasionaria (1895–1989): Communist Woman of Steel, Global Icon,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Communist Women Activists Around the World* (Switzerland: Springer International Publishing AG, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-13127-1>.

²⁷⁵ Ștefan Bosomitu and Luciana Jinga, “Ana Pauker (1893–1960): The Infamous Romanian Woman Communist Leader,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Communist Women Activists Around the World* (Switzerland: Springer International Publishing AG, 2023), 141–66, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-13127-1_6.

Popova, engineer of Metrostroi (Metro construction) Tatiana Fedorova, and the head of the Moscow Circle Railway, Zinaida Troitskaya, gave speeches at the first anti-fascist meeting of Soviet women, which took place on September 7, 1941 in the Pillar Hall of the House of Unions. The actual Committee was formed in the spring of 1942 (exact date is unknown) and consisted of 24 members, including prominent politicians, professional women, famous artists, and, importantly, the head of the Zhenotdel from 1924 to 1925 Klavdia Nikolaeva, who also participated in the 1941 first meeting.²⁷⁶

The SWC membership increased substantially over the years: in November 1945, the Committee had 70 members;²⁷⁷ in 1958, 135 members, out of which 117 attended the Plenum;²⁷⁸ in 1970, 262 members, 185 out of which attended the Plenum.²⁷⁹ As these numbers show, the SWC was not a mass organization but an elite women's organization. Moreover, the majority of its members were from the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR), and a considerable part of these were from Moscow or the Moscow region. For example, in 1958, 91 out of 135 members were from the RSFSR, 50 from Moscow, and 10 from the Moscow region.²⁸⁰ And another example: at the 1968 Plenum, 90 delegates were from Moscow, 12 from Ukrainian SSR, 5 from Belarusian SSR, 5 from Moldovian SSR, 4 from Latvian SSR, 5 from Lithuanian SSR, 3 from Estonian SSR, 4 from Azerbaijan SSR, 6 from Armenian SSR, 5 from Georgian SSR, 5 from Uzbek SSR, 4 from Kyrgyz SSR, 5 from Tadjik SSR, 4 from Turkmen SSR, 3 from Kazakh SSR, 1-2 representatives of RSFSR regions (with exceptionally high number of representatives of Leningrad region — 9) amounting up to 58 delegates.²⁸¹ These

²⁷⁶ *K Zhenshchinam Vsego Mira [to Women of the Whole World]* (Moskva: OGIZ, 1941).

²⁷⁷ Galkina, *Komitet Sovetskikh Zhenshchin: Stranitsy Istorii (1941-1992)*, 42.

²⁷⁸ "Dokladnye Zapiski, Informatsii, Otchety o Deiatel'nosti KSZh, Napravlennye v TsK KPSS [Reporting Notes, Information, Reports on SWC Activities Sent to the CC of the CPSU]," January 1-December 4, 1958, F.P7928, Op.4, D.116, GARF, I.12.

²⁷⁹ "Stenogramma Zasedaniia Plenuma KSZh [Transcript of the SWC Plenum Meeting]," November 30-December 1, 1970, F.P7928, Op.3, D.2387, GARF.L.1

²⁸⁰ GARF, F.P7928, Op.4, D. 116, L.15-16

²⁸¹ GARF, F. P7928, Op.3, D. 1888, ll. 4-16.

regional disparities in representation were sometimes discussed at the SWC Plena, as I will show in Chapter Two.

In an interview in the 1990s with Racioppi and O’Sullivan See, Aleftina Fedulova, the last SWC head, said: “surely the task was not to unite all the women, it was necessary to put together and involve prominent women whose names and whose authority could somehow influence legislation.”²⁸² However, I would doubt that their ability to influence the legislation was the only or the main reason behind the appointment strategy, but rather the fact that they had to represent the Soviet Union to a foreign audience.

According to the 1987 SWC brochure, the SWC members and head were elected at the All-Union Conference of Women, which took place every five years.²⁸³ But since the first such Conference only took place in 1987,²⁸⁴ the procedure must have been different in earlier years. At this point I do not know how exactly decisions concerning the SWC employees and members were made: how much of it depended on the SWC Presidium, on individual applications, and/or the CC or regional Party Committee. However, formally, Party Committees “allocated”²⁸⁵ members to the SWC, as a 1958 SWC’s letter to the CC CPSU shows:

In order to ensure the most representative composition of the Committee, we request that the Central Committees of the Parties of the Soviet Republics and regional committees of the CPSU be instructed to recommend representatives of republics and regions to the Committee of

²⁸² Racioppi and O’Sullivan See, *Women’s Activism in Contemporary Russia*, 86.

²⁸³ Fedyushova, *Komitet Sovetskikh Zhenschin [Soviet Women’s Committee]*, 16.

²⁸⁴ “Dokumenty Vsesoiuznoi Konferentsii Zhenshchin (Stenogramma, Spiski Zhenshchin Prezidiuma Vsesoiuznoi Konferentsii i KSZh, Priglasitel’nyi Bilet, Plan Razmeshcheniia Delegatov, Plan Podgotovki Konferentsii, Polozhenie o KSZh, Vyrezki Iz Gazet) [Documents of the All-Union Women’s Conference (Transcript, Lists of Women of the Presidium of the All-Union Conference and the SWC, Invitation Card, Delegates’ Accommodation Plan, Conference Preparation Plan, SWC Regulations, Newspaper Clippings)],” January 30, 1987, F.P7928, Op.3, D. 7802, GARF.

²⁸⁵ « выделяли », GARF, F.P7928, Op.4, D. 116, L.18

Soviet Women. The list of regions and cities from which it is desirable to have representatives in the Committee is attached.²⁸⁶

To which degree the nominated women themselves had a say in their appointment for now also remains unclear. As said, SWC members were not paid, but they had access to trips abroad, received daily compensations in case of these trips, and received considerable payment if they headed a delegation.²⁸⁷ Yet, complaints about members who did not participate or those who were “allocated” but had not attended Plena²⁸⁸ hinted that not all women were enthusiastic about this additional workload, even if it was sometimes beneficial.

The case of Valentina Tereshkova’s appointment to SWC head in 1968, as documented in Colonel General Nikolay Kamanin’s diary is telling.²⁸⁹ Tereshkova was the world’s first female cosmonaut and as such in 1963 had acquired world fame. It was Nikolay Kamanin who prepared her for the space flight. At the end of February 1968, Boris Ponomarev, a Secretary of the Central Committee of the CPSU, invited Valentina Tereshkova to his office and proposed that she become the SWC head, as Nina Popova’s successor. The proposal deeply frightened Tereshkova who felt unprepared and unwilling to abandon her work in cosmonautics. Despite Kamanin’s encouragement to embrace a public political role, she preferred to focus on completing her studies at the Zhukovsky Academy, maintaining her work at the Cosmonaut Training Center, and caring for her little daughter, whose health

²⁸⁶ GARF, F.P7928, Op.4, D. 116, L.12; Для обеспечения наиболее представительного состава Комитета просим дать указание Центральным Комитетам партий союзных республик, крайкомам и обкомам КПСС рекомендовать в состав Комитета советских женщин представителей республик, краев и областей. Список областей и городов, из которых желательно иметь представителей в составе Комитета, прилагается.

²⁸⁷ GARF, F.P7928, Op.4, D. 91, l. 10, 49, 64

²⁸⁸ GARF, F.P7928, Op.4, D. 116, L.18

²⁸⁹ Nikolay Kamanin, “Diary,” Прожито, accessed November 7, 2024, <https://corpus.prozhito.org/person/39>.

required constant attention.²⁹⁰ She was sure the SWC position would mark the end of her aspirations in spaceflight and engineering, leaving her feeling despondent about her personal dreams and professional future. She talked about this with Kamanin, several secretaries of the CC, and probably even with Leonid Brezhnev, the General Secretary of the CPSU (1964-1982). However, her personal wishes were overruled, and she was forced to take up the position of the SWC head for which she had zero enthusiasm. As Kamanin recorded in his diary of May 27, 1968:

This Friday, Valya Tereshkova visited me once again. Suslov [Second Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union from 1965, and its unofficial chief ideologue] had announced to her that the Politburo had already decided on her assignment. All Valya's hopes and plans are ruined, she came to me in tears like to her own father and her only defender. I understood what Valya felt, it was useless to comfort her and to try to convince her. Over and over again she came to back to one and only thought: "Everything is gone now" (the space, the academy, the flights, the family, the daughter). I assured Valya that I will do anything in my power so that the new job would let her graduate from the academy and would let her to spend some time with her daughter.

I hope with time Valya will come to terms with her new position. She is very suitable for the role of Soviet Women's Committee head, yet for now

²⁹⁰ This note about Tereshkova as a main care-giver of the daughter illustrated that she embodied female ideal different from the previous generation, for example, Valentina Grizodubova relegated part of her parental responsibilities to her husband. See: Krylova, "Stalinist Identity from the Viewpoint of Gender," 646.

she lacks the most important trait—the desire to give all of herself to this job, to become overwhelmingly interested in it.²⁹¹

As it turned out, Tereshkova very soon became highly engaged in the SWC work, to the degree “that doctors start worrying for her health,” and Kamanin noted with satisfaction that he had been right regarding her suitability for public work, that she had done “more good for the Motherland than any male cosmonaut.”²⁹² However, the way Tereshkova was instrumentalized and Party leaders disregarded her personal aspirations is harrowing. The “Party-tool narrative” seems very convincing here—and the SWC was indeed designed as a tool of the Party.

Importantly, all SWC heads before perestroika had a military background. Its first head, Valentina Grizodubova, a pilot and a Hero of the Soviet Union, was “the only woman to command an all-male long-range bomber regiment” during WWII.²⁹³ Nina Popova was responsible for security and operation of one of the key Moscow districts during the war, which entailed her preparation for underground work in the rear of the enemy; her personal fund contains her fake id, a permit to carry a gun and a certificate for the local military office, issued in 1985, which states that “in the period 1941-42 she assisted in the selection of partisan groups, provided them with uniforms and was the leader of a group of party workers of Krasnopresnensky district, left for underground work behind enemy lines [...] carried out

²⁹¹ Nikolay Kamanin, “Diary Entry, 27.05.1968,” Прожито, May 27, 1968, <https://corpus.prozhito.org/note/30219>. ; В пятницу Валя Терешкова еще раз была у меня. Суслов объявил ей уже состоявшееся решение Политбюро о ее назначении. Все планы и надежды Вали разрушены, вся в слезах она пришла ко мне, как к родному отцу и единственному ее защитнику. Я понимал состояние Вали, утешать и уговаривать ее было бесполезно. Она непрерывно возвращалась к одной и той же мысли: «Все пропало» (космос, академия, полеты, семья, дочь). Я заверил Валу, что сделаю все возможное, чтобы новая работа не помешала ей закончить академию и оставляла время для воспитания дочери.

Я надеюсь, что время примирит Валу с ее новым положением. Для роли председателя Комитета советских женщин Терешкова по всем данным очень подходит, но пока у нее нет главного—желания отдать себя этой работе, загореться интересом к ней.

²⁹² Nikolay Kamanin, “Diary, 5.05.1970,” Прожито, accessed November 7, 2024, <https://corpus.prozhito.org/note/30542>; Nikolay Kamanin, “Diary, 19.02.1970,” Прожито, accessed November 7, 2024, <https://corpus.prozhito.org/note/30502>.

²⁹³ Krylova, “Stalinist Identity from the Viewpoint of Gender,” 649.

a lot of work to prepare the Party apparatus workers for conspiratorial work.”²⁹⁴ Valentina Tereshkova’s preparation for her space flight and the subsequent work took place at Zhukovsky Military Academy; by 1968 she had the rank of lieutenant colonel.²⁹⁵ Ksenia Proskurnikova became the vice-head of the SWC in 1968; her previous career was in the Committee for State Security (KGB) and Soviet intelligence service abroad.²⁹⁶ This choice of SWC leaders clearly shows the expectation of their full loyalty to the state, which was cemented by the oath they took during their (para)military service.



Illustration 2 Valentina Tereshkova is awarding Nina Popova. Valentina Grizodubova is sitting next to them. Source: TsGA.

However, the SWC history I will present in the following chapters will show that many SWC members did not automatically or passively agree with their assigned role of being “Party-tools” but inhabited the political structures in their own way, and fought for women’s

²⁹⁴ “Materialy k Biografii N.V. Popovoi [Materials for the Biography of N.V. Popova],” n.d., F. 11-389, Sd. Op. 2, D.3, TsGA.

²⁹⁵ Galkina, *Komitet Sovetskikh Zhenshchin: Stranitsy Istorii (1941-1992)*, 63–64.

²⁹⁶ Gradskova, *The Women’s International Democratic Federation, the Global South and the Cold War*, 55.

interests also when it went against their male colleagues' views. Completely loyal to the state, they also thought of the state as something that they have right to define.

1.5. Conclusion

The Chapter has shown the transformation of the scholarly perspectives on the SWC during the last fifteen years. For decades dismissed as merely a Party propaganda tool, in the recent scholarship the SWC has emerged in its complex engagement in the international arena, where its work, while serving Soviet propaganda, also contributed to the global women's and peace movement. The SWC in-house history strongly contrasted with the scholarship in two ways. First, it uncritically applauded to the SWC activities in the name of the Soviet Union as great deeds. Second, it paid more attention to their activity within the Soviet Union.

None of the earlier or more recent authors asked questions about the SWC's existence per se, which, as I have argued with reference to the history of other anti-fascist committees and of the Zhenotdel, was far from being self-evident. In this chapter, I explored how the SWC developed as an organization, based on an analysis of SWC's archival documents and using the theoretical lens of resource mobilization theory. I showed that the SWC was designed as a Party propaganda tool, and as such it enjoyed material prosperity, had employees, a building and its own cars. Its members were "allocated" by local party committees and all of its heads before perestroika had a military background, which assumed their loyalty to the state. While serving to Soviet propaganda, the SWC nevertheless made meaningful contributions to transnational women's movement, even in spheres where the situation in Soviet Union was far from the propagated ideal. Importantly, I also showed that the SWC used their reports to the CC CPSU as a source for addressing domestic problems.

I argued that to survive they had to prove their relevance simultaneously to the CPSU, foreign women's organizations and Soviet women. However, the last group seemed to pose most of the problems: being an elite organization, the SWC repeatedly addressed the necessity

to inform and connect with ordinary Soviet women better. The SWC also was not open to the initiative of women outside the Committee, which contributed to its ambiguous reputation.

Chapter Two: “Soviet women walk the streets with their heads held high”: The SWC

Plena as sites of consolidation of women as an interest group

On February 19, 1958, the first SWC Plenum since its last Plenum in 1946 took place.²⁹⁷ In the House of Unions gathered 112 delegates from the Soviet republics and regions; and 100 participants from the Moscow region and from the conference of the Union of Soviet Societies for Friendship and Cultural Contacts (SSOD), another Soviet organization for people's diplomacy, just like the SWC also chaired by Nina Popova (1957-1975). A former ball venue for nobility of the Russian empire. The House of Unions, served during the Soviet time as a venue for many significant events. Its 58 crystal chandeliers saw Clara Zetkin and Diego Rivera and other “friends of the Soviet Union”, the major Soviet stars and world politicians who visited the SU, and the dead bodies of all Soviet leaders before their eternal departure to the Kremlin necropolis.²⁹⁸

As I showed in the previous Chapter, the SWC gathered women from different generations and different backgrounds who might not have met by their free choice but were appointed by the CCs of the Communist Party of different levels. The SWC Plena, thus, were ambivalent spaces. They took place in a very formal, ceremonial setting. From 1958 onward, they happened once every two-three years, and from 1970 onward annually. They followed the conventions of official Soviet language. They gathered women appointed by the local CC CPSU, who often met each other in real life for the first time; however, many of them knew each other from the Soviet media,²⁹⁹ or trips abroad.

²⁹⁷ “Materialy Plenuma AKSZh (Reglament Plenuma, Rezoliutsii, Plan Meropriiatii, Spravki Ob MDFZh) [Materials of the SWAFC Plenum (Plenum Regulations, Resolutions, Action Plan, References on MDFW).].” July 15, 1946, F.P7928, Op. 2, D. 163, GARF.

²⁹⁸ “Zdanie Doma Soiuzov: Istoriia [Building of the House of Unions: History],” accessed March 23, 2025, <https://domsojuzov.ru/o-dome-soyuzov/>.

²⁹⁹ GARF, P7928, Op.3, D.1, l.74.

A Plenum always opened with a speech by the SWC head, reporting on the SWC's achievements in international propaganda and service to the CC CPSU. Speeches of the SWC members from different republics and regions followed, usually focused on two main topics: contributions of women of the region or republic to the national economy and their work for international propaganda. SWC Plena transcripts (ranging from 100 to 350 pages) meticulously documented the speeches and the discussions emerged during Plena, including reactions of the audience such as applause, laughter, or noise.

My first impression from reading hundreds of pages of SWC Plena is that they perfectly fit the “performative shift” in the Soviet discourse, as historian Alexey Yurchak described it in his 2005 book *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation*. Drawing upon numerous manuals for speechwriting, interviews with political consultants and media of the late Soviet period, Yurchak argued that after Stalin's death, latter's position as the figure that stayed outside the discourse and defined its usage by other members due to his “external knowledge of the objective truth” disappeared.³⁰⁰ Yurchak quoted examples of Stalin's abundant editing and evaluating of the usage of ideological discourse by which Stalin created, thus, metadiscourse from his outsider position as a “master” of the discourse.³⁰¹ This post-Stalinist lack of calibration from the “master” increased the possibility of unintentional deviation in the usage of ideological discourse, *hypernormalization* of the official language, as Yurchak termed it, i.e., the citations and cliches were not meant to express any particular message, but rather were the final end in itself: ritualized, strictly formulaic speech was the goal of text (re)production. In Yurchak's words: “It became increasingly more important to

³⁰⁰ Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 26.

³⁰¹ Alexei Yurchak 1960-, *Everything Was Forever, until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation*, Acls Humanities E-Book (Princeton University Press, 2005), 67.

participate in the reproduction of the *form* of these ritualized acts of authoritative discourse than to engage with their constative meanings.”³⁰²

However, such hypernormalization of the discourse did not mean that people were not able to perform any agency within it, quite the opposite. As Yurchak suggested, this shift opened up possibilities to inscribe different meanings into the political rituals of late socialism: “participating in these acts reproduced oneself as a ‘normal’ Soviet person within the system of relations, collectives, and subject positions, with all the constraints and possibilities that position entailed, even including the possibility, after the meeting, to engage in interests, pursuits, and meanings that ran against those that were stated in the resolutions one had voted for.”³⁰³ Therefore, in on the face of it the ritualized SWC Plena were formal meetings, they had potentiality as sites of emergence of a certain type of sociality.

Indeed, with sometimes one or two men in the room, the Plena generally were unique women-only or predominantly female meetings on such a level that gave those present a touch of intimacy and constituted a space of trust. Also, all these women were supposedly absolutely loyal to the Soviet state and worked for its interests, were entrusted to represent it in front of an international audience and had passed all the security checks needed for that activity. Olga Lepeshinskaya, a Soviet ballerina, while sharing her experience of work in Hungary, said at the 1965 Plenum: “I hope the walls here are thick enough and strong enough to keep these words within those bounds.”³⁰⁴ This is a clear expression of trust during the SWC Plena, which suggested that the SWC Plena were more than a pure formality for their participants.

This Chapter is based on my analysis of the SWC Plena transcripts from 1958-1975,³⁰⁵ kept in GARF. It will be structured in the following way. First, I will analyze the SWC Plena

³⁰² Yurchak, 38.

³⁰³ Yurchak, 44.

³⁰⁴ GARF, P7928, Op.3, D. 1376, l. 75

³⁰⁵ The SWC Plena transcripts of the late 1970s did not give any new themes, in my reading, but reiterated topics discussed before.

minutes. I will pay special attention to Soviet women's problems addressed and the SWC members' reflections of who Soviet women were; additionally, I will try to grasp the social fabric of the events by paying attention to mutual citations, emotional moments (such as "laughter," "noises in the audience," and "applause" in a middle of the paragraph or sentence). I will explore what Anatoly Pinsky conceptualized as "epistemological autonomy," i.e., the belief that one's personal experience, emotion, and reason can be a valid source of knowledge production and truth, competing with the one produced by the Party elite (which did not necessarily mean conflict with Marxist-Leninist tradition).³⁰⁶ In my analysis, I will pay special attention to the epistemological source for rights claims that SWC members voiced. Second, I will specifically explore the 1958 SWC Plenum discussion to trace the relationship between the SWC and women's councils, which were established in the late 1950s. Third, I will analyze the criticism of the SWC, voiced at the Plena by SWC members from the national republics. Finally, I will briefly outline different attitudes to reproductive labor as they were discussed during Plena, which I will explore in more detail in the Chapters Three and Four.

The main questions of this chapter are: (2.1.) What role did Plena play for the SWC members: were they just formal gatherings, did they also function as spaces where certain problems could be addressed or spaces to voice certain problems? Did they allow for a certain type of sociality to emerge out of them? (2.2.) What does a close reading of Plena's minutes contribute to our understanding the SWC's relationship with women's councils (zhensoveti)? (2.3., 2.4.) What can we learn from the Plena transcripts about the SWC inner conflicts and criticism?

³⁰⁶ Pinsky, "The Origins of Post-Stalin Individuality," 458–59.

2.1. SWC Plena as a space of forming women as an interest group

The SWC's task to represent Soviet women abroad demanded discussion and creativity in defining this puzzling political subject—a Soviet woman: what made her a woman, what a Soviet and what did it all mean? In the following, I will analyze how SWC members spoke about the position of Soviet women within international domain and Soviet state at the SWC Plena.

Since the early Soviet years, the dilemma of *baba* (as distinction) and *comrade* (as similarity) in defining women's place in Soviet politics appeared³⁰⁷—and never was fully resolved. After the abolishment of Zhenotdel in 1930, gender kept playing a critical role in the self-reflection of Soviet society. However, *baba* transformed into a Soviet woman, heroine, embodying the modernity.³⁰⁸ According to historian Anna Krylova, the Soviet society under Stalin “routinely addressed itself, both publicly and in its professional pedagogical journals, employing the category of gender and debating its meanings.”³⁰⁹ This openness of gender categories demanded an active role from the Soviet citizens: “the operation of the 1930s Stalinist system, perpetually contradictory on the question of gender, required and depended on an active historical subject—the Soviet citizen—who, in various ways, engaged with cultural discourses and state policies, not by unproblematically internalizing them but by navigating and sorting out their contradictory gender ideals.”³¹⁰ These contradictions posed a persistent challenge to Soviet policymaking³¹¹ and were framed in the late Soviet Union as “non-antagonistic contradictions,” as problems that could be resolved without radical economic transformation.³¹²

³⁰⁷ Wood, *The Baba and the Comrade*, 1997.

³⁰⁸ Chatterjee, “Soviet Heroines and the Language of Modernity, 1930–39.”

³⁰⁹ Anna Krylova, *Soviet Women in Combat: A History of Violence on the Eastern Front* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 20.

³¹⁰ Krylova, 294–95.

³¹¹ Browning, *Women and Politics in the USSR*, 53.

³¹² Browning, 10; Buckley, *Women and Ideology in the Soviet Union*, 162.

The Plena transcripts are rich in the emotional moments: bursts of laughter, sudden applause, noises in the audience, or silence when a reaction was obviously expected. This “sincerity” of Plena might be regarded as a sign of the time, since historian Susan Reid showed, emotions in Soviet politics became a key means of de-Stalinisation, a cure from the dogmatism of the previous epoch.³¹³ I suggest, however, that laughter during Plena was also an important element of the consolidation of Soviet women as an interest group, as well as marking their distinct position from both Soviet men and Western women. Sociologists agree on the fact that humor is “one of the central signs of closeness and social understanding,”³¹⁴ simultaneously, it constitutes a group’s “Other”, marking the boundary between the subjects and objects of laughter. As philosopher Sara Ahmed wrote:

Emotions create the very effect of the surfaces and boundaries that allow us to distinguish an inside and an outside in the first place. So emotions are not simply something ‘I’ or ‘we’ have. Rather, it is through emotions, or how we respond to objects and others, that surfaces or boundaries are made: the ‘I’ and the ‘we’ are shaped by, and even take the shape of, contact with others.³¹⁵

Following that perspective, I suggest regarding the moments of laughter as crucial for marking the boundary between those who were laughing and those who were laughed at—and, thus, it contributed to consolidation of Soviet women into a distinct shared identity that helped to form an interest group.

³¹³ Susan E. Reid, “Masters of the Earth: Gender and Destalinisation in Soviet Reformist Painting of the Khrushchev Thaw,” *Gender & History* 11, no. 2 (1999): 276–312, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0424.00143>.

³¹⁴ Giseline Kuipers, “The Sociology of Humor,” in *The Primer of Humor Research*. (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2008).

³¹⁵ Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 10.

The first group the SWC members constructed as “Other” were foreign women. For example, Elena Hahalina, the vice head of the Leningrad Regional Executive Committee, at the 1960 SWC Plenum described several interactions she had with women from New Zealand, West Germany, Iceland, and Brazil. In her accounts, women from West Germany discovered the ways Soviet youth spent their time and admired it; women from Iceland were grateful that the Soviet women treated them with the same respect as women from large countries, and Icelandic men showed tears of gratitude for such an approach. When Hahalina narrated that a delegation from Brazil attempted to sell some underwear illegally to Soviet women, it caused laughter in the audience,³¹⁶ and her story about a delegation from New Zealand received applause:

It turns out that New Zealand women brought us simple household soap as souvenirs because in New Zealand there is a widespread opinion that in the Soviet Union people do not wash because there is no soap, that they steam in baths with brooms and this replaces soap.

Then they brought us simple stockings as souvenirs, because they also have a popular opinion that Soviet women go without stockings because we don't have them.

They visited our stores, saw everything, saw how our women are dressed. We brought several sets of toilet soap and asked them to give them to the New Zealand women /Applause/.³¹⁷

³¹⁶ GARF, F.P7928, Op.3, D.363, l.120

³¹⁷ GARF, F.P7928, Op.3, D.363, l.115: Оказывается, ново-зеландские женщины привезли нам в качестве сувениров простое хозяйственное мыло потому, в Новой Зеландии распространено мнение, что в Советском Союзе люди не моются из-за отсутствия мыла, что они парятся в банях вениками и это заменяет мыло.

Затем они в качестве сувенирова привезли нам простые чулки потом, что у них также распространено мнение, что советские женщины ходят без чулок, так как у нас их нет.

The SWC reports about delegation exchange were full of critical remarks about Soviet women by the visitors, who generously shared the negative stereotypes produced by the Cold War—the Plena became the space where these experiences were confronted, which might have been impossible in a diplomatic setting of delegation exchange. Praskovja Malinina, a Hero of Labor and the Head of a collective farm (kolhoz), gave the speech that evoked most reactions during the 1960 Plenum. She recounted a trip on the train with two women from the US—each of the described dialogue she described turned into mutual humiliation:

I recently went to Leningrad. Women are going there. I went to the “Strela.” [The Red Arrow—an overnight sleeper train connecting Moscow and Leningrad]. I come in. They say—you have to go with a foreigner, there are no more places. I walk into the compartment and say “hello.” She has turned away from me and does not speak. Then she goes out and declares: “I don't want to go [share my compartment] with a Russian woman.” [...] Then the second American woman, a real one, came up and said: “Come with me.” [...] I was in a shawl, in a coat—a real collective farm woman, who will go with such a bad looking person [rastereha]? Then, when I took off my coat, I had no medals, but only an order block [a sign, everyday substitute of the medal], the American saw it and said “Ah, ah!” [...]

The second real American woman says: “We were told that Soviet people are only engaged in politics, they never smile, only politics and politics.”

And I say that here I am smiling and talking. See, this is what I am, and

Они у нас побывали в магазинах, все видели, видели и как одеты наши женщины. Мы и предоднесли по несколько наборов туалетного мыла и просили передать их новозеландским женщинам /аплодисменты/

you are thin. You probably save your bread, but I eat it. "Why are you so thin?" She couldn't explain anything. The translator laughed and walked away.³¹⁸

We went to bed. I feel—I am suffocating, it smells like dust. I think: if she wants to poison me / LAUGHTER /, then she will poison herself. I wrapped myself in a blanket. I think, at least to see what she is doing, and she rubs her hair with something—an old woman of 70 years ... / LAUGHTER /.

Then she calmed down. In the morning, they got up and began to put themselves in order. She massages her face, and I decided to wash my face at my relatives' house.

A woman who had run away from the Soviet Union came in. She says that she repented a lot afterwards, but now she is used to that life—she doesn't work, doesn't do anything. And I don't know what to do without work. I am the chairman of a collective farm, I have a very difficult and responsible job, but I still participate in amateur art. "That can't be true!" they say. "Would you like me to sing for you now?" I told them. They said, "We think you're just working." Wrong. [...] We're putting on "Two Wives", I'm playing a wife whose husband cheated, but I made him come back. "You," I say, "are Russian, you know 'Thunderstorm', so I'm going to play Katerina." "How can you say you're going to play Katerina, she's

³¹⁸ That is a mirror episode of another dialogue in the story, when one of the American women, sooviet émigré, asked Malinina how she can play Katerina [character from classic Russian play] if she is fat, and Katerina is thin.

skinny?” And I answered that there are all kinds of Katerina—some are thin and some are fat.³¹⁹



Illustration 3 Praskovja Malinina, a Hero of Labor and the head of a collective farm. Source: Stanovov A.I. Rabotnitsa, №1, 1952.

Malinina’s speech encapsulated many aspects of the communication between Soviet women and Westerners: a sense of hidden danger (“she wants to poison me”), hostility (“I don’t want to go [share my compartment] with a Russian woman”), and humiliation because of Soviet

³¹⁹ GARF, F.P7928, Op.3, D.363, l. 137-139: “Я недавно ехала в Ленинград. Едут там женщины. Ехала на «Стреле.» Вхожу. Говорят—вам придется поехать с иностранкой, мест больше нет. Я вхожу в купе, говорю «здравствуйте.» Она отвернулась от меня и не разговаривает. Потом выходит и заявляет: «Не хочу ехать с русской женщиной.» <...> Тогда вторая американка, настоящая, подошла и говорит: «Поедьте со мной.» <...> Я была в шали, в пальто—настоящая колхозница, с такой рестерехой кто поедет? Потом, когда я разделась,—правда, орденов у меня не было, а только колодочка, американка увидела и говорит «Ах, ах!» <...>

Вторая настоящая американка говорит: «Нам сказали так, что советские люди занимаются одной политикой, улыбаться никогда не улыбаются, одна политика и политика.» А я говорю, что вот я улыбаюсь и разговариваю. Видите, вот я какая, а вы худые. Вы, наверное, хлеб бережете, а я его ем. «Почему вы такие худые?» Она ничего не могла объяснить. Переводчик посмеялся и отошел. Мы легли спать. Чувствую—задыхаюсь, пахнет дустом. Думаю: если она меня отравить хочет /СМЕХ/, так она и сама отравится. Я закуталась одеялом. Думаю, хоть поглядеть, что она делает, а она натирает себе чем-то волосы—старуха 70 лет.../Смех/.

Потом все-таки поуспокоилась. Утром встали, стали приводить себя в порядок. Она лицо массирует, а я решила—умоюсь у родственников.”

“Тут вошла женщина, которая удрала из Советского Союза. Говорит, что потом она очень покаялась, но теперь уже привыкла к той жизни—не работает, ничего не делает. А я не знаю, что без работы делать. Я—председатель колхоза, у меня работа очень трудная, ответственная, но я еще участвую в художественной самодеятельности. “Не может этого быть!”—говорят. “Хотите сейчас вам спую?” /Смех/ Я им рассказала. Они говорят, что “мы считаем, что у вас только работают.” Неправильно. [...] Ставим “Две жены”, играю жену, у которой мужа отбили, но я заставила его вернуться обратно./Смех/ “Вы,—говорю,—русская, вы знаете “Грозу”, так я собираюсь сыграть Катерину.” “Как же вы, говорите, что собираетесь Катерину играть, она же худая?” А я отвечаю, что всякие Катерины бывают—есть худые, а есть толстые.

women's lack of conventional Western femininity ("How can you say you're going to play Katerina, she's skinny?")—that she tried to make fun of in her account. This feeling, as clearly shown in Malinina's story, was compensated by the Soviet women's wartime deeds ("when I took off my coat, I had no medals, but only an order block, the American saw it and said 'Ah, ah!'") and their contribution to the economy, society, and politics ("I don't know what to do without work. I am the chairman of a collective farm, I have a very difficult and responsible job.") It illustrates well that stories of humiliation during the Plena were often retold in the spirit of the Breaking Repression technique of the Theatre of the Oppressed, which is a technique that uses re-enactment of concrete oppressive moments when the actor resists the unjust situation, what was not possible in real life.³²⁰ Indeed, these interactions with Western women served as a background for articulating pride of being a Soviet working woman.

However, the vexed question of feminine gender display persisted. During the 1970 Plenum, Valentina Vavilina, Chief Editor of *Rabotnitsa* (Working Woman), presented this paradox of expectations from Soviet women:

The Italian communists asked us this question (not in reproach, but with some doubt). They said: "Strange, we were in women's clubs and somehow they told us more about sewing and teaching them to knit. But we were told almost nothing about political work in these clubs.

Well, maybe there are excuses. We told our Italian friends that Soviet women are often accused of not doing women's things. So they decided to show that they did.³²¹

³²⁰ Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Nick Montfort, "From Theatre of the Oppressed," in *The NewMediaReader* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2003), 339–52.

³²¹ GARF, P7928, Op.3, D.2387.

It was not a fantasy, thus, for example, report on the visit of the French delegation in 1955, stated that they were critical that the Soviet girls learn carpentry at school and not housekeeping.³²²

Thus, Western women were presented during SWC Plena as critical observers of the Soviet reality. Although they belonged to the elite of the Soviet society, this generation of the SWC members were predominantly of peasant or working-class background, deprived of a great variety of consumer goods and beauty practices;³²³ they experienced their femininity in a different way, they had different body types, which were marked as deficient in their interactions with the Western women (as Malinina's speech, for example, illustrated). The SWC members recognized this distinction as a shared experience, as their habitus, as something that was felt and had the capacity to enact affinities, as it made clear social dispositions.³²⁴ I conclude that confronted with critical attitudes, the SWC members consolidated their identity as Soviet women vis-à-vis their Western counterparts, deriving pride and dignity from their war-time deeds and work.

In contrast, in the eyes of non-Western foreigners, Soviet women were often presented as respected and praised older sisters. Aleksandra Us, an Editor-in-Chief of the Belarus SSR women's magazine *Rabotnitsa i Syalyanka* (Working Woman and Peasant Woman in Belarusian), said this during the 1958 Plenum:

She [a Japanese guest] concluded that the most important thing that struck her was that Soviet women walk the streets with their heads held high, while Japanese women always walk with their heads down. She, of course, correctly noticed this outward difference, but it was impossible for her to

³²² GARF, P7928, Op.4, D. 96, l. 38.

³²³ This changed with the shift of generations in the SWC in 1968 with the appointment of Valentina Tereshkova.

³²⁴ Steven Threadgold, *Bourdieu and Affect: Towards a Theory of Affective Affinities*, 1st ed. (Bristol University Press, 2020), 61, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1453m06>.

understand what a long way a Soviet woman has passed so that she could walk with her head held high.³²⁵

This quote illustrates one of the functions of stories about encounters with non-Western women—to emphasize the progress Soviet women had made in their own emancipation. As Lidiya Petrova, the SWC’s deputy head, underscored during the 1965 Plenum: “We often say ‘the state’, but the state is not only the Government, but we, women, are also the state, our trade unions and other organizations, which contribute so much to the upbringing of our children.”³²⁶ The topic of women’s participation in politics and management was a consistent thread at all the gatherings as a source of Soviet women’s pride and a reason for admiration from the foreign delegations.³²⁷

Similar to the general discussion of women’s political roles during the Khrushchev years, the contradictions in women’s political participation were discussed at the Plena: the Soviet women were praised for their active participation, and based on that, they had a right to point out the insufficiency of their political participation. Nadezhda Puchkovskaya, a prominent ophthalmologist, Director of the Filatov Ophthalmological Institute in Odesa, and a Deputy of the Supreme Soviet, at the 1965 Plenum advocated for more women in higher positions and more promotion of women as well as more self-awareness on the side of Soviet women based on their achievements:

I think we should have more women ministers. That's a reproach to Moscow, the capital. We should have more women-responsible workers. And it seems to me that every woman in her position should promote women, for example, promote them to graduate school. Every woman in

³²⁵ GARF, P7928, Op. 3, D.1, l.84.

³²⁶ GARF, P7928, Op. 3, D. 1376, l.71.

³²⁷See examples: GARF, P7928, Op.3, D. 1, l.71; GARF, P7928, Op.3, D.1376, l. 44, 93.

her position should remember our women. [...] Thus, my wish is that our Soviet Women's Committee and all our media, not only women's magazines, should raise the self-awareness of our women more, because nowhere else in the world can a woman achieve what she has in our country.³²⁸

This quote articulates the dialectics between the Subject (state) and subjects (citizens), that constitute each other. Following Althusser, to consider that the Subject is dependent on its subjects.³²⁹ Consequently, we should keep in mind possible institutional changes stemming from re-signification, or change in subjects' self-recognition in the ideological hailing, as the latter creates a ground for the functioning of the system.³³⁰ This also echoes what Pinsky proposed as "epistemological autonomy," i.e., knowledge derived from one's own experience of labor and political participation, competing with the truth produced by the Party elite, even though developed within the same discourse. And that is what happened, in my reading, during Plena, which turned out to be unintentional consciousness-raising events, during which Soviet women defined themselves as distinct political subjects and claimed their special rights based on that.

Soviet women reflected on their distinction not only from Western women but also from Soviet men, who also often became objects of laughter in the audience. Men were often mentioned in the context of labor, gender-infused competition in the sphere of labor to be

³²⁸ GARF, P7928, Op.3, D.1376, l.93.; Я считаю, что у нас должно быть больше женщин-министров. Это уже упрек Москве-столице. Больше надо иметь женщин-ответственных работников. И мне кажется, что каждая женщина на своем посту должна продвигать женщин, например, продвигать в аспирантуру. Каждая женщина на своем посту должна помнить о наших женщинах. [...] Таким образом, у меня такое пожелание, чтобы наш Комитет советских женщин и вся наша пресса, не только женская, больше поднимали самосознание наших женщин, ведь нигде в мире женщина не может достичь того, что она имеет у нас в стране.

³²⁹ This is consonant with approach developed in the revisionist school of the Soviet history: Sheila Fitzpatrick, "Politics as Practice: Thoughts on a New Soviet Political History," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 5, no. 1 (March 18, 2004): 27–54, <https://doi.org/10.1353/kri.2004.0009>.

³³⁰ Louis Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* (London ; New York: Verso, 2014).

precise. Soviet ballerina Olga Lepeshinskaya at the 1958 Plenum evoked laughter from the audience by simply mentioning men and pregnancy leave:

Let it not offend men, in many ways we prioritize them, say in science, philosophy, technology [...] Who better to talk about the great achievements of Soviet power—about rest, about maternity leave? Isn't it women? Because men don't get pregnancy leave [dekretnyi otpusk].
/Laughter/³³¹

The practice of labor as a fundament for subject formation and self-realization was a key tenet of the Soviet (and broader socialist) understanding of subjects and their consciousness formation. What was the role of women's engagement in paid labor in their self-representation at the SWC Plena? The majority of speeches provided detailed accounts of women's contribution to the development of national economy, accounts that were mobilized for asserting a special role of women. Following Lenin's famous words, "he who does not work, shall not eat,"³³² Soviet citizenship implied engagement in socially useful work, the equation of which with merely productive labor the SWC Plena contested. Speakers at the Plena used women's child-rearing activity to assert an authoritative position within the Soviet discourse, a special place of women in the society. Sabokhat Azimdzhanova, a Director of the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Uzbek Academy of Sciences, was, according to her own words, so overwhelmed with emotion at the 1960 Plenum that she decided to give a speech, even though she had not planned to.³³³ She summarized the idea that pushed her to speak:

³³¹ GARF, P7928, Op.3, D.1, l. 53.

³³² Maria Cristina Galmarini-Kabala, *The Right to Be Helped: Deviance, Entitlement, and the Soviet Moral Order* (DeKalb, Illinois: Northern Illinois University Press, 2016), 3.

³³³ She improvised inspired by other speakers, probably caught by feeling articulated by Grinenko: Гриненко, директор фабрики красный октябрь: "Вот видишь в журналах фотографии женщин или в газетах читаешь фамилии, а сегодня очень многих из них пришлось увидеть здесь, послушать, сделать многие полезные выводы для своей дальнейшей работы."

I have an opinion / may be biased / that our women are mostly more energetic and proactive than some of our men. / APPLAUSE/ I apologize to the only man present here. I think he will forgive me for that. Think yourself: a woman bears a lot of burdens in the family, in the organization of domestic life, in the upbringing of the young generation, from birth to adulthood, and sometimes even after adulthood. On top of that, our personal work is connected with long-term plans, and also our great social work. All this suggests that our women heroically and steadfastly fulfill all the responsibilities assigned to them, both in the family and at work.³³⁴

It is important to note that both women (Lepeshinskaya and Azimdzhanova) had to excuse themselves to the men in the audience before saying anything slightly critical, thus reproducing the gender hierarchy. Nonetheless, due to the prevalence of women the SWC Plena were spaces for addressing existing gender-based conflicts. Picking up on Azimdzhanova's speech just quoted, Praskovja Malinina, a chairman of the collective farm in the Kostroma region, stated at the same 1960 Plenum:

We women are a great power, a lot depends on us and we must strengthen the peace. We do not want to say that men do not work, they work, but in a collective farm, in a village, women are a great power. For example, we have: the chairman of the collective farm is a woman, an agronomist is a woman, a livestock technician is a woman, foremen are women/Applause/.

True, when I was in China, they asked me the question: what do men do? I say we make them do the hardest work. /Laughter/³³⁵

³³⁴ GARF, F.P7928, Op.3, D.363, l.128

³³⁵ GARF, F.P7928, Op.3, D.363, l.134

Although this Plenum took place during the period of de-Stalinization, Malinina built her speech upon Stalin's quote, "Women in collective farms are a great power,"³³⁶ which had served as an appeal for women's engagement in the collectivization of farming. Malinina now turned it into a doxa of the Soviet rural reality. Her speech echoed the popular motive of Stalinist representations of female heroines, who reversed the traditional power dynamics, emphasizing the submissive role of men in kolhoz.³³⁷ However, I suggest that Malinina's ironic tone revealed a shared understanding among the SWC women that this image was merely a construct.

Many SWC members did not have illusions about the gendered power hierarchies in the Soviet Union, but rather articulated a hidden critical position towards the actual lack of respect to women's labor in the country, that made them insist on its recognition during Plena. As Mariia Ovsianikova, the Chief Editor of the magazine *Soviet woman*, also made this lack explicit during the 1960 Plenum:

It is possible to express deep regret that the employees of the Ministry of Culture and the Main Directorate of Chronicle Films still do not understand the huge role that the Soviet woman has played and is playing in the building of a new communist society. If they understood this, they would not have released such soulless films. Please treat them [these films] critically. Propaganda must be built skillfully. People working on the

Мы, женщины—большая сила, от нас зависит многое и мы должны крепить мир. Мы не хотим говорить, что мужчины не работают, они работают, но все же в колхозе на селе женщины—это большая сила. Вот, например, у нас: председатель колхоза—женщина, агроном—женщина, зоотехник—женщина, бригадиры—женщины /аплодисменты/.

Правда, когда я была в Китае, то мне задали вопрос: а что у вас делают мужчины? Я говорю, мы их заставляем выполнять самую тяжелую работу. /Смех/

³³⁶ Josef Stalin, "Rech' Na Pervom Vsesoiuznom s"ezde Kolkhoznikov-Udarnikov [Speech at the First All-Union Congress of Collective Farmers-Shock Workers]," in *Cochineniia*, vol. 13 (Moskva: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1951), 251.

³³⁷ Chatterjee, "Soviet Heroines and the Language of Modernity, 1930–39," 58.

release of films, have not learned to respect the Soviet woman. /

APPLAUSE /³³⁸

Clearly, these employees were not female. This discussion of female representations gave Ovsianikova chance to voice severe criticism of persisting disrespect towards Soviet women in the Soviet society (“People working on the release of films, have not learned to respect the Soviet woman.”). As I will show in Chapter Five, critique of media representations of Soviet women or lack of them, often served as a way to address persisting gender inequality in the USSR. The representatives of national, non-slavic republics, were often more direct about the persistent stereotypes. Albeit such statements resonated with the audience, as the applause for of comrade Ananurova’s speech, Head of the Propaganda and Agitation Department of the Central Committee of the Party of Turkmenistan, at the 1968 Plenum showed:

In order for women to increase their labor and social activity, party, soviet, Komsomol, and public organizations in the country have to perform a lot of explanatory work not only among women but also among the male population because the carriers of these vestiges are primarily men—it’s no secret! /APPLAUSE/³³⁹

My reading of the SWC Plena transcripts confirms historian Genia Browning’s observation, which she derived from her fieldwork in the USSR in the late 1980s:

During three years spent working and studying in Moscow, I came to have a deep respect for the Soviet women I met. They manage so many roles not only their mother and worker roles, but are also active in voluntary social work [...]. We know they work longer hours than men, have less

³³⁸ GARF, F.P7928, Op.3, D.363, ll.126-127

³³⁹ GARF, F.P7928, Op.3, D. 1888, ll. 228-229.

leisure time, and are generally in lower positions at work, on correspondingly lower pay. What is not so well documented is their sense of confidence. Confidence in their right to work, and a confidence about themselves as women. Soviet women have internalized their right to equality, albeit an equality far from being realized and a limited one in Western feminist terms.³⁴⁰

Overall, the image of Soviet women constructed during the 1958-1975 SWC Plena resonated with the images of Soviet heroines of the Stalinist period³⁴¹ and echoed Khrushchev's speeches, in which he challenged the uneven distribution of managerial positions in the USSR.³⁴² As historian Choi Chatterjee wrote, "Soviet propaganda provided citizens with a yardstick against which they could measure the various deficiencies of the system. Therefore, propaganda could serve as a means of empowerment by providing a permissible vocabulary of complaint and criticism."³⁴³ My analysis showed that the SWC members during Plena did not simply reproduced the official discourse but creatively reworked it into a toolkit for advocating their distinguished position within Soviet production. Deriving from their "corporeal-intellectual practice of labor,"³⁴⁴ they developed a certain degree of "epistemological autonomy," i.e., a belief that one's personal experience, emotion, and reason could be a valid source of knowledge production and truth, competing with the one produced by the Party elite.³⁴⁵ However, their self had a clear statist dimension, they saw themselves as inseparable from the Soviet state, which was constituted by their participation.

³⁴⁰ Browning, *Women and Politics in the USSR*, 6.

³⁴¹ Chatterjee, "Soviet Heroines and the Language of Modernity, 1930–39."

³⁴² Ilić, "What Did Women Want? Khrushchev and the Revival of the Zhensovety," 106.

³⁴³ Chatterjee, "Soviet Heroines and the Language of Modernity, 1930–39," 51.

³⁴⁴ Anna Maria Smith, "Subjectivity and Subjectivation," in *Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory* (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2016), 962.

³⁴⁵ Pinsky, "The Origins of Post-Stalin Individuality," 458–59.

2.2. The 1958 SWC Plenum and the mass growth of zhensovety

Zhensovety (women's councils) were grassroots women-only social organizations that according to historians started growing 'ad hoc' in the late 1950s. Zhensovety existed on different levels of Soviet society, but the network had neither a clear structure nor a clearly limited scope of activities.³⁴⁶ They dealt with a wide and barely structured range of activities, from research on time budgets and domestic work distribution within families to organizing festivals, which overall should have encouraged women's interest in political participation.³⁴⁷ They were often compared in the Soviet public discourse with early delegate meetings, according to Browning, and "referred to as 'spiritual heirs' of the *Zhenotdel*."³⁴⁸ In the 1989 Soviet book *Zhensovet: Opyt, Problemy, Perspektivy* (A Women's Council: Experience, Problems, Perspectives), the history chapter was named "The Unbreakable Threads of History (Istorii nervushchiesia niti)"; the authors suggested that the zhensovety derived their origins from the First All-Russian Congress of Workers and Peasant Women, held in 1918 and organized by Inessa Armand, Aleksandra Kollontai, and Klavdia Samoilova.³⁴⁹ Similarly, scholarship has explored zhensovety as pressure group or potential space of consciousness-raising for the Soviet women. Historian Genia Browning, in her 1987 book concluded that:

the zhensovety do act on behalf of women workers. In some cases, this has brought zhensovety activists into conflict with management. To support women, they have had to oppose the practice of (male) managers and trade union officials. [...] zhensovety do have potential to act as a form of pressure group on behalf of women.³⁵⁰

³⁴⁶ Browning, *Women and Politics in the USSR*.

³⁴⁷ Ilić, "What Did Women Want? Khrushchev and the Revival of the Zhensovety."

³⁴⁸ Browning, *Women and Politics in the USSR*, 54.

³⁴⁹ A.A. Muzyria and V.V. Kopeiko, *Zhensovet: Opyt, Problemy, Perspektivy* [A Women's Council: Experience, Problems, Perspectives] (Moskva: Izdatel'stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1989), 18.

³⁵⁰ Browning, *Women and Politics in the USSR*, 114–16.

However, Browning concluded that any zhensovety role as a pressure group is limited.³⁵¹ Melanie Ilić in a 2009 chapter concluded that “the women’s councils were seemingly less interested in what Soviet women themselves wanted, but were motivated instead more by what the state perceived that women needed in order to participate more fully in the public life of the country.”³⁵² Nonetheless, she also established that zhensovety made significant improvements to the lives of many women at the local level, such as exposing shortages of goods and services in residential areas and offering both material and emotional support to households and families facing challenges. Historian Zamira Abman, based on the case of Tajik SSR, stated that:

These women’s committees marked a radical change in the Soviet regime’s conventional top-down approach to women’s emancipation by promoting a bottom-up strategy. This made the Soviet Union the first government among regimes that enforced state feminism—whose ranks included Iran, Turkey, and Afghanistan, among others—to officially allow women to organize themselves autonomously from the state.³⁵³

Thus, zhensovety, despite their restricted space of action, had a positive effect on women’s lives.

The genealogy of the zhensovety remains somewhat blurry, and Browning indicated that there was “the evident lack of an official blueprint proposing women-only groups.”³⁵⁴ Moreover, some of the women-only social groups that the late Soviet publications named ‘zhensovety’ kept functioning after the abolishment of Zhenotdel,³⁵⁵ before the mass growth of

³⁵¹ Browning, 116.

³⁵² Ilić, “What Did Women Want? Khrushchev and the Revival of the Zhensovety,” 117–18.

³⁵³ Abman, *Coerced Liberation*, 111.

³⁵⁴ Browning, *Women and Politics in the USSR*, 53.

³⁵⁵ Muzyria and Kopeiko, *Zhensovet: Opyt, Problemy, Perspektivy [A Women’s Council: Experience, Problems, Perspectives]*, 27–31.

zhensovet started in the late 1950s.³⁵⁶ According to Browning, “the most systematic information about zhensovet comes from the period 1958-1961, which can be dated as their main growth period.”³⁵⁷ Historian Mary Buckley attributed the zhensovet’s growth to the 21st Party Congress, at which Khrushchev called for improvement of “socialist democracy.”³⁵⁸ Historian Melanie Ilić suggested they appeared due to Khrushchev's call:

As part of an attempt to reinvigorate participatory politics through a broad program of public consultation campaigns, once in office, Khrushchev called for the mobilization of a range of different social groups, and this resulted in the revival of formal women’s organizations. As a result, zhensovet began to be formed throughout the Soviet Union at grassroots level from 1957.³⁵⁹

However, Ilić did not derive that date of 1957 from any specific archival source. Ilić mentioned in her chapter that “the official state body with responsibility for overseeing women’s interests at the national and international level was the Soviet Women’s Committee”,³⁶⁰ but she did not explore the relationship between the SWC and zhensovet. The 1989 book *Zhensovet: Opyt, Problemy, Perspektivy* also mentioned their connection, but yet again, without any particular details, except that the 27th Congress of the Communist Party in 1986 officially tasked the SWC with the responsibility to overlook zhensovet.³⁶¹ Historian Zamira Abman also mentioned that zhensovet “were affiliated with the Soviet Women’s Committee”; however, mistakenly writing that “the Soviet Women’s Committee, which the

³⁵⁶ Browning, *Women and Politics in the USSR*, 57–58; Ilić, “What Did Women Want? Khrushchev and the Revival of the Zhensovet,” 107.

³⁵⁷ Browning, *Women and Politics in the USSR*, 55.

³⁵⁸ Buckley, *Women and Ideology in the Soviet Union*, 143–44.

³⁵⁹ Ilić, “What Did Women Want? Khrushchev and the Revival of the Zhensovet,” 108.

³⁶⁰ Ilić, 107.

³⁶¹ Muzyria and Kopeiko, *Zhensovet: Opyt, Problemy, Perspektivy [A Women’s Council: Experience, Problems, Perspectives]*, 33.

regime reinstated in the 1980s.”³⁶² Thus, the literature suggests different connections between the SWC and zhensovety. This subchapter explores their relationship in more detail, based on an analysis of the SWC Plena transcripts.

The 1958 SWC Plenum, which took place on February 19, became the first big SWC meeting since its last Plenum in 1946.³⁶³ The Plenum itself launched the revitalization of work among women, and, as I argue, gave an impetus for its further growth. The SWC worked with *aktiv* (active women) on a local level during all the post-war years: informing them about the WIDF activities,³⁶⁴ preparing for joining delegations abroad,³⁶⁵ and hosting foreign delegations.³⁶⁶ Nina Popova in her opening speech during the 1958 SWC Plenum, raised the question of working with women’s *aktiv* via four special commissions in the SWC: 1. On work with foreign delegations; 2. On organizing individual correspondence; 3. On information; 4. On research of women’s equality in different countries. She mentioned that at that point, the commissions consisted only of women from Moscow and articulated the necessity to change that situation.³⁶⁷

Several speakers after Popova raised the issue of the necessity to create SWC branches. Elena Hahalina, the Vice Head of the Leningrad Regional Executive Committee, proposed to organize a small group consisting of 3-5 women in the Leningrad region to work with letter exchange within the Soviet pen-pal program.³⁶⁸ The representative of the Latvian republic, A. Vindenz, the Deputy Head of the Latvian Soviet of Ministers, told the story of how Latvian women motivated by their obligation to work with foreign delegations, had already established a smaller committee in their republic:

³⁶² Abman, *Coerced Liberation*, 111.

³⁶³ GARF, P7928, Op. 2, D. 163.

³⁶⁴ GARF, P7928, Op. 2, DD. 503, 931, 956, 957.

³⁶⁵ GARF, F. P7928, Op. 2, D. 991, Galkina, *Komitet Sovetskikh Zhenshchin: Stranisy Istorii (1941-1992)*, 472.

³⁶⁶ GARF, P7928, Op. 3, D.1, l.23.

³⁶⁷ GARF, P7928, Op. 3, D.1, l.23.

³⁶⁸ GARF, P7928, Op. 3, D.1, l. 32.

We do not have special departments for women that would deal with the issue of organizing women's work in the republic. They existed at one time, but now they have ceased to exist, as probably in most other republics. We believed that this work should be somehow intensified, since delegations are coming and our women travel abroad often.

With this issue, we went to the Central Committee of the party of our Republic and raised this question at one of the bureaus, indicating that we believe that in the Republic it is necessary to resolve these issues in a more organized manner. The Central Committee of the Communist Party of Latvia made a decision at its bureau to create, though not in the broad sense of a committee, but a “troika” of the chairman of this committee, two deputies and one member of the committee, which would keep in touch with the Soviet Women Committee, carry out the orders of the Soviet Women Committee, and create around itself some kind of an aktiv on which it would be possible to rely during the organization of women's work in the Republic. And it must be said that this helped us considerably.³⁶⁹

Nina Dzhavakhishvili, Head of the Department of Experimental Morphology, Academy of Sciences of the Georgian SSR, regretted that they did not have a women's organization in her Republic, thus, they had to organize delegation exchange as “their private initiative.”³⁷⁰ Aleksandra Us, an Editor-in-Chief of Belarus SSR women's magazine *Rabotnitsa i Syalyanka* (Working Woman and Peasant Woman in Belarusian), proposed Popova to have a meeting of editors of women's magazines because, during her

³⁶⁹ GARF, F.P7928, Op.3, D.1, ll.35-36.

³⁷⁰ GARF, F.P7928, Op.3, D.1, l. 47.

long-term work in the magazine, no one had gathered the editors.³⁷¹ The first documented meeting of the women's magazines' editors took place only ten years later, on May 2-4, 1968.³⁷²

Nina Popova concluded the discussion by stating that:

I think it would be right if we give a directive from here to organize in the republics and locally. This should be done locally, based on the conditions that exist. But it is necessary to bear in mind, as comrades have pointed out here, the different experiences. It is necessary to solve the question with the Party organs on how best to do this, but one task must be solved: it is necessary to involve *aktiv* more widely in this activity.

The second question is about holding a plenum. I also believe that it is useful and should be organized, but it is unlikely that we will be able to convene a plenum very often. But we need to use all other sources of attracting a very wide range of activists to this activity in the republics and oblasts. Let us make more active use of the visit of our women comrades from the republics and regions. Our women come to the sessions of the Supreme Soviet, we have always tried to arrange with our women deputies who come to the sessions to meet in the Committee. I think it will be even more successful if there are such instructions from you. Let us do this in such a way that when your comrades come to Moscow, especially an *aktiv*—to plenums of the Central Committee, to meetings, to sessions, let

³⁷¹ GARF, F.P7928, Op.3, D.1, l. 89.

³⁷² "Materialy I Kollokviuma Glavnykh Redaktorov Zhenskikh Zhurnalov (Vystupleniia, Obzor, Spisok i Dr.) [Proceedings of the I Colloquium of Editors-in-Chief of Women's Magazines (Speeches, Review, List, Etc.).]," May 2, 1968. F.P7928, Op.3, D.1906. GARF.

us agree that there should be a closer connection with the Committee. Let your comrades come to us; this will make it possible to inform them more quickly and to solve quickly those questions which we will have to deal with in a timely manner.³⁷³

Notably, none of that went into the Plenum resolution. But the 1958 Plenum transcript does state that when the resolution was read out loud in the end of the Plenum, someone from her place (the surname is not indicated) proposed that “the resolution should point out the need to unfold systematic work among women in our country, not only in receiving and welcoming delegations, but also in raising culture, etc.”³⁷⁴ According to the Soviet official discourse, the level of culture conditioned the level of female autonomy, as I show in Chapter Three, and indeed, zhensovety were tasked with enhancing women’s political culture.³⁷⁵ The Chair of the Plenum’s discussion(Vindenz) replied that the key topic of the Plenum was the work with delegations and there was no need to write anything about work among women into the resolution. Once again, someone without indicated surname from her seat said, “the work carried out by the Committee should serve to strengthen work among women.”³⁷⁶ The Chair asked the room whether this should be

³⁷³ GARF, F.P7928, Op.3, D.1, ll. 92-93.:Я думаю, что будет правильно, если мы отсюда дадим директиву, что организовывать в республиках и на местах. Это нужно сделать на местах, исходя из тех условий, которые имеются. Но нужно иметь в виду, как указывали здесь товарищи, различный опыт. Нужно на местах решать вопрос с партийными органами о том, как лучше сделать, но одна задача должна быть при этом решена: нужно шире привлечь актив к этой деятельности. Второй вопрос — относительно созыва пленума. Я тоже считаю, что это полезно и организовывать нужно, но нам вряд ли часто удастся созывать пленум. Но нам нужно использовать все другие источники привлечения очень широкого актива к этой деятельности в республиках и областях. Давайте более активно использовать приезд наших товарищей женщин из республик и областей. На сессии Верховного Совета приезжают наши женщины, мы всегда старались договориться с нашими депутатами - женщинами, которые приезжают на сессии, чтобы встретиться в Комитете. Я думаю, что это будет еще более успешно, если будут такие поручения от вас. Сделаем таким образом, когда ваши товарищи приезжают в Москву, особенно такой актив — на пленумы центрального комитета, на совещания, на сессии, давайте условимся, чтобы была более тесная связь с Комитетом. Пусть товарищи заходят к нам, это даст возможность быстрее информировать и быстро оперативно решать те вопросы, которые у нас будут возникать.

³⁷⁴ GARF, F.P7928, Op.3, D.1, l. 94.

³⁷⁵ Browning, *Women and Politics in the USSR*.

³⁷⁶ GARF, F.P7928, Op.3, D.1, ll. 94-95.

included in the resolution. Voices answered, “No.”³⁷⁷ Some other corrections were proposed, and after them, Popova stated that “the Presidium will consider the questions raised and solve them, if possible.”³⁷⁸ The Chair summed up: “This is recorded in the minutes of the meeting. These issues will be specifically addressed, but this will not be included in the resolution,”³⁷⁹ and proposed to approve the resolution as it was prepared beforehand. It was approved unanimously.

This resistance from the Chair towards including into the resolution the question of work among women in the USSR, which was raised so many times during the Plenum, is puzzling. It could be interpreted as a sign of fear of too much initiative or of a demand for too much autonomy for women, which, as was well-known from their predecessor Zhenotdel, could endanger the existence of the SWC. It may have been a consequence of a lack of time to rewrite the resolution. It might have been the Chair’s personal disagreement with the proposal. However, the absence of the issue in the resolution definitely indicates that emphasis on the local work among women in the USSR was not yet sanctioned by the CC CPSU. The situation also revealed how restricted was the SWC as an organization to act on its own, while its members had a certain freedom to express their views, build networks, work together, and champion women's interests.

Not debating the fact that women’s councils fitted into Khrushchev’s broader agenda of democratization, I nevertheless contend that it was not so much Khrushchev himself but rather women who advocated for women’s councils. Already, starting from the next, 1960 Plenum, the questions of work among women were reported as part of the compulsory agenda, as a task implemented following the decisions of the 1958 Plenum.³⁸⁰

³⁷⁷ GARF, F.P7928, Op.3, D.1, l. 95.

³⁷⁸ GARF, F.P7928, Op.3, D.1, l. 96.

³⁷⁹ GARF, F.P7928, Op.3, D.1, l.96

³⁸⁰ GARF, P7928, Op.3, D. 363, l. 67, 78, 99

The 1968 SWC Plenum not only discussed the local women's councils in detail, it also included a separate meeting on zhensovet, run by the SWC Presidium.³⁸¹ The meeting had a casual, working tone, unlike Plenum. SWC head Valentina Tereshkova proposed in her opening remark that the goal was to gather representatives of all the republics to talk about their challenges in the work of women's councils and solutions. The participants openly discussed the problem of financing zhensovet and women's magazines and the different models of organizing; they detailed a wide range of questions zhensovet addressed, and the resistance and hostile attitudes they faced from their male colleagues. Several speakers requested protection from the SWC as a way to strengthen zhensovet's weak position vis-à-vis local politicians. A proposal of Elizaveta Uzhinova's, a Deputy Rector for Scientific Work at Ivanovo Medical Institute and a head of Ivanovo Women's Council, caused animation among the audience:

But it is necessary now to confess bluntly that our women's issues inside [on the local level] remain unresolved and we need to prepare our women to be mature and ready to deal with many of the questions posed by our Plenum and those posed by life itself. [...]

It seems to me that, therefore, our rights in the [Soviet Women's] Committee should be legalized. [...compares it to the Peace Committee, which has a representative, a letterhead, an office]

What about us? We're nothing, in fact, if we don't identify ourselves. We are known only in the city committee or district party committee, and the general public doesn't know us at all.

³⁸¹ GARF, P7928, Op.3, D.1888, l.255

/From their seats, several unnamed people say: That's right./³⁸²

A similar request to formalize the relationship between zhensovet and the SWC was voiced during the regular SWC 1968 Plenum as well. The head of the women's council of Lithuanian SSR, requested support from the SWC:

We are a public organization and do not have any legal rights and it is sometimes difficult for us. We would ask that either the Central Committee of the Party or the Soviet Women's Committee assist us in this, that the women's councils of the republic be helped, because they are doing a very big job everywhere.³⁸³

As these quotes show, the zhensovet perceived formalization of relationship with the SWC as their way to gain a stronger position at the local level. There is no evidence of formalization of the SWC-zhensovet relationship before the 27th Congress of the Communist Party, which took place from February 25 to March 6, 1986.³⁸⁴ Yet, the SWC and its Plena served as a place for women to first demand and later discuss the work of women's councils long before the CC CPSU officially tasked them with that.

³⁸² GARF, P7928, Op.3, D.1888, l. 288.; Но надо сейчас прямо признаться, что наши женские вопросы внутри остаются нерешенными и нам необходимо готовить наших женщин, чтобы они были зрелыми и готовыми к решению многих вопросов, которые ставились нашим пленумом и которые ставит сама жизнь. [...] Мне представляется, что поэтому наши права в комитет должны быть узаконены. [сравнивает с комитетом защиты мира, который имеет представителя, бланк, кабинет] А что мы? Мы—ничего, по сути дела, если мы себя не назовем. Нас знают только в горкоме или в райкоме партии, а широкая общественность нас совершенно не знает.
/С мест: Правильно./

³⁸³ GARF, P7928, Op.3, D.1888, l. 136.; Мы общественная организация и не имеем никаких юридических прав и нам порой бывает трудно. Мы просили бы чтобы нам в этом посодействовали или Центральный комитет партии, или Комитет советских женщин, чтобы женским советам республики помогли, потому что они везде делают очень большое дело.

³⁸⁴ Muzyria and Kopeiko, *Zhensovet: Opyt, Problemy, Perspektivy* [*A Women's Council: Experience, Problems, Perspectives*], 33.

2.3. Inequalities within the SWC

So far, I have shown that the SWC Plena served as a space for consolidation of Soviet women as interest group and boosted the growth of women's only spaces in the USSR. In addition, they also gave room to voice criticism of the unequal distribution of resources between women of the different republics in the USSR. As mentioned in the previous chapter, this inequality clearly manifested itself in the prevalence of women from Moscow and RSFSR among the SWC members, as well as among delegation members sent abroad.³⁸⁵ But these inequalities also emerged in many other aspects that were addressed at the SWC Plena.

Women from different Soviet Republics claimed for a better connection, fairer distribution of sources and visibility, based on their merit in the development of Soviet economics, state, and society. Already during the 1958 Plenum, A. Vindenz, the Deputy Head of the Latvian Soviet of Ministers, raised the issue:

There is a great need for closer communication with the republics through the Committee of Soviet Women, for assistance in preparing for such great events in our lives, our country, where we must intensify our work [...] to be systematic and not confined only to significant big dates.³⁸⁶

During the 1960 Plenum, the topic of inequality of the republics was especially present. A delegate from Kyrgyz SSR, A. Apysheva, Deputy Head of the Party Organizations Department of the CC Kyrgyz CP, launched the discussion:

I would like to talk about the magazines *Sovetskaja Zhenschina*, *Rabontitsa*, *Krestyanka* [central Soviet magazines for women—A.T.].

³⁸⁵ GARF, P7928, Op.3, D. 1, l. 11.

³⁸⁶ GARF, P7928, Op.3, D. 1, l.39.

These magazines cover very little of our work, especially on the level of national republics.[...] Why couldn't our magazines cover this issue and show the work of the republics, in that way the work of women's councils would be even better developed, it would help us.³⁸⁷

Besides raising the visibility of their work, Apysheva also insisted on the invitation of women from Kyrgyz SSR to the celebration of the 8th of March in Moscow,³⁸⁸ as well as proposed to send foreign delegations to the Republic, as they had a new hotel that would allow them to accommodate them.³⁸⁹ Apysheva, thus, demanded both visibility and access to resources such as delegation exchange, which was not only interesting but also generously remunerated.

Nina Dzhavakhishvili, Head of the Department of Experimental Morphology, Academy of Sciences of the Georgian SSR, called attention to the fact that *Sovetskaja Zhenschina* rarely used the material they sent, adding that they had “something to show in Georgia. This is the republic with the highest rate of higher education—38 people per thousand, 350 people with secondary education.”³⁹⁰ She also questioned the practice of delegation exchange in which the return tickets were paid by the receiving organization abroad, as it left “a negative impression on our foreign friends.”³⁹¹

Aklima Bisenova, a delegate from Kazakhstan and Director of the Research Institute for Maternal and Child Health, built upon Apysheva's criticism:

I would like to join the voice of the previous speaker comrade Apysheva from Kyrgyzstan, so that leaders of industry and agriculture and other

³⁸⁷ GARF, F.P7928, Op.3, D.363, l.59

³⁸⁸ GARF, F.P7928, Op.3, D.363, l. 60

³⁸⁹ GARF, F.P7928, Op.3, D.363, l. 61

³⁹⁰ GARF, F.P7928, Op.3, D.363, l.85

³⁹¹ GARF, F.P7928, Op.3, D.363, l.87

workers from the union republics are invited to Moscow to celebrate the 50th anniversary of International Women's Day.

When major international congresses on women's issues are held, not all union republics are included in the delegation, therefore, the results of such meetings should be conveyed not only in Moscow, but also in other cities of the republics. [...] Now it is not a problem to get to us—any regions of Kazakhstan. It used to take a long time to travel by train, 16-18 hours by airplane, and now you can fly to Alma-Ata in 5 hours.³⁹²

She invited Nina Popova and the main editors of Soviet women's magazines to her republic, once again joining the previous speakers from "national republics" that "in 1959, these magazines did not reflect the achievements of the women of our republic."³⁹³ Mariia Ovsianikova, the Chief Editor of the magazine *Soviet woman*, acknowledged "their big flaw."³⁹⁴ Elena Hahalina, the Vice Head of the Leningrad Regional Executive Committee, developed Apysheva's proposal further:

I echo Comrade Apysheva's suggestion that we should meet more often internally. We have a proposal to hold plena more often than once every two years and to make traveling plena. Why not make a traveling plenum in Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, etc.? /Applause/³⁹⁵

The 1960 Plenum was exceptional in how much the topic but not unique. For example, at the 1968 Plenum, during the voting for the Presidium, someone asked from her seat, as it was

³⁹² GARF, F.P7928, Op.3, D.363, l.106

³⁹³ GARF, F.P7928, Op.3, D.363, l.107

³⁹⁴ GARF, F.P7928, Op.3, D.363, l. 123.

³⁹⁵ GARF, F.P7928, Op.3, D.363, l.120-121

recorded: “When nominating candidates to the Presidium, was the participation of each republic respected?”³⁹⁶ The answer from the Chair, however, was somewhat disappointing:

Comrades, when we consulted, we decided that the participation of each republic was impossible and probably not necessary, so we went along the lines of having the most active participants represented. We believe that the women's movement in the field is led by the Central Committees of the respective republics and will develop not only because one of women participating in the work of the Presidium. We proceeded from this principle.

But the composition of the Presidium is much broader than last year, almost all the republics of our country were included.³⁹⁷

That was an improvement in comparison with 1958, when the elected Presidium did not include even one representative of the “national republic.”³⁹⁸ To sum up, despite the voiced criticism of the SWC Moscow-centered structure and its obvious contradiction with the Soviet self-representation as an internationalist state, pioneer of emancipation of “woman of the East,”³⁹⁹ the inequality between Moscow and the rest of the country persisted in the SWC, even if some improvements took place in the 1960s.

2.4. Two generations of the SWC

At the SWC Plenum, which took place on July 2, 1968, in the Pillar Hall of the House of Unions, Nina Popova, the SWC head from 1945, ended her term in the SWC, and Valentina Tereshkova, the first female cosmonaut, was “elected” as new SWC head, together with new

³⁹⁶ GARF, F.P7928, Op.3, D. 1888, l. 238.

³⁹⁷ GARF, F.P7928, Op.3, D. 1888, l. 238-239.

³⁹⁸ GARF, P7928, Op.3, D. 1, l. 47.

³⁹⁹ Varga-Harris, “Between National Tradition and Western Modernization,” 781.

members of the SWC Presidium.⁴⁰⁰ The SWC members praised Nina Popova in a special common message and in their individual speeches. The meeting marked the end of an era in the SWC with the new generation coming up. This change was apparent not just in the appointments but also in the 1968 Plenum transcript. Tamara Konstantinova, a Hero of the Soviet Union, a deputy squadron commander during the Second World War, as a representative of an old guard, allowed herself to publicly comment on Tereshkova's appointment, which found a wide approval in the audience:

Comrade Nina Vasilyevna Popova is a truly wonderful Soviet woman who enjoys universal respect and authority, who has done a great deal in the SWC and in the international movement. This is a model for you and me. And we want to be like this woman.

But it must be said that now this huge area has been entrusted to Valentina Vladimirovna. And I would like to wish her [Tereshkova] a good contact with all the women who are here, I wish her not to be so overly serious. We have been looking at her for two days and she is very serious. / LAUGHTER/ I understand that the work area is very large, huge, but, comrades, the general contact between her and the audience has not yet been established / LAUGHTER /.

I think that we, after all, are good women who sit in this hall, we are all worthy women and we will help you all. / APPLAUSE / Personally, I am, you are welcome, ready to follow all your instructions / LAUGHTER/.

⁴⁰⁰ GARF, F.P7928, Op.3, D.1888, ll.1-22.

After all, we will all work on one huge issue that will move our country towards the goal set.⁴⁰¹

Konstantinova's speech was a remarkable sign of lines drawn within the SWC: between the old guard ("we"), women who built their careers during high Stalinism in the 1930s and took an active part in WWII, embodying the early Soviet idea of gender equality,⁴⁰² and the new one, 'Stalin's last generation', consisting of those who socialized in the post-war USSR with different values (Tereshkova).⁴⁰³ Although all of them were "speaking Bolshevik", they spoke different versions of it. As Anna Krylova wrote "[since] the mid-1930s, Soviet society, in the process of industrializing, began speaking more than one—still socialist—language of modernity right at the centre of its political and popular culture."⁴⁰⁴ From generation to generation, the visions of women's emancipation also varied, I will briefly outline it on the material of the SWC Plena and explore it further in the Part Two.

⁴⁰¹ GARF, F.P7928, Op.3, D.1888, l.163; Товарищ Нина Васильевна Попова — это поистине прекрасная советская женщина, которая пользуется всеобщим уважением и авторитетом, которая сделала очень много в Комитете советских женщин и в международном движении. Это образец для нас с вами. И мы хотим быть похожи на эту женщину.

Но нужно сказать, что сейчас этот огромный участок доверен Валентине Владимировне. И мне хочется пожелать ей больших контактов со всеми женщинами, которые здесь находятся, чтобы она не была чрезмерно серьезной. Вот мы смотрим два дня на нее и она очень серьезна. /смех/ Я понимаю, что участок работы очень большой, огромный, но, товарищи, общий контакт между ею и залом еще не установлен /смех/.

Я думаю, что мы, все-таки, хорошие женщины, которые сидят в этом зале, все мы достойные женщины и мы вам все поможем. /аплодисменты/ Лично я, пожалуйста, готова выполнить все ваши указания /смех/. Ведь мы же будем решать одно огромное большое дело, которое будет продвигать нашу страну к поставленной цели.

⁴⁰² Krylova, *Soviet Women in Combat*.

⁴⁰³ Juliane Furst, *Stalin's Last Generation: Soviet Post-War Youth and the Emergence of Mature Socialism*, Illustrated edition (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

⁴⁰⁴ Krylova, "Imagining Socialism in the Soviet Century," 318.



Illustration 4 Tamara Konstantinova, a Hero of the Soviet Union, a deputy squadron commander during the Second World War. Source: warheroes.ru

The SWC Plena made visible the divergence of the emancipation visions between different generations of Soviet women (mostly). The question of reproductive or domestic labor showcased these differences well, and these topics it always caused animation in the audience. Nina Orlova, Doctor of Law, Senior Researcher at the Institute of Law of the Russian Academy of Sciences, nicely put it at the 1968 Plenum: “For all that we are so educated and so advanced and in high positions, I think for literally every one of us, housework is expensive because it's so time-consuming. What can we say about it / cheer in the room, applause/.”⁴⁰⁵ The solutions for the problem varied and conflicted.

I will give two examples of when speakers indicated negative reaction of the audience to what they proposed in the field of reproductive labor. The first, is Orlova’s report about her trip to the Federal Republic of Germany at the invitation of Housewives’ Union:

This is where we need to learn a lot from them [...]. They have put the question of domestic labor on a scientific basis. /noise in the audience/ On

⁴⁰⁵ GARF, F.P7928, Op.3, D. 1888, l.148.; При всем том, что мы так образованы и такие передовые, находимся на высоких постах, я думаю буквально для каждой из нас домашняя работа стоит дорого, потому что она отнимает очень много времени. Ну что о ней говорить /в зале оживление, аплодисменты/.

the one hand, it is ridiculous, but on the other hand, rational domestic labor, it helps women to cope with household chores much faster.⁴⁰⁶

The reaction “it is ridiculous” to the noise in the audience tells me that the noise was not approving of discussing of how to arrange domestic chores more rationally. This attitude also meant more investment into household supplies or a different place of reproductive labor in the general discussion of the economy as well as giving up idea of the socialization of this labor, one of the original building blocks of Bolshevik feminism.

At the 1971 SWC Plenum Valentina Vavilina (b.1911), Chief Editor of *Rabotnitsa*, spoke about the debates on the role of a mother in the early stage of a child’s development. Remarkably, she herself indicated her alien position to the majority of the audience:

Maybe I’m not talking about the topic today at the festive jubilee meeting, but it seems to me that these are the problems [the persistence of “bourgeois ideas” about a natural bond between mother and her child that are used for criticizing the Soviet nursery and kindergarten system she spoke about earlier — A.T.] that we must not forget if we, communists, want to fight and are fighting for the implementation of the decisions of the 24th Congress of our party if we are fighting and we will always fight against bourgeois forays, which are aimed at denigrating our achievements and our successes, including successes in education and in creating a

⁴⁰⁶ GARF, F.P7928, Op.3, D. 1888, l.148.; Вот тут надо много поучиться у них [отчет по поездке в ФРГ по приглашению Союза домохозяек]. **У них вопрос о домашнем труде поставлен на научную базу /в зале шум/.** С одной стороны, это смешно, но с другой стороны, рациональный домашний труд, он помогает женщинам справляться с домашними делами значительно скорее. 28.03.2025 14:32:00

whole network of institutions that allow women to remain a mother and a worker.⁴⁰⁷

Vavilina insisted on the fact that denaturalization of motherhood was a communist agenda and labeled as “bourgeois” the belief that “biologically, a woman should be connected with a child, separation of a child from a mother leads to tragedy, etc.”⁴⁰⁸ Her strong position against such a “traditional” perspective on women was in line with early Soviet radical agenda, Bolshevik feminism, and goes against the dominant interpretation of the Soviet gender contract after the 1920s as a return to more conservative notions of the natural female role as a mother.⁴⁰⁹

These two examples show that the problem of domestic labor was addressed during SWC Plena in two ways. The first scenario, a development of Bolshevik feminism ideas about radical socialization of reproduction and shared responsibility between state and parents⁴¹⁰ as represented by Vavilina. This type of attitude to reproductive labor prevailed in the reasoning for decriminalization of abortion in the USSR, as I show in Chapter Three. Another strand, adopted by the ‘Stalin’s last generation’ was less focused on challenging image of women as a primarily responsible parent, but tackled norms of female labor productivity and place of the reproductive labor in the system of economy (represented by Orlova’s remark)—the main proponent of such politics was the AUCCTU Secretary and the SWC member Aleksandra Biryukova, who actively promoted this vision, as I show in Chapter Four and Five. But both of the options were not unanimously shared and both of them found their way into the policymaking, and to great degree were defined by generational belonging. Importantly, despite

⁴⁰⁷ “Stenogramma Zasedaniia Plenuma KSZh i Materialy Podgotovki k Nemu [Transcript of the SWC Plenum Meeting and Preparatory Materials for It],” December 16, 1971. P7928, Op.3, D.2672. GARF, ll.86-87.

⁴⁰⁸ GARF, F.P7928, Op.3, D. 2672, ll.86-87

⁴⁰⁹ Zdravomyslova and Temkina, “Gosudarstvennoe Konstruirovaniie Gendera v Sovetskom Obshchestve [State Construction of Gender in the Soviet Society].”

⁴¹⁰ Krylova, “Bolshevik Feminism and Gender Agendas of Communism.”

contradictions, both of the scenarios aimed at women's emancipation but along the different lines.

2.5. Conclusion

This chapter has explored the meaning of SWC Plena for its members. Based on SWC Plena transcripts, I have suggested regarding the SWC's Plena as a site for consolidation of Soviet women as an interest group within Soviet politics, as well as a space for voicing their demands and differences. I suggest that the bonding among SWC members was built upon shared emotions, which marked boundaries between Soviet women and Soviet men, and between Soviet women and Western women. The SWC members, rather than passively reproducing official narratives, creatively reworked them into a toolkit for advocating their distinct position within Soviet production. Rooted in their "corporeal-intellectual practice of labor," they developed a degree of "epistemological autonomy," asserting the validity of personal experience, emotion, and reason as sources of knowledge and truth, even in competition with the Party elite. However, this sense of self remained deeply tied to the Soviet state, which they perceived as a fruit of their own work.

I also showed that while formalization of this relationship did not occur until the 27th Congress of the Communist Party in 1986, the SWC Plena served as a critical space for women to demand and discuss the role of women's councils long before official recognition of the SWC-zhensovety relationship. Given the acknowledged by scholars lack of the archival blueprint of the launch of women's councils in other sources, it allowed me to suggest that this initiative came from the SWC. My reading of the 1958 SWC Plena showed that it served as an important space for articulation of the demand to launch women-only groups on the local level across the USSR, and in 1968 the SWC organized an All-Union meeting for women's councils (zhensovety).

As important as they were for Soviet women as an interest group, the SWC Plena also became a space of criticism and disagreements. Thus, the SWC Plena became a space to voice criticism of the inequalities within the organization, which kept privileging white Soviet women in visibility and access to resources. Despite some progress in the 1960s, the SWC's Moscow-centered structure remained a point of contention, contradicting the Soviet Union's self-representation as an internationalist state and a pioneer in emancipating women, particularly those from the "East." The persistent inequality between Moscow and the rest of the country underscored the limitations of the SWC's efforts, even as it provided a platform for women's voices.

Another point of contestation was that of domestic labor. Two distinct approaches emerged often shaped by generational divides: one rooted in Bolshevik feminism, advocating for the radical socialization of reproductive labor and shared responsibility between the state and parents, as exemplified by Valentina Vavilina; and another, represented by figures like Aleksandra Biryukova, which focused on redefining norms of female labor productivity and the economic value of reproductive labor. Importantly, both of them were seen as a way to improve women's position.

Part Two: Bolshevik Feminism in the SWC Members' Work

Chapter Three: Pronatalism vs. Bolshevik feminism: The 1955 Decriminalization of abortion

The abortion legislation in the Soviet Union occupies a special place in the historiography as one of the key markers of the gender regime of the time: from the liberalization of the early Soviet years to the ban on abortion under Stalin in 1936—and, finally, the lifting of the ban on abortion during the Khrushchev Thaw in 1955. Notably, the 1955 abortion legislation was never discussed in the context of the women's movement/women's organizations in the USSR and their contribution to the policymaking process—the aim of the chapter is to explore the 1955 legislative change from that angle.

Abortion on social and medical grounds was first legalized in the Soviet Union in 1920, making the young Soviet state the first country in Europe to provide such a right.⁴¹¹ The legalization of abortion was justified on the ground of the oppressive social and economic conditions inherited from Tsarism, which were expected to disappear with the development of socialism. As a result, as historian Susan Solomon has argued, early Soviet activists for women's emancipation saw no contradiction between anti-abortion propaganda and the legalization of abortion.⁴¹² This was in line with Lenin's argument in his 1913 article "The Working Class and Neo-Malthusianism," probably one of the main ideological sources for abortion politics in the Soviet Union. Lenin regarded neo-Malthusianism, i.e., birth control, as an attempt of the ruling class to protect itself from the growing number of the working class and as a hypocritical solution to the social and economic problems under capitalism. The need for birth control stemmed from the plight of the working class, which could not be improved

⁴¹¹ Susan Gross Solomon, "The Demographic Argument in Soviet Debates over the Legalization of Abortion in the 1920's," *Cahiers Du Monde Russe* 33, no. 1 (1992): 59, <https://doi.org/10.3406/cmr.1992.2306>.

⁴¹² Gross Solomon, "The Demographic Argument in Soviet Debates over the Legalization of Abortion in the 1920's."

under capitalism except by reducing the family size. At the same time, all the repressive laws of the capitalist society, i.e., the prohibition of abortion or of dissemination of information about birth control, should be annulled under socialism: “Freedom for medical propaganda and the protection of the elementary democratic rights of citizens, men, and women, are one thing. The social theory of neomalthusianism is quite another.”⁴¹³ Lenin regarded the growth of the population/working class as a sign of social vitality, and a goal of Marxist demographic politics.⁴¹⁴ Along these lines, Alena Heitlinger concluded in 1979 that the Bolshevik approach to abortion therefore had to focus on “removing the social and economic *causes* of abortion rather than trying to prevent abortion by repression.”⁴¹⁵ Abortion itself was seen as an evil deriving from capitalism that would cease to exist under socialism, similar to sex work.

These two perspectives on abortion—first, as a symptom of unequal capitalist economic system that did not allow for having children, and second, as a “elementary democratic right”—created a space for contradictory policies around birth control which, thus, became a point of struggle and contestation. The 1920 “Decree on the Protection of Women’s Health” declared illegal abortion a “serious evil to the community” and insisted that extensive social protections for maternity and infancy could secure “the gradual disappearance of this evil.” But since both “the moral survivals of the past and the difficult economic conditions of the present still compel[led] many women to resort to this operation,” it was necessary to provide women with the option of legal abortion through the health care system rather than allow its continued illegal practice.⁴¹⁶

⁴¹³ V. Lenin, “The Working Class and Neo-Malthusianism,” in *Lenin Collected Works*, vol. 19 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977), 235–37, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1913/jun/29.htm>.

⁴¹⁴ Sylwia Kuźma-Markowska, “Marx or Malthus? Population Debates and the Reproductive Politics of State-Socialist Poland in the 1950s and 1960s,” *The History of the Family* 25, no. 4 (2020): 576–98, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1081602X.2019.1702889>.

⁴¹⁵ Alena Heitlinger, *Women and State Socialism: Sex Inequality in the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1979), 123.

⁴¹⁶ People’s Commissariat of Health, “On the Protection of Women’s Health,” November 18, 1920, <https://soviethistory.msu.edu/1917-2/the-new-woman/the-new-woman-texts/on-the-protection-of-womens-health/>.

This liberalization was not to last. In 1936, abortion on social grounds was criminalized again, and replaced by a narrow list of medical criteria. Women who transgressed the ban not only risked severe injury or worse by having an illegal abortion, but if caught, they also faced punishment in the form of a social reprimand or a fine (300 rubles) in case of repeated violation of the law. The 1936 “Decree on the Prohibition of Abortions and the Improvement of Material Aid to Women in Childbirth” emphasized that due to improved economic conditions, women no longer “needed” abortions—and, in any case, they had to uphold their role as mothers. Thus, it referred to the rationale of the previous legislation that promised that the “evil” of abortion would cease to exist once the economic conditions improved. Notably, the 1936 decree also invoked Lenin’s 1913 article:

Back in 1913, Lenin wrote that class-conscious workers are: ‘unquestionable enemies of neo-Malthusianism, that tendency of the philistine couple, pigeon-brained and selfish, who murmur fearfully: ‘May God help us to keep our own bodies and souls together: as for children, it is best to be without them.’ But, while rebelling against abortions as a social evil, Lenin considered the mere legislative banning of abortions clearly inadequate to combat them.⁴¹⁷

The 1936 decree that reversed abortion rights further insisted that in the Soviet Union, under declared socialism, abortion and birth control were no longer needed. Thus, the decree stated:

⁴¹⁷ The All-Union Central Executive Committee and The Council of People’s Commissars of the Soviet Union, “Decree on the Prohibition of Abortions, the Improvement of Material Aid to Women in Childbirth, the Establishment of State Assistance to Parents of Large Families, and the Extension of the Network of Lying-in Homes, Nursery Schools and Kindergartens, the Tightening-up of Criminal Punishment for the Non-Payment of Alimony, and on Certain Modifications in Divorce Legislation,” June 27, 1936, <https://soviethistory.msu.edu/1936-2/abolition-of-legal-abortion/abolition-of-legal-abortion-texts/protection-of-motherhood/>.

In no country in the world does a woman enjoy such complete equality in all branches of political, social and family life as in the USSR. In no country in the world does a woman, as a mother and a citizen who bears the great and responsible duty of giving birth to and bringing up citizens, enjoy the same respect and protection from the law as in the USSR. Only under conditions of socialism, where exploitation of man by man does not exist and where a woman is an equal member of society, while the continual improvement of the material well-being of the toilers constitutes a law of social development, is it possible seriously to organize the struggle against abortions by prohibitive laws as well as by other means.⁴¹⁸

The 1955 law on “The Abolition of the Prohibition Against Abortion,” which proclaimed that changed circumstances allowed the lifting of the ban, took the rationale of the previous legislation—the opportunities for women, and Soviet state care for their health—but pushed it further.⁴¹⁹ It did so by claiming that the created conditions and the level of women’s consciousness made it unnecessary to prohibit abortion any longer—and not abortion but illegal abortion was framed as evil:

The measures to encourage motherhood and protect childhood carried out by the Soviet state together with the steady rise in consciousness and cultural level among women actively participating in all sectors of the economy now make it possible to eliminate the legislative ban on abortions. [...] Removing the ban on abortions will also create the

⁴¹⁸ The All-Union Central Executive Committee and The Council of People’s Commissars of the Soviet Union.

⁴¹⁹ Nakachi, *Replacing the Dead*, 180.

possibility of eliminating the great harm to female health caused by abortions outside hospitals, often by untrained individuals.⁴²⁰

Scholars regard the first lines of the 1955 legislation (“On Repeal of the Prohibition of Abortions”) as part of the Soviet paternalistic pronatalist policies, designed to increase the birth rate by reducing the harm to women’s reproductive functions caused by illegal abortions, I will elaborate in the next subchapter. But to give an example, historian Mary Buckley wrote: “Abortion was being legalized not so much as a right for women but as a corrective against resorting to illegal abortions.”⁴²¹ However, the historians who propose this pronatalist interpretation did not pay much attention to another part of the legislation, the part that says: “In order to give a woman the opportunity to decide the issue of motherhood herself.”⁴²² It is precisely this striking phrase that undermines the argument for a purely pronatalist reading of the legislation because it frames motherhood as a choice. Instead, it raises the question where this framing came from.

The chapter first of all will try to answer that question. It will do so by analyzing the 1955 decriminalization of abortion within the state feminism framework. The authors of that framework, Goertz and Mazur, proposed to consider two lines of inquiry—(a) the extent to which women shaped the framing of the gender policy debates and (b) whether independent activists were included in the process. I will explore that through the following four sets of questions: (3.1) What is the current scholarly understanding of the history of decriminalization of abortion in 1955? (3.2). How was the SWC or its leadership involved in the 1955 decriminalization? (3.3). Did they manage to shape the discussion of abortion and the outcome? How did they develop or abandon the key tenets of the Bolshevik feminism? What role did ordinary women’s voices play? (3.4). Did Kovrigina’s involvement in the Soviet Women’s

⁴²⁰ Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, “On Repeal of the Prohibition of Abortions.”

⁴²¹ Buckley, *Women and Ideology in the Soviet Union*, 156.

⁴²² Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, “On Repeal of the Prohibition of Abortions.”

Committee and the Women's International Democratic Federation matter for her thinking about women's rights? (3.5). How does the story of the 1955 decriminalization of abortion in the USSR fit into broader debates about state feminism under state socialism?

The chapter is based on primary sources, such as the collection of documents titled “Delo №15-A/7-b/1; Ob okhrane materinstva, detstva i pomoshch' mnogodetnym sem'iam.”(Case No. 15-A/7-b/1; On the protection of motherhood, childhood and assistance to large families), kept in RGANI (Fonds 3), Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CC documents hereafter in the text). These documents were discussed in the CC CPSU from October 3, 1955 until December 30, 1956. Another important primary source is Maria Kovrigina's unpublished autobiography titled *Zhizn' prozhit' ne pole pereiti* (To live life is not a field to cross), which was written in the first half of the 1980s and is kept in the Russian State Archive (GARF, F. 10095, Op.1, D. 30). In addition, I use her published autobiography *V neoplatnom dolgu* (In Unpaid Debt), that was based on the draft and was published by the Soviet Union Politizdat publishing house in 1985 (print run 100 000).

The chapter is structured as follows. I will start with an overview of the existing historiography on the 1955 decriminalization of abortion in the Soviet Union and identify existing contradictions in it. Secondly, based on the CC documents, I will examine the role of the SWC and its leadership in the 1955 decriminalization campaign. Further, I will analyze how Kovrigina and Popova conceptualized the right to motherhood and reproductive justice their documents to the CC. Finally, I will explore Maria Kovrigina's involvement in the Soviet and the transnational women's organizations, and its meaning in her autobiography.

3.1. The historiography on the 1955 decriminalization of abortion in the Soviet Union

In this subchapter, I will briefly discuss the existing scholarly accounts of the decriminalization of abortion in 1955. There is a consensus in the scholarship that abortion was decriminalized as a response to the growing number of illegal abortions, an interpretation that

has dominated the scholarship over the last more than 40 years. In 1979, Alena Heitlinger wrote that “abortion was re-legalised in 1955, ostensibly on the grounds of the prevalence of criminal abortions taking place outside hospitals.”⁴²³ However, the legalization also could be regarded as “a popular gesture of the post-Stalin leadership to the population, which was still living in crowded housing conditions.”⁴²⁴ Given the fact that abortion was still publicly disapproved, that contraception was not well developed and promoted, and that motherhood was considered a social duty, Heitlinger concluded that in the process of the decriminalization of abortion, “a ‘woman's right to choose’ had not been accepted as policy in the Soviet Union.”⁴²⁵

In her 1989 book, Mary Buckley likewise concluded that decriminalization happened as a reaction to the growing number of backstreet abortions that were extremely harmful for women’s health. In her words: “Abortion was being legalized not so much as a right for women but as a corrective against resorting to illegal abortions.”⁴²⁶ Her argument was based on the fact that the 1955 legalization was not widely discussed or covered in Soviet media, unlike the 1936 criminalization, and that promotion of motherhood was a priority in public campaign around it. However, Buckley noted one significant aspect of the legislation, namely that its preamble included the justification that it would give women an opportunity to make decisions regarding motherhood themselves. Buckley added that this justification was “more in line with the views of Armand, Kollontai and Lenin on abortion”.⁴²⁷ Buckley did not explore this contradiction further in her book, but it points to some tension in her own interpretation of the 1955 law as not being about “a right for women” to choose. Deborah Field’s 2007 book *Private Life and Communist Morality in Khrushchev’s Russia* is exceptional. It argued that the framing of motherhood as a women’s choice rather than a social duty in the 1955 law could be seen as an

⁴²³ Heitlinger, *Women and State Socialism*, 127.

⁴²⁴ Heitlinger, 127.

⁴²⁵ Heitlinger, 128–29.

⁴²⁶ Buckley, *Women and Ideology in the Soviet Union*, 156.

⁴²⁷ Buckley, 158.

innovation in the Soviet approach to motherhood.⁴²⁸ Nonetheless, the interpretation of the 1955 Soviet legalization as a reaction to the growing number of illegal abortions, and as unrelated to women's interests, let alone to their right to choose, became axiomatic in most of the historiography. In her comprehensive 2012 book *A History of Women in Russia*, Barbara Clements wrote: "Although Khrushchev never made the woman question a high priority, his administration did institute important changes. In 1955 it legalized abortion, on the grounds that backstreet procedures were harming women's health."⁴²⁹

It is important to note that this interpretation finds additional support in historical research on the anti-abortion public campaign that supplemented the decriminalization of abortion in the USSR in 1955. As historian Amy Randall suggested, in the years that Nikita Khrushchev was the First Secretary of the CPSU, 1954—1964, state pronatalism shifted from a direct prohibition of abortion to "soft" power that aimed to steer women away from abortions. This soft power was executed through educational campaigns that produced knowledge about the harmful consequences of abortion.⁴³⁰ In the same year that abortion was decriminalized, Khrushchev declared: "The more people we have, the stronger our country will be."⁴³¹ Such statements seemingly leave no doubt regarding the pronatalist agenda behind the decriminalization. However, Randall also noticed a paradox: "What was unusual in the Soviet case was the conjunction of state pronatalism with the legalization of abortion and promotion of contraception."⁴³² Again, the scholar did not explore this paradox further.

The interpretation of the 1955 legalization as a top-down reaction to the growing number of illegal abortions within a pronatalist framework, imposed without any consideration of

⁴²⁸ Deborah A. Field, *Private Life and Communist Morality in Khrushchev's Russia* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), 58.

⁴²⁹ Barbara Evans Clements, *A History of Women in Russia: From Earliest Times to the Present* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 254.

⁴³⁰ Amy E. Randall, "'Abortion Will Deprive You of Happiness!': Soviet Reproductive Politics in the Post-Stalin Era," *Journal of Women's History* 23, no. 3 (2011): 13–38, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jowh.2011.0027>.

⁴³¹ Randall, 15.

⁴³² Randall, 14.

women's rights and without women's involvement with the legal change, has led to a lack of interest on the side of historians in the process that led to the 1955 law. In key academic anthologies about gender and women in the Soviet Union such as the 2004 *Women in the Khrushchev Era* or the 2018 *Palgrave Handbook of Women and Gender in Twentieth-Century Russia and the Soviet Union* one can find no answers to questions as: who put the problem of illegal abortion into the spotlight?; why was the reaction decriminalization of abortion and not a harsher punishment for illegal abortions?; nor, finally, how did the reference to women's rights come to be included in the law's preamble?

Only Mie Nakachi's 2021 book *Replacing the Dead: The Politics of Reproduction in the Postwar Soviet Union* provides a more detailed account of the struggle for the decriminalization of abortion in 1955 and shows that several different professional groups took part in the decriminalization of abortion. Nakachi examined this process in the broader context of the post-WWII demographic crisis; therefore, she also located this debate in the framework of pronatalism and governmental measures against the falling birth rates due to the high number of illegal abortions. Nakachi showed that different special governmental commissions were set up after WWII to explore the reasons behind the falling birth rates and to develop possible solutions.

Nakachi nevertheless mentioned that "the 1955 re-legalization was different from the 1920 legalization because the main motivation was not the medical protection of women's health but the recognition of a woman's right to abortion."⁴³³ Although this is an important finding, she did not explore the role of women's organizations in the process but rather did the opposite. Thus, as mentioned in my Introduction, she formulated her research question as follows: "In the absence of a feminist movement, how did the idea of a woman's right to abortion emerge in the Soviet Union? And how was it suppressed?"⁴³⁴ Her answer to that question was that some

⁴³³ Nakachi, *Replacing the Dead*, 4.

⁴³⁴ Nakachi, 5.

professional groups felt a degree of political agency due to the experience of acting on their own decisions during the wartime, which gave them a sense of empowerment. In her words, “professionals of women’s medicine, many of them women, and female party members were especially active in mediating between the state and women,”⁴³⁵ and they were the ones who finally developed and pushed the legislation. Nakachi emphasized the role of Maria Kovrigina, the USSR Minister of Health at the time, in the decision-making process. Nakachi stated that “her opinion developed over many years of carrying out pronatalist policies as a medical administrator, witnessing the deleterious effects of unwanted pregnancies on women’s health, and receiving letters directly from women asking for legal abortion.”⁴³⁶ This, however, explained neither why Kovrigina framed abortion in the discourse of women’s rights, nor how “the opportunity to decide herself” made it into the document’s final version.

Lastly, Nakachi noted: “The significant female presence in the medical and legal professions was also crucial as female participants at meetings and conferences eloquently spoke out about women’s difficult situations and argued for reform.”⁴³⁷ However, although she emphasized the role of female professionals in the decriminalization of abortion, Nakachi did not address the question of *why* gender mattered to them or whether there were special spaces for articulating a gendered professional identity.

To conclude, the existing scholarship on the 1955 decriminalization of abortion has primarily regarded it in the context of pronatalist policies. Some scholars underscored the paradox of the legalization of abortion within that ideological framework, and some noted the closing phrase of the preamble which states that a woman should have “the opportunity to decide the issue of motherhood herself.” However, this has not been examined further, nor have questions been posed about the role of a women’s movement or organizations.

⁴³⁵ Nakachi, 6.

⁴³⁶ Nakachi, 4.

⁴³⁷ Nakachi, 4.

3.2. The 1955 decriminalization: Maria Kovrigina's and Nina Popova's joint effort

The ban on abortion was lifted in the Soviet Union with a decree issued on November 23, 1955, following the discussions in the Presidium of the Central Committee (CC hereafter) that took place on October 28, 1955 and on November 16, 1955.⁴³⁸ Nakachi wrote that “Kovrigina was able to present abolition as a pronatalist measure to improve women’s health.”⁴³⁹ However, Nakachi also mentioned that there was some resistance to the proposal, and that Kovrigina was not alone in submitting the proposal. Nina Popova, the head of the Soviet Women’s Committee and a Secretary of the All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions (AUCCTU), recalled at the June 1957 CPSU Plenum that she submitted the final proposal together with Kovrigina and faced hostile attitudes from some of the Party members. Nakachi wrote:

Popova, together with Kovrigina, had submitted the proposal to the Central Committee of the Communist Party. She discussed how L. M. Kaganovich insulted her and Kovrigina and how A. I. Mikoian, who supported their initiative, warned Kaganovich that ‘this was exactly the way to discourage people from submitting [new] proposals’. After reworking the proposal and making additions based on the criticisms of the Presidium, on November 16, 1955, the Presidium confirmed the abolition of criminalized abortion.⁴⁴⁰

Making this important observation, Nakachi did not explore what role Popova’s support played in the process.

⁴³⁸ “Delo №15-A/7-b/1; Ob Okhrane Materinstva, Detstva i Pomoshch’ Mnogodetnym Sem’iam [Case No. 15-A/7-b/1; On Protection of Motherhood, Childhood and Assistance to Large Families],” October 3, 1955—December 30, 1956. F.3, Op. 29, D. 36. RGANI.

⁴³⁹ Nakachi, *Replacing the Dead*, 180.

⁴⁴⁰ Nakachi, 180.

In her unpublished memoirs, Kovrigina also used “we” (without clarification) when she recounted the story of the decriminalization of abortion: “To be honest, this was not easy to do. Not everyone shared **our** [bold—A.T.] point of view.”⁴⁴¹ The October 28, 1955, CC meeting’s protocol showed that there were different opinions as well, thus, the document with the excerpt of protocol addressed to Kovrigina and Popova stated:

Agree in principle with the proposal of the USSR Ministry of Health to repeal the law banning abortions. To instruct the Ministry of Health (Comrade Kovrigina) and the All-Russian Central Council of Trade Unions (Comrade Popova), taking into account the exchange of opinions, to develop proposals on this issue in more detail and submit them to the Central Committee of the CPSU.⁴⁴²

The final proposal for legislation lifting the ban on abortion was submitted to the CC on November 4, 1955, with three signatures of Maria Kovrigina, Nina Popova and Konstantin Gorshenin, the USSR Minister of Justice.⁴⁴³

The folder with documents connected with the 1955 decriminalization of abortion that is kept in the Russian State Archive of Contemporary History (RGANI) contains not only Kovrigina’s proposal for the October 28, 1955 CC meeting, but also a note by Popova called “O merakh po dal’neishemu uluchsheniui okhrany materinstva i detstva” (On measures for further improvement of the protection of motherhood and childhood).⁴⁴⁴ The discussion of Popova’s document was postponed to the next meeting, as the October 28 CC meeting protocol shows.⁴⁴⁵ Perhaps for this reason, historians never regarded it in the context of the campaign

⁴⁴¹ Kovrigina, Mariia. “‘Zhizn’ Prozhit’ - Ne Pole Pereiti’. Mashinopis’[‘To Live Is Not a Field to Cross.’ Typewriter],” 1980s. F.10095, Op.1, D. 30. GARF, l. 395.

⁴⁴² RGANI, F.3, Op.29, D. 36, l. 4.

⁴⁴³ RGANI, F.3, Op.29, D. 36, l. 19.

⁴⁴⁴ RGANI, F.3, Op.29, D. 36, l. 16, 22-44.

⁴⁴⁵ RGANI, F.3, Op.29, D. 36, l. 16.

for decriminalizing abortion, despite the fact that Popova submitted her proposal simultaneously with Kovrigina and later took part in developing the legislation lifting the ban on abortion. To the contrary, not only did historians not explore Popova's role, but Nakachi even wrote: "Lack of items that involved trade unions suggests their unwillingness to be involved with abortion issues. Medical professionals complained that the VTsSPS [AUCCTU, where Popova held one of the key positions as a Secretary— A.T.], which should have been most concerned about protecting women workers, had no interest in improving mothers' lives."⁴⁴⁶ Nakachi drew this conclusion from a statement by Professor V. I. Konstantinov, Deputy Director of the Khar'kiv Institute for the Protection of Motherhood and Infancy. On August 23, 1955 at the meeting in the Ministry of Health, he said: "Our legal advisor made several legislative proposals. In his opinion, the present laws on maternity protection needed correction. Amazingly, the central trade union answered us that they did not consider it appropriate at the moment to make any legislative changes. And why? Because there were no economic reasons!!"⁴⁴⁷ If the trade unions were so reluctant, then Popova's involvement in the decriminalization campaign is even more noteworthy and went against the attitude of her colleagues.

Popova's 1955 proposal "On measures for further improvement of the protection of motherhood and childhood" tackled many issues that the Ministry of Health had promoted years before. Its proposal developed in 1950 aimed to reduce the number of illegal abortions included expansion of maternity leave up to 112 days, improvement of the living and working conditions of pregnant women and nursing mothers, reform of the system of pre-school education,⁴⁴⁸ as well as some others that I will discuss in detail in the following subchapter. Unlike the earlier draft of the Ministry of Health, Popova's 1955 proposal did not suggest any increased

⁴⁴⁶ Nakachi, *Replacing the Dead*, 168.

⁴⁴⁷ TsMAMLS f. 218, op. 1, D. 188, l. 20 in Nakachi, 168

⁴⁴⁸ Nakachi 2021, 156-7; RGANI, F.3, Op.29, D. 36, l. 16, 22-44.

punishment for abortion. But the most crucial point is that Popova's note did include a suggestion to expand the criteria for abortion to include social and economic conditions, as well as a proposal to develop contraception. Popova's note stated: "Expansion of abortion criteria and use of contraception will not decrease fertility but free women from harsh consequences"⁴⁴⁹; and "[i]nstruct research institutes to develop the most effective contraceptives to provide those women for whom a pregnancy is dangerous due to their health condition."⁴⁵⁰ Thus, Kovrigina and Popova in 1955 simultaneously submitted two different proposals to change the abortion legislation in the Soviet Union and used two different approaches: decriminalization (Kovrigina) vs. expansion of the criteria and development of contraception (Popova).

One might wonder whether Popova submitted a different proposal because she disagreed with Kovrigina regarding the legalization. Indeed, Nakachi showed that there was no unity regarding abortion within the medical community or the Central Committee. One can assume that the CC suggested that Kovrigina and Popova develop the final proposal in cooperation because they advocated for two different solutions. However, the further evidence leads me to conclude that it was the opposite: Kovrigina and Popova submitted two proposals simultaneously to ensure that at least one of the variants would pass, and they collaborated closely on them.

The first piece of evidence suggesting this is the emphasis both Kovrigina and Popova placed on the need for more and better nurseries and kindergartens. When I first saw Popova's note "On measures for further improvement of the protection of motherhood and childhood," I was puzzled by the amount of attention it paid to the organization of nurseries (2 out of 9 pages), and her advocacy to transfer the responsibility for nurseries from the Ministry of Health to the

⁴⁴⁹ RGANI, F.3, Op.29, D. 36, l.28.

⁴⁵⁰ RGANI, F.3, Op.29, D. 36, l.38.

industrial ministries. Why did the issue seem so important? What was behind this detailed discussion of nurseries?

I found an answer in Kovrigina's published memoirs *V neoplatnom dolgu*. They show the importance she attached to the issue of nurseries, to which she spent the same amount of pages as, for example, on her participation in the drafting of the Geneva Conventions of 1949.⁴⁵¹ According to her memoirs, Kovrigina for eight years promoted the idea of transferring the jurisdiction on nurseries from the Ministry of Health to industrial ministries. She first raised the issue in October 1950, at a CC meeting about "the work among women."⁴⁵² Kovrigina connected the lack of nurseries with the reluctance of ministries to install proper control over their construction, *because* nurseries were the responsibility of the Ministry of Health. In her memoirs, Kovrigina wrote:

The boards of ministries, local party, and Soviet bodies consider it their indispensable duty to check and discuss the progress of the construction of workshops of factories, blast furnaces many times over, but to check the progress of the construction of nurseries—for this, as a rule, there is not enough time or desire.⁴⁵³

By equating the importance of nurseries—essential infrastructure for social reproduction—with the construction of industrial facilities like workshops and blast furnaces, she implicitly

⁴⁵¹ Kovrigina took part in the Conference that drafted two conventions: Geneva Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded and Sick in Armed Forces in the Field; Geneva Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded, Sick and Shipwrecked Members of Armed Forces at Sea. Mariia Kovrigina, *V Neoplatnom Dolgu [In Unpaid Debt]*, Moskva (Politizdat, 1985), 121. About the USSR role in the process see Giovanni Mantilla, "The Protagonism of the USSR and Socialist States in the Revision of International Humanitarian Law," *Journal of the History of International Law* 21, no. 2 (April 2019): 181–211, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15718050-12340118>.

⁴⁵² Kovrigina, *V Neoplatnom Dolgu [In Unpaid Debt]*, 96.

⁴⁵³ Kovrigina, 96. «Коллегии министерств, местные партийные и советские органы считают своим неперенным долгом по многу раз проверять и обсуждать ход строительства цехов заводом, доменных печей, но проверить ход строительства детских яслей—для этого, как правило, не хватает ни времени, ни желания»

challenged the prevailing hierarchy of values that often prioritized industrial production over social welfare.

As a possible solution to the ongoing neglect of childcare infrastructure, Kovrigina proposed to transfer the responsibility for nurseries to industrial ministries. In her view, this would not only push local bodies to take more care of the construction of nurseries but also help women to save time if they had two children of different ages.⁴⁵⁴ This is what Kovrigina wrote in her memoirs, quoting from her speech at the 1950 CC meeting dedicated to “work among women”:

Nurseries and kindergartens that existed separately created an artificial gap between the upbringing of children under the age of three and children from 3 to 7 years old, which had no theoretical or practical justification....

But the current disunity between them leads to the mother spending her energy uneconomically. A mother, worker, or employee who has two children—one under the age of 3 years, the other from three to seven years old—before going to work must take one child to a nursery and the other to a kindergarten. Most often, these institutions are located quite far from each other. In the evening, after returning from work, the mother must again follow the same route and collect her children.⁴⁵⁵

⁴⁵⁴ Kovrigina, 99–100.

⁴⁵⁵ Kovrigina, 99–100. «Раздельно существовавшие детские ясли и детские сады создавали искусственный, не имеющий никакого теоретического и практического обоснования, водораздел между воспитании детей до трехлетнего возраста и детей от 3 до 7 лет. <...>

Но существующая в данное время разобщенность между ними ведет к тому, что мать неэкономно расходует свои силы. Мать, работница или служащая, имеющая двух детей—одного в возрасте до 3-х лет, другого с трех до семи лет, прежде чем пойти на работу должна отвести одного ребенка в ясли, другого в детский сад. Чаще всего эти учреждения находятся довольно далеко друг от друга. Вечером, вернувшись с работы, мать должна снова пройти по тому же маршруту и собрать своих детей.»

Remarkably, the phrasing about the mother's time budget and childcare infrastructure in Kovrigina's 1950 speech, as presented in her 1985 memoirs, is almost identical to the wording of Popova's note sent to the CC in 1955:

With the separate existence of nurseries and kindergartens, an artificial gap and disunity in the organization and conduct of activities for the upbringing of children under the age of three and children from 3 to 7 years old was created, which does not have any theoretical and practical justification.

Due to the current disunity of nurseries and kindergartens, the mother is forced to spend her energy uneconomically. A mother, worker, or employee who has two children—one under the age of 3 years, the other from three to seven years old—before going to work must take one child to a nursery, the other to a kindergarten. In the evening, returning from work, the mother must go to two institutions for her children again. Most often, these institutions are located in different places, and sometimes quite far from each other.”⁴⁵⁶

The fact that in her 1985 memoirs, Kovrigina's 1950 speech was identical to the fragment from Popova's 1955 note to the CC (which was not publicly available) makes it likely that

⁴⁵⁶ RGANI, F.3, Op.29, D. 36, 1.31-32, “Раздельно существовавшие детские ясли и детские сады создавали искусственный, не имеющий никакого теоретического и практического обоснования, водораздел между воспитании детей до трехлетнего возраста и детей от 3 до 7 лет. <...>

Но существующая в данное время разобщенность между ними ведет к тому, что мать неэкономно расходует свои силы. Мать, работница или служащая, имеющая двух детей—одного в возрасте до 3-х лет, другого с трех до семи лет, прежде чем пойти на работу должна отвести одного ребенка в ясли, другого в детский сад. Чаще всего эти учреждения находятся довольно далеко друг от друга. Вечером, вернувшись с работы, мать должна снова пройти по тому же маршруту и собрать своих детей.”

Kovrigina wrote or co-wrote this part from Popova's note or Popova used fragments of Kovrigina's 1950 speech. In any case, such a similarity of phrasing showcased their close collaboration.

Additional evidence of their joint work on their proposals to the CC in 1955 is that they both used the same letter a Soviet woman called Burtseva had written to the Minister of Health. Burtseva connected the need to have an abortion with the material conditions of women's life or her having an unreliable partner:

A woman wants to end the pregnancy, not because of cruelty or heartlessness, but because she either has a hard time living financially, or she has a large family, or an unsuccessful marriage and she feels the need to break ties with her husband, or she is abandoned by a soulless person and does not want to leave a child without a father. And the woman does anything [to get an abortion]!⁴⁵⁷

Both Kovrigina and Popova quoted this letter in detail. These pieces of evidence allow me to suggest that Popova's and Kovrigina's different proposals for decriminalization were developed in cooperation between them.

3.3. In the footsteps of Bolshevik feminism: Framing of abortion legislation

This subchapter aims to explore how Kovrigina and Popova framed the abortion legislation, in particular, to what degree they developed or abandoned the tenets of the

⁴⁵⁷ RGANI, F.3, Op.29, D. 36, l. 13, 28; “Женщина желает ликвидировать беременность не из-за жестокости или бездушия, а от того, что или ей трудно живется материально, или у нее большая семья, или неудачный брак и она чувствует необходимость порвать связь с мужем, или она брошена бездушным человеком и не хочет оставлять ребенка, у которого не будет отца. И женщина идет на все!”; Remarkably, Kovrigina quoted the same Burtseva's letter in her unpublished memoirs as well, see: GARF, F.10095, Op.1, D. 30, ll.393-394.

Bolshevik feminism. Whereas Nakachi did not examine Popova's role in the process, I suggest it is crucial to examine both proposals on the right to abortion and their views on motherhood.

A critical tone distinguished Popova's document from others in the folder. Popova mentioned concrete examples of failures to implement the legislation on labor protection and described the severe living conditions of working women:

At factory No. 2 "Krasnaya Vetka" /town Kineshma / Ministry of Industrial Consumer Goods of the USSR 235 rooms are inhabited by 2 families, 61 rooms—1 by three families, and 28 rooms—by four families. Some rooms present a gruesome picture. 8—12 people live on 18 square meters of living space, bunks are arranged in the rooms, baby cradles hang over the bunks, and 2—3 people sleep in one bed.⁴⁵⁸

Similar harsh realistic descriptions were present in letters from ordinary people attached to Popova's and Kovrigina's notes. Popova was not the only one who addressed these problems in the discussion on abortion, but she did support these complaints with her own voice. It is evident that Popova's words in front of the CC weighed more than some ordinary Soviet citizens' complaints. Still, the risk for her of saying something this critical in the first person was higher than merely citing letters.

Another important point in Popova's note was the suggestion to develop contraception: "Expansion of abortion criteria and use of contraception will not decrease fertility but free women from harsh consequences."⁴⁵⁹ The question of contraception did not appear in any following documents in the folder, but Kovrigina wrote about it in her unpublished autobiography as well:

⁴⁵⁸ RGANI, F.3, Op.29, D. 36, l.27.

⁴⁵⁹ RGANI, F.3, Op.29, D. 36, l.28.

We need to teach women (and men too) how to prevent unwanted pregnancies. This is an important and most noble task for doctors. I would also like to note that our scientists still owe a great debt to women, they do little work on the creation of convenient, reliable and absolutely harmless contraceptives.⁴⁶⁰

It was a risky move for Popova to put the issue of contraception into the note, as contraception was not entirely legalized.⁴⁶¹ In all the 1955-1956 documents to the CC concerning abortion and the protection of motherhood, Popova was the only politician who mentioned the necessity of developing contraception in the USSR.⁴⁶² Thus, it allows us to state that Popova did try to contribute to the changing Soviet policies around reproduction and was not just an “experienced apparatchik” who “made a conservative turn in the ideology of the position of women in Soviet society,” as historian Magali Delaloye only recently characterized her.⁴⁶³

Popova and Kovrigina developed nuanced and profound ideas about reproductive labor and the causes of abortion. The name of Popova’s note, “On measures for further improvement of the protection of motherhood and childhood,” similarly to the 1955 legislation, followed the line of the previous debates about abortion in the Soviet Union, as the 1936 Decree prohibiting abortion was called “Improvement of Material Aid to Women in Childbirth.” The phrase “further improvement” directly connected her proposal with the 1936 legislation, suggesting that the situation had developed, therefore, women’s rights should change accordingly. Such

⁴⁶⁰ GARF, F.10095, Op.1, D. 30, ll.395-396.; Нужно научить женщину (и мужчину тоже) предупреждать нежелательную беременность. Это важная и самая благородная задача врачей. Хочу заметить также, что наши ученые еще в большом долгу перед женщинами, они мало работают над созданием удобных, надежных и абсолютно безвредных противозачаточных средств. Kovrigina raised the issue at the August 23, 1955 meeting at the Ministry of Health. See: Nakachi, 178.

⁴⁶¹ Nakachi, *Replacing the Dead*, 178.

⁴⁶² This led to abortion being the dominant means of contraception in the Soviet Union; see Anatoly Vishnevsky, Boris Denisov, and Victoria Sakevich, “The Contraceptive Revolution in Russia,” *Demograficheskoe Obozrenie* 4, no. 5 (December 1, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.17323/demreview.v4i5.8570>.

⁴⁶³ Magali Delaloye, *Usy i Iubki. Gendernye Otnosheniia Vnutri Kremlevskogo Kruga v Stalinskuiu Èpokhu (1928–1953) [Moustache and Skirts. Gender Relations in Kremlin Circle under Stalin (1928-1953)]* (Moskva: ROSSPEN, 2018), 315.

framing had further implications—advocating for abortion not only in the context of reproductive rights but in the context of reproductive justice, i.e., the right to have as well as not to have a child and the necessity of special benefits for women that would compensate for their unpaid reproductive labor or communalize it.⁴⁶⁴ Essentially, Popova’s proposal was in line with Lenin’s approach to abortion that to combat abortion, its “causes” needed to be overcome. But the understanding of these causes was nuanced in Popova’s proposal and not reduced to the reminiscences of Tsarism, as the first Soviet abortion legislation did.

Popova proposed changes in labor legislation that would protect mothers from losing their jobs or salaries because of their child caring responsibilities, as well as an extension of maternity leave, the development of the infrastructure for children, the improvement of women’s living conditions, etc.—all essential to guarantee women’s right to become mothers. What is particularly striking is the level of attention and care about women’s reproductive labor in Popova’s proposal. One example is the suggestion to “recommend the organization of points for the rental of household items/washing and sewing machines, electric floor polishers, electric vacuum cleaners, and others/under house management in cities.”⁴⁶⁵ This proposal was not present either in the previous or following documents but perfectly fits with how Yuri Grigoriev, her son-in-law, remembered Popova. According to him, Popova traveled abroad a lot, but she never brought anything back for herself; sometimes she had some kitchen supplies that could ease domestic labor—special knives for vegetables, filters for water, a pressure cooker, etc. Again, not for herself, she carried them to “different ministers” to convince them to launch the same product in the USSR.⁴⁶⁶

⁴⁶⁴ Tithi Bhattacharya, “‘What is social reproduction theory?’,” October 17, 2017, <https://marxismocritico.com/2017/10/17/what-is-social-reproduction-theory/>.

⁴⁶⁵ RGANI, F.3, Op.29, D. 36, l.35

⁴⁶⁶ Renita Grigorieva, ed., *Golub' Mira Niny Popovoi* [Nina Popova’s Dove of Peace] (Moskva: TONCHU, 2010), 204.

Not only did Popova discuss such concrete details as the availability of household supplies in the context of abortion, she also addressed the problem of domestic labor as a source of persistent inequality between men and women in the Soviet Union. For example, at a trade union meeting in 1954, she stated: “The work of the trade unions and their soviets should be focused on improving the living conditions of the Soviet family, on alleviating the situation for women in the household, which, as we know, takes a lot of their time and efforts.”⁴⁶⁷

Kovrigina saw the right to abortion as inseparable from additional benefits for women, as the last point of her proposal showed:

The USSR Ministry of Health believes that the complete repeal of the law banning abortions should be followed by the establishment of some additional benefits for mothers, creating an interest in the birth and upbringing of children. Proposals on this issue by the Ministry of Health of the USSR are being developed and will be additionally submitted for consideration by the Presidium of the Central Committee of the CPSU.⁴⁶⁸

Historians interpret this focus on benefits for mothers as a sign of Soviet pronatalism, which had conservative connotations. This interpretation misses the crucial point that the 1955 decriminalization of abortion presented motherhood as a choice, as women’s “opportunity to decide the issue of motherhood herself” that the state should encourage. Popova’s and Kovrigina’s 1955 notes presented motherhood as a right of women that was hindered by the severe difficulty of reproductive labor. One letter by a woman called Ivanova attached to Kovrigina’s proposal is especially illustrative in this regard (however, the other six letters in the same file follow a similar line):

⁴⁶⁷ Nina Popova, *Ob Izmenenii v Ustave Professional'nykh Soiūzov SSSR* [On Changes in the Statute of the Soviet Trade Unions], Profizdat (Moskva, 1954), 16–17. More on Popova’s speeches about domestic labor see: Talaver, “Nina Vasilievna Popova (1908–1994): ‘Woman in the Land of Socialism.’”

⁴⁶⁸ RGANI, F.3, Op.29, D. 36, l.8

The happiness of motherhood is also hindered by the fact that a woman has too many duties. A woman is an industrial worker, has civil responsibilities, a wife, a mother-educator, a cook, a laundress, a cleaner, and has other duties. I know well what awaits me when a new person appears. One child is in the nursery; the other is in the kindergarten. Persistent infectious diseases of children /daughter has already been ill six times/, sleepless nights, but you still need to work creatively.⁴⁶⁹

Even though the letter did not call for women's emancipation from these duties directly, it had a clear critical tone, emphasizing that there were "too many." But what is remarkable even more is that the author did not naturalize these duties; all the different tasks women had to handle are listed without camouflaging them with some affectionate or natural epithets—Ivanova did not present laundry and cleaning as "love" or "care" which would be "natural" for women. In other letters attached to Kovrigina's proposal, the women wrote: "I am not a machine to produce two kids per year!"⁴⁷⁰ or "I haven't forgotten the pain of the previous birth yet."⁴⁷¹ Thus, motherhood was not framed as natural, easy, or painless—quite the opposite. To substantiate her proposal, Kovrigina had picked letters which depicted reproductive labor as tiring, painful, not creative, or rewarding.

It is important to note that, unlike early Soviet projects, the 1955 discussion about motherhood lacked a radical utopian vision of communal life and the abolition of the family.⁴⁷²

⁴⁶⁹ RGANI, F.3, Op.29, D.36, l.14; Счастью материнства мешает и тот факт, что слишком много обязанностей лежит на женщине. Женщина—работник на производстве, общественный работник, жена, мать-воспитатель, повар, прачка, уборщица, несет и другие обязанности. Я хорошо знаю, что меня ожидает при появлении нового человека. Один ребенок в яслях, другой в садике, Бесконечные инфекционные болезни детей/дочь уже шесть раз переболела/, бессонные ночи, да нужно еще творчески работать»

⁴⁷⁰ RGANI, F.3, Op.29, D.36, l.11

⁴⁷¹ RGANI, F.3, Op.29, D.36, l.13

⁴⁷² Lynne Attwood, *Gender and Housing in Soviet Russia: Private Life in a Public Space*, 1st ed., Gender in History (Manchester: University Press, 2010); Anna Alekseyeva, *Everyday Soviet Utopias: Planning, Design and the Aesthetics of Developed Socialism*, Routledge Studies in the History of Russia and Eastern Europe (London ; New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2019).

Instead of revolutionary projects, the heteronormative nuclear family was at the center of policymaking.⁴⁷³ The nuclear family was also at the center of Khrushchev's housing project.⁴⁷⁴ Early Soviet radical ideas of communes in the 1955 documents had transformed into a proposal to make available rent of household supplies.

However, the fact that the nuclear family was at the center of 1955 proposal did not mean that childcare was expected to become a private matter—even the opposite, the line of Bolshevik feminism regarding state share in childcare and denaturalization of motherhood was continued. Such a perspective on reproductive labor echoed the view of earlier prominent Bolshevik authors, such as Vladimir Lenin, Nadezhda Krupskaya, and Aleksandra Kollontai. None of them had a favorable opinion of reproductive labor; instead, they saw it as one of the main obstacles to women's emancipation. As Lenin emphasized in his 1919 article "A Great Beginning," legal equality would not bring real equality as long as a woman remained "a domestic slave":

Notwithstanding all the laws emancipating woman, she continues to be a domestic slave because petty housework crushes, strangles, stultifies and degrades her, chains her to the kitchen and the nursery, and she wastes her labour on barbarously unproductive, petty, nerve-racking, stultifying and crushing drudgery. The real emancipation of women, real communism, will begin only where and when an all-out struggle begins (led by the proletariat wielding the state power) against this petty housekeeping, or

⁴⁷³ Zdravomyslova and Temkina, "Gosudarstvennoe Konstruirovanie Gendera v Sovetskom Obshchestve [State Construction of Gender in the Soviet Society]."

⁴⁷⁴ Lynne Attwood and Olga Isupova, "'To Give Birth or Not to Give Birth?': Having Children in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Women and Gender in Twentieth-Century Russia and the Soviet Union*, 2018, 452.

rather when its wholesale transformation into a large-scale socialist economy begins.⁴⁷⁵

Lenin considered reproductive labor an obstacle to women's real emancipation because it was unproductive and uncreative. It simply stole women's energy and time from more important tasks, like politics or work in production. This perspective on domestic labor as something that "degraded" women and, thus, should be structurally changed, became commonplace in the Soviet Bolshevik feminist tradition. Kollontai explained in her 1920 article on "Communism and the Family" that this "degrading" effect was linked with the unproductive nature of domestic labor:

The housewife may spend all day, from morning to evening, cleaning her home, she may wash and iron the linen daily, make every effort to keep her clothing in good order and prepare whatever dishes she pleases and her modest resources allow, and she will still end the day without having created any values. Despite her industry she would not have made anything that could be considered a commodity. Even if a working woman were to live a thousand years, she would still have to begin every day from the beginning. There would always be a new layer of dust to be removed from the mantelpiece, her husband would always come in hungry and her children bring in mud on their shoes. Women's work is becoming less useful to the community as a whole. It is becoming unproductive.⁴⁷⁶

⁴⁷⁵ Vladimir Lenin, "A Great Beginning. Heroism of the Workers in the Rear 'Communist Subbotniks,'" in *Collected Works*, vol. 29 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1965), 408–34, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1919/jun/19.htm>.

⁴⁷⁶ Alexandra Kollontai, "Communism and the Family," in *Selected Writings of Alexandra Kollontai*, trans. Alix Holt (London: Allison & Busby, 1977), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/kollonta/1920/communism-family.htm>.

Contemporary feminist scholars who are developing social reproduction theory attribute this disavowal of reproductive labor to the fact that labor power is a commodity and insist on the fundamental importance of reproductive labor for the economy.⁴⁷⁷ They also underscore that such a disavowal of reproductive labor allows for its exploitation and constitutes one of the critical contradictions of capitalism, which needs reproductive labor for growth but simultaneously denies its importance.⁴⁷⁸ However, here comes a distinction of the Soviet approach to the one criticized—childbirth was acknowledged as essential for the communist society. At the same time, since reproductive labor was “degrading for women,” parenting was seen as a necessarily shared responsibility between state and parents. As Kollontai wrote in the same article mentioned above:

Communist society considers the social education of the rising generation to be one of the fundamental aspects of the new life.... The workers' state aims to support every mother, married or unmarried, while she is suckling her child and to establish maternity homes, day nurseries, and other such facilities in every city and village, in order to give women the opportunity to combine work in society with maternity.⁴⁷⁹

Such a fundamental restructuring of the sphere of reproduction in favor of women's emancipation through waged labor was expected to lead to a radical reshaping of the maternal instinct which, as historian Anna Krylova writes, “was expected to diminish as women and men would reconsider parenthood's temporal boundaries and meaning.”⁴⁸⁰

⁴⁷⁷ Tithi Bhattacharya, “Introduction:: Mapping Social Reproduction Theory,” in *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression* (Pluto Press, 2017), 1–20, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1vz494j>.

⁴⁷⁸ Nancy Fraser, “Crisis of Care? On the Social-Reproductive Contradictions of Contemporary Capitalism,” in *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression*, ed. Tithi Bhattacharya (London: Pluto Press, 2017), 24.

⁴⁷⁹ Kollontai, “Communism and the Family.”

⁴⁸⁰ Krylova, “Bolshevik Feminism and Gender Agendas of Communism,” 432.

In 1955, Kovrigina attached letters to her proposal that represented motherhood outside the framework of “instinct” or some “inner call” but instead emphasized its hardship. The choice of letters, thus, reflected the shift envisioned by the Bolshevik feminist project—the loss of the aura of “maternal instinct.” Notably, Kovrigina also attached letters, which accused men of demotivating women to have kids because of their irresponsible behavior and, importantly, violence:

Many women cripple themselves only because they are not sure about the father. We know many examples when the mother is lying in the hospital, in the maternity hospital, and the father leaves for another...[...] Often dads prefer to spend leisure time drinking alcohol and flirting but have no time to raise children... Beatings, insults force a woman to get an abortion...⁴⁸¹

In this scheme, the only way to incite women to give birth was to guarantee the *right to motherhood*, i.e., creating actual economic conditions that would allow women to choose motherhood without losing in salary, job opportunities, social and political life and by sharing care responsibilities between state and a woman. This was a utopian horizon that was never realized but remained in view as a goal.

Decriminalizing abortion was not the end of the struggle for a right to motherhood or reproductive justice, but only the beginning. Following the discussion of Popova’s note, on November 24, 1955, a special commission was set to develop Popova’s note on the improvement of women’s working and living conditions. It included Alexey Kosygin, Deputy Chairman of the Council of Ministers, Ekaterina Furtseva, First Secretary of the Moscow City

⁴⁸¹ RGANI, F. 3, Op.29, D. 36, l. 15; “Многие женщины калечат себя только потому, что они не уверены в отце. Мы знаем много примеров, когда мать лежит в больнице, в роддоме, а отец уходит к другой...[...] Нередко папы предпочитают проводить часы отдыха за алкогольными напитками и занимаются флиртом, а на воспитание детей не остается времени...Побои, оскорбления принуждают женщину стремиться сделать аборт...”

Party Committee, Arseny Zverev, Minister of Finance, Ivan Goroshkin, Chairman of the Supreme Soviet of the Russian SFSR, Grigory Kosyachenko, Chairman of State Planning Committee of the Soviet Union, and Andrey Andreev, Chairman of the Central Commission, as well as Maria Kovrigina, and Nina Popova.⁴⁸² On March 12, 1956, their proposals were discussed in the CC meeting. They included a note explaining the budget for the proposed legislative changes, a project of a Decree of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet, and a project of a Decree of the Soviet of Ministers, both with the same title as Popova's note "On measures for further improvement of the protection of motherhood and childhood." The detailed budget for all the changes amounted to 1,7 billion rubles in 1956. This sum was approx. 34% of the smallest 1955 Soviet budget line, i.e. state support for single mothers and mothers of many children (4,9 bln.), and approx. 1% of the 1955 Soviet military budget (107,4 bln.), overall, the costs of the new proposals constituted approx. 0,3% of the 1955 Soviet budget (539,5 bln.).⁴⁸³ Thus, the requested amount did not substantially transform the state budget towards a fairer redistribution in favor of reproductive labor. Yet, it demanded a significant increase compared with the state spending in support of motherhood.

The proposals were adopted only partially as Decree of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet 26.03.1956⁴⁸⁴ and Soviet of Ministers' decree №1414 13.10.1956,⁴⁸⁵ although the CC approved one of the proposed decrees (for the Supreme Soviet), and sent another (for the Soviet of Ministers) for further discussion and development to the Soviet of Ministers.⁴⁸⁶ The spectrum

⁴⁸² RGANI, F. 3, Op.29, D. 36, l.23.

⁴⁸³ "Gosudarstvennyi Biudzheth SSSR v 1940, 1946, 1950-1955 Gg.[State Budget of the USSR in 1940, 1946, 1950-1955.],” n.d. F.1562, Op.41, D.113, ll.181-182. RGAE. <https://istmat.org/node/18453>.

⁴⁸⁴ "Ukaz Prezidiuma VS SSSR Ot 26.03.1956 'Ob Uvelichenii Prodolzhitel'nosti Otpuskov Po Beremennosti i Rodam'[Decree of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR of 26.03.1956 'On Increasing the Duration of Maternity Leave'],” n.d.

<https://www.consultant.ru/cons/cgi/online.cgi?req=doc&base=ESU&n=17167#BihrfBTW44L7E2xX1>.

⁴⁸⁵ "Postanovlenie Sovmina SSSR Ot 13.10.1956 N 1414 O Dal'neishikh Merakh Pomoshchi Zhenshchinam Materiam, Rabotaiushchim Na Predpriatiiakh i V Uchrezhdeniiakh [Decree of the USSR Council of Ministers of 13.10.1956 N 1414 On Further Measures to Help Women Mothers Working at Enterprises and Institutions],” n.d. https://lawrussia.ru/texts/legal_346/doc346a332x152.htm.

⁴⁸⁶ RGANI, F. 3, Op.29, D. 36, l. 49.

of measures suggested in the proposals gave clarifies what reproductive rights from a socialist perspective encompassed (see Table 1).

Table 1 Comparison of proposals to the CC and adopted legislation

Proposed changes 1955	Adopted changes
expansion of maternity leave up to 112 days and up to 140 days in case of difficult childbirth	Decree of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet 26.03.1956
prohibition of overtime and business trips without consent for pregnant women and women with children under eight years of age	
introduction of additional unpaid maternity leave up to three months upon request, permission to leave a job for women who want to take care of their kids	
expansion of state support for single mother until her child reaches the age of 18	
expansion of a network of kindergartens and nurseries and uniting them	
to strengthen control over the Soviet of Ministers' decree №2004 18.05.1949 about the obligation to use 5% of a square of newly built housing for childcare infrastructure	
to allow construction of childcare infrastructure in dacha (countryside) area for summer wellness programs	
to oblige to accept to nurseries and kindergartens that belong to certain industrial Ministries kids of people who do not work in the relevant industries but live in the neighborhood	Soviet of Ministers' decree №1414 13.10.1956
to establish 2000 schools (1-4 years) with extended day and hot meals (paid by parents) for those kids whose parents cannot take care of them after school	Soviet of Ministers' decree №1414 13.10.1956
to provide hot breakfasts (paid by parents) in all schools	Soviet of Ministers' decree №1414 13.10.1956
to provide hot breakfasts and hot meals at the schools with extended days for free for children from poor families (up to 15%)	
to establish 20 boarding schools (paid by parents) in Moscow and Leningrad for children without proper care at home or with special needs	

to improve extra curriculum work with children and to organize special groups in the neighborhoods (paid by parents)	
to establish 18 sanatoriums for 2000 people in 1956-57 for pregnant women and women with children	
to allow to allocate 15% of places in sanatorium nurseries and kindergartens to mothers with many children and single mothers for free	
to allow enterprises to provide free tours to sanatorium to pregnant women in need	Soviet of Ministers' decree №1414 13.10.1956
to oblige enterprises to establish rooms for breastfeeding, showers, rooms of personal hygiene, et. al	Soviet of Ministers' decree №1414 13.10.1956
to develop special work clothes and shoes for women (notably, this demand was repeated by Popova in her another note to the Soviet of Ministers in October 1956) ⁴⁸⁷	
to expand a network of laundries and canteens	Soviet of Ministers' decree №1414 13.10.1956

Therefore, simultaneously with women's right to abortion, a broad communal infrastructure for childcare was ought to be developed to create possibilities for having children. Yet, many of the proposed changes were either postponed or remained a subject of continuous women's struggle, some even thirty years later, during International Women's Year and the UN Decade for women, as I will show in Chapter Five.

In conclusion, the 1955 decriminalization of abortion resulted not solely from Kovrigina and other medical experts (as Nakachi wrote) but from Kovrigina's joint effort with Popova. Moreover, this cooperation reshaped Soviet politics around motherhood, bringing women's productive and reproductive labor to the forefront. The 1955 decriminalization of abortion presented motherhood as a choice, as an issue a woman could decide about herself. And in Kovrigina's and Popova's proposals to the CC, this choice was not presented as easy to make, for which they based themselves on letters from ordinary Soviet women's. In line with the

⁴⁸⁷ GARF, F. 5451, Op. 43, d. 1290B, l.153

Bolshevik feminist tradition, reproductive labor was described as endless and exhausting, significantly hindering the right to motherhood; importantly, men were also regarded as responsible for childrearing, even though no concrete measures for increasing their roles were taken. Kovrigina and Popova insisted on state responsibility to share women's caring duties. Thus, further proposals for improving women's working and living conditions were developed to bring closer the ideal of reproductive justice, which was never achieved but never given up on by the SWC members, as the next chapters will further develop.

3.4. The meaning of women's organizations in Kovrigina's autobiography

This subchapter aims to answer why Kovrigina and Popova together promoted the legislation, even though they belonged to two different and only loosely connected governmental bodies: the Ministry of Health and the All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions.

Moving beyond the simplifying assumption that they did so because they were women themselves, I argue that what enabled their cooperation in the policymaking process was that both Kovrigina and Popova belonged to the Soviet Women's Committee, which allowed for the creation a gender-based bond between them. We have seen that the SWC Plena served as a space for collective reflection on the Soviet women's place in Soviet society and politics. However, Popova and Kovrigina had even more meaningful shared experiences than attending SWC Plena—they went together to Paris for the WIDF founding Congress in 1945, as members of the Soviet delegation. This Congress played a significant role in Kovrigina's autobiographical narrative. For this subchapter, I will mainly use Kovrigina's published autobiography *V neoplatnom dolgu* (In Unpaid debt) to analyze how she reflected on this first encounter with the transnational women's movement and her role in it.



Illustration 5 M.Kovrigina as a pioneer leader, 1926. Source: Kovrigina, V Neoplatnom Dolgu [In Unpaid Debt].

Autobiography was a widespread genre in the Soviet Union that blossomed in the late 1950s as one of the key means to pass the lived experience on to new generations.⁴⁸⁸ In the Soviet context, a published autobiography was obviously a censored construction of an appropriate public persona, a Soviet citizen—and in the case of Kovrigina, a female doctor and a politician. Her autobiography showed a solid gendered professional identity. It paid special attention to her female colleagues and to the history of women’s medical education—and the last chapter of the book is called “Bow to you, female doctors.” However, autobiographical writing is also a process of telling oneself and organizing one’s life narrative—it is regulation as much as production, and as Marianne Liljeström wrote about female autobiography under Khrushchev: “The agency of the autobiographically writing female subjects is an effect of power, but, importantly, never fully determined in advance.”⁴⁸⁹ Kovrigina’s autobiography was structured in a way typical for the Soviet *nomenklatura* of her generation, which followed the

⁴⁸⁸ Marianne Liljeström, “Monitored Selves: Soviet Women’s Autobiographical Texts in the Khrushchev Era,” in *Women in the Khrushchev Era*, ed. Melanie Ilić, Susan E. Reid, and Lynne Attwood, Studies in Russian and East European History and Society (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 131–49.

⁴⁸⁹ Liljeström, 145.

conventions of the official “autobiography” each Soviet citizen had to provide in their workplace.

Maria Kovrigina was born in 1910. Coming from the peasantry, she welcomed the Bolshevik Revolution (indeed, her elder brother was a founder of a local Bolshevik organization), and she joined the youth body Komsomol at the age of 14, helping to build a local pioneer organization. She had her professional training as a medical doctor, but her career after graduation turned toward hospital administration. As she worked on organizing the evacuated hospitals in her home region, the Ural region, during the Second World War, she was noticed in Moscow. She was pushed to take up government positions. She became deputy head of the USSR Ministry of Health (1942–1950), the Minister of Health of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (1950–54, RSFSR), and finally, the USSR Minister of Health (1954–59). In this capacity, Kovrigina achieved many improvements in Soviet healthcare besides the legalization of abortion, for example, a modification of the tuberculosis treatment, an extension of maternity leave after pregnancy, etc.⁴⁹⁰ Kovrigina presented herself as a critical and a bit inconvenient politician, who fought for what she believed was the best for Soviet people. The narrative about the 10th Moscow region Conference of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks)⁴⁹¹ in 1951 illustrates that well. Kovrigina wrote about her criticism of the Soviet politics in environmental protection, or lack of those to be precise. She recollected the final words of her speech and disapproval of the audience:

⁴⁹⁰ At the same time, she participated in the after-war purges among doctors, which probably paved her way to the ministerial post. In December 1947, the Ministry of Health established a special commission headed by Kovrigina to investigate the Moscow Institute for Gynecology and Obstetrics. In early 1948 Kovrigina submitted the report that unveiled the blossoming of “private practice” and “nepotism” at the Institute, which led to many individuals being fired or demoted and an overall reduction of the personnel. Nakachi, *Replacing the Dead*, 79–84.

⁴⁹¹ The name of CPSU in 31 December 1925 – 14 October 1952.

“Condemn the practice of economic organizations that underestimate the tasks of improving the health of settlements (soil, water and air protection).”

I was very surprised and saddened by the fact that there was noise in the audience during my speech. Why? Did I touch their heart? Or did they disagree with me? I returned to my seat in complete frustration.⁴⁹²

Kovrigina did not see her achievements as a story of individual success but considered herself a part of the larger historical process enabled by the state and the Communist party, which was in line with the Soviet tradition of autobiography.⁴⁹³ This is why her memoirs are called *V neoplatnom dolgu* (In Unpaid Debt)—and at the very beginning, she listed everyone she was indebted to: those who participated in the October Revolution, the Soviet people who paid for her education with their “labor money,” and, finally, the Communist Party, which raised her “and entrusted the daughter of a simple peasant from a distant Siberian village with high posts in the Soviet state.”⁴⁹⁴ However, acceptance of these political positions was not easy for Kovrigina, who repeatedly refused such appointments, according to her autobiography. Not only did she try to resist becoming the deputy head of the USSR Ministry of Health, but she later tried to quit her job as the RSFSR Minister of Health because she felt she lacked the knowledge to hold such a responsible position successfully. She negotiated with the Central Committee that she would pursue an individual educational program, which she began in 1952.⁴⁹⁵

⁴⁹² Kovrigina, *V Neoplatnom Dolgu [In Unpaid Debt]*, 152.

⁴⁹³ Jochen Hellbeck, “Working, Struggling, Becoming: Stalin-Era Autobiographical Texts,” *The Russian Review* 60, no. 3 (2001): 340–59; Liljeström, “Monitored Selves: Soviet Women’s Autobiographical Texts in the Khrushchev Era.”

⁴⁹⁴ Kovrigina, *V Neoplatnom Dolgu [In Unpaid Debt]*, 5.

⁴⁹⁵ Kovrigina, 56–57, 147–51.

Kovrigina also was a member of the SWC Presidium.⁴⁹⁶ Unfortunately, neither her autobiography, nor the SWC archival documents I have worked with indicate when she joined the SWC and during which years she had a position in the Presidium. But she was a member of the Soviet women's delegation, that attended the founding congress of the Women's International Democratic Federation, which took place in Paris from November 26 until December 1, 1945.⁴⁹⁷ Kovrigina's archival collection shows that she kept the brochure from the founding congress throughout her life. Moreover, she followed the WIDF's activities closely enough to keep a newspaper clipping about the WIDF's second congress in 1948 in her collection.⁴⁹⁸

In her autobiography, Kovrigina dedicated an entire chapter to her trip to the WIDF Congress in Paris in 1945; it is the eighth out of sixteen chapters and serves as the opening to the culmination of her career. It is followed by chapters "At international conferences," which covers other congresses she attended after the WIDF's one, and "Serving my beloved country," which covers her work as the USSR Minister of Health. This structure suggests that she saw the WIDF congress as one of the most important events in her autobiographical narrative. She wrote about her journey to the WIDF's founding congress in Paris in 1945: "The upcoming trip was exhilarating. The unusual thing about this event was that almost all of us went abroad for the first time."⁴⁹⁹ Kovrigina described her excitement mixed with a feeling of otherness, which was a predictable reaction to the first trip abroad. However, in Kovrigina's account, the difference was in "doing gender" by a Soviet woman versus French women:

⁴⁹⁶ Mishchenko, IAna. "Mishchenko IAna Igorevna. Obzor Dokumentov Lichnogo Fonda Ministra Zdravookhraneniia SSSR Kovriginoi Marii Dmitrievny (1931-2002 Gg.). Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii. Diplomnaia Rabota Studentki V Kursa Zaochnogo Otdeleniia IAI RGGP [Mishchenko Yana Igorevna. Review of Documents of the Personal Fund of the Minister of Health of the USSR Kovrigina Maria Dmitrievna (1931-2002). State Archive of the Russian Federation. Diploma Thesis of the 5th Year Student of the Correspondence Department of the IAI RSHU]." 2007. F.10095, Op.1, D.122. GARF.

⁴⁹⁷ Kovrigina, V *Neoplatnom Dolgu [In Unpaid Debt]*, 102.

⁴⁹⁸ "'2-i Mezhdunarodnyi Zhenskii Kongress. Informatsionnyi Biulleten' № 1', 'Manifest v Zashchitu Mira'. Budapesht. 1948 g. [2nd International Women's Congress. Newsletter No. 1, 'Manifesto for Peace'. Budapest. 1948]." 1948. F.10095, Op.1 D. 82. GARF.

⁴⁹⁹ Kovrigina, V *Neoplatnom Dolgu [In Unpaid Debt]*, 102.

I am convinced that it was very interesting to watch us from afar. There is a group of women, almost all of them tall (and of considerable weight), dressed in solid heavy coats, some in gray, well-fitted commander's coats. The steps are large; the steps are solid. You can't confuse us with French women, most of them are running in light coats [pal'tishki] and jackets [kurtochki], mincing their feet [nozhki], tangled in short and tight skirts [iubochki].⁵⁰⁰

Notably, she used many diminutive-hypocoristic words when describing French women (pal'tishki, kurtochki, nozhki, iubochki), contrasting them with Soviet women whose steps were “solid” and “large.” Soviet women’s perceived physical and inner strength became essential in Kovrigina’s reflections on their encounters with Westerners. She used epithets like “brave” even in comical situations, for example, in the story about their attempt to buy textiles as a gift to their daughters without any knowledge of a foreign language. Kovrigina wrote about Daria, a prominent tractor driver, who “bravely approached the counter, pointed to the blue velvet, then to a meter and, spreading five fingers of her hand in front of the very nose of the dumbfounded seller, said [in Russian—AT]: - This. So many. Understood?”⁵⁰¹

⁵⁰⁰ Kovrigina, 103–4.; Я убеждена, что наблюдать за нами издали было очень любопытно. Идет группа женщин, почти все высокого роста (и веса немалого), одетые в добротные тяжелые пальто, некоторые в серых, хорошо подогнанных, командирского кроя шинелях. Шаги крупные, поступь твердая. Никак не спутаешь с француженками, бегущими в массе своей в легких поношенных пальтишках и курточках, семенящих ножками, спутанными короткими и узкими юбочками.

⁵⁰¹ Kovrigina, 113.



Illustration 6 Part of the Soviet Delegation at the 1945 WIDF Congress. Kovrigina is the first on the left. Source: Kovrigina, V Neoplatnom Dolgu [In Unpaid Debt].

Kovrigina compensated for her felt “otherness” by emphasizing the exceptional strength, bravery, and, ultimately, the unique historical mission of the Soviet women. For example, when she described the Soviet delegation at the Congress, she depicted something between a rock concert and a human zoo:

Our large and multinational delegation was greeted with loud shouts and thunderous applause. It must be said that the Soviet delegation was at the center of attention all the days of the congress. **We were not only carefully examined from head to toe but even touched** [bold added—A.T.]. Everyone wanted to touch the women of a **distant, unfamiliar, and mysterious country** [bold added—A.T.], whose people made a decisive contribution to the victory over German fascism.⁵⁰²

The “otherness” she felt could have developed into many different affects: humiliation, discrimination, exceptionalism, pride, etc. In the case of Soviet women, their “otherness” versus

⁵⁰² Kovrigina, 104–5.; Нашу большую и многонациональную делегацию приветствовали громкими криками, бурей аплодисментов. Надо сказать, что и все дни конгресса советская делегация была в центре внимания. Нас не только внимательно оглядывали с головы до ног, но даже ошупывали. Всем хотелось прикоснуться к женщинам далекой, малознакомой и загадочной страны, чей народ вложил в победу над немецким фашизмом решающий вклад.

Western women was inhabited and articulated by Kovrigina (and, as the previous chapter suggests, by other women from her generation as well) as a unique, brave, strong, and heroic position/mission of a Soviet woman within international politics, which, however, had militant undertones with repetitive references to their war-time past. Kovrigina's 1985 autobiography, echoed not only SWC's *Plena* of the 1950s-1960s but also the position articulated by the Soviet Women's Committee and its magazine *Soviet Woman*. As Alexis Peri has suggested, they often used their contribution to the fight against fascism as an argument for their entitlement to a particular position in the international peace movement. Peri illustrated this with a quote from the magazine from 1946: "the hardships and privation borne by them through the dark days of the war have given women the right to take part in solving the problems connected with maintaining peace and international security."⁵⁰³ In the official Soviet discourse, peace and international security were linked with women's rights as their necessary precondition. This consonance between Kovrigina's memoirs, SWC *Plena* minutes and *Soviet Woman* articles from the 1940s allow me to suggest that the idea of Soviet women's exceptional position in international politics, resting on their outstanding contribution to the fight against fascism, was one of the critical elements of the framing of the Soviet female citizenship. Thus, participation in international events on behalf of Soviet women was essential to fulfill a historic mission to promote peace and women's rights, and allowed Kovrigina to transform her felt "otherness" into a positive self-image.

During the 1945 WIDF Congress, several members of the Soviet delegation gave speeches: Nina Popova, the head of the Soviet delegation, Zinaida Gagarina, Tatiana Fedorova, Valentina Vasilieva, Tatiana Kosheleva, Bakhty-Goul Altybaeva, Nadezhda Parfenova, Marianna Sabillo, and Maria Kovrigina. Dozens of other participants from all over the world

⁵⁰³ Peri, "New Soviet Woman," 637.

gave speeches as well.⁵⁰⁴ However, in her autobiography Kovrigina mentioned only the speeches by WIDF founding president Eugénie Cotton, Nina Popova, and herself. She did not write much about Popova but more generally did not provide many accounts of her intimate friendships and personal life. Yet, Kovrigina did present Popova's speech in Paris in detail and gave it profound praise: "Nina Vasilievna's report was emotional, deep in content, full of vivid facts and figures."⁵⁰⁵

Based on the available documents, it is impossible to establish how the relationship between Popova and Kovrigina developed after the Paris Congress. Still, we can suggest that this shared experience of the first trip abroad, as well as the numerous SWC's events they subsequently participated in, created a bond between them which made it possible for them to work jointly on the campaign for the decriminalization of abortion in 1955.

The 1945 WIDF Congress stood out in Kovrigina's autobiography among several episodes that informed the gendered dimension of her political participation—where her understanding of Soviet women's political position and mission was articulated. The format of mixing summaries of Congress speeches and personal anecdotes revolving around Soviet women's bodies (the size of their bodies, clothes for their bodies, the capacity of communication via bodies), which she did not use when covering other political events, articulated her felt experience of being a Soviet woman. It also illustrated the inseparable connection between the private and the political for her. Remarkably, these two dimensions were intertwined in Kovrigina's writing even on the level of epithets: she described Soviet women as "brave" and "strong" in their everyday interactions like stepping or shopping, whereas political organization had an intimate dimension for her: Kovrigina described the WIDF as "her own, dear" [*svoia*,

⁵⁰⁴ WIDF, "Congrès International Des Femmes; Compte Rendu Des Travaux Du Congrès Qui S'est Tenu à Paris Du 26 Novembre Au 1er Décembre 1945," 1945, Alexander Street, part of Clarivate, https://search.alexanderstreet.com/view/work/bibliographic_entity%7Cbibliographic_details%7C1683696#page/289/mode/1/chapter/bibliographic_entity%7Cdocument%7C1831831.

⁵⁰⁵ Kovrigina, *V Neoplatnom Dolgu [In Unpaid Debt]*, 107.

rodnaia] women's organization. In Kovrigina's narrative about her own speech at 1945 Congress, we can see her transformation from the position of a person who was anxious and stared at into an agent who promoted an influential international agenda. Thus, she wrote: "I went up to the stage and immediately met with hundreds of eyes fixed on me. My heart was beating fast, fast, a strong excitement seized me. Overcoming it with difficulty, I began my speech..."⁵⁰⁶

Lost at the beginning, she finished with confidence in their political mission:

We, Soviet women, are confident that the common efforts of women's democratic organizations will ensure, not in words, but in deeds, happy motherhood and a joyful childhood for mothers and children all over the world—this is how I ended my speech. The Congress unanimously passed a resolution on the issue of children. Unlike others adopted at the congress, it has a strict, imperative character.⁵⁰⁷

The narrator moved from a first-person position to a birds-eye view after the speech, marking that Kovrigina transcended her position and merged with the Congress as the unity of "81 million women."⁵⁰⁸ This episode at the Congress was one of the first articulations in Kovrigina's autobiography of her agency in policymaking. Other examples include debates with the USA delegation about the World Health Organization program regarding the protection of motherhood and childhood in 1948,⁵⁰⁹ and promoting her legislative proposals in front of the Central Committee, which chronologically happened later in her life.⁵¹⁰

⁵⁰⁶ Kovrigina, 108.

⁵⁰⁷ Kovrigina, 110.

⁵⁰⁸ Kovrigina, 111.

⁵⁰⁹ Kovrigina, 117–19.

⁵¹⁰ Kovrigina, 100.

Referring to the meaning of the 1945 WIDF Congress for Kovrigina, it likely was one of the sources for the discourse of rights that played an essential role in Kovrigina's framing of the abortion decriminalization. She wrote about the Congress: "We solemnly pledge to protect the economic, political, legal and social rights of women."⁵¹¹ In both her memoirs and her proposal to the CC, there is an unambiguous articulation of the fact that state control over female bodies "humiliated" them and that women should have the right to decide on motherhood for themselves. In the unpublished autobiography (the pages about abortion did not make it to the published text), Kovrigina wrote:

Abortion is not only medical but also a big social and ethical problem. It is known that giving birth to children is a social function of a woman, but it is also her private matter. The abortion ban, as it were, humiliated the woman's personality, put the intimate side of her life under control, not to mention the fact that a great many women paid with their health or even their lives.⁵¹²

The same language can be traced in Kovrigina's proposal to the CC in 1955: "The Soviet state has the opportunity to repeal the law banning abortions, which to a certain extent defines interference in the intimate personal relationships of people, infringes on the right of a woman to choose a convenient time for giving birth to children."⁵¹³ Overall, Kovrigina depicted her political role mainly as one of protecting women and children. Thus, the autobiography chapter about her work in the Ministry of Health is called "Being personally responsible for the health of children and women of the country." However, the protection of women for Kovrigina was

⁵¹¹ Kovrigina, 111.

⁵¹² GARF, F.10095, Op.1, D. 30, l. 394-5; Аборт не только медицинская, это большая и и очень сложная социально-этическая проблема. Известно, что рождение детей — общественная функция женщины, но, однако, это и ее личное дело. Запрет на производство аборта, как бы унизил личность самой женщины, поставил под контроль интимную сторону ее жизни, не говоря уже о том, что великое множество женщин поплатились здоровьем и даже самой жизнью.

⁵¹³ RGANI, F. 5, Op.29. D. 36, l.8.

not a paternalist imposition but based on respect for women's right to make decisions about their own bodies.

It is important to note that the discourse of women's rights was present in Soviet propaganda, and that the statement that women enjoyed equal rights was an almost obligatory element of any speech regarding the status of women in the SU. The international arena was the space where this entitlement of Soviet women was performed and solidified as part of Soviet foreign politics. Historian Jennifer Ann Amos has put it like this: "Debates about equal rights for women became a symbol of the progressive nature of socialism in the international ideological battle with capitalism."⁵¹⁴ The experience of the 1945 WIDF Congress likely contributed to Kovrigina's confidence in appealing to women's rights in the documents regarding abortion.

Finally, Kovrigina shared her first trip abroad to the 1945 WIDF Congress with Nina Popova, who chaired the Soviet delegation. This trip was the first moment that may have formed a bond between them, which was later maintained or developed through different international events, delegation exchanges, and SWC Plena—and probably created a foundation for their joint work on the decriminalization of abortion ten years later.

3.5 Conclusion

This chapter has explored the history of the 1955 decriminalization of abortion in the Soviet Union. Unlike most of the scholarship, it has focused on the role and agency of two female politicians, Maria Kovrigina, the USSR Minister of Health (1954-1959), and Nina Popova, President of the SWC (1945-1968) and Secretary of the AUCCTU (1945-1957) in that process. The Chapter situated this history in the longer history of Bolshevik feminism.

⁵¹⁴ Jennifer Ann Amos, "Soviet diplomacy and politics on human rights, 1945–1977" (Ph.D., Ann Arbor, United States, 2012), 130, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/1027145675/abstract/4090F51FA9EE4CDDPQ/1>.

As I showed, most historians regard the 1955 decriminalization of abortion in the Soviet Union as a reaction to the growing number of illegal abortions and the declining birth rates. Thus, in their interpretation, the law had a pronatalist goal. Not denying that population growth was desirable, I want to emphasize that the 1955 law aimed “to give a woman the opportunity to decide the issue of motherhood herself.” This framing of motherhood as a choice and not an obligation marked a significant shift even in comparison with the 1920 law that legalized abortion but framed it as a “necessary evil” that would cease to exist with the development of socialism, implying that motherhood was a Soviet women’s duty to be performed once the remnants of Tsarism were gone.

Historian Mie Nakachi, in her 2021 book, asked how the idea of a woman’s right to abortion emerged in the Soviet Union “in the absence of a feminist movement”?⁵¹⁵ The answer is that the women’s organizations namely the SWC and the WIDF, contributed to the decriminalization of abortion. The final draft of the 1955 decree lifted the ban on abortion was submitted by Nina Popova and Maria Kovrigina, who took part in the founding congress of the WIDF in 1945 in Paris and were members of the Soviet Women’s Committee. Notably, in Kovrigina’s unpublished memoirs, there are pages about the decriminalization of abortion, which did not make it into the published version.⁵¹⁶ This fact illustrates that Soviet censorship suppressed the voices of those who legalized abortion—but historians who subsequently denied the possibility of a feminist agenda of women who brought the legislation into being did the same.

The joint effort of Kovrigina and Popova not only resulted in the lifting of the ban on abortion in the Soviet Union, but their cooperation also to a great extent shaped Soviet politics around motherhood. They showed the choice of becoming a mother as difficult to make in the Soviet state. In line with the Bolshevik feminist tradition and based on letters of Soviet women, they

⁵¹⁵ Nakachi, *Replacing the Dead*, 6.

⁵¹⁶ GARF, F.10095, Op.1, D. 30, l. 393-5.

presented reproductive labor as endless and exhausting and, importantly, hindering the right to motherhood as such. In line with this position, they developed further proposals for improving women's working and living conditions to bring closer the ideal of reproductive justice, which never was achieved, but never given up on either.

Referring to the state feminist framework, I can conclude that my analysis of the decriminalization of abortion in the Soviet Union showed a presence of state feminism, i.e., considerable success of Popova and Kovrigina, based on their involvement into the women's organizations and the letters they received from ordinary Soviet women, to influence policy outcome and framing of the debate around reproduction.

Chapter Four: Negotiating Productive and Reproductive Labor: The SWC and the All-Union Central Council of Trade

In this chapter, I will examine what the cooperation between the SWC and the AUCCTU consisted of. What did it mean for women involved for women involved in both the SWC and the AUCCTU simultaneously, and, most importantly, what did this cooperation and personal overlap between the organizations allow them to achieve?

On the first page of the magazine *Soviet Woman* one can read “An Illustrated Magazine Devoted to Social and Political Problems, Literature and Art. Published by the Soviet Women’s Committee and the Central Council of Trade Unions of the USSR.” Historical scholarship mentions the fact that the magazine in fact was published by these two organizations,⁵¹⁷ but what it meant was never explored. In fact, this question was raised by SWC members themselves at a Presidium meetings in 1957. During the discussion of *Soviet Woman*’s 1956 annual report, the editor asked Nina Popova, at that point the head of the SWC and as well as AUCCTU secretary, what the AUCCTU’s support for the magazine consisted of, and whether the relationship between the SWC and the AUCCTU was not a “fictitious marriage” that better be ended? Popova answered that “they [unclear who exactly—A.T.] need women in trade unions.”⁵¹⁸ This episode exemplifies the contradictory position of the SWC within the Soviet system: the SWC represented Soviet women, its members were promoted to certain positions as women to embody women’s emancipation, but the space for their own decision-making was narrow. The question of intensification of the cooperation with trade unions persisted and was repeatedly raised during SWC Plena.⁵¹⁹

⁵¹⁷ Alexis Peri, “New Soviet Woman: The Post-World War II Feminine Ideal at Home and Abroad,” *The Russian Review* 77, no. 4 (2018): 621–44, footnote 2.

⁵¹⁸ GARF, P7928, Op.2, D. 1823, l.54

⁵¹⁹ GARF, P7928, Op.3, D.1, l.24; D.363 l.170; “Protokol №№ 1-4 Zasedaniĭ Prezidiuma KSZh [Minutes Nos. 1-4 of the SWC Presidium Meetings],” January 29 - February 16, 1976, P7928, Op. 3, D.3950, GAR,.l. 64.

Yet, as I argue in this dissertation, despite such restricting circumstances, SWC members developed tactics to navigate the spaces of Soviet policymaking. Therefore, instead of discarding the connection between the SWC and AUCCTU as a pure formality, I would like to explore what this connection meant to the women involved in both organizations, and what it enabled them to do. In the end, the “need” for women in the trade unions led to the fact that the AUCCTU secretariat (that is, its main executive body) in the post-WWII period included one influential SWC member: Nina Popova (1945–1957), Tatiana Nikolaeva (1959–1971), Aleksandra Biryukova (1972–1985, the AUCCTU deputy head in 1985–1988), Galina Sukhoruchenkova (1985–1991).⁵²⁰ They will be at the center of my analysis in the first part of this chapter.

I suggest that researching the AUCCTU is important for two reasons. First, the AUCCTU was, one of the key Soviet governmental bodies responsible for welfare.⁵²¹ Since 1933, the All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions was the supreme authority of trade unions in the Soviet Union, in a system that was highly centralized for most of the Soviet time (from 1933, with the exception of Khrushchev’s reforms that occurred between 1957 to 1964).⁵²² After the abolishment of the Commissariat of Labor in 1933 and the loss of trade unions’ autonomy, considerable assets that used to be in the Commissariat of Labor’s possession were transferred to the jurisdiction of the trade unions, including funds and functions of social insurance.⁵²³ As Polish Marxist historian and journalist Isaac Deutscher wrote:

trade unions have also been made responsible for welfare and several auxiliary functions designed to improve the workers' standard of living

⁵²⁰ “Spravochnik Po Istorii Kommunisticheskoi Partii i Sovetskogo Soiuz 1898 - 1991 [Handbook on the History of the Communist Party and the Soviet Union 1898 - 1991],” n.d., http://www.knowbysight.info/7_VCSPPS/17517.asp.

⁵²¹ Elena Burdygina, “Razvitie Sotsial’nogo Strakhovaniia v Rossii [The Development of Welfare in Russia],” *Vestnik Orenburgskogo Gosudarstvennogo Universiteta*, no. 8 (2006): 26.

⁵²² Junbae Jo, “Dismantling Stalin’s Fortress” (London ; New York: Routledge, 2009), 122–42.

⁵²³ Isaac Deutscher, *Soviet Trade Unions : Their Place in Soviet Labour Policy* (Westport, Conn. : Hyperion Press, 1950), 116–17.

within the limits set by the Plan and the fixed fund of wages. In these fields, the unions have found some compensation for the loss of their bargaining power over wages.⁵²⁴

In addition to the AUCCTU's crucial role in managing social welfare services, the second reason why the AUCCTU deserves to be researched is that after the abolishment of the Zhenotdel in 1930, the AUCCTU became, albeit reluctantly, a significant actor in the fight against male prejudice towards women on the shop floor, as historian Wendy Goldman has pointed out: "The newly-recognised need for women to enter the workforce jolted both the party and the AUCCTU into looking more closely at male attitudes and women's experiences on the local level."⁵²⁵ The AUCCTU was tasked with organizing the All-Union Meeting for Work among Women on February 1, 1931, which became a space for women in industry to channel their anger and voice experiences of injustice.⁵²⁶ After that meeting, the AUCCTU adopted resolutions that "addressed the unions' general apathy toward women."⁵²⁷ This was, according to Goldman, a unique moment during the first five-year plan (1928—1932), when "the Party's campaign to involve women, the growing need for skilled labor, and the feminism of the women's activists came together to create new and vast opportunities for hundreds of thousands of women workers."⁵²⁸

The moment was, however, short-lived. The liquidation of the Zhenotdel in 1930 sent a signal to the local trade union organizations to cease all the work among women.⁵²⁹ In 1932, the KUTB (the Committee to Improve the Labor and Life of Women, established in 1926) was eliminated.⁵³⁰ Thus, by the end of the first five-year plan, Soviet women were left without an

⁵²⁴ Deutscher, 119.

⁵²⁵ Goldman, "Babas at the Bench: Gender Conflict in Soviet Industry in the 1930s," 71.

⁵²⁶ Wendy Z. Goldman, *Women at the Gates: Gender and Industry in Stalin's Russia* (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 210–11.

⁵²⁷ Goldman, 222.

⁵²⁸ Goldman, 282.

⁵²⁹ Goldman, 62.

⁵³⁰ Goldman, 63.

organization to represent their interests as a group, and “voices of economists replaced those of working-class women,”⁵³¹ leading to a fundamental reconsideration of questions of reproduction, or *byt*. The Bolshevik promise of a revolutionary emancipation via the socialization of reproduction became another means of labor control during the second five-year plan: “by the end of the first five-year plan, the dreams of *novyi byt* had been transformed into a ‘social wage,’ a set of rewards and privileges for high productivity, another lever of production.”⁵³² As a result, according to Goldman, the interests of women as a group were subordinated to the Party’s interest in production and accumulation.⁵³³

Goldman did not explore the period after the first five year plan. However, she mentioned that women did not disappear from policymaking completely; they were not empowered anymore as a group but only individually, *vydvizhenie*. Goldman provided anecdotal evidence of this widespread situation. During a trade union meetings in the early 1930s, a delegate from Per’m complained that she came to Moscow to discuss work among women. It turned out that in the trade union’s central committee, no one had information about the work among women but they redirected her to comrade Murav’eva, who confirmed that: “‘Yes, every piece of paper that has the word *woman* on it, they dump into my lap. The higher organs say, ‘You are supposedly a woman, so you should do it.’”⁵³⁴ This clearly indicates that the trade unions did not take women’s problems seriously, and women in the system were the only ones responsible, which restricted their capacity to act. However, it also implies that the women in leading positions could have a significant role in shaping the trade unions’ policies towards women.

The main question this chapter asks is whether the positions of the SWC members held the AUCCTU secretariat gave them an opportunity to advocate for the interests of Soviet

⁵³¹ Goldman, 275.

⁵³² Goldman, 284.

⁵³³ Goldman, 67.

⁵³⁴ Goldman, 221.

women. To answer this question, first, I will first analyze the individual biographies of the women who were simultaneously SWC members and AUCCTU secretaries, so as to establish how their belonging to the Committee informed their trade union work and vice versa (4.1.). Second, I will explore how the SWC members in the AUCCTU attempted to challenge attitudes towards byt, or reproductive labor, and its place on the shop floor. I will focus on two cases: the AUCCTU Presidium Commission on Problems of Labor and Everyday Life of Women and of Mother and Child Protection, established in 1963 (4.2.1.), and the research of prominent Soviet sociologist Elvira Novikova (4.2.2.). The sources include documents from personal, SWC's, and the AUCCTU funds kept in GARF, as well as published speeches, research, interviews and memoirs.

4.1. The AUCCTU Secretariat: A biographical perspective

From 1932 until 1991, the following women held an AUCCTU Secretary position: Evgenya Egorova (1932-1937), Klavdia Nikolaeva (1937-1944), Nina Popova (1945-1957), Klavdia Kuznetsova (1949-1954), Praskovia Korobova. (1954-1959), Tatiana Nikolaeva (1959-1971), Liudmila Zemlyannikova (1971-1986), Aleksandra Biryukova (1968-1986), and Galina Sukhoruchenkova (1985-1991).⁵³⁵ Below, I will focus on those who played an active role in the SWC to explore how this belonging affected their politics within the AUCCTU.

4.1.1. Klavdia Nikolaeva (1937—1944)

The history of the SWC and AUCCTU connection begins with Klavdia Nikolaeva, who was an AUCCTU Secretary from 1937 to 1944. Although Klavdia Nikolaeva's life and work fall outside of the timeframe of my research, it is necessary to start this analysis with her,

⁵³⁵ “Spravochnik Po Istorii Kommunisticheskoi Partii i Sovetskogo Soiuz 1898 – 1991] http://www.knowbysight.info/7_VCSPS/17517.asp.

because in her person the revolutionary feminism of the time of the Bolshevik Revolution, the Zhenotdel, the SWC and the AUCCTU were connected.



Illustration 7 Klavdia Nikolaeva. Source: goskatalog.ru

Nikolaeva was born on July 13, 1893, to a working-class family. She started working from the age of 8, first as a babysitter, and in her early teens she started working in a printing company. In 1908 she joined the printers' trade union and the Society for Mutual Aid to Women Workers, headed by Aleksandra Kollontai, which resulted in her joining the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party in 1909. Before the October revolution, she was arrested and exiled.⁵³⁶ Nikolaeva contributed to *Rabotnitsa* from its very first issue⁵³⁷ and remained involved with the magazine in 1914 until her death in 1944.⁵³⁸ In 1918, Nikolaeva and Inessa Armand, Aleksandra Kollontai, and Yakov Sverdlov organized the First All-Russian Congress of Women Workers

⁵³⁶ Barbara Evans Clements, *Bolshevik Women* (Cambridge, UK ; New York, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 27–28.

⁵³⁷ Barbara Evans Clements, *Bolshevik Women*, 268.

⁵³⁸ “Material, Otlozhivshiisia v Protsesse Deiatel'nosti Sekretaria VTSSPS t. Nikolaevoi K.I.: Dokladnye Zapiski v TSK VKP(b), Proverka Uslovii Raboty i Byta Molodezhi i Podrostkov; Ob Osvoenii Zhenshchinami Voennykh Professii; o Poezdke Delegatsii Profsoiuzov Na Front; o Razvitii Ogorodnichestva i Perepiska Po Proektam Polozhenii i Instruksii [Material Deposited in the Process of Activity of the Secretary of the All-Union Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party of Bolsheviks, K.I. Nikolaeva: Reports to the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party of Bolsheviks (b), Inspection of Working and Living Conditions of Youth and Adolescents; on the Mastering of Military Professions by Women; on the Trip of a Delegation of Trade Unions to the Front; on the Development of Horticulture and Correspondence on Draft Regulations and Instructions.],” n.d., F. P5451, Op. 43, D. 325a, GARF.

and Peasants.⁵³⁹ From 1924 to 1925, Nikolaeva was the head of Zhenotdel.⁵⁴⁰ Later, she served as the head of the Agitation and Propaganda Section at the Party Committee on the local (1928-1930) and later Central (1930-1933) level. Despite her public agreement with the decision to eliminate Zhenotdel, at a meeting of the local Party leaders with Lazar M. Kaganovich, a member of the Central Committee, and a member of the AUCCTU presidium in January 1930, she “warned that the women’s movement would benefit from the reorganization only if Party cells became directly involved in women’s work. If this work, however, was relegated to a single women’s organizer, and the rest of the cell remained indifferent, then ‘the situation created will be unsatisfactory.’”⁵⁴¹

Klavdia Nikolaeva was a candidate member (1925-1934) and a member (1934-1944) of the CC CPSU.⁵⁴² She was elected Secretary of the AUCCTU at the 5th AUCCTU Plenum on May 15, 1937,⁵⁴³ and held this position till her death on December 28, 1944. In her function of AUCCTU Secretary, she participated in the first women’s antifascist meeting, in Moscow on September 7, 1941, which marked the revitalization of work among women in the USSR and in 1942 was institutionalized as the SWC (at the time, SWAFC). In her speech at the September 1941 meeting, Nikolaeva focused on the violence against women, both physical and sexual, which the Nazi troops perpetuated.⁵⁴⁴ Nikolaeva was buried in the Necropolis near the Kremlin wall.⁵⁴⁵

She combined her position in the AUCCTU with her position on the editorial board of *Rabotnitsa*, and because of that she received numerous letters from women covering a wide

⁵³⁹ Richard Stites, *The Women’s Liberation Movement in Russia: Feminism, Nihilism, and Bolshevism, 1860-1930 - Expanded Edition*, Subsequent Edition (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1978), 330.

⁵⁴⁰ Barbara Evans Clements, *Bolshevik Women*, 268.

⁵⁴¹ Goldman, *Women at the Gates*, 55.

⁵⁴² “Nikolaeva, Klavdiia Ivanovna,” in *The Great Soviet Encyclopedia*, 1979 1970, <https://encyclopedia2.thefreedictionary.com/Nikolaeva%2c+Klavdiia+Ivanovna>.

⁵⁴³ “Stenogrammy VI Plenuma TSVPS IX Sozyva 11-15 Maia [Transcripts of the VI Plenum of the Ninth Convocation of the AUCCTU on May 11-15],” 1937, F. P5451, Op. 21, D. 6., GARF.

⁵⁴⁴ *K Zhenshchinam Vsego Mira [to Women of the Whole World]*, 31–33.

⁵⁴⁵ “Nikolaeva, Klavdiia Ivanovna.”

range of issues.⁵⁴⁶ Together with Marina Raskova, a Hero of the Soviet Union, a prominent air navigator and a founder of the female aviation regiment during WWII, in 1942, Nikolaeva wrote a letter to Stalin to request special aviation schools for women,⁵⁴⁷ and a special uniform for women in the army.⁵⁴⁸

Nikolaeva's history is crucial for understanding the continuities between the Zhenotdel, the AUCCTU and the SWC.

4.1.2. Nina Popova (1945—1957)⁵⁴⁹

Three months after Nikolaeva's death, the 8th AUCCTU Plenum on March 26-30, 1945, appointed Nina Popova as an AUCCTU Secretary, succeeding Klavdia Nikolaeva.⁵⁵⁰ A letter from Nikolaeva's sister to Nina Popova shows that Popova and Nikolaeva knew each other beyond purely professional circumstances. On February 18, 1955, Nikolaeva's sister sent a letter to Nina Popova as the AUCCTU Secretary, which opened with "Dear (dorogaya) Nina Vasilievna," and in which she asked for financial support due to her age and the poor health condition of her daughter and herself.⁵⁵¹ Nina Popova responded positively, allocating her a one-time payment of 550 rubles.⁵⁵²

⁵⁴⁶ GARF, F. P5451, Op. 43, D. 325a, ll.10-13, 27, 52-53.

⁵⁴⁷ GARF, F. P5451, Op. 43, D. 325a, l.53-55.

⁵⁴⁸ GARF, F. P5451, Op. 43, D. 325a, l.48.

⁵⁴⁹ Some parts of this section were published in my chapter: Talaver, Aleksandra. "Nina Vasilievna Popova (1908–1994): 'Woman in the Land of Socialism.'" In *The Palgrave Handbook of Communist Women Activists Around the World*, edited by Francisca De Haan, Palgrave Macmillan., 245–69, 2023..

⁵⁵⁰ "Protokol, Stenogramma, Postanovlenie XIII Plenuma VTSSPS. Povestka Dnia: 1. Ob Uluchshenii Raboty Profsoiuznykh Organizatsii Po Udovletvoreniiu Bytovykh Nuzhd Rabochikh i Sluzhashchikh. 2. Ob Uluchshenii Kul'turno-Massovoï Raboty Profsoiuznykh Organizatsii Sredi Rabochikh i Sluzhashchikh. 3. Ob Itogakh Vsemirnoï Profsoiuznoï Konferentsii v Londone. 28-30 Marta [Minutes, Transcript, Resolution of the XIII Plenum of the All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions. Agenda: 1. On Improving the Work of Trade Union Organizations to Meet the Everyday Needs of Workers and Employees. 2. 2. On Improving the Cultural and Mass Work of Trade Union Organizations among Workers and Employees. 3. On the Results of the World Trade Union Conference in London. March 28-30]," n.d., F.P5451, Op.24, D.280, GARF.

⁵⁵¹ "Protokol Zasedaniia Sekretariata VTSSPS № 13 8-22 Fevralia [Minutes of the Meeting of the Secretariat of the All-Union Communist Party of the Soviet Union No. 13 8-22 February]," February 8, 1955, GARF, l.259.

⁵⁵² GARF, F. P5451, Op.24, D. 1474, l. 15, 93.



Illustration 8 Nina Popova, January 1945. Source: TsGA

From the very beginning, the combination of the two positions, in the SWC and the AUCCTU, proved to be meaningful for both Popova's political career and the Soviet participation in the international domain of women's rights. The folder "Perepiska Antifashistskogo Komiteta Sovetskikh Zhenshchin s VTSSPS, TSK KPSS i MID Po Voprosam Raboty Antifashistskogo Komiteta i Obmena Delegatsiiami Zhenshchin" (Correspondence of the SWAFC with the AUCCTU, the CC CPSU and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on the Work of the Anti-Fascist Committee and the Exchange of Women's Delegations) holds numerous documents of conversations and of requests that Popova received as an AUCCTU Secretary which were connected with work for women and vice versa. For example, in 1946, she wrote a letter to the AUCCTU head, Vasiliy Kuznetsov, that she received a personal message as an AUCCTU secretary from Bodil Begtrup, Chairwoman of the UN Sub-Commission on the Status of Women, proposing to hold the Commission's next meeting in Moscow.⁵⁵³ Popova considered it "reasonable to agree" and proposed that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs take over the organizational process, because "the appearance of the All-Union Central Council of Trade

⁵⁵³ The UN-CSW never met in Moscow, but I have not found any documents following up on Begtrup's proposal and Popova's letter to Kuznetsov about this.

Unions or the Soviet Women's Anti-Fascist Committee in the role of organizer of a meeting of the Commission may cause various complications and claims on the part of the members of the Commission."⁵⁵⁴ In her capacity as an AUCCTU Secretary, Popova also contributed to politics that can undoubtedly be qualified as feminist. Besides the decriminalization of abortion in 1955, in her AUCCTU function, she also accumulated data regarding "crimes" against women, which included rapes, child marriages, polygyny, payment of dowry, prohibition for women to participate in public life, and the evasion of alimony payments.⁵⁵⁵

Nina Popova was an AUCCTU Secretary until 1957. She left her position in the context of Khrushchev's trade union reforms, which aimed to diminish their bureaucratization and centralization.⁵⁵⁶ However, as historian Junbae Jo has shown, at the 11th Plenum of Trade Unions, which took place on June 11-12, 1954, Popova herself already spoke out against the bureaucratization of the trade unions and called for the development of self-criticism and criticism from below, with the trade unions focusing more on work with people and organizing work.⁵⁵⁷ Her call to work more with people, she implemented in her own work, as the AUCCTU report on work with visitors showed that in 1953, Popova accepted 122 visitors out of 856, the second biggest amount among all six AUCCTU secretaries.⁵⁵⁸ Importantly, though not noted by Jo, in the same speech in 1954, Popova also paid special attention to women, stating that the

⁵⁵⁴ "Perepiska Antifashistskogo Komiteta Sovetskikh Zhenshchin s VTSSPS, TSK KPSS i MID Po Voprosam Raboty Antifashistskogo Komiteta i Obmena Delegatsiiami Zhenshchin [Correspondence of the SWAFC with the AUCCTU, the CC CPSU and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on the Work of the Anti-Fascist Committee and the Exchange of Women's Delegations]," February 21-December 31, 1946, F.P5451, Op. 43, D.548, GARF, ll.37-36.

⁵⁵⁵ "Predlozheniia VTSSPS, Spravki i Svedeniia o Sostoianii Okhrany Materinstva i Detstva, Zhilishchno-Bytovykh Uslovii i Uchastii Zhenshchin SSSR v Narodnom Khoziaistve (Imeiutsia Sravnitel'nye Dannye s 1940 g.) [Proposals of the All-Union Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, References and Information on the State of Maternal and Child Welfare, Living Conditions and Participation of Women in the USSR National Economy (Comparative Data from 1940).]," 1955-1957, F.P5451, Op. 43, D.1290B, GARF, ll.1-3.

⁵⁵⁶ Jo, "Dismantling Stalin's Fortress."

⁵⁵⁷ Jo, 123; Popova, *Ob Izmenenii v Ustave Professional'nykh Soiuзов SSSR* [On Changes in the Statute of the Soviet Trade Unions].

⁵⁵⁸ "Spravki o Rabote Priemnoi Za 1949-1953 Gody [Information on the Work of the Reception Office for the Years 1949-1953]," 1946, F.P5451, Op.50, D.5, GARF, l.17.

task of trade unions should be to “alleviate the situation of women in the household, which, as we know, takes a lot of effort and time from them.”⁵⁵⁹

Popova developed a tactic of combining her different positions to advocate for women’s interests. She advocated for women’s rights internationally, citing Soviet achievements as an example. Conversely, in domestic Soviet policymaking, she used foreign evaluations and experiences to motivate improvement in the USSR. Thus, she converted her work for the propaganda of socialism internationally into leverage within the Soviet system. Popova’s advocacy for equal pay in the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU) in 1948 shows a great example of this strategy internationally. Historian Johanna Wolf recently wrote about WFTU, showing that it played an essential role in the debate on equal pay for equal work in the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). Popova played a vital role in the inner WFTU debate, which she used for propaganda of Soviet achievements:

The topic would probably not have received such attention if Nina Popova had not appeared as a representative of the ACCTU. She was both a socialist as well as a women’s activist, who, through her membership in other international women’s organizations, attached special importance to the discussion. Popova, however, did not use the forum only to advocate women’s occupation but also transformed her speeches into propaganda in which the Soviet solution appeared as the only real choice for women.⁵⁶⁰

Such devoted service to the Soviet cause internationally probably contributed to Popova’s authority inside the country. Whereas Popova in the Stalin era internationally propagated the Soviet Union as an almost flawless example of women’s emancipation, she expressed herself more critically during the post-Stalin period of relative liberalization of the Soviet Union. In

⁵⁵⁹ Popova, *Ob Izmenenii v Ustave Professional'nykh Soiuzov SSSR*, 16–17.

⁵⁶⁰ Wolf, ““Women as Workers,”” 227.

1956, the SWC organized an international seminar “Equality of Women in the USSR” in Moscow, with participants from different countries, UNESCO, the UN Commission on the Status of Women, and the World Health Organization. In her speech (later published as a brochure in Russian) as an AUCCTU Secretary, Popova stated that “the problem of improving women’s economic position and work conditions is not solved yet” in the USSR,⁵⁶¹ and problems such as violations of protective labor legislation, the inactivity of trade unions in such cases, and the lack of daycare facilities, new flats, and socialized domestic services existed in the Soviet Union.⁵⁶²

Popova not only voiced criticism but used foreigners' perspectives to strengthen her proposals to improve women’s lives in the USSR. Thus, after the international seminar “Equality of Women in the USSR,” she submitted a report to the CC CPSU, in which she summarized critical comments from the foreign participants’ critical comments, which included even questions about political prisoners in the Soviet Union.⁵⁶³ She allocated a considerable amount of space to the criticism of the Soviet family code, in particular, the highly complex divorce procedure, and ended with “the request” from foreign participants to raise this question and say that “women from other countries cannot comprehend how such laws have appeared in a socialist country.”⁵⁶⁴ It is probably important to note here that Popova herself divorced her first husband due to his infidelity.⁵⁶⁵ Earlier, Popova had also participated in a Commission that was set in 1947 to develop a new family code in the USSR.⁵⁶⁶ Finally, using her unique position as a representative of Soviet women for the international audience and as responsible for the

⁵⁶¹ Nina Popova, *Ravnopravie Sovetskikh Zhenshchin v Ekonomicheskoi Oblasti* [Equality of Soviet Women in the Economic Sphere] (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo literatury na inostrannykh iazykakh, 1956), 31.

⁵⁶² Popova, 32.

⁵⁶³ GARF, P7928, Op. 4, D. 99, l. 28.

⁵⁶⁴ GARF, P7928, Op. 4, D. 99, l. 39.

⁵⁶⁵ Grigorieva, *Golub' Mira Niny Popovoi* [Nina Popova's Dove of Peace], 38.

⁵⁶⁶ “Proekt Zakona ‘Osnovy Zakonodatel'stva Soiuza SSR o Brake i Sem'e’ (Materialy k Razrabotke Proekta) [Draft Law ‘Fundamentals of the Legislation of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics on Marriage and Family’ (Materials for Drafting)],” September 6, 1946 - January 20, 1952, F. P7523, Op. 45, D. 213, GARF, ll.15-16.

well-being of working women in the USSR, “given the existing flaws in women’s working and living conditions, with consideration of the critical comments of the Seminar participants,”⁵⁶⁷ in 1956 she submitted to the CC CPSU a document with proposals for improving women’s working and living conditions, which included the production of uniforms for working women, expansion of the childcare infrastructure, protective labor legislations, restricting women’s employments under heavy physical conditions and underground, etc.⁵⁶⁸ A special governmental commission discussed her suggestions and developed a set of measures to discuss and implement them.⁵⁶⁹ This example shows how Popova’s position in the AUCCTU allowed her to convert the knowledge she had accumulated through her SWC activities into policymaking within the Soviet Union. It is noteworthy that her documents in the AUCCTU fund include several SWC-related documents.⁵⁷⁰ At the same time as Popova, Klavdia Stepanovna Kuznetsova had a position of AUCCTU Secretary from 1949 to 1954.⁵⁷¹

4.1.3. Tatiana Nikolaeva (1959—1971)

Tatiana Nikolaeva was appointed AUCCTU Secretary in 1959 and held the position until 1971. She was born in 1919 and died in 2022.⁵⁷² Her documented career started in 1941 as a school director for three years, after which she started climbing the party ladder. From 1945 to 1946, she served as the head of the department of the Nebylovsky and Kirzhachsky district committees of the CPSU. From 1947 to 1954, she worked in the Ivanovo City Party Committee. In 1954, she became 1st Secretary of the Stalin District Committee of the CPSU in Ivanovo; she continued her work in the Party Committee on the district, and in 1958 became the 1st

⁵⁶⁷ GARF, P7928, Op. 4, D. 99, l. 49.

⁵⁶⁸ GARF, F. P5451, Op. 43, D. 1290B, l. 153.

⁵⁶⁹ GARF, F. P5451, Op. 43, D. 1290B, l. 154.

⁵⁷⁰ GARF, F. P5451, Op. 43, D. 548.

⁵⁷¹ “Spravochnik Po Istorii Kommunisticheskoi Partii i Sovetskogo Soiuza 1898 - 1991, http://www.knowbysight.info/7_VCSPP/17517.asp.

⁵⁷² “V Moskve Umerla Sovetskii Gosdeiatel’ Tat’iana Nikolaeva [Soviet Stateswoman Tatyana Nikolaeva Died in Moscow],” *Rosbalt*, n.d., <https://www.rosbalt.ru/news/2022-01-21/v-moskve-nashli-mertvoy-sovetskogo-gosdeyatelia-tatyanu-nikolaevu-4924714>.

Secretary of the Ivanovo City Committee of the CPSU. A year later, she was elected as an AUCCTU Secretary. In 1966, she also became a deputy of the Soviet Supreme Soviet for one term (1966-1970).⁵⁷³ When her term in the AUCCTU Secretariat had ended, from 1972, she worked as an executive secretary on social matters in the apparat (administrative system) of the Soviet of Ministers of the USSR.⁵⁷⁴

As yet, there is very little written about her, but her private archive kept by her family members exemplifies the scope of her activities, , and a UN colleague characterized her as “a dynamic woman leader.”⁵⁷⁵ She had wide international connections with women’s rights activists and politicians, and numerous diplomas from Soviet public organizations and state awards. On the occasion of her 100th birthday, a local newspaper published a short article about her, in which she reflected on her life. Importantly, she used the words of freedom and independence to describe her life: “I am happy with my life, free and independent! It is not an easy thing to live an active life like mine.”⁵⁷⁶



Illustration 9 Nikolaeva's AUCCTU Id issued on April 21, 1959. Private archive.

⁵⁷³ “Annotatsiia Fonda T.N. Nikolaeva [Fund Abstract],” n.d., <http://opisi.garf.su/default.asp?base=garf&menu=2&v=3&node=326&Fonds=1902&opis=>.

⁵⁷⁴ L.N. Zenkova, *Zhenshchiny-Lidery Profsoiuznogo Dvizheniia Rossii: Istorii i Sovremennost'* [Women Leaders of the Russian Trade Union Movement: History and Modernity] (Moskva, 2005), 42–43.

⁵⁷⁵ de Haan, “The Global Left-Feminist 1960s,” 236.

⁵⁷⁶ Natalia Naumenko, “Ne Stareyu, a Sovershenstvuyus’ [I’m Not Getting Older, I’m Getting Better],” *Caoinform.Moscow*, December 19, 2019, <https://caoinform.moscow/ne-stareyu-a-sovershenstvuyus/?ysclid=m4mw2nz31z985719695>.

Tatiana Nikolaeva was a member of the Soviet delegation in the 1963 WIDF World Congress of Women, which took place in Moscow.⁵⁷⁷ In 1968, she was elected to the SWC Presidium.⁵⁷⁸ As Francisca de Haan established, Nikolaeva represented the Soviet Union in the UN Commission on the Status of Women from 1966 until 1991. From 1992 to 1994, she represented the Russian Federation in the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, “following international agreements.”⁵⁷⁹ It was her who proposed that the UN-CSW prepare a draft of what later became the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).⁵⁸⁰

In 1962, the AUCCTU issued a decree “On improving the work of trade union organizations among women,” which critically evaluated the efforts of trade unions to promote women and create favorable working conditions, following it, in 1963, the AUCCTU Presidium Commission on the Problems of Labor and Everyday Life of Women and of Mother and Child Protection was established.⁵⁸¹ This Commission was active until 1990; it dealt with improving women’s living conditions, childcare, healthcare, and labor legislation and monitored the implementation of protective labor legislation (as it follows from the description of its Fonds).⁵⁸² Due to a lack of archival data, we do not know whether Nikolaeva was directly involved in the establishment of this Commission but according to her short biographical note in *Zhenshchiny-lidery profsoiuznogo dvizheniia Rossii: istoriia i sovremennost'* (Women Leaders of the Russian Trade Union Movement: History and Modernity) stated, she headed the Commission.⁵⁸³

⁵⁷⁷ Galkina, *Komitet Sovetskikh Zhenshchin: Stranisy Istorii (1941-1992)*, 61.

⁵⁷⁸ GARF, P7928, Op.3, D.1888, l.37.

⁵⁷⁹ Naumenko, “Ne Stareyu, a Sovershenstvuyus’ [I’m Not Getting Older, I’m Getting Better].”

⁵⁸⁰ de Haan, “The Global Left-Feminist 1960s,” 236.

⁵⁸¹ E. E. Novikova, T.N. Sidorova, and S.Ia. Turchaninova, *Sovetskie Zhenshchiny i Profsoiuzy [The Soviet Women and Trade Unions]* (Moscow, Profizdat, 1984).

⁵⁸² GARF, F. P5451, Op. 81.

⁵⁸³ L.N. Zenkova, *Zhenshchiny-Lidery Profsoiuznogo Dvizheniia Rossii: Istorii i Sovremennost'* (Moskva, 2005), 43.

4.1.4. Aleksandra Biryukova (1968—1988)

Aleksandra Biryukova was elected as an AUCCTU Secretary in 1968. In 1985, she was promoted further in the AUCCTU hierarchy, being elected as one of its vice-heads on May 17, 1985. From this position, she pursued her career further as a Secretary of the CC CPSU (1986-1988), a candidate for the Politburo CC CPSU (1988-1990) and a vice-head of the Soviet of Ministers of the USSR (1988-1990).

Born to a peasant family in 1929, Biryukova graduated from the Moscow Textile Institute in 1952. She worked in a factory until 1959, when she was promoted to the Regional Economic Soviet. From 1963 to 1969, she worked as a leading engineer in the Moscow cotton mill, "Tryokhgornaya Manufactory." She was also a member of the Soviet Women's Committee (years unknown). In 1976, she became a Chairman of the Permanent Commission on the Problems of Labor and Everyday Life of Women and of Mother and Child Protection of the RSFSR Supreme Soviet.⁵⁸⁴ From 1968, she was the head of the AUCCTU Presidium Commission on the Problems of Labor and Everyday Life of Women and of Mother and Child Protection (hence, a Commission with the same name and focus as the one of the RSFSR Supreme Soviet).⁵⁸⁵ From 1982 to 1986, she was a member of the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women.⁵⁸⁶

⁵⁸⁴ Larisa Kulikova, "For The Working Mother," *Soviet Woman*, July 7, 1980.

⁵⁸⁵ Novikova, Sidorova, and Turchaninova, *Sovetskie Zhenschiny i Profsoiuzy [The Soviet Women and Trade Unions]*, 167.

⁵⁸⁶ "Members of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women," n.d., https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/CEDAW/Membership_1982_Present.docx.



Illustration 10 Aleksandra Biryukova in the late 1980s. Source: RIA Novosti.

The biographies of all above-mentioned AUCCTU Secretaries showed immense social mobility, but Biryukova was the only one with shopfloor experience. As a student at the Moscow Textile Institute, she worked part-time in a boiler room; her task was to bring coal from the outside and throw it into the oven—thus, she had first-hand experience of the necessity to limit the maximum weight for women.⁵⁸⁷ Her work at the factory resulted in her having health problems, as she recalled in a 2005 interview:

I left, frankly speaking, for health reasons. I worked as the head of a dyeing shop, and there was nitric acid, alkalis and almost no ventilation. I began to choke and lost a lot of weight. The doctors said I needed to leave.⁵⁸⁸

⁵⁸⁷ Oksana Khimich, “Zheleznaia ledi SSSR [Soviet Iron Lady],” March 12, 2004, Moskovskiy Komsomolets edition, <https://www.mk.ru/editions/daily/article/2004/03/12/117744-zheleznaya-ledi-cccp.html>.

⁵⁸⁸ Evgeniy Zhirnov, “Sekretariat TSK, a na mne iarko-krasnyi kostium v taliu [Secretariat of the Central Committee, and I’m wearing a bright red fitted suit],” March 7, 2005, Kommersant edition, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/552735>.

This experience probably strengthened her later investment in improving women's working conditions when she had a chance to do so. At the AUCCTU, she was first responsible for labor protection and later for social benefits (sick and parental leaves, retirement payments, etc.). As she recalled it in the same 2005 interview:

At the All-Russian Central Council of Trade Unions, I worked on labor protection issues. Then I was given responsibility over social insurance. It was a huge budget: benefits, pensions. Pensions then went through us. I had 47 people in this department. There was no massive apparatus of the Pension Fund. And we coped with the whole country.⁵⁸⁹

Before analyzing Biryukova's role in shaping the AUCCTU legislation regarding women's labor protection (below) and during IWY in the USSR (in Chapter 5), I explore what role gender played in her politics and how she reflected on it herself. Biryukova was very feminine and put much effort into her looks, according to her own accounts. In her interviews from the early 2000s, her suits, hairstyle, and high heels played a considerable role in her self-presentation⁵⁹⁰—she was consciously working on producing her femininity. Biryukova clearly used a hyperfeminine gender display, likely to soften her strong personality and often harsh criticism she uttered of the industrial and party management. In the interviews, she ascribed her career success to being very energetic,⁵⁹¹ and to the fact that she “spoke at various meetings, criticized management.”⁵⁹² Several episodes illustrate that Biryukova was not afraid to be inconvenient and critical. Yegor Ligachyov, Second Secretary of the CPSU, recalled that when the Secretariat of the CC CPSU had not been holding meetings for a year in 1988, it was

⁵⁸⁹ Zhirnov.

⁵⁹⁰ Khimich, “Zheleznaia ledi SSSR [Soviet Iron Lady].”

⁵⁹¹ Khimich.

⁵⁹² Zhirnov, “Sekretariat TSK, a na mne iarko-krasnyi kostium v taliu [Secretariat of the Central Committee, and I'm wearing a bright red fitted suit].”

Biryukova who asked Gorbachev, the General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, why that had happened. Gorbachev redirected the question to Ligachyov, but he could not answer it.⁵⁹³ Notably, both of them held higher positions than Biryukova. She recalled a similar episode in her 2005 interview later when during one of the meetings, she had to report on the situation with a deficit of medicine in the USSR in the late 1980s:

As soon as I started, Gorbachev suddenly interrupted me: ‘Your government is pursuing the wrong policy! They left the country without medicine!’ I say: ‘Mikhail Sergeevich, this is not our government. This former government and political leadership, of which you were a part, made the wrong decision at one time.’⁵⁹⁴

Biryukova had the same critical attitude toward management at every level, higher or lower, in the hierarchy. As she said at one of the AUCCTU Commission meetings: “Comrades, if we just pat our administrative leaders on the head like this, then we will never have order.”⁵⁹⁵ The description of her behavior echoes the tradition of early Soviet female delegates, who, according to Goldman, fiercely criticized colleagues and management.⁵⁹⁶ Notably, Anatoly Chernyaev, Mikhail Gorbachev’s closest assistant, wrote in his diary about one of the meetings dedicated to the prices and quality of children’s and medical products in the USSR:

At the instigation of the All-Russian Central Council of Trade Unions, Biryukova dumped the “products” onto the secretariat table and criticized [ponesla] the ministers. They tried to resist, even accusing her of

⁵⁹³ Yegor Ligachyov, “Memoirs,” 1988, <https://corpus.prozhito.org/note/656473>.

⁵⁹⁴ Zhirmov, “Sekretariat TSK, a na mne iarko-krasnyi kostium v taliu [Secretariat of the Central Committee, and I’m wearing a bright red fitted suit].”

⁵⁹⁵ “Protokoly i Stenogrammy Zasedaniia Komissii Prezidiuma VTSSPS Po Rabote Sredi Zhenshchin [Minutes and Transcripts of the Meeting of the Commission of the Presidium of the All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions on Work among Women],” December 16, 1980, P5451, Op.81, D. 29, GARF, l. 77

⁵⁹⁶ Goldman, “Babas at the Bench: Gender Conflict in Soviet Industry in the 1930s.”

“sensationalism,” but Gorbachev scolded them so much that they sat down like beaten mongrels. It was a real Party and Soviet [po-nastoiashchemu partiinyi sovetskii] conversation with bureaucrats.⁵⁹⁷

Biryukova also emphasized the role of interpersonal connections in her professional success. For example, for any type of construction, as an AUCCTU Secretary, she needed the approval of Gosplan, the state planning Committee, for any type of construction, and she recalled in 2005: “I had an excellent relationship with the Chairman of the State Planning Committee (Gosplan) Baibakov. He was a real gentleman, and he really liked me.”⁵⁹⁸ She also evoked another episode from her late 1980s career, when she advocated for huge foreign currency allocations to refurbish the light industry. She learned that most of the Politburo members were against her prepared decree draft and used her connection with Gorbachev and the occasion of her birthday to ask him directly to make the Politburo approve her proposal before the Politburo meeting.⁵⁹⁹

Biryukova creatively navigated her femininity in the political field, not only softening her strong personality with convenient hyperfeminine looks but also clearly demonstrating her belonging to a group—that of “women.” As her colleague from the CC CPSU, Anatoly Chernyaev wrote in his diary about her in the context of one of her promotions: “Smart, active, principled, got into the business well... and a woman.”⁶⁰⁰ Biryukova’s speeches and publications, in which she emphasized the role of women in Soviet policymaking, demonstrate that being “a woman” was crucial for her self-identification in politics. An example is the 1970

⁵⁹⁷ Anatoly Chernyaev, “Diary Entry,” February 24, 1984, <https://corpus.prozhito.org/note/61744.>;

С подачи ВЦСПС Бирюкова вывалила на секретариатский стол «продукцию» и понесла министров. Они пробовали сопротивляться, даже обвинить ее в «сенсационности», но Горбачев сделал им такой разнос, что уселись они на свои места побитыми дворняжками. Это был по-настоящему партийный советский разговор с бюрократами.

⁵⁹⁸ Zhirnov, “Sekretariat TSK, a na mne iarko-krasnyi kostium v taliu [Secretariat of the Central Committee, and I’m wearing a bright red fitted suit].”

⁵⁹⁹ Zhirnov.

⁶⁰⁰ Anatoly Chernyaev, “Diary Entry,” September 14, 1988, <https://corpus.prozhito.org/note/61985.>

SWC Plenum, where she emphasized that “all the work that is carried out by trade unions to improve work, life, and women's health would be unthinkable and impossible without the active and direct participation of women themselves.”⁶⁰¹ The tendency in the Soviet system to delegate the woman question to women’s already overloaded shoulders, Biryukova, like many other Soviet women, managed to turn into a reason for pride. Indeed, most of the rights and achievements Soviet women had, they had acquired due to their efforts. Biryukova saw the great importance of women’s participation in politics.

Due to her bright political career and style, contemporaries often compared her with Margaret Thatcher—one of the interviews with her had the title “Zheleznaia ledi SSSR [Soviet Iron Lady],” a title Biryukova clearly appreciated. Biryukova accompanied Thatcher during her visit to Moscow in 1987⁶⁰² and later visited her in the UK when she was a vice head of the Soviet of Ministers (1988—1990).⁶⁰³ During Biryukova’s meeting with Margaret Thatcher in London on July 26, 1989, she complained to Thatcher “that there were only half as many women in the new Supreme Soviet as in the last one. She put this down to a conservative outlook on the part of men,” as reported by Charles Powell, Department of Trade and Industry.⁶⁰⁴ The fact that Biryukova felt compelled to share this opinion with a politician who clearly distanced herself from the women’s movement as her political career advanced,⁶⁰⁵ shows Biryukova’s assumption that all women in politics as were concerned with the problems of women as a group, by default, something unquestionable and a ground for building trust across borders and political camps.

⁶⁰¹ GARF, P7928, Op.3, D.2387, l.157.

⁶⁰² Zhirnov, “Sekretariat TSK, a na mne iarko-krasnyi kostium v taliu[Secretariat of the Central Committee, and I’m wearing a bright red fitted suit].”

⁶⁰³ “PREM19/2867: Soviet Union (Visits to the UK by Soviet Deputy Prime Ministers: Leonid Konstandov, Vladimir Kamentsev and Aleksandra Biryukova) | Margaret Thatcher Foundation,” accessed April 25, 2024, <https://www.margaretthatcher.org/source/prem19/prem19-2867>.

⁶⁰⁴ “PREM19/2867”, 2.

⁶⁰⁵ Krista Cowman, “8 ‘The Statutory Woman Whose Main Task Was to Explore What Women ...were Likely to Think’: Margaret Thatcher and Women’s Politics in the 1950s and 1960s,” in *Rethinking Right-Wing Women* (Manchester: University Press, 2017), 140–55, <https://doi.org/10.7765/9781526125194.00014>.

Biryukova acted upon her identity as “a woman” in policymaking. She actively worked on her feminine gender display and took advantage of it, when possible. However, despite her proud embrace of the image of a “Soviet Iron Lady,” she was the opposite of Thatcher in her politics. Biryukova stayed attuned to the needs of working-class women no matter what heights of politics she had reached, as I will discuss in further detail below.

4.1.5. Galina Sukhoruchenkova (1985—1991)



Illustration 11 Galina Sukhoruchenkova. Source: 50 Let. Zolotoĭ Iubileĭ Vypusnikov Khimfaka MGU 1958 g.

After Biryukova (1972–1985) and Zemlyannikova (1971–1986), Galina Sukhoruchenkova occupied the position in question in the AUCCTU Secretariat, and held it until 1991. She was responsible for labor protection and social welfare. According to the short autobiography she wrote a brochure issued by her university, she was born on November 25, 1935, in Moscow. In 1958, she graduated from the Faculty of Chemistry at Moscow State University. By assignment, she was directed to the All-Union Design and Research Institute “Giprokauchuk,” where she worked for 12 years as group head and was elected chairman of

the local committee. In 1970, she began working in trade union bodies. She was elected secretary and then chairwoman of the Moscow City Committee of the Trade Union of Workers in the Oil, Chemical, and Gas Industry. She graduated from the graduate school of the Higher School of Trade Union Movement (now the Academy of Labor and Social Relations). In 1977, she was elected secretary, and in 1982, chairwoman of the Central Committee of the Trade Union of Workers in the Chemical and Petrochemical Industries of the USSR. In 1986–1987, she participated in the liquidation of the consequences of the accident at the Chornobyl Nuclear Power Plant. In December 1988, she conducted the evacuation of those affected by the earthquake in Leninakan. Later, she was involved in organizing the recovery of workers and the population in disaster areas. She was elected vice president of the International Federation of Trade Unions of Workers in the Oil, Chemical, Petrochemical, and Forestry Industries. She emphasized that she worked on the development of the social sphere, the construction of housing and social and cultural facilities, the improvement of working conditions, and labor protection.⁶⁰⁶

In her short autobiographical note, Sukhoruchenkova wrote that “as secretary of AUCCTU and a member of the presidium of the Soviet Women's Committee,” she actively participated in the international women’s and trade union movement.⁶⁰⁷ Such a recollection is meaningful because it showed how closely linked these two posts were for her. But the combination also had a direct effect on her work outside of delegations. Thus, following Biryukova, she became a head of the AUCCTU Presidium Commission on Problems of Labor and Everyday Life of Women and of Mother and Child Protection.⁶⁰⁸

⁶⁰⁶ “50 Let. Zolotoï Iubileï Vypusnikov Khimfaka MGU 1958 g [50 Years. Golden Jubilee of Graduates of the Chemistry Department of Moscow State University in 1958],” 2008, 164.

⁶⁰⁷ “50 Let. Zolotoï Iubileï Vypusnikov Khimfaka MGU 1958 g [50 Years. Golden Jubilee of Graduates of the Chemistry Department of Moscow State University in 1958],” 164.

⁶⁰⁸ GARF, F.5451, Op. 81.

As my overview has shown, the presence of the SWC members in the AUCCTU Secretariat did matter for women as a group. Popova, Nikolaeva, Biryukova and Sukhoruchenkova were invested in advancing women's rights in the USSR and internationally. I suggest that their belonging to the SWC supported and enabled their responsiveness to women's concerns.

4.2. The productionist bias challenged: reframing reproductive labor in the AUCCTU Activities

The previous subchapter showed that women individually promoted to the AUCTTU Secretariat women advocated for women's interests as a group, and their belonging to the SWC enabled this. This section will explore to what degree their efforts challenged the persisting gender inequality in labor, "productionist bias in Marxism-Leninism," which privileged the sphere of production over reproduction.⁶⁰⁹ I define reproductive labor here, following historian Eileen Boris, "as work that exists as a counterpart, but often prior, to other forms of productive labor,"⁶¹⁰ which covers a wide range of activities "both material (like feeding), emotional (like love), and assimilative (like transference of norms and values)."⁶¹¹

Historian Susan Zimmermann has written critically about trade union women in state socialist Hungary in the 1960s-1970s, arguing that they only outwardly improved the system, but thereby contributed to the reproduction of its deep inequalities:

They visibly contributed to the women-friendly substance and appearance of the state-socialist system, while simultaneously cooperating—some from a position of "soft power" and many from clearly subordinate

⁶⁰⁹ Kruks, Reiter, and Young, *Promissory Notes*, 10.

⁶¹⁰ Eileen Boris, *Making the Woman Worker: Precarious Labor and the Fight for Global Standards, 1919-2019* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019), 7.

⁶¹¹ Boris, 7.

locations—with a system of labor policies that continuously produced and reproduced the material injustice weighing so heavily on women workers.⁶¹²

In this subchapter, I will discuss attempts by SWC members in the AUCCTU to put women's interests in the first place versus the prioritizing of productivity. Using Eileen Boris's words about the International Labor Organization, I will examine how they attempted to "elevate care, in its paid as well as unpaid forms, as one key pillar for the future of work."⁶¹³ These efforts were especially important in the context of the involuntary labor in the Soviet Union, which meant that its citizens had minimal rights in defining the place and conditions of their work.⁶¹⁴ I will also explore whether Zimmermann's conclusion regarding Hungary equally applies here.

In the early 20th century, protective labor legislation was one of the key demands of working-class feminists across the world.⁶¹⁵ As historian Dorothy Sue Cobble wrote, American labor feminists saw special treatment for women as a way to fight "penalization for motherhood" and claimed that "women should not have to become *like men* in order to deserve first-class citizenship."⁶¹⁶ In other words, they attempted to challenge male workers as the standard and to revalue care work by having special measures introduced. Whereas in the capitalist countries by the 1940s, labor feminists acknowledged that some types of special labor

⁶¹² Zimmermann, "'It Shall Not Be a Written Gift, but a Lived Reality,'" 372.

⁶¹³ Boris, *Making the Woman Worker*, 12.

⁶¹⁴ Paul K. Eiss, "Free and Unfree Labour: The Debate Continues Tom Brass Marcel van Der Linden," *Journal of Social History* 34, no. 1 (October 1, 2000): 218–20.

⁶¹⁵ Marilyn Lake, "From Self-Determination via Protection to Equality via Non-Discrimination: Defining Women's Rights at the League of Nations and the United Nations," in *Women's Rights and Human Rights: International Historical Perspectives*, ed. Patricia Grimshaw, Katie Holmes, and Marilyn Lake (Gordonville: Palgrave Macmillan Limited, 2001), 254–71; Ulla Wikander, Alice Kessler-Harris, and Jane Lewis, *Protecting Women: Labor Legislation in Europe, the United States, and Australia, 1880-1920* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995).

⁶¹⁶ Dorothy Sue Cobble, *The Other Women's Movement: Workplace Justice and Social Rights in Modern America*, Politics and Society in Twentieth-Century America (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004), 57.

protection for women (prohibition of certain jobs, of night shifts, and other laws restricting women's working hours) resulted in gender-based discrimination,⁶¹⁷ in the USSR this strand of feminist struggle continued. Many of these efforts, however, either became unimportant in the market economy after the dissolution of the Soviet Union or even created an additional disadvantage for women and, thus, were never seriously examined as a site of feminist activism.

For example, the prohibition of certain jobs for women was one of the key demands throughout IWY in the Soviet Union, promoted by the SWC members. A list of 550 prohibited occupations for women had been adopted by the AUCCTU in 1978.⁶¹⁸ According to the decree, women who must have been transferred from occupations with hazardous and unhealthy conditions were entitled to improve or change their qualifications if needed for the new job, receiving their average monthly salary during the training period. Also, they kept the majority of benefits from their previous occupation (childcare infrastructure, housing, special payments enumerated on the grounds of their work under hazardous and unhealthy conditions).⁶¹⁹ The decree ensured that women would get another job and could not be just fired and unemployed. Finally, this list was intended to be re-evaluated in accordance with technological progress.

According to Vera Tolkunova, a soviet lawyer, suggested, one of the key aims of the decree was to “increase the amount of women working in the sector of intellectual labor and consequently reduce the number of women, doing physical labor.”⁶²⁰ In 1976 *Rabotnitsa* published an interview with Chayanov, a member of the Committee of the USSR Council of Ministers for science and technology, in which a correspondent pointed out in that “[a]s far as mechanization comes to this or that part of the factory, men are the ones who become

⁶¹⁷ Cobble, 64.

⁶¹⁸ “Postanovlenie Goskomtruda, AUCCTU Ot 25 Iulya 1978 N II10-3,” 1978, <http://base.safework.ru/law?d&nd=9039453&prevDoc=33303178>.

⁶¹⁹ “Postanovlenie Goskomtruda, AUCCTU Ot 25 Iulya 1978 N II10-3.”

⁶²⁰ V. Tolkunova, “Sovetskoe Zakonodatel'stvo v Period Desiatiletiia Zhenshchin [Soviet Legislation During the UN Decade for Women],” in *Rol' Zhenshchiny v Sovremennom Obshchestve (K Itogam Desiatiletiia Zhenshchiny OON)* [Role of Women in the Modern Society (On the Results of the UN Decade for Women)] (Moskva, Hauka, 1985), 35.

operators, whereas women are transferred to those departments where manual labor persists.”⁶²¹

In fact, the prohibition of professions addressed two issues: protection of women’s reproductive functions, and, most importantly, the gender pay gap in the Soviet Union, which was often caused by the fact that women with the same qualifications as men would be kept on non-automatized shop floors or not promoted, while men got better working conditions and often salaries.⁶²² Aleksandra Biryukova put it in her 1985 interview to *Soviet Woman*, “as a rule, their [women transferred from jobs with unfavorable working conditions—A.T.] new jobs demanded higher skill, and consequently returned higher wages.”⁶²³ This quote explicated the initial goal of the law—to increase women’s wages and to squeeze men in the automatized sector. Feminist economist Katarina Katz suggested that one of the strategies for women to reduce the wage gap with men was to enter “male-dominated areas (heavy industry, construction, science, skilled blue-collar work).”⁶²⁴ This strategy, I argue, was also supported by the Soviet legislation of the UN Decade for Women, in particular, in 1980, the AUCCTU and the State Committee for Labor and Social Problems (Goskomtrud) adopted a decree, according to which women with children under eight years had a right to attend refresher courses during working hours without reduction of their average wage.⁶²⁵ In essence, this decree tried to convert women’s reproductive labor as mothers into career promotion and not penalization. Sociologist Elvira Novikova, about whom I will write later in the chapter, claimed her contribution to that legislation.⁶²⁶ This legislation, which till recently kept its full power in Russia, is usually discussed by the feminists and the

⁶²¹ O. Vasilieva, “NTR Meniaet Sud’by. Beseda s R.A. Chaianovym [NTR Changes Destinies. A Conversation with R.A. Chayanov],” *Rabotnitsa*, no. 1 (1976): 9–10, 9.

⁶²² N Vishneva-Sarafanova, *Soviet Women’s World. The United Nations Decade for Women 1976-1985* (Moscow: Novosti Press Publishing House, 1985), 22.

⁶²³ Aleksandra Biryukova, “In the Interests of Working Women,” *Soviet Woman*, no. 9 (1985): 3.

⁶²⁴ Katz, *Gender, Work and Wages in the Soviet Union*, 241.

⁶²⁵ Tolkunova, “Sovetskoe Zakonodatel’sтво v Period Desiatiletiia Zhenshchin [Soviet Legislation During the UN Decade for Women],” 28.

⁶²⁶ Racioppi and O’Sullivan See, *Women’s Activism in Contemporary Russia*, 40.

UN experts as an example of discriminatory politics.⁶²⁷ And indeed, it has turned to be discriminatory in the market economy. However, it had a completely different meaning in the Soviet economic system, where employment was not fully voluntary but compulsory.

4.2.1. The AUCCTU Presidium Commission on Problems of Labor and Everyday Life of Women and of Mother and Child Protection: Accommodating Reproductive Labor on the Shopfloor

The logic of privileging of women's reproductive labor on the shop floor was very well articulated in the work of the AUCCTU Presidium Commission on Problems of Labor and Everyday Life of Women and of Mother and Child Protection. This subchapter explores work of the Commission.

The AUCCTU's responsibility since the 1930s covered a wide range of activities: sick leave and other social insurance payments, labor protection, cultural and educational facilities, control of housing programs for workers, operation of canteens and co-operative shops, organization of auxiliary farms, kindergartens and since the late 1950s nurseries, and a wide variety of assistance to workers' everyday life.⁶²⁸ The latter was a responsibility of trade union's insurance delegates: unpaid activists, whose duties covered a surprisingly broad range of spheres under the umbrella of "constant comradely concern" for colleagues.⁶²⁹ However, not much has been written on the AUCCTU's policies,⁶³⁰ even less about its input in Soviet gender

⁶²⁷ "Spisok Zapreschennyh Dlya Zhenshin Professii v Rossii Narushaet Ih Prava i Podlezhit Izmeneniy—Schitayut Experty OON [The List of Forbidden Professions for Women Violates Women's Rights and Should Be Changed—the UN Experts Argue]."

⁶²⁸ Deutscher, *Soviet Trade Unions*, 124.

⁶²⁹ Bernice Q. Madison, *Social Welfare in the Soviet Union* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1968), 91.

⁶³⁰ See: Deutscher, *Soviet Trade Unions*; Madison, *Social Welfare in the Soviet Union*; Blair A. Ruble, *Soviet Trade Unions : Their Development in the 1970s*, Soviet and East European Studies (Cambridge [Eng.] : Cambridge University Press, 1981); Donald A. Filtzer, *Soviet Workers and De-Stalinization: The Consolidation of the Modern System of Soviet Production Relations, 1953-1964*, Soviet and East European Studies ; 87 (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Ilić, *Women in the Stalin Era*; Goldman, *Women at the Gates*; Jo, "Dismantling Stalin's Fortress."

policies after WWII; the existing scholarship mainly focuses on the local trade union level or other aspects of women's labor activism under state socialism.⁶³¹

In 1962, the AUCCTU issued a decree “On improving work of trade union organizations among women,” which critically evaluated the efforts of trade unions to promote women and to create more favorable working conditions. It also heavily criticized the Central Asian Republics and Northern and Southern Caucasus Republics for “weakening the fight against backward views and incorrect attitudes towards women,” for the fact that “in these areas, women and girls of Indigenous nationality were extremely rarely promoted to leading economic, administrative and public work.”⁶³² Following the 1962 Decree, the AUCCTU established the special commission in the AUCCTU Presidium for work among women (later renamed into the AUCCTU Presidium Commission on Problems of Labor and Everyday Life of Women and of Mother and Child Protection, the AUCCTU Presidium Commission further in text). The AUCCTU Presidium Commission worked in close cooperation with the SWC, and Aleksandra Biryukova headed it from 1968,⁶³³ succeeding most probably Tatiana Nikolaeva. In 1969, the new regulations were published.⁶³⁴ Besides the AUCCTU Presidium Commission, similar commissions were established at all levels of the trade union system.⁶³⁵ The AUCCTU Presidium Commission monitored their work and accumulated information, organized seminars to share best practices, ordered research, published books, developed directives for local commissions to follow, and it also participated in the development of the AUCCTU documents regarding plans for the development of the national economy.⁶³⁶

⁶³¹ Ilić, “What Did Women Want? Khrushchev and the Revival of the Zhensoveti”; Gnydiuk et al., *Through the Prism of Gender and Work*.

⁶³² Novikova, Sidorova, and Turchaninova, *Sovetskie Zhenshiny i Profsoiuzy [The Soviet Women and Trade Unions]*, 157.

⁶³³ Novikova, Sidorova, and Turchaninova, 167.

⁶³⁴ “Polozhenie o Komissii VTSSPS Po Rabote Sredi Zhenshchin [Regulations on the All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions Commission on Work among Women],” October 10, 1969.

⁶³⁵ Novikova, Sidorova, and Turchaninova, *Sovetskie Zhenshiny i Profsoiuzy [The Soviet Women and Trade Unions]*, 158.

⁶³⁶ Novikova, Sidorova, and Turchaninova, 167–68.

Although the AUCCTU Presidium Commission's first task, according to regulations, was to "create conditions for high productivity of female labor,"⁶³⁷ which was also its "most important task,"⁶³⁸ its responsibilities spread way beyond questions of productivity, and in the discussion, that I will analyze below, the questions of productivity were barely touched upon. Other tasks of the Commission, according to the regulations, included:

Vocational training and qualifications for women; facilitating and improving working conditions for female workers, sanitary, hygienic, and consumer services for women in production; protection of motherhood and childhood, fertility, assistance to women in raising children; use of non-working time; organizing the work of children's institutions, as well as consumer services that facilitate women's domestic work; sanitary and hygienic, pedagogical, moral and ethical education of women, girls, young mothers.⁶³⁹

Notably, the 1984 book *Sovetskie Zhenschiny i Profsoiuzy* (The Soviet Women and Trade Unions), dedicated to women in the trade unions in the USSR exposed the way all these aspects were legitimized through labor productivity: "After all, her [a Soviet woman—A.T.] performance, creative growth, and career advancement depend on the improvement of her everyday life, on whether a woman manages to relax after work and restore expended energy."⁶⁴⁰ Legitimized through the increase of women's productivity, other spheres of life like

⁶³⁷ "Polozhenie o Komissii VTSSPS Po Rabote Sredi Zhenshchin [Regulations on the All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions Commission on Work among Women]."

⁶³⁸ Novikova, Sidorova, and Turchaninova, *Sovetskie Zhenschiny i Profsoiuzy* [*The Soviet Women and Trade Unions*], 160.

⁶³⁹ "Polozhenie o Komissii VTSSPS Po Rabote Sredi Zhenshchin [Regulations on the All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions Commission on Work among Women]."

⁶⁴⁰ Novikova, Sidorova, and Turchaninova, *Sovetskie Zhenschiny i Profsoiuzy* [*The Soviet Women and Trade Unions*], 161.

consumer services, domestic chores, and childcare occupied substantially more space in female trade union activism.⁶⁴¹

Contemporaries often confused the trade union commissions with women's councils (zhensovet), which illustrates that trade union commissions' responsibilities spread much further than the shop floor. Thus, during one of the AUCCTU Presidium Commission meetings in 1980, Vera Ivanovna Sivolob, secretary of the Republican Ukrainian Council of Trade Unions, chairman of the Commission on Work among Women of the Ukrainian Republican Council of Trade Unions, complained that there was some duality because of the parallel existence of "women's councils" and "trade union commissions." Moreover, sometimes they work well together, but sometimes "neither the women's council nor the commission work properly, one relies on the other."⁶⁴² Aleksandra Biryukova commented that "often our trade union commissions are called women's councils."⁶⁴³ She proposed differentiation of responsibilities based on the fact that women's councils were responsible for women's life outside of the work realm; on the city level, they organize leisure time activities, events, and gatherings, whereas trade union commissions "strictly monitor compliance with labor legislation, all the benefits and advantages that are provided for women; [...] manage state social insurance, [...] control the activities of all healthcare in the country."⁶⁴⁴ In other words, trade union commissions were tasked with protecting all the rights and benefits Soviet women were entitled to as workers, but simultaneously, women in the commissions worked to expand this range of rights and tackle gender relations outside of the workplace. For example, due to the initiative of the commissions, "many trade union cultural institutions strive to overcome the persistent tradition of shifting all household chores onto the shoulders of women, and promote

⁶⁴¹ It is telling that the book describing work of the trade union commissions dedicate most of the subchapter to these questions and not productivity of women: Novikova, Sidorova, and Turchaninova, 161–68.

⁶⁴² GARF, F. P5451, Op. 81, D. 29, l. 50.

⁶⁴³ GARF, F. P5451, Op. 81, D. 29, l. 74.

⁶⁴⁴ GARF, F. P5451, Op. 81, D. 29, l. 74.

the way of life of those families where husband and children are actively involved in housework.”⁶⁴⁵ This quote showed how much more fundamental persisting inequalities were addressed under cover of the increase of women’s productivity on the shop floor.

While in the public discourse, these efforts to achieve a fairer redistribution of resource allocations and labor between spouses in the sphere of reproduction were linked to productivity, in the inner discussions, this bow and scrape to productionism was often omitted which allows to suggest that growing labor productivity was just another way to camouflage the actual goal of the proposed initiatives. On December 16, 1980, a meeting of the AUCCTU Presidium Commission on Problems of Labor and Everyday Life of Women and of Mother and Child Protection took place. It was mainly dedicated to the discussion of the 10th paragraph of the collective working agreement, which from 1977 was titled “Improving working and living conditions for women and providing assistance in raising children.”⁶⁴⁶ This discussion showed a broad scope of measures that were introduced in USSR to accommodate women’s domestic workload on the shop floor and, notably, exemplified the prioritizing of reproductive labor over labor productivity. Indeed, that was a new strategy in addressing the persistent overburden of Soviet women—by combating female productivity norms.

The meeting report summarized the results of the AUCCTU inspection regarding the content and implementation of the 10th paragraph, which took place in three autonomous republics, 19 regions, and 41 enterprises of the Healthcare Ministry. While its first page glorified achievements, the rest of the six pages discussed problems and propose changes— notably, labor productivity was not mentioned even once, not even when questions of improving women’s qualification were discussed.⁶⁴⁷ Such a lack of reference to economic reasoning behind questions so strongly linked with labor productivity was significant. The

⁶⁴⁵ Novikova, Sidorova, and Turchaninova, *Sovetskie Zhenschiny i Profsoiuzy [The Soviet Women and Trade Unions]*, 161.

⁶⁴⁶ GARF, F. P5451, Op.81, D. 29, l. 29.

⁶⁴⁷ GARF, F. P5451, Op. 81, D.29, l.2.

transcript shows that the Commission prioritized the interests of women as they were understood by the members and, first of all, the head of the AUCCTU Presidium Commission, Aleksandra Biryukova.

Aleksandra Biryukova, in her final words at the meeting, emphasized the most important, in her opinion, points that should be included in the 10th paragraph. First was women's labor protection. She blasted enterprises' administrators who subjected pregnant women to overtime, to work in weekends and holidays, disregarded restrictions on limits for the carriage and shifting of weights, did not transfer pregnant women to physically easier jobs, and did not permit women with small children to work part-time.⁶⁴⁸ She additionally proposed to include in the collective labor agreement a precise number of women who have small children who should be guaranteed the right to work part-time, calculated based on the number of women needing it at the enterprise so that the question could not be dismissed by the administration. Her reasoning was nothing but these these women's well-being:

In our country, it is very difficult for women who have a child under 1-year-old, single mothers, mothers of children of preschool age and especially primary school age, especially first-graders, when a woman does not know what to do, the child just started school, how to pick him up from school, how to adapt him, for this the party and the state have done everything, there is a decision, a resolution on the provision of part-time or part-time work, work from home according to special schedules.⁶⁴⁹

⁶⁴⁸ GARF, F. P5451, Op. 81, D.29, 1.7.

⁶⁴⁹ GARF, F. 5451, Op. 81, D.29, 1.78; “У нас очень трудно женщинам, имеющим ребенка до 1 года, одиноким матерям, ребят дошкольного и особенно младшего школьного возраста, особенно первоклашек, когда женщина не знает, как ей быть, ребенок пошел в школу, как его встречать, как его приучить, для этого партия и государство сделали все, есть решение, постановление о предоставлении неполного рабочего дня или неполной рабочей недели, работа на дому по специальным графикам.”

Biryukova also underscored the need to improve childcare facilities, 80% of which were the trade unions' responsibility. She spoke about the need, for more material motivation for employers and for allocating more money to food in kindergartens. She said that she had already developed a project regarding the increase of food norms in kindergartens in the Soviet of Ministers of the USSR, emphasizing that "when it is expanded to the whole country, it will cost hundreds of billions of rubles,"⁶⁵⁰ but enterprises could do it already, she insisted. The rationale for it was the health of children and the decrease in illness rates.

Biryukova's last point was about single mothers, a vulnerable and, in many contexts, marginalized group.⁶⁵¹ However, Biryukova celebrated a single mother as a hero, as "a woman who accomplished a feat that may be greater than a woman permanently living with her husband, that she alone decided to have this child."⁶⁵² She used glorification and emotional language to explain why these women deserved special benefits: "This is scary because a very large double burden falls on the mother, and we must help this mother."⁶⁵³ There was again no productionist logic or economic rationality, but the problems of the working mother and her care work were centered.

The reasons for labor protection besides women's interests that were mentioned in the report were an improvement of the demographic situation, strengthening of the family, creating better conditions for combining motherhood with paid work and public activity, improvement of socialized childcare, according to "Guidelines for the Economic and Social Development of the USSR for 1981-1985 and for the period ending in 1990."⁶⁵⁴ Again, even though these

⁶⁵⁰ GARF, F. 5451, Op. 81, D.29, l.80.

⁶⁵¹ See Nakachi, *Replacing the Dead*; Tatyana Mamonova, *Woman and Russia : First Feminist Samizdat*, Almanach for Women about Women: No. 1 (London : Sheba Feminist Publishers, 1980).

⁶⁵² GARF, F. 5451, Op. 81, D.29, l.80.

⁶⁵³ GARF, F. 5451, Op. 81, D.29, ll.80-81.

⁶⁵⁴ GARF, F. 5451, Op. 81, D.29, ll.5-6.

grounds could be criticized for conservative overtones,⁶⁵⁵ it clearly prioritized reproduction over production, which seemed to be an important point for Aleksandra Biryukova, who was the one deciding what to put into the report of the meeting, which she indicated in her speech.⁶⁵⁶

Many other Commission meetings showcased a similar logic, discussing wide scope of legislative proposals. Galina Sukhoruchenkova as the head of the Commission, continued this line of policy. The Commission Presidium resolution from, September 29, 1987 included a number of special measures for pregnant women, women, caring for sick relatives or children younger than 8, or studying women, right to work part-time, at home or be transferred to the positions with the lower productivity norms, as well as an additional unpaid day off a month for a parent, taking care of a child under age of 8, to mother or father, depending “on the parents’ choice,” as well as a maternity leave of 56 days after the child’s birth for women who adopted a baby.⁶⁵⁷ Overall, through its numerous initiatives, the AUCCTU Presidium Commission attempted to normalize the idea of special benefits and a reconsideration of productivity norms for “working women and women, raising small children,” which I interpret as a way to address the overburdening of Soviet woman in a situation in which the utopian horizon of a full socialization of reproduction had vanished.

4.2.2. Domestic Labor as Sublime: Elvira Novikova’s Research

There is a growing body of research on how the expert community and knowledge production influenced gender politics under state socialism.⁶⁵⁸ Historian Mary Buckley wrote:

⁶⁵⁵ Elena Zdravomyslova and Anna Temkina, “Gosudarstvennoe Konstruirovanie Gendera v Sovetskom Obshchestve [State Construction of Gender in the Soviet Society],” *Zhurnal Issledovanii Sotsial’noi Politiki* 1, no. 3–4 (2003): 299–321.

⁶⁵⁶ GARF, F. 5451, Op. 81, D.29, l.77.

⁶⁵⁷ “Protokol i Stenogramma Zasedaniia Komissii Prezidiuma VTSSPS Po Voprosam Truda i Byta Zhenshchin, Okhrany Materinstva i Detstva [Minutes and Transcript of the Meeting of the Commission of the Presidium of the All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions on Women’s Labor and Life, Maternity and Childhood Protection],” September 29, 1987, GARF, F. 5451, Op. 81, D. 68, GARF, ll. 2-3.

⁶⁵⁸ Marie Láníková, “The Czechoslovak Women’s Union, Labour Activism, and Expertise under Socialism, 1960s and 1970s,” in *Through the Prism of Gender and Work* (Brill, 2023), 399–429, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004682481_014; Natalia Jarska, “Trade Union Activists, Expertise, and Gender Inequalities in the Workplace in Post-1956 Poland: A Struggle to Reveal Unequal Pay,” in *Through the Prism of*

“One vigorous debate that began in the mid-1960s and continued throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s was about the position of women in society.”⁶⁵⁹ The questions addressed therein included changing women’s roles, and the connection between falling birth rates and women’s paid employment combined with their “double burden”. The debate resulted in a rich and broad scope of research that was “of great interest to Soviet policy-makers because the way in which women organised their lives seriously affected the running of the economy, population size, labour supply, the stability of the family and the nature of childrearing.”⁶⁶⁰ In this subchapter, I will analyze the publications of one of these experts, Elvira Novikova, who worked at the AUCCTU and belonged to the SWC, and remarkably, called herself a feminist in her interview with Racioppi and O’Sullivan See in 1997.⁶⁶¹ The scholars introduced her story as proof that “some women in relatively high positions were sensitive to and deeply concerned about the circumstances of women in the Soviet Union and worked within state-defined parameters on their behalf.”⁶⁶²

Racioppi and O’Sullivan See did a biographical interview with Elvira Novikova, according to which she was born on December 13, 1939, to a family of railway engineers. Her father died in 1941, during the Second World War, Elvira’s mother never remarried, and Elvira was raised by her grandmother and mother, who valued education and economic independence, which contributed to her formation as “a feminist.”⁶⁶³ After graduation from the Historical department of the Pedagogical Institute, she started her career as a teacher. Soon after joining the Communist Party in 1963, she got promoted via the Party structures for youth, the

Gender and Work (Brill, 2023), 375–98, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004682481_013; Rustam Alexander, “From Sodomy to Homosexuality: Same-Sex Desire and the Rise of Soviet Sexopathology in the 1960s,” in *Regulating Homosexuality in Soviet Russia, 1956-91*, 1st ed. (Manchester: University Press, 2021), 77–132, <https://doi.org/10.7765/9781526155771.00009>; Nakachi, *Replacing the Dead*.

⁶⁵⁹ Mary Buckley, *Soviet Social Scientists Talking: An Official Debate about Women* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan, 1986), ix.

⁶⁶⁰ Buckley, *Soviet Social Scientists Talking*, ix.

⁶⁶¹ Racioppi and O’Sullivan See, *Women’s Activism in Contemporary Russia*, 36.

⁶⁶² Racioppi and O’Sullivan See, 33.

⁶⁶³ Racioppi and O’Sullivan See, 34.

Komsomol. She quit her job in the Komsomol for scientific work as soon as she got the opportunity. In 1967, she worked at the newly established Institute of the International Labor Movement in Moscow. Novikova's job was to report on the situation in the United States, based on US newspapers—and that was how she learnt about the feminist movement, as she recalled: “After reading and looking through all these articles, I had the opportunity to order books: Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics*.”⁶⁶⁴ In 1970, Novikova defended her dissertation about the American women's liberation movement.⁶⁶⁵ In 1973, she became the head of a new research center, a special sector on women's trade union positions, at the AUCCTU, where she learned about the discrimination of women and the actual situation with women's status in the USSR via accumulated data and her own trips.⁶⁶⁶ For example, in 1976, in this capacity, she traveled to the Ukrainian Socialist Republic as a member of a special brigade to monitor the implementation of the 1973 AUCCTU decree on the improvement of women's working conditions.⁶⁶⁷ In her recollections, she was proud and serious about work in that position, and tried to address women's problems not only in research but also in praxis. In Racioppi and O'Sullivan See's words, “[i]t also gave her privileges such as membership on the Soviet Women's Committee”; she was, later appointed a member of the National Committee on the United Nations Decade for Women and in that capacity participated in UN conferences in Copenhagen in 1980 and Nairobi in 1985.⁶⁶⁸

⁶⁶⁴ Racioppi and O'Sullivan See, 38.

⁶⁶⁵ E. E. Novikova, “Polozhenie zhenshchin v SShA i ikh uchastie v bor'be za mir i sotsial'nyĭ progress (1945-1969 gg.): Avtoreferat dis. na soiskanie uchenoi stepeni kandidata istoricheskikh nauk [The status of women in the USA and their participation in the struggle for peace and social progress (1945-1969) [Text]: Abstract of thesis. for the degree of candidate of historical sciences],” Текст (Moskva: б. и., 1970), Авторефераты диссертаций, <https://search.rsl.ru/ru/record/01007189993>.

⁶⁶⁶ Racioppi and O'Sullivan See, *Women's Activism in Contemporary Russia*, 39.

⁶⁶⁷ “Otchet Chlenov Komissii Po Rezul'tatam Proverki Deiatel'nosti Komissii Po Rabote Sredi Zhenshchin Ukrsovsprof a Zhitomirskogo Oblsovsprof a [Report of the Members of the Commission on the Results of the Inspection of the Activity of the Commissions for Work among Women of Ukrsovsprof and Zhytomyr Oblastsovsprof],” 1976, F. P5451, Op. 81, D. 11, GARF, I.1.

⁶⁶⁸ Racioppi and O'Sullivan See, *Women's Activism in Contemporary Russia*, 41.

Novikova wrote numerous publications on the status of women in the USSR, on women in trade unions, and the history of March 8.⁶⁶⁹ Some of her books, including the ones discussed below, were published by Profizdat, the publishing house of the AUCCTU, some in the state publishing house “Mysl” (Thought), and some by the educational society “Znanie” (Knowledge).

In 1978, Profizdat published the book *Zhenshchina. Trud. Sem'ia (Sotsiologicheskii Ocherk)* (Woman. Labor. Family: a Sociological Essay), which Novikova wrote together with V.S. Yazykova and Z.L. Yankova. It provided an overview of the structure of women’s participation in the labor market in the USSR; labor legislation and the role of trade unions in improving women’s living and working conditions. It had a separate section titled “Woman and everyday life [byt],” which discussed the problem of “socialist byt”: state support in domestic labor, child rearing, leisure time, and proposed a new conceptualization of reproductive labor.

In particular, the book departed from the widespread perspective in the Soviet research on domestic labor as degrading, non-productive which, thus, had no future within the development of socialism. Lenin’s famous quote set the foundation for this attitude to domestic work: “petty housework crushes, strangles, stultifies, and degrades her, chains her to the kitchen and the nursery, and she wastes her labor on barbarously unproductive, petty, nerve-wracking, stultifying and crushing drudgery.”⁶⁷⁰ This negative perspective on domestic work gave a considerable impetus to its socialization in the Soviet state, which improved women’s lives even though the full socialization was never achieved and women had to do most of the domestic chores. However, Novikova, Yazykova and Yankova argued that:

⁶⁶⁹ Novikova’s perspective of combining socialist theory and second wave feminism was rare but not unique in the socialist bloc. See: Stana Buzatu, “Issues for a Fruitful Dialogue between Feminism and Marxism,” in *Texts and Contexts from the History of Feminism and Women’s Rights: East Central Europe, Second Half of the Twentieth Century*, ed. Zsófia Lóránd et al. (Budapest, Hungary ; New York, NY: CEU Press, 2024), 822–32.

⁶⁷⁰ Lenin, “A Great Beginning. Heroism of the Workers in the Rear ‘Communist Subbotniks,’” 429.

Such an unambiguous assessment of all household work is unjustified. In the conditions of the growing scientific and technological revolution, the development of personality and her ability to create is of direct practical importance, therefore, domestic work, associated, for example, with raising children, mutual education of spouses, cannot be entirely qualified as unproductive labor.⁶⁷¹

They proposed a division into two types of reproductive labor: mechanical, aimed primarily at serving family members, cleaning the premises, doing laundry, etc., and “domestic labor as a whole, including, in addition, educational, organizational, aesthetic and other essentially creative functions that can be compared with the types of activities [Friedrich] Engels classified as “sublime”.”⁶⁷² They argued that the latter, although it aimed at the satisfaction of the needs of one family, nevertheless was “socially useful, as it contributes to an increase in the material and spiritual wealth of society, as well as to the education and formation of a person.”⁶⁷³ Therefore, domestic work should be analyzed not only through the lenses of political economy but also sociologically; this implied that its importance for society should be reconsidered, as it also transformed with the transition to communism. Indeed, they maintained that “the development of socialist production relations into communist ones leads to overcoming the relative economic isolation of household labor.”⁶⁷⁴ Although the full merger of

⁶⁷¹ E. E. Novikova, V.S. Yazykova, and Z.L. Yankova, *Zhenshchina. Trud. Sem'ia (Sotsiologicheskiĭ Ocherk)*[*Woman. Labor. Family: A Sociological Essay*] (Profizdat, 1978), <https://a-z.ru/women/texts/nov1r-4.htm>; Подобная однозначная оценка всего домашнего труда неправомерна. В условиях нарастающей научно-технической революции развитие личности человека, его способности к творчеству имеет непосредственно практическое значение, поэтому домашний труд, связанный, например, с воспитанием детей, взаимовоспитанием супругов, нельзя целиком отнести к труду непроизводительному.

⁶⁷² Novikova, Yazykova, and Yankova.

⁶⁷³ Novikova, Yazykova, and Yankova.; является общественно полезным, так как способствует приумножению материальных и духовных богатств общества, а также воспитанию и формированию человека.

⁶⁷⁴ Novikova, Yazykova, and Yankova.

productive and reproductive spheres would not happen, not even under communism, the authors argued that the content of domestic labor changed, and this had to be acknowledged.

Yet, the authors also underscored the need to further advance the socialization and automatization of mechanical domestic labor. They described the flaws of the existing system: the low quality of the services, the long distances to the places where they were provided and long queues, as well as high prices (for canteens). They concluded that women who did not use services did so because of their unavailability, not by choice. Interestingly, they showed with sociological data that women's interest in the automatization of domestic work was connected with the level of their satisfaction with their job: the more satisfied they were, the more they tried to save time on domestic chores.

Finally, the authors discussed the problem that domestic work continued to be seen as "women's work": "Sociological studies conducted in our country have shown the relative persistence of this old, patriarchal point of view on the distribution of family responsibilities."⁶⁷⁵ They had found that a fair redistribution of domestic chores was directly connected with women's satisfaction with marriage. Thus, in families with an equal share of domestic work, 60,8% of women evaluated their marriage as happy and only 5,6% as unhappy, whereas in families where women were primarily responsible for domestic work only 21,6% considered their marriage as happy and 40% as unhappy.⁶⁷⁶ Overall, only 15% of women thought that it was women's task to do the domestic chores, and, as the authors stated, these were predominantly elderly women "with a low level of professional and general culture."⁶⁷⁷ Thus, clearly discarding such attitudes as old-fashioned and not Soviet. They concluded that these types of domestic labor that could be seen as sublime and creative should remain in the

⁶⁷⁵ Novikova, Yazykova, and Yankova.

⁶⁷⁶ Novikova, Yazykova, and Yankova.

⁶⁷⁷ Novikova, Yazykova, and Yankova.

future and be shared between spouses, whereas the mechanical had to be automatized, but until then, had to be shared between spouses.

In their work, two aspects are remarkable. The first is their proposal to regard a part of domestic labor as creative and even sublime. This positive evaluation served to raise the prestige of domestic work and, consequently, its allocations, and attracting men to do their share. The second remarkable aspect was their focus on women's satisfaction with their job and family life. Such a psychologizing approach put the focus on women's subjectivity instead of economic needs of the country. The combination of a focus on women's labor and on women's happiness I interpret as a combination of Soviet and American feminist traditions that Novikova knew well. I suggest qualifying such an attitude as feminist, as it reconsidered the evaluation of domestic labor, demanded allocations and also a fair division of domestic work between the sexes; finally, it took women's satisfaction as the key criterion for evaluation of the situation.

The same approach was present in some of Novikova's other publications. An example is a publication based on research she conducted with colleagues O.L. Milova and E.V. Zaliubovskaia at the Scientific Center of the AUCCTU in 1988. It described the level of women's satisfaction with their jobs and their financial contribution to the family budget. Interestingly, they concluded: "the most important reason for women's work activity is a material one, although it has a psychological undertone: women like to have their own wage and be independent."⁶⁷⁸ Having their own wage, however, came at the price of having to combine the roles of a mother and a worker; the researchers explored the frustration that came from this combination (or double burden) and named the reasons for it with a strong focus on women's subjective feelings: the deficit of consumer goods, an unequal distribution of domestic work in the family, a shortage of free time for both professional education and family, and

⁶⁷⁸ E. E. Novikova, O. L. Milova, and E. V. Zaliubovskaia, "Modern Woman at Work and at Home: A Sociopsychological Study," *Soviet Sociology* 28, no. 5 (September 1, 1989): 92, <https://doi.org/10.2753/SOR1061-0154280589>.

fatigue, constant stress, fear of not being able to cope, etc. In their words: “Professional and family life requires extreme efforts from women and are accompanied by serious psychological problems, heightened anxiety, etc.”⁶⁷⁹ They also explored the feeling of guilt women experienced that derived from the combination of two roles.

They argued that sex stereotypes existing in women’s immediate surroundings played a crucial role in the self-reflection, and they concluded that the less women were expected to fit into traditional gender roles, the more satisfied with everything they were:

The women respondents are self-critical, unsure of themselves, and have a difficult inner life. Many of them are chronically in a state of psychological discomfort, as evidenced by the high level of anxiety, dejection, and bad mood. Anxiety depends directly on satisfaction with marriage, and the husband’s attitude toward the wife’s work. Women who are mainly oriented toward their jobs, however, are less anxious, and better adapted to combining professional activity and motherhood.⁶⁸⁰

The authors argued that a change in the position of women depended on consistent emancipation, a challenging of sex stereotypes, and also an “inner psychological effort on the part of women.”⁶⁸¹ Overall, they concluded that “what is ‘to blame’ for this is not women’s emancipation, to which all sins are frequently assigned, but the fact that this process is unfinished, is contradictory, and often takes place in unfavorable forms.”⁶⁸² Such explicitly feminist statements were possible during *perestroika*, but, as I showed, and were also present in Novikova’s publications way earlier.

⁶⁷⁹ Novikova, Milova, and Zaliubovskaia, 104.

⁶⁸⁰ Novikova, Milova, and Zaliubovskaia, 99.

⁶⁸¹ Novikova, Milova, and Zaliubovskaia, 100.

⁶⁸² Novikova, Milova, and Zaliubovskaia, 101.

Novikova's research diverged from the dominant perspective on domestic labor in the Marxist-Leninist tradition. First, her work centered on women's feelings and satisfaction, not on the needs of production. Second, she proposed to move away from the classic Leninist approach to domestic labor as degrading; to the contrary, she declared part of this work as creative and even "sublime," for which she referred to Engels. Third, she explored the subjective consequences for women of the combination of two roles—those of worker and mother—and explained the negative effects of the combination with stereotypes held in a woman's immediate surroundings and infrastructural problems—deliberately arguing against the position that blamed women's emancipation for these contradictions. Therefore, I suggest that her research demonstrated an "epistemological autonomy," which derived from Novikova's fieldwork and knowledge of feminist theory and challenged the key tenets of the Leninist approach to domestic labor.

4.3. Conclusion

This chapter has explored what the cooperation between the SWC and the AUCCTU consisted of and what it meant for women to be involved in the SWC and the AUCCTU simultaneously. My starting point was the fact that the AUCCTU organized an All-Union Meeting for Work among Women that took place on February 1, 1931; this meeting was a space for women in industry to channel their anger and voice experiences of injustice after the Zhenotdel had been abolished. I showed for the earlier period, Klavdia Nikolaeva, who was the Zhenotdel head (1924—1925) and the AUCCTU Secretary (1937—1944), was the connecting link between the organizations.

After WWII, at least one woman connected with the SWC held a position in the AUCCTU Secretariat. Thus, the AUCCTU became an institutional bridge connecting the Zhenotdel and the SWC. I also showed that the presence of SWC members in the AUCCTU Secretariat, and vice versa, had a meaningful impact on Soviet women as a group. Popova,

Nikolaeva, Biryukova, and Sukhoruchenkova were committed to advancing women's rights both in the USSR and on the international stage. I hope to have shown herethat their affiliation with the SWC contributed to their attentiveness to women's concerns.

The second question I explored how the SWC members in the AUCCTU attempted to challenge attitudes towards byt, or reproductive labor, and its place on the shop floor. First, I analyzed the discussion of the AUCCTU Presidium Commission on the Problems of Labor and Everyday Life of Women and of Mother and Child Protection; my analysis showed how, instead of dealing with questions on how to increase women's labor productivity, in line with the dominant productivist logic, they switched the focus to aiding women with their care responsibilities. This approach may have contributed to challenging the male worker as a standard for labor regulation. The AUCCTU Presidium Commission treated women's reproductive work as something that deserved and demanded special treatment without further consideration regarding the effects on women's labor productivity.

Second, I analyzed Elvira Novikova's research from the 1970s and 1980s as an example of Soviet domestic feminist critique of how the combination of women's two roles, as worker and mother, affected them (the infamous double burden). At the center of Novikova's evaluation was women's satisfaction with their work and marriage in connection with domestic labor. Interestingly, she, with her co-authors, proposed to reconsider the role of domestic labor under developed socialism as not only degrading but as also having creative and even sublime aspects.

The chapter showed that the AUCCTU became an important site for SWC members to influence policies towards women in the USSR, that is, in the given situation of mandatory labor; they managed to promote a number of legislative changes, to control the implementation of existing laws and in the late Soviet period developed ways to challenge the productivist bias in Soviet policymaking regarding women. The latter they did by shifting attention to the need

for reducing the productivity norms for working women and parents (mostly mothers). There were some attempts to make men more involved with household and caring work, but nothing very significant. I also mentioned that the implementation of protective labor legislation for women later had negative consequences for them, when the Soviet Union fell apart and a market economy was adopted. Regarding my question whether their actions contributed to a women-friendly façade but reproduced a Soviet patriarchal system, all of this means that their efforts at reducing productivity norms for women and reconsideration of the reproductive labor in the hierarchy challenged the patriarchal exploitation of women, even if their efforts were not successful.

Part Three: International Propaganda in the Service of Soviet Women

Chapter Five: The Global as an Instrument in Local Policymaking: International

Women's Year in the Soviet Union

This chapter will focus on the impact of United Nations-proclaimed International Women's Year (1975) within the Soviet Union. A growing field of research shows the flow of ideas, goods, and technologies through cultural, academic, and scientific exchange and people's diplomacy between the Soviet Union and the West during the Brezhnev years.⁶⁸³ The Soviet people, in their international encounters, were tasked with the mission to establish connections with foreigners and promote a picture of the USSR as a state striving for social equality. Historian Maria Galmarini-Kabala has shown that the social support system was seen as a foundation of the Soviet moral order and regarded as proof of the superiority of socialism; this sense of socialism's superiority "continued to be pivotal to self-identification of the Soviet state and therefore needed to be sustained at all costs in the eyes of both internal and external audiences."⁶⁸⁴ The UN was an essential site for the Soviet Union to develop and sustain that vision of the Soviet moral superiority (domestically and internationally) and as a site of actual influence on international norms. As historian Jennifer Ann Amos showed, since the very early years of the UN and the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, "the Soviet

⁶⁸³ To name just recent scholarship:

Katarina Serulus, "'Well-Designed Relations': Cold War Design Exchanges between Brussels and Moscow in the Early 1970s," *DESIGN AND CULTURE* 9, no. 2 (January 1, 2017): 147–65, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17547075.2017.1326231>; Sergei Zhuk, "Soviet Americanists, Academic Exchanges, the KGB and the Promotion of Video Media from Capitalist America during the Cold War," *MONDO CONTEMPORANEO*, June 24, 2021, 361–80, <https://doi.org/10.3280/mon2020-002018>.
Bradford Martin, "Musical Cultural Exchanges in the Age of Detente: Cultural Fixation, Trust, and the Permeability of Culture," *Journal of Contemporary History* 51, no. 2 (April 2016): 364–84, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022009414566292>; Simo Mikkonen, *Entangled East and West*. [Electronic Resource] : *Cultural Diplomacy and Artistic Interaction during the Cold War*, 1st edition., Rethinking the Cold War: 4 (De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2018); Thomas Ellis, "Curating the Space Race, Celebrating Cooperation: Exhibiting Space Technology during 1970s Détente," *European Journal of American Culture* 39, no. 3 (September 2020): 275–95, https://doi.org/10.1386/ejac_00031_1.

⁶⁸⁴ Galmarini-Kabala, *The Right to Be Helped*, 218.

diplomats were the most vocal advocates of women's equality and racial equality.”⁶⁸⁵ The activities of Soviet representatives had a substantial impact on the global feminist movement. For example, historian Francisca de Haan has shown that it was the Soviet representative in the UN-CSW, Tatiana Nikolaeva (discussed in the previous chapter), who in 1972 proposed to start preparing the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).⁶⁸⁶ The role of the Soviet representatives in developing the document was celebrated on the pages of Soviet media.⁶⁸⁷ It was crucial for the Soviet Union to compete for the pioneering role in shaping women's rights at the UN during the 1970s.⁶⁸⁸ According to historian Celia Donert, at a preparatory meeting for the 1975 WIDF-convened World Congress of Women in East Berlin, Vitality Shaposhnikov, the head of the International Department of the CPSU Central Committee, “emphasized that the UN had adopted the International Women's Year themes of equality, development, and peace ‘on our initiative and not on the initiative of our opponents.’”⁶⁸⁹

International Women's Year (IWY) undoubtedly marked a consolidation of transnational feminist organizing,⁶⁹⁰ which nevertheless derived from numerous political conflicts over the definition of women's rights and feminist agenda from various standpoints.⁶⁹¹

⁶⁸⁵ Amos, “Soviet diplomacy and politics on human rights, 1945–1977,” 340.

⁶⁸⁶ de Haan, “The Global Left-Feminist 1960s,” 236.

⁶⁸⁷ *Pravda*, 1980, #212 (July, 30): 1; *Soviet Woman*, 1985, #9: 3

⁶⁸⁸ Celia Donert, “Chapter 5. Whose Utopia? Gender, Ideology, and Human Rights at the 1975 World Congress of Women in East Berlin,” in *The Breakthrough: Human Rights in the 1970s*, ed. Jan Eckel and Samuel Moyn (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 69, <https://doi.org/10.9783/9780812208719.68>.

⁶⁸⁹ Donert, 75.

⁶⁹⁰ Jocelyn Olcott, *International Women's Year: The Greatest Consciousness-Raising Event in History* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017).

⁶⁹¹ Jean H. Quataert and Benita Roth, “Guest Editorial Note: Human Rights, Global Conferences, and the Making of Postwar Transnational Feminisms,” *Journal of Women's History* 24, no. 4 (2012): 11–23; Kristen Ghodsee, “Rethinking State Socialist Mass Women's Organizations: The Committee of the Bulgarian Women's Movement and the United Nations Decade for Women, 1975–1985,” *Journal of Women's History* 24, no. 4 (December 17, 2012): 49–73, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jowh.2012.0044>; Olcott, *International Women's Year*; Aoife O'Donoghue and Adam Rowe, “Feminism, Global Inequality, and the 1975 Mexico City Conference,” in *Women and the UN*, ed. Dan Plesch and Rebecca Adami, 1st ed., vol. 1 (UK: Routledge, 2022), 88–103, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003036708-6>; Natalia Jarska, “Women's Activism and State Policies during International Women's Year and the United Nations Decade for Women: A Comparative Perspective,” *Women's History Review* 34, no. 1 (2025): 1–7, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09612025.2023.2277483>.

The editors of the 2012 special issue of the *Journal of Women's History* that focused on the UN World Conferences on Women, historians Jean H. Quataert and Benita Roth, underscored the importance of the national contexts for feminist organizing. In their words, “the ‘national’ stand[s] in the way of feminist desires for organizing, even while it is clear that the ‘national’ is the main way in which the UN proceeded in making international space in its conferences.”⁶⁹² Yet, historian Natalia Jarska wrote in the editorial Introduction to a recent Forum of the *Women's History Review*, despite recognition of “the relevance of national contexts, scholars have paid less attention to IWY and the UN Decade in particular countries.”⁶⁹³

To date, only a few publications address the impact of IWY in socialist states, although the latter took pride in their promotion of women's rights globally.⁶⁹⁴ Feminist scholar Maria Raluca Popa already in 2009 explored the meaning of IWY in Romania and Hungary, whose representatives had actively shaped the international agenda. Popa argued that in the domestic context, IWY “did not change existing institutions or policies; thus, it did not perform a direct transformative function in either Hungary or Romania.”⁶⁹⁵ However, she found that in Hungary, it “may have enhanced the implementation of existing policy” to improve the economic and

⁶⁹² Quataert and Roth, “Guest Editorial Note,” 21–22.

⁶⁹³ Jarska, “Women's Activism and State Policies during International Women's Year and the United Nations Decade for Women,” 2.

⁶⁹⁴ Not much is written about other countries as well, see: Erin M Kempker, ‘Battling “Big Sister” Government: Hoosier Women and the Politics of International Women's Year’, *Journal of Women's History* 24, no. 2 (2012): 144–70; Elena Díaz Silva, ‘El Año Internacional de la Mujer en España: 1975’, *Cuadernos de Historia Contemporánea* 31 (8 October 2009): 319–39; Verónica Giordano, ‘The Celebration of the International Women's Year in Argentina (1975): Actions and Conflicts’, *Estudios Feministas* 20, no. 1 (2012): 75–94, <https://doi.org/10.1590/S0104-026X2012000100005>; Jadwiga E. Pieper Mooney, ‘Forging Feminisms under Dictatorship: Women's International Ties and National Feminist Empowerment in Chile, 1973–1990’, *Women's History Review* 19, no. 4 (1 September 2010): 613–30, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09612025.2010.502406>; Dubel, Ireen. “1975–1985: A Catalyst for Global South-Oriented Advocacy by Dutch Feminists.” *Women's History Review* 0, no. 0 (2023): 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09612025.2023.2277488>; Strippoli, Giulia. “Arriving from the Revolution: International Women's Year in the Portuguese ‘Hot Summer.’” *Women's History Review* 0, no. 0 (2023): 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09612025.2023.2277485>.

⁶⁹⁵ Popa, “Translating Equality between Women and Men across Cold War Divides: Women Activists from Hungary and Romania and the Creation of International Women's Year,” 70.

social situation of women, a policy that had been adopted in 1970.⁶⁹⁶ IWY also was a moment of “feminist awareness” for some women activists from Hungary and Romania.⁶⁹⁷

Historian Natalia Jarska, in a 2023 article about IWY in Poland and Spain, seconded Popa’s evaluation of IWY under state socialism; in her words, “IWY was not ‘transformative’ for the Polish women’s movement.”⁶⁹⁸ Jarska nonetheless mentioned a wide range of policies that the official Polish women’s organization managed to promote, taking advantage of IWY. These included: “improving professional qualifications and working conditions, combating women’s unemployment, increasing the availability of childcare facilities and producing more household appliances,” the retirement age for women was lowered to 55 years, the issue of inequality within families was addressed, as well as the lack of women in managerial positions despite their high qualifications.⁶⁹⁹ As all these initiatives were a continuation of the earlier policies. However, such issues as access to contraception and sexuality more broadly were not even raised. Jarska concluded that “IWY did not affect either the structure or the discourse of the women’s movement in Poland.”⁷⁰⁰

This chapter contributes to this field of research by examining how the SWC operated domestically in the context of IWY. To be able to answer that bigger question, I will explore the following sub questions: (5.1.) How did the SWC position itself, publicly in Soviet media, and “behind closed doors,” vis-à-vis the growing feminist movement in the West? (5.2.) What role did the SWC play in the implementation of IWY? (5.3.) What were the outcomes of IWY for women in the USSR? (5.4) What were the outcomes of IWY for the SWC? (5.5.) What was SWC’s relationship with the feminist dissident movement, which emerged in Leningrad in 1979? The primary sources for this chapter consist of Soviet publications (magazines,

⁶⁹⁶ Popa, 71.

⁶⁹⁷ Popa, 72–73.

⁶⁹⁸ Jarska, “International Women’s Year and Women’s Activism,” 54.

⁶⁹⁹ Natalia Jarska, “International Women’s Year and Women’s Activism,” 51.

⁷⁰⁰ Jarska, 51.

newspapers, books, brochures, movies) and archival documents kept in GARF from the SWC and the Supreme Soviet funds.

5.1. Soviet and Western women's movement

This section explores how the SWC acted in the context of the growing feminist movement and women's NGOs in the West, which "diverted attention away from the geopolitical issues that Eastern Bloc women's organisations were championing,"⁷⁰¹ as historian Lea Boergerding has put it. I will first look at the representations of IWY events in the Soviet media, representations which the SWC influenced; then I will explore the SWC's documents and discussions related to the Western feminist movement.

The SWC considerably influenced the press coverage of IWY in the USSR. In June 1973, it organized a meeting of the editors of 38 socialist women's magazines from different countries in Moscow, at which they discussed strategies of cooperation during IWY, among other questions.⁷⁰² The SWC invited representatives of Soviet media to their Presidium meeting in February 1974 dedicated to IWY planning,⁷⁰³ and repeatedly addressed the question of the press coverage at the Commission for IWY in the USSR, as I will show later. The Editors-in-chief of all key Soviet women's magazines were SWC members. For these reasons I suggest analyzing the media representations of IWY as part of the SWC dealings with this topic.

In their reporting, the Soviet women's magazines and the general Soviet media focused on the conflicts at the IWY's international events, such as the UN World Conference on Women held in Mexico City on 19 June-2 July 1975. The main Soviet women's magazine *Rabotnitsa*, in its report on that UN World Conference wrote that while some countries tried to "limit the

⁷⁰¹ Boergerding, "Women's Internationalism Behind the Berlin Wall: The East German Women's League, East-South Solidarity, and Gendered Globalization during the Cold War, 1947-1989," 223.

⁷⁰² Lea Börgerding, "Mobilizing: State Socialist Media and the 'Women of the World,'" *The American Historical Review* 129, no. 2 (June 1, 2024): 618, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ahr/rhae176>.

⁷⁰³ GARF, P7928, Op.3, D. 3380, l. 3.

discussion to purely female problems,” others sought to “reveal the social causes of inequality” and “find effective measures to eliminate it.”⁷⁰⁴ *Rabotnitsa* portrayed the adoption of the main conference documents, the World Plan of Action and the Declaration of Mexico, as successful outcomes of the event because they were aligned with the Soviet perspective, and stressed that the USA and Israel had voted against the documents. The main Soviet newspaper, *Pravda*, reported about the Mexico conference in a similar way. It highlighted the active role of the Soviet delegation in shaping the conference agenda while presenting the United States and “other Western capitalist countries” as the primary opponents of the democratic women’s movement: “The United States and other Western capitalist countries tried to prevent the participants from the discussion of current political and social problems, and narrow the agenda to secondary questions of ‘feminism’;”⁷⁰⁵ “The United States demonstrated to the whole world their unwillingness to consider the interests and goals of the women’s [democratic] movement. The official US delegation tried to redirect discussion from the main questions; they made an absurd objection against the ‘politicization’ of the forum [the Parallel NGO *Forum*, called the International Women’s Year *Tribune*, which attracted approximately 4,000 participants and was held at the same time as the World Conference of the International Women’s Year.—A.T.].”⁷⁰⁶ The US delegation opposed discussing women’s rights as connected to imperialism, racism, and colonialism, as recent scholarship on the UN Conferences during the UN Decade for Women showed.⁷⁰⁷ Historian Jocelyn Olcott wrote that “from the US State Department’s perspective, ‘politicization’ signaled a challenge to US interests beyond the standard ‘noise

⁷⁰⁴ Maximenko L. ‘Uspekh sil mira i progressa’, *Rabotnitsa*, (8/1975): 2-3.

⁷⁰⁵ *Pravda*, 1975, #185 (July, 4): 5

⁷⁰⁶ *Pravda*, 1975, #209 (July, 25):5

⁷⁰⁷ Jocelyn Olcott, “Introduction,” in *International Women’s Year: The Greatest Consciousness-Raising Event in History* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017), 1–16; Kristen Ghodsee, “Revisiting the United Nations Decade for Women: Brief Reflections on Feminism, Capitalism and Cold War Politics in the Early Years of the International Women’s Movement,” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 33 (January 1, 2010): 3–12, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2009.11.008>.

level’ of politics found in all international gatherings. Politics, many agreed, should be left at the conference hall door.”⁷⁰⁸

Conflict and confrontation were the main features of the reporting as well in the Western media. Despite debate being crucial in all thematic global conferences, as Aoife O’Donoghue and Adam Rowe argued, “conflict amongst women is presented as fundamental and distinctive to women’s events.”⁷⁰⁹ Such a representation had a different function on both sides. While in the Western context, it was a way of discrediting the events, in the Soviet media, it served to show the Soviet leading role in the international democratic women’s movement,⁷¹⁰ which was presented as leaning towards a socialist perspective on women’s emancipation. The *Pravda* article about the UN World Conference on Women stated: “From the report of the conference, the ‘Declaration,’ as well as the Plan for Action, it is evident that all the questions, connected with woman’s social status, her role and participation in political, social and economic life, were discussed in the spirit of socialism.”⁷¹¹ *Rabotnitsa* reported similarly that “the holding of the International Women’s Year is of great importance for the struggle of women in the non-socialist zone for their rights. They are inspired by the world-historical achievements of the socialist countries in the solution of the woman question.”⁷¹² Therefore, unlike Western participants of those events, who hoped for a *global* sisterhood,⁷¹³ the Soviet media cherished the tensions between participants from socialist and capitalist countries⁷¹⁴ and framed them in a way that emphasized the leading role of socialism in the advancement of women’s rights while strengthening the image of a Western ‘Other’ in the Soviet discourse around women’s

⁷⁰⁸ Olcott, “Introduction,” 11.

⁷⁰⁹ O’Donoghue and Rowe, “Feminism, Global Inequality, and the 1975 Mexico City Conference,” 88; Jocelyn Olcott, “Empires of Information: Media Strategies for the 1975 International Women’s Year,” *Journal of Women’s History* 24, no. 4 (2012): 24–48, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jowh.2012.0041>.

⁷¹⁰ Lea Boergerding and Aleksandra Talaver, “Writing the Global Women’s Movement” (The History of Medialization and Empowerment: The Intersection of Women’s Rights Activism and the Media, London, January 20, 2022).

⁷¹¹ *Pravda*, 1975, #185 (July, 4):5

⁷¹² A. Shchedrova, “Vmeste so Stranoï [Together with the Country],” *Rabotnitsa*, 1975, 2-3:2.

⁷¹³ Olcott, “Introduction.”

⁷¹⁴ Boergerding and Talaver, “Writing the Global Women’s Movement.”

rights. The coverage of the UN World Conference in the Soviet media worked to consolidate the Soviet identity as morally superior, built upon this opposition.

How did these images correspond with the discussions behind “closed doors”? The SWC documents give various examples of their rivalry with the “Westerners.” For example, the SWC paid close attention to the plans and events related to IWY in the US and simultaneously condemned the US-type women’s movement as “depoliticizing.” The SWC collected available information about IWY events in the US, and one such collection of brochures from the United States had a handwritten remark on the margins: “read attentively and use for the preparation of IWY.”⁷¹⁵ Whether and how these materials were used, we cannot know, but other documents in the SWC archive suggest that the SWC’s goal was not inspiration but rather confrontation. On February 28, 1975, SWC head Valentina Tereshkova wrote to the Soviet representative in the UN, Yakov Malik, about the upcoming *NGO Forum*, to be held in conjunction with the 1975 UN World Conference on Women. She extensively used militarized vocabulary, for example, “neutralization of the Forum of the non-state organizations,” which she described as a “subversive activity” of the westerners (*zapadniki*) and which, in her words, required “development of the tactic.”⁷¹⁶ The SWC discussed “capitalist countries”, their governments and women’s organizations, as serving to their interests, as the enemies who tried to distract attention from “actual problems” and reduce discussions to “formal equality.”⁷¹⁷ According to the SWC’s annual report about 1975 stated that during the Mexico City conference, the Western countries tried “to depoliticize the conference and discuss the problems of women’s status from

⁷¹⁵ “Perepiska so Spetsializirovannymi Organizatsiiami OON, Natsional’nymi Zhenskimi Organizatsiiami Po Podgotovke k MGZh i Vsemirnomu Kongressu Zhenshchin v 1975g.[Correspondence with UN Specialized Organizations, National Women’s Organizations on Preparations for IWY and the World Congress of Women in 1975.],” January 7 – December 23, 1975, P7928, Op. 3, D.3402, GARF, l.208

⁷¹⁶ Perepiska s OON i ee spetsializirovannymi organizatsiiami o provedenii MGZh v SSSR, podgotovke VKZh. t.1 [Correspondence with the UN and its specialized organizations about the conduct of IWY in the USSR, the preparation of the IWY v.1], January 30 – October 1, 1975, GARF, P7928, Op.3, D. 3715, l. 19

⁷¹⁷ GARF, P7928, Op.3, D. 3715, l. 18

the feminist position.”⁷¹⁸

The SWC also accused some western women’s organizations from of advocating the interests of the ruling class. For example, Raisa Smirnova, the Editor-in-chief of the Russian-language version of *Women of the Whole World*, at the February 1974 SWC Plenum spoke about “Women’s Councils” in Western countries that are “funded by their governments, and whose leaders promote the politics of their class.”⁷¹⁹ Tereshkova, in her speech during the 1975 SWC Plenum summed up the SWC’s vision of IWY in the international arena:

International Women's Year opens up vast opportunities for the international democratic women's movement to consolidate its ranks, to strengthen its influence, to involve the broad masses of women in the common anti-imperialist struggle of the peoples. At the same time, we must clearly realize that IWY undoubtedly intensifies the ideological struggle over the woman question.

We must remember that there are specific forces that are trying to distract the masses of women from the struggle for the solution of acute social problems and use International Women's Year to spread their ideology. Our adversaries realize that the experience of socialist countries in solving the woman question is of interest to women in other countries and has great appeal. They know we have something to tell the world in all three International Women’s Year areas: equality, development, and peace. The mainstream media of the developed capitalist countries have already begun

⁷¹⁸ Protokol №№ 1-4 zasedaniĭ Prezidiuma KSZh [Minutes Nos. 1-4 of meetings of the Presidium of the SWC], January 26 – December 16, 1976, GARF, P7928, Op.3, D. 3950, l. 12

⁷¹⁹ “Stenogramma Plenuma Komiteta Sovetskikh Zhenshchin. 14-15 Fevralia. Moskva [Transcript of the Plenum of the Soviet Women’s Committee. February 14-15. Moscow],” February 14, 1974, P7928, Op. 3, D.3379, GARF, l. 153.

to actively attack the experience of socialist countries, falsifying the actual situation of women in socialist countries and denying their achievements.⁷²⁰

However, this is only one part of the story—underneath this confrontation, we can also see the building of a fragile cooperation and timid solidarities between women’s movements across the geopolitical divide, not only between the Second and Third World. In their report about IWY submitted to the Soviet IWY Commission on September 5, 1975, the SWC put “cooperation with women’s organizations from capitalist and developing countries in the struggle for peace and national independence” as the last point of their goals, which, they stated, was set “by the documents of the XXIV CPSU Congress (1971).”⁷²¹ During the meeting of the IWY Commission two weeks later, on September 17, 1975, Vitality Shaposhnikov, the International Department of the CPSU Central Committee, once again confirmed the need to expand connections with women’s organizations in the capitalist and developing countries, in order to “influence a global public opinion.”⁷²² Both the reference to the 24th CPSU Congress in the SWC report and Shaposhnikov’s directive allow seeing the SWC’s position on this topic as just fulfilling the Party’s expectations. However, it was the SWC itself that had earlier

⁷²⁰ “Stenogramma Plenuma KSZH [Transcript of the SWC Plenum],” February 25, 1975, P7928, Op. 3, D.3653, GARF, l. 197. Международный год женщины открывает широкие возможности перед международным демократическим женским движением для консолидации своих рядов, для усиления своего влияния, для вовлечения широких женских масс в общую антиимпериалистическую борьбу народов. Вместе с тем мы должны ясно понимать, что Международный год женщины несомненной обостряет идеологическую борьбу вокруг женского вопроса.

Нельзя забывать, что есть определенные силы, которые пытаются отвлечь женские массы от борьбы за решение острых социальных проблем и использовать Международный год женщины для распространения своей идеологии. Наши противники понимают, что опыт социалистических стран в решении женского вопроса вызывает интерес у женщин других стран и имеет огромную притягательную силу. Они знают, что нам есть что рассказать миру по всем трем направлениям Международного года женщины: и по вопросам равноправия, и по вопросам развития, и по вопросам мира. Основные средства массовой информации развитых капиталистических стран уже начали активно выступать с нападениями на опыт социалистических стран, фальсифицируя истинное положение женщин в социалистических странах и отрицая их достижения.

⁷²¹ О проведении Международного года женщины в СССР [On International Women’s Year in the USSR], November 1974 – January 1976, P5446, Op. 134, D. 36, GARF, l. 209.

⁷²² О проведении Международного года женщины в СССР [On International Women’s Year in the USSR], November 1974 – January 1976, P5446, Op. 134, D. 37, GARF, l. 187.

worked to convince the CC of the importance of cooperation with women's organizations beyond the socialist bloc as a way to influence public opinion in capitalist countries, as SWC reports to the CC CPSU show, and examples below will elaborate on.

In the summer of 1973, a delegation from the SWC participated in the preparatory conference of the US National Organization for Women (held in Cambridge, Massachusetts, from June 1 to 4, 1973). The National Organization for Women (NOW) was the most significant US feminist organization. The Soviet delegates submitted a comprehensive report about their trip to the Central Committee. This report provides insights into their views on the various trends in the feminist movement in the USA:

The first, moderate, and most numerous of them [feminists—A.T.] [are] advocates for women's equality within the existing capitalist system, believing that the problem can be solved through legislative reforms.

The second trend is represented by feminists who see the main reason for women's inequality in the "masculine" nature of the modern social system, declaring all men to be enemies of women, demanding, first of all, the sexual liberation of women (hence the justification and even propaganda of lesbianism).

The third trend, still small in number but clearly gaining more and more influence every year, is characterized by the understanding that women's inequality is due to the fundamental ills of capitalist society and can be eliminated only through radical changes in existing socio-economic and political institutions.⁷²³

⁷²³ "Informacii, Pis'ma, Spravki Otdela, Komiteta Sovetskikh Zhenshchin, Posol'stv SSSR Po Voprosam Razvitiya Mezhdunarodnogo Zhenskogo Dvizheniya [Information, Letters, References from the Department, the

The report's conclusion aimed to convince the CC of the importance of cooperation with the Western feminist movement despite the latter's limitations:

The resurgence of feminism testifies not only to women's dissatisfaction with their position in society but also to their dissatisfaction with traditional women's organizations, which are characterized by a conciliatory attitude toward existing capitalist legal orders. [...] Today's feminist movement is class bounded; it has not resonated with the broad masses of working people. [...] Nevertheless, it seems to us that this movement is worthy of attention. Contact with the feminist movement opens up the possibility of working with the female population of capitalist countries and, most importantly, with female youth, who are drawn to the slogans of feminism.

The feminist movement can help awaken women's political consciousness, which is why **the cooperation of women's organizations in socialist camp countries with this movement seems appropriate.** [bold added—A.T.]⁷²⁴

As the excerpts show, although the SWC perceived Western women's activists and organizations as being aligned with the interests of the Western ruling class, the Committee also sought to foster cooperation with those groups and women from capitalist countries, whom they believed had the potential to resist their state elites.

This cooperation took the form of joint events, delegation exchanges, and the promotion of feminist discourse and agenda in media and at international gatherings. For example, in

Soviet Women's Committee and USSR Embassies on the Development of the International Women's Movement],” December 1973, F.5, Op.66, D.963, RGANI, l. 66-67.

⁷²⁴ RGANI, F.5, Op.66, D. 963, l. 69-70.

September 1975, *Rabotnitsa* published a report about the American women's movement, in which the author expressed support to young American women who were fighting against economic inequality, unemployment, racism, and sexism. Interestingly, the *Rabotnitsa* reporter introduced and explained the term "sexism": "That is how in the US they call discrimination against women."⁷²⁵ Yet, this solidarity from the Soviet part had a top-down overtone, from the Soviet "elder" and more emancipated sisters to their young American ones. The fact that the story was published in the youth section of the magazine (*Girlfriend/Podruzhka*) highlights this. In addition, the condition for solidarity was the exemption of the Soviet Union from the place where the discussed problems persisted. For example, historian Ella Rossman showed that in 1975, US feminist Karin DeCrow was censored in her public speech in the USSR when she attempted to say that sexism was a problem "in every place in the world". The use of "every" caused the problem.⁷²⁶

An example of solidarity with Western women's struggle was the fight against the sexualization of women in the media—an issue actively platformed by the Soviet bloc both in their media and at international events. The topic was especially convenient for Soviet women since sexualization of women was absent in the Soviet media. Thus, the document titled "Some thoughts regarding the agenda of the interregional UN seminar on "Women, media and art" (Sydney, November 26th – December 10th, 1975)" stated: "The media should fight against humiliating depictions of woman as a sex symbol, which are imposed by bourgeois propaganda."⁷²⁷ The same text simultaneously opposed the representation of women as sex symbols to the image of the Soviet woman, whom Soviet media presented as:

⁷²⁵ S. Vishnevskaya, "Kraski Beloï Steny [The Colors of a White Wall]," *Rabotnitsa*, 9, 1975, 17-19: 18.

⁷²⁶ Ella Rossman, "How to Be a Soviet Girl: Female Adolescence in the USSR after the Second World War (1946–1991)" (UCL SSEES, expected 2025).

⁷²⁷ GARF, P7928, Op.3, D. 3715, l. 284.

actively participating in all spheres of society—industrial, socio-political, family; such a woman is a harmoniously developed person with high spiritual demands, successfully combining the features of a citizen, worker, and mother, actively participating in the construction of a new communist society and the education of the younger generation.⁷²⁸

The document emphasized the propaganda tasks of the Soviet media in women's emancipation by promoting images of the new Soviet woman, educating and mobilizing women in the USSR to fight society's problems.⁷²⁹ Soviet women's magazines also discussed media representations of women. *Rabotnitsa* published an interview with Freda Brown, president of the Women's International Democratic Federation and of the preparatory committee for the WIDF's World Congress of Women in Berlin (1975), in which she spoke about the plan for a special panel at the Berlin Congress on women's representations in media and their effects on women's place in society; she emphasized that in capitalist countries, women were represented as "objects for sex" (*predmet seksa*).⁷³⁰ Sexualization of women in Western media became a fruitful ground for establishment of connection with Western feminist movement.

This subchapter has shown that the SWC and Soviet media framed IWY events, such as the 1975 UN World Conference on Women, as a battleground between socialist and capitalist ideologies, emphasizing the USSR's leadership in advancing women's rights while portraying Western countries as opponents of global progress. Internally, the SWC adopted a confrontational stance, using militarized rhetoric to counter perceived Western attempts to depoliticize women's issues. However, the SWC also pursued selective support of the Western feminist movements, particularly those critical of capitalism, to influence global public opinion and promote Soviet achievements in women's emancipation.

⁷²⁸ GARF, P7928, Op.3, D. 3715, l. 280.

⁷²⁹ GARF, P7928, Op.3, D. 3715, l. 282.

⁷³⁰ Freda Brown, "Pered Kongressom [Before the Congress]," *Rabotnitsa*, 9, 1975, 8.

5.2. The Soviet Commission for IWY: From international propaganda to domestic problems

This section will explore what role the SWC played in the implementation of IWY in the Soviet Union. The SWC started discussing how IWY should be organized in the Soviet Union during a SWC Presidium meeting on February 7, 1974. Mariia Ovsiannikova, the Editor-in-chief of *Sovetskaia Zhenshchina/Soviet Woman*, said that the preparation for IWY should begin with the demonstrating of the advantages of socialism,⁷³¹ the SWC Presidium member Olga Khvalebnova, proposed to develop a concrete plan of preparation for IWY.⁷³² Comrade Radina, a TASS representative, said that they were ready to cover the preparation for IWY.⁷³³ Finally, the SWC Deputy head, Ksenia Proskurnikova said:

that ideological work is currently gaining great importance, therefore preparations for International Women's Year should be used to promote the benefits of socialism; for this purpose, the presidium of the SWC, its public commissions, the magazines *Sovetskaia Zhenshchina*, *Rabotnitsa*, *Krestianka* and *Women of the Whole World* / Russian edition / should work on the topics that should be covered and think about the activists and authors whom they could attract; [she also] **made a proposal to raise the issue of creating a commission of party, state, trade union and public figures who would develop a detailed plan for preparing for International Women's Year in the USSR and take part in its implementation** [bold added—A.T.].⁷³⁴

⁷³¹ GARF, P7928, Op.3, D. 3380, l. 1.

⁷³² GARF, P7928, Op.3, D. 3380, l. 2.

⁷³³ GARF, P7928, Op.3, D. 3380, l. 3.

⁷³⁴ GARF, P7928, Op.3, D. 3380, l. 3.

In May 1974, a WIDF meeting in Warsaw took place, which recommended “to national organizations that they should ‘undertake an analysis of the *de jure* and *de facto* rights that exist for women in their respective countries’,”⁷³⁵ as feminist researcher Maria Raluca Popa showed. Following this meeting, the National Preparatory Committees for IWY were established in Hungary and Romania.⁷³⁶

On November 22, 1974, the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR established the Soviet IWY Commission, chaired by the First Deputy Chairman of the Council of Ministers, Kirill Mazurov. Boris Ponomarev, a CC Secretary, and Valentina Tereshkova, the SWC head, were appointed as deputy chairs.⁷³⁷ They were entrusted with choosing the Commission’s members. The Commission included 72 members who occupied high governmental or party positions. More than half of its members were women, and at least seventeen of its female members were connected through their active involvement in the Soviet Women’s Committee: Irina Blokhina, Aleksandra Biryukova, Valentina Vavilina, Raisa Dementieva, Zinaida Fedorova, Valentina Fedotova, I. Kobchikova, Zoya Kruglova, Elena Novikova, Zoya Novozhilova, Nina Popova, A. Lavrent’eva, Lidya Lykova, Kseniya Proskurnikova, Zoya Pukhova, Valentina Tereshkova and Tamara Yanushkovskaya. The Commission had a Secretariat, which was responsible for defining the working plan of the Commission and agenda for its meetings, and the Working Group, which was responsible for gathering and summarizing the ideas of different governmental bodies about IWY. Two out of the four members of the Secretariat were SWC members: Aleksandra Biryukova, an AUCCTU Secretary, and Zinaida Fedorova, a SWC Executive Secretary.⁷³⁸ The Working Group of the IWY Commission included 14 members, of which 5 were SWC members: besides Biryukova

⁷³⁵ Popa, “Translating Equality between Women and Men across Cold War Divides: Women Activists from Hungary and Romania and the Creation of International Women’s Year,” 65.

⁷³⁶ Popa, 65.

⁷³⁷ O provedenii Mezhdunarodnogo goda zhenshchiny v SSSR [On International Women’s Year in the USSR], November 1974 – January 1976, GARF, P5446, Op. 134, D. 33, l. 1.

⁷³⁸ GARF, P5446, Op. 134, D. 33, ll. 3-7.

and Fedorova, Kseniya Proskurnikova, the Deputy head of the SWC, Lidya Lykova, the vice-chair of the Council of Ministers of RSFSR, and Raisa Dementieva, a Secretary of the Moscow City Committee of the CPSU.⁷³⁹ Thus, whether the IWY Commission was established as a result of SWC lobbying or not, something that we have no definitive proof of either way, the organization had a substantial presence in it. Moreover, it is crucial that the SWC members constituted half of the Secretariat members, and that Biryukova simultaneously held the post of executive secretary and had a position in the Working Group—allowing her to shape the agenda of the IWY Commission meetings by using her positions and connections. And she did.

The first meeting of the SU IWY Commission took place on December 24, 1974. Commission head Kirill Mazurov emphasized at this meeting that questions regarding women's living and working conditions should not dominate their work. He expressed concern that the IWY Commission might be primarily focused on solving social problems, stating:

I just want to prevent our Commission from one thing. Of course, we assume that some social issues related to the status of women in our country and children can and should be resolved, especially since we are now preparing a new Five-Year Plan, but it is crucial that these issues do not prevail in the internal aspect of our work, because [in that case] we would become a body that solves social problems. We cannot allow this.

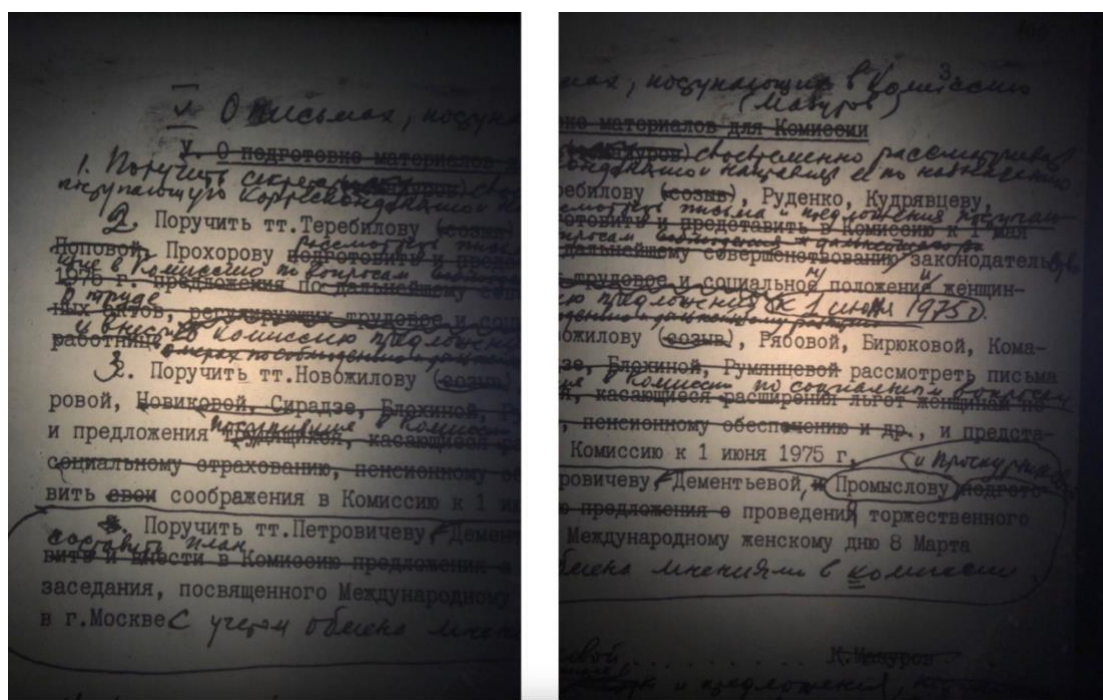
We have special organizations for this.⁷⁴⁰

The second meeting of the IWY Commission took place on January 27, 1975. The extensive corrections in handwriting on the meeting resolution show that it took a turn than had

⁷³⁹ GARF, P5446, Op. 134, D. 33, l. 8.

⁷⁴⁰ GARF, P5446, Op. 134, D. 33, l.96; Я только хочу уберечь нашу Комиссию от одной вещи. Конечно, мы предполагаем, что какие-то социальные вопросы, связанные с положением женщин в нашей стране и детей, могут и должны решаться, тем более, что мы сейчас готовим новый пятилетний план, но надо, чтобы эти вопросы не превалировали во внутреннем аспекте нашей работы, потому что мы превратимся в орган, который разрабатывает социальные проблемы. Этого мы не можем допустить.

been expected.⁷⁴¹ The topic that caused heated debate was about place of Soviet domestic problems in the work of the Commission—the agenda point “On preparation of materials for the Commission” was renamed into the more precise “About letters received by the Commission” and substantially elaborated (see Illustration 12). Usually, in the Supreme Soviet, meeting decisions were prepared beforehand by its Presidium/Secretariat and later corrected if the discussion took an unexpected turn. Thus, it is clear that the second meeting of the IWY Commission made changes in the Commission’s initial and expected focus. The focal point of the debate centered on the Commission’s role in addressing domestic issues versus the propagation of socialist achievements.



⁷⁴¹ GARF, P5446, Op. 134, D. 34, l.100

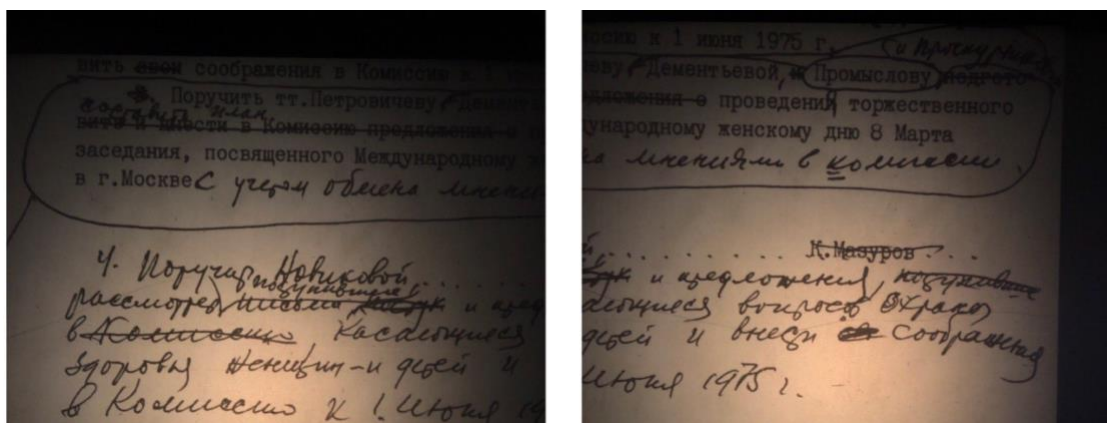


Illustration 12 Soviet IWY Commission resolution. Source: GARF, P5446, Op. 134, D. 34, l.100.

Already, the Plan of events dedicated to IWY that Nikolay Petrovichev, the First Deputy Head of the Organizational and Party Work Department of the CPSU Central Committee, announced at the second meeting, diverged from Mazurov's recommendation at the IWY Commission's first meeting. Thus, Petrovichev outlined three main directions of work, with the first focusing on women's working conditions, health protection, and the upbringing of the new generation. The second direction involved international events, and the third pertained to propaganda work. Petrovichev, however, explicitly noted the need to concentrate on activities already outlined in the state plan and to remain within the allocated resources:

However, comrades, it should be noted that in this case, it seems that we should mainly talk about the activities that have already been written down in the state plan and within the limits of the allocations already defined according to the plan. These allocations are not insignificant, and it is necessary to achieve their full utilization, which is sometimes lacking.⁷⁴²

This change in the agenda was likely due to Biryukova's effort as her speech signaled. After Petrovichev's short presentation, no questions were asked, and Aleksandra Biryukova

⁷⁴² GARF, P5446, Op. 134, D. 34, l.118.

next took the floor. Biryukova's presentation notably shifted the discussion towards actions aimed at improving the situation of women in the Soviet Union, diverting attention from international and propaganda work:

[We will] hear ministries, departments, institutions and organizations about the work they are doing to create proper working and living conditions for women, leisure facilities, assistance in childcare, because for this purpose we scheduled special sessions with ministries and departments where female labor dominates to learn about the development and implementation of technical means that ease working conditions. It is planned to consider issues and hear reports from a number of departments on the observance of labor legislation in relation to women, on the state of medical care, and a number of other issues.⁷⁴³

Although significant resource allocations existed, Biryukova highlighted the inadequacy of preschool care in the Soviet Union, implicitly challenging Petrovichev's stance on restricting their actions to within the existing allocations.⁷⁴⁴

Nina Popova took the floor straight after Biryukova and clearly stated that the plan Biryukova had presented they had developed together—via constant calls: “Comrades, we must very cordially thank our Secretariat and our preparatory Working Group, which have done a very great job. And it must be said frankly that we had calls to consult on the phone on certain issues.”⁷⁴⁵ Unlike Biryukova, Popova did address the importance of international and propaganda events, but she eventually returned to domestic politics and resource allocations. Popova proposed the formation of a group within the IWY Commission to examine

⁷⁴³ GARF, P5446, Op. 134, D. 34, l.120.

⁷⁴⁴ GARF, P5446, Op. 134, D. 34, l.121.

⁷⁴⁵ GARF, P5446, Op. 134, D. 34, l.121.

“internal”(Soviet) issues within the existing allocations and capabilities:

It is difficult for me to propose anything concrete at this point, but maybe we could have a group from our Commission that would, as Mr. Petrenko [probably reference to Pertovichev—A.T.] said, within the limits of our allocations and our capabilities, look at some of our internal issues. When on the second day of the establishment of the Soviet state, V.I. Lenin proposed drafts and laws on the equality of women, on special benefits, etc. It was a different time. This legislation has been improved over time. Now, it seems to me, this legislation should be improved further.⁷⁴⁶

The speakers after Popova referred more to her input than to anyone else's. For example, Viktorija Siradze, a secretary of the CC CP of Georgia, who supported Popova's suggestion, emphasizing the importance of legislative acts related to women's working and living conditions and social problem, which could have international resonance during IWY:

I would like to support N.V. Popova's proposal that it would be possible to adopt some legislative acts and consider those proposals that would have an international resonance and would relate to women's working and living conditions and some social problems. Some of these proposals seem interesting to me, and if possible, they could be solved, at least they could be considered during International Year of Women.⁷⁴⁷

Ksenia Proskurnikova later supported their point: “We think these laws [the family code, labor code, legislation about healthcare and education] are our best propaganda literature.”⁷⁴⁸ With

⁷⁴⁶ GARF, P5446, Op. 134, D. 34, ll.124-125.

⁷⁴⁷ GARF, P5446, Op. 134, D. 34, l.139.

⁷⁴⁸ GARF, P5446, Op. 134, D. 36, l. 121.

this reference to Soviet laws as a means of international propaganda, Proskurnikova cleverly invoked the Soviet ambition to influence women's rights in the international domain. At the same time, this framing allowed Soviet women to push for changes in domestic politics, which were not easy to achieve despite the declared Soviet commitment to women's emancipation.

In his concluding remarks at the January 27 meeting, Kirill Mazurov expressed gratitude to the Working Group for the plan and endorsed the proposal to expand the range of public and state organizations involved in holding planned events, referring to Popova. He specifically highlighted the importance of analyzing legislation concerning women's labor and social measures. Mazurov suggested instructing a group, potentially led by Mr. Terebilov, the Minister of Justice, to work with the Procurator's Office of the USSR and other administrative organizations to scrutinize legislation related to women. Additionally, he proposed to set up another group, consisting of Novozhilova, Biryukova, and Ryabova, to review citizens' letters and proposals concerning social issues related to women's life and labor in the country, and to submit their considerations to the IWY Commission. These were the points that were changed in handwriting in the initial plan (Illustration 12).⁷⁴⁹

The working group consisting of Novozhilova, Biryukova, and Ryabova reviewed the letters, and subsequently, prepared a special note from the IWY Commission to the Soviet of Ministers. It requested an increase of benefits for mothers (35 rubles per month during maternal leave up to one year; financial support for children from poor families up to 16 years instead of 8), a lowering of the retirement age for women-veterans, and an increase of payments for people with disabilities—overall, the Commission requested an additional 3,160 billion rubles based on the analysis of the citizens' letters.⁷⁵⁰

The correction of the second meeting's decision also showed changes in the Commission's focus areas, with a substantial shift towards domestic issues dominating the IWY

⁷⁴⁹ GARF, P5446, Op. 134, D. 34, ll. 157-158.

⁷⁵⁰ GARF, P5446, Op. 134, D. 36, ll. 10-23.

Commission's agenda. The IWY Commission became the pivotal body for accumulating information about women's lives in the Soviet Union and a battleground for additional resources on the eve of the 10th Five-Year Plan (1976-1980) to address women's needs.

The agenda for the third Commission meeting on April 7, 1975, opened with domestic issues: 1. Improving women's working conditions (based on reports of different ministries); 2. Support for children with disabilities and protection of newborns and mothers; 3. Propaganda of the Soviet achievements; 4. Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON) and IWY (agenda point was not recorded in transcript).

The focus on improving women's working conditions, the first point on the agenda, mirrored Biryukova's emphasis during the previous meeting, showcasing the result of her efforts and design despite her absence among speakers on the first agenda point. Mazurov summarized the speeches on the first agenda point by outlining two primary directions for future work: transferring women from workplaces with hazardous and strenuous conditions and enhancing the ergonomics of shop floor equipment in alignment with women's anatomy.⁷⁵¹ These two points, together with different recommendations for the improvement of women's working conditions, were adopted as one of the IWY Commission Third Meeting resolutions.⁷⁵² Thus, despite Mazurov's caution at the first meeting against addressing all the problems of women in the USSR, the resolution of the meeting included very detailed recommendations for the improvement of women's working conditions, whereas the rest of the resolutions followed the same level of details, as the following excerpt shows:

Recommend that the Ministry of Light Industry of the USSR and the Ministry of Food Industry of the USSR determine the needs of enterprises for lifting and transport, ventilation equipment, air conditioners,

⁷⁵¹ GARF, P5446, Op. 134, D. 35, l. 232.

⁷⁵² GARF, P5446, Op. 134, D. 35, ll. 177-179.

installation and lighting fixtures, fluorescent lamps, instrumentation and make appropriate proposals in the prescribed manner to the Council of Ministers of the USSR.⁷⁵³

At the end of his speech, Mazurov mentioned the international competition as a motivation for improvement: “We should be exemplary in terms of people working in much better conditions than in the West.”⁷⁵⁴ This mentioning of the competition with the West one more time showed the importance of IWY for the Soviet women’s domestic struggle and the SWC’s success in framing domestic issues as the material for the propaganda of Soviet achievements abroad. Given the political significance of the Cold War rivalry, it became essential that in 1975 it revolved around women’s rights, which created space for SWC members’ for advancing the topic on the highest political level in the USSR.

Elena Novikova, the USSR Vice-Minister of Healthcare and a prominent SWC member delivered the first input on the second agenda point—support for children with disabilities and the protection of newborns and mothers. Novikova was not just the Vice-Minister of Healthcare but also a prominent and active SWC member, as detailed in her short autobiographical note: “I was a member of the SWC, knew V.N. Tereshkova well, and always took part in the meetings.”⁷⁵⁵ She was also a member of the SWC Presidium and participated in the SWC Presidium discussion of the Plan for IWY, which took place on February 20, 1975.⁷⁵⁶ Here, Novikova concluded with a long list of demands for the development of the infrastructure for mothers and children, an increase of maternal leave and special benefits for mothers, as well as cost-free abortions for housewives, peasant (kolhoz) women and students, and sick leave for

⁷⁵³ GARF, P5446, Op. 134, D. 35, l. 179.

⁷⁵⁴ GARF, P5446, Op. 134, D. 35, l. 234.

⁷⁵⁵ E. Novikova, “Moia Rabota V Ministerstve Zdravookhraneniia Sssr (1972–1984) [My Activity in the Ministry of Health of the USSR (1972–1984)],” *Rossiiskii Pediatricheskii Zhurnal (Russian Pediatric Journal)* 1, no. 21 (2018): 64.

⁷⁵⁶ GARF, P7928, Op. 3, D. 3654, l. 3.

women after an abortion.⁷⁵⁷ Notably, she also advocated for an update of the list of prohibited professions for women and of the document regulating norms of lifting and moving weights for women and adolescents.⁷⁵⁸ She ended by making it very explicit that she was advocating for more resources for women, on the Eve of the 10th Five-Year plan:

The implementation of all these measures will undoubtedly require large allocations. At the same time, the realization of all these proposals, which is dictated by life itself and should be taken into account not only in connection with International Women's Year, will be a further manifestation of the care of the Party and the Government for the health of future generations, and these will find its realization in the tenth and subsequent Five-Year Plans.⁷⁵⁹

Other presenters continued to lobby for more resources. Subsequently, Grigorieva, the leader of the Central Committee of Trade Unions representing medical industry workers, advocated for a 30% wage increase for nurses, referring to their role in caring for individuals in hospitals.⁷⁶⁰ Next, Rano Abdullaeva, Vice-Chair of the Soviet of Ministers of the Uzbek Republic, outlined the challenges associated with high birth rates in her region and proposed raising the benefits for mothers caring for newborns and reducing the working hours for mothers:

The 10th Five-Year Plan is approaching—a new stage of our country in its further blossoming. We would ask the Central Committee of the CPSU and the Union Government (this is mentioned in the draft resolution of the

⁷⁵⁷ GARF, P5446, Op. 134, D. 35, l.242.

⁷⁵⁸ GARF, P5446, Op. 134, D. 35, l.243.

⁷⁵⁹ GARF, P5446, Op. 134, D. 35, l.243-244.

⁷⁶⁰ GARF, P5446, Op. 134, D. 35, l.251.

Commission) to consider the possibility of paying 50 percent of wages for mothers who are caring for a child under one year and some reduction in working hours for mothers with school-age children, especially those studying in the primary school.⁷⁶¹

Not all the above-mentioned speakers were connected with the SWC, but they repeatedly promoted the same set of demands: extension of parental leave, restrictions on heavy working conditions for women, reduction of productivity norms in different ways, and more allocations for childcare infrastructure. It is important that the discussion had been launched by Elena Novikova. Mazurov and the Commission endorsed her proposal to be sent for consideration to the governmental bodies that made decisions about redistributing resources for the Five-Year Plan.⁷⁶² Remarkably, in his concluding remarks, Mazurov emphasized that this point of the agenda should not reach the Soviet media as it might give a negative image:

I wanted to say the following so that the editors of newspapers and heads of information services present would keep in mind that the materials on the second agenda point we discussed today should be handled very delicately: no particularly negative figures should be given, because it is a classified issue. And in no way to express on the pages of the press and in the information about the list of problems that we recommended to address to the relevant organizations and the Ministry of Health to bring to the State Plan and the Ministry of Finance, because if this case is blown up outside our Commission, it will not be very good.⁷⁶³

⁷⁶¹ GARF, P5446, Op. 134, D. 35, l.254.

⁷⁶² GARF, P5446, Op. 134, D. 35, l.259.

⁷⁶³ GARF, P5446, Op. 134, D. 35, l.271; Попутно хотел сказать о следующем, чтобы присутствующие редактора газет и руководители информационных служб имели в виду, что с материалами по второму вопросу, которые мы сегодня обсуждали, надо очень деликатно обращаться: никаких особо отрицательных цифр не надо приводить, потому что это закрытый вопрос. И никоим образом не

The third agenda point on April 7, 1975 was a written paper (no name under it but it covered the work of key Soviet media) about propaganda work. After everyone read it and the people responsible for the media said that they had nothing to add, Ksenya Proskurnikova, the SWC Deputy head, took the floor and started with remarkably explocot criticism of the presented results:

Comrades, I think that the reports of the heads of a number of information and propaganda agencies suggest that they have done some significant work, although actually, we would probably like to feel it more ourselves. There was a certain buzz right after the Commission was established, then around March 8. Now we feel it less. And if we talk about radio and television, one would think that we have an international year of sports, not of women. There is still more attention paid to this, and rather little material is given about women.⁷⁶⁴

Proskurnikova also insisted on having more publications about women, especially in foreign languages—her speech contained numerous examples and many proposals. She emphasized one more time that the Soviet laws themselves were the best propaganda for what the country stood for. Mazurov generally approved Proskurnikova’s proposal, but her sharp pun about sports clearly was not appreciated by the male audience and occupied a lot of space in Mazurov’s summary of the session. He addressed the question of sports programs separately, since mentioning it he perceived as an attack on “men’s interests”:

высказывать на страницах печати и в информациях, о том списке проблем, которые мы рекомендовали соответствующим организациям и Минздраву внести в Госплан и Минфин, потому что если это дело раздуть за пределами нашей Комиссии, это будет не очень хорошо.

⁷⁶⁴ GARF, P5446, Op. 134, D. 35, l.261-262.

I also do not fully agree with comrade Proskurnikova that television is too overloaded with programs and reports on sports. It should be said that operative information about sports will be broadcast regardless of what political events will be held. It is necessary, besides, it should be taken into account that this is demanded by the male part of the population, and it will be.⁷⁶⁵

This episode vividly exemplifies the limits of support for women's agenda within the Commission, which lasted until the point when it directly or openly entered men's territory.

The rest of the IWY Commission's meetings again addressed questions of women's working and living conditions, political participation, representation in Soviet media and art, and childcare infrastructure. On June 9, 1975, the IWY Commission held its fourth meeting, with four topics on its agenda: 1. The participation of the SWC, SSOD, The Central Committee of the Komsomol, and the Committee of Youth Organizations in international events; 2. About the work of the creative unions dedicated to IWY; 3. About fulfillment of the 9th five-year plan in the sphere of the preschool infrastructure; 4. The protection of women's labor. On the one hand, the work of the Commission followed three directions of work proposed by Petrovichev at the second meeting: 1. women's working conditions, health protection, and the upbringing of the new generation; 2. international events; 3. propaganda work. On the other hand, questions about women's labor and childcare repeatedly occupied half of the agenda and, consequently, these discussions. This can be read as a sign of Biryukova's influence since she was the most vocal advocate of these topics during the second Commission meeting and had the power to shape the agenda.

⁷⁶⁵ GARF, P5446, Op. 134, D. 35, l. 270;



Illustration 13 Nina Popova and Sakin Begmatova in the Soviet IWY Commission. Source: TsGA

Throughout all the meetings, discussions about domestic issues had a critical tone. Yet, this criticism had to remain within strict norms, which became obvious in the moments when these were broken. For example, at the fourth IWY Commission meeting on June 9, 1975, Sakin Begmatova, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Kyrgyz Soviet Socialist Republic and vice-head of the Soviet of Ministers of Kyrgyz Soviet Socialist Republic, took the floor regarding the topic of preschool education. She started with harsh criticism of three Soviet ministers: Stepan Khitrov, Minister of Rural Construction of USSR, Georgy Karavaev, Minister of Construction of USSR, Petr Neporozhniy, Minister of Energy and Electrification, for their desire to build cheap factories without any infrastructure for workers, for the fact that Khitrov's report wrote nicely about large-panel construction which the Ministry did not have, etc. Mazurov interrupted her repeatedly and recommended that she talk to the three ministers herself. Begmatova answered that they were silent; Mazurov threw an ironic comment that "I don't give them the floor,"⁷⁷ which caused animation in the room, according to the note in the meeting's minutes. Nevertheless, Mazurov's repetitive interventions did not stop Begmatova, who was described

by her colleagues as a sharp and talented diplomat.⁷⁶⁶ She continued emphasizing the fact that childcare infrastructure did not have a priority in the construction plans. Despite the fact that Mazurov said himself earlier that the Commission should recommend giving kindergartens and nurseries as a high priority as schools,⁷⁶⁷ he interrupted Begmatova even on this point again stating that the Soviet of Ministers of Kyrgyz Republic “was guilty itself” for that and could do much more.⁷⁶⁸ Yet, Begmatova persisted and even raised another point: about the construction norms for regions with high seismic activity. Mazurov then reacted by saying: “This should not be included into our decision. We can find many details like this. Are there any further questions or comments?”⁷⁶⁹ Thus, Begmatova was silenced. However, high seismic activity was not a detail like any other, but an important and life-threatening issue for many Soviet people outside of the European part of the USSR. As the Big Soviet Encyclopedia wrote, 28,6% of the USSR territory had high seismic activity, consisting of “areas of possible magnitude 9 earthquakes—in Central Asia, the Baikal region, Kamchatka, the Kuril Islands, etc.; 8-point areas—in Moldova, Crimea, the Caucasus, Southern Siberia, etc.”⁷⁷⁰ The areas potentially affected were mostly “national republics”, i.e. areas belonging to non-Slavic ethnicities. Thus, Mazurov’s dismissal of the issue had traces of not only economic rationality (earthquake engineering is an expensive enterprise) but also racialized priorities, when the needs of the people from non-Slavic regions were dismissed. However, the main norm Begmatova broke was the absence of compulsory self-criticism combined with accusations of the all-Union level Ministers from her position as a representative of a national republic—symptomatically Mazurov said that the

⁷⁶⁶ I.S. Boldjurova, “S.B. Begmatova – Zhizn’, Otdannaia Gosudarstvu (K 70-Letiū Ministerstva Inostrannykh Del Kyrgyzskoi Respubliki) [S.B. Begmatova – Life, Devoted To The State (Dedicated To The 70th Anniversary Of The Ministry Of The Foreign Affairs Of The Kyrgyz Republic)],” *Vestnik KRSU* 14, no. 12 (2014): 3–8.

⁷⁶⁷ GARF, P5446, Op. 134, D. 36, l. 181.

⁷⁶⁸ GARF, P5446, Op. 134, D. 36, l. 188.

⁷⁶⁹ GARF, P5446, Op. 134, D. 36, l. 188.

⁷⁷⁰ G.A. Shenkaryova, “Seismicheskoe Raionirovanie [Seismic Zoning],” in *Bolshaya Sovetskaya Encyclopedia [Big Soviet Encyclopedia]* (Sovetskaya Encyclopedia, 1986 1969), <https://www.booksite.ru/FullText/1/001/008/100/812.htm>.

Soviet of Ministers of Kyrgyz Republic “was guilty itself”—in a way calling for her to get back to the ritual, which she resisted and, thus, was silenced.

Another example of the effect of disciplining female members of the IWY Commission was the change of Proskurnikova's tone of voice compared to the previous meeting. At the June 9, 1975 IWY Commission meeting, she spoke less critically and confrontationally and started by showcasing the successes of the SWC. She emphasized their work and results, and once again underscored the existing competition with the Western women's organizations; these which she characterized as making “an attempt to avoid discussing serious political problems and, above all, international problems, an attempt to avoid discussing pressing social problems and to reduce the importance of the experience of resolving the woman question in socialist countries.”⁷⁷¹ These Western women's organizations, according to Proskurnikova, were trying to “replace the key problems for the solution of the woman question with feminist slogans.”⁷⁷² She concluded that this confrontation only showed the importance of the participation of Soviet women in international IWY events and how the SWC had managed to influence the final documents as they had been submitted to the World Conference of International Women's Year in Mexico City. “The proclamation of IWY attracted the attention not only of the women's community, but also the attention of all governments, which held regional seminars in Asia, Africa and Latin America.”⁷⁷³ She underscored that key politicians from the Global South took part in the regional seminars with greetings as well as with meaningful contributions, while the Western governments didn't take IWY seriously and only limited themselves to “demagogy” and “protocol events.”⁷⁷⁴

After reporting about the SWC's successes, Proskurnikova commented on the work of different information agencies she had complained about during the previous meeting and, with

⁷⁷¹ GARF, P5446, Op. 134, D. 36, l.112.

⁷⁷² GARF, P5446, Op. 134, D. 36, l.112.

⁷⁷³ GARF, P5446, Op. 134, D. 36, l. 114.

⁷⁷⁴ GARF, P5446, Op. 134, D. 36, l. 114.

a degree of satisfaction of a rightful judgment, noted that the situation had improved and the SWC received most of the necessary publications she requested previously.⁷⁷⁵ But the production of items such as movies, posters, and postmarks was still too slow. Mazurov shared this concern, since the Mexico City Conference was going to happen the same month. Ksenia Proskurnikova felt the moment and again addressed the coverage of IWY in the Soviet media. However, she had substantially changed her tone of voice compared to the previous meeting; not the tiniest threat towards potential men's interests could be detected in her speech this time. She asked again for more coverage of IWY and the preparation of the Mexico City Conference. She referred to the newspaper *Sovetskaia Rossiia* (Soviet Russia) as a good example because it had started a special rubric about IWY, implying that others should do the same. Petrovichev and Ponomarev asked her numerous questions about her evaluation of the upcoming UN Conference and its NGO Tribune. Her choice of presentation tactic, which showed loyalty and hard work in the interest of the Soviet state first, and only then expressed some criticism of those who created obstacles for the SWC's important tasks, helped her to be heard. Indeed, this time, instead of arguing with her, male members of the Commission asked for Proskurnikova's opinion on the work of Soviet media as "one of the organization's [SWC] leaders."⁷⁷⁶

Overall, discussions of the Commission showed that despite the declared promotion of women's rights on the state level, even women working in the IWY Commission had to follow certain discursive restrictions to be heard, they had to cooperate to promote their agenda, and they often had to deal with hostile attitudes of their male colleagues. A telling example is the way the head of the IWY Commission captured the mood in the audience: "Someone here said, I didn't catch it, that the remaining years will pass under the sign of men or other signs of the zodiac."⁷⁷⁷ This remark showed that behind the façade of support for women's

⁷⁷⁵ GARF, P5446, Op. 134, D. 36, l.120.

⁷⁷⁶ GARF, P5446, Op. 134, D. 36, l.125.

⁷⁷⁷ GARF, P5446, Op. 134, D. 36, l.172.

emancipation, there was an old brick wall of patriarchal attitudes towards women, which built the fortress of the Soviet authoritarian state. The fact alone that the head of the IWY Commission in the USSR was a man showed the deep patriarchy ingrained in the Soviet state apparatus and its assumption about the subjugated role of the woman question; its proponents in the Soviet Union, however, were way less obedient than the male establishment would have liked them to be.

This subchapter has explored the role of SWC members in implementing IWY in the USSR and has examined the tactics its members used. I found that that SWC members played a pivotal role in shaping the Soviet IWY Commission's agenda, skillfully balancing the promotion of socialist achievements with advocating for tangible improvements in women's lives. Through strategic positioning within the Commission, SWC members like Nina Popova, Aleksandra Biryukova and Ksenia Proskurnikova successfully shifted discussions toward domestic issues such as women's working conditions, childcare, and healthcare, framing these as essential for both domestic progress and international propaganda. Despite facing resistance and patriarchal attitudes from male colleagues, SWC members leveraged their influence to push for legislative and resource changes, often using the international context of IWY to justify their demands. However, their efforts were constrained by the need to adhere to strict discursive norms and avoid direct criticism of the state, highlighting the complex interplay between advancing women's interests and political conformity in the Soviet system.

5.3. IWY in the Soviet Union: The outcomes

The fifth meeting of the Soviet IWY Commission took place on September 17, 1975. It had four agenda points: 1. Soviet women's participation in the struggle for peace and national independence; 2. Soviet women's participation in the work of Soviets of workers' deputies in Ukrainian SSR and Stavropol region; 3. On the state of public education and preventive care

for children in preschool institutions; 4. Summarizing the IWY results in the Soviet Union.⁷⁷⁸

At the meeting the following people were tasked with preparing the Commission report and documents to the CC: Nikolay Petrovichev, the First Deputy Head of the Organizational and Party Work Department of the CPSU Central Committee, Georgy Smirnov, the First Deputy Head of the Propaganda Department of the CPSU Central Committee, Vitaliy Shaposhnikov, the International Department of the CPSU Central Committee, Zoya Tumanova, the First Deputy Head of the Department of Culture of the CPSU Central Committee, Aleksandra Biryukova, a Secretary of the AUCCTU, N. Rodionov, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the USSR, Zinaida Fedorova, a SWC executive secretary.⁷⁷⁹ The final documents showcased the Commission's shift to domestic issues and the relative success of those had been advocating for the redistribution of resources in the USSR. Yet, it also addressed the state interest in IWY, such as propaganda achievements and the increase in female labor productivity. The latter point is especially remarkable given that much of the effort of many women in the Commission was directed to the opposite cause: lowering retirement age for women-veterans, additional leaves for mothers and reduction of working hours, which led to reducing norms for female labor productivity.

The prepared documents were discussed at the Commission's last meeting on January 16, 1976.⁷⁸⁰ The protocol of the meeting outlined the results of IWY in the USSR in 9 points. The first result was the growth of female political participation and the increase of women in Supreme Soviets of Republics and local Soviets. The second was the growth in female labor productivity: competitions, patriotic initiatives, fulfillment of the plan, etc. The third outcome was an improvement of women's working and living conditions via the All-Union Watch of Women's Working, Living, and Leisure Conditions, organized by the AUCCTU and local trade

⁷⁷⁸ GARF, P5446, Op. 134, D. 37, ll.139-146.

⁷⁷⁹ GARF, P5446, Op. 134, D. 37, l. 146.

⁷⁸⁰ GARF, P5446, Op. 134, D. 37, l. 147.

unions. This Watch showed numerous flaws in women's working conditions and accumulated "more than one million" suggestions for improvement, 75% of which, according to the report, were implemented, whereas others were included in the "Guidelines for the Development of the National Economy of the USSR for 1976-1980." There was also an effort to automate production and to transfer women from heavy manual or unqualified labor to automatized or more skilled jobs: about 275,000 working women in the USSR and 400,000 peasant women only in RSFSR (with the implication that the numbers were much higher throughout the USSR). The childcare infrastructure had been increased with 17 new child hospitals, 20 new pediatric clinics, and 33 maternity hospitals.

Considerable part of the report (points 5-8) outlined propaganda successes and international engagements, which included Soviet participation in international events and hosting several of them. For example, the international seminar "Women's Participation in Economic Development and Upbringing of the Young Generation" took place in Almaty in June; in August SSOD organized the international symposium of women-lawyers in Moscow; on October 13, the International Meeting of Young Women started in Moscow; the international meeting "Women in the fight against fascism, for lasting and just peace on Earth" took place in Minsk. This point occupied a considerable space the report covered the Soviet struggle in the international arena to frame women's rights. The following points mentioned a mass media production featuring Soviet women, from newspaper articles to exhibitions, promotion of art created by Soviet women, etc.

The last, ninth, point indicated that the Republican Commissions, Ministries, Departments, and individual citizens had made a number of proposals, briefly summarized there, with a heavy focus on relieving women's working conditions: improving control of labor law implementation, reducing working hours for mothers, reducing the number of women in the workplaces with hazardous conditions and working night shifts, expanding of the list of jobs

prohibited for women, etc.⁷⁸¹

The Commission's report was approved and, additionally, the special report (shortened) to the CC CPSU based on it. This report to the CC stated that many issues discussed at its meetings were included in the Decision of the 25th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union on the CC CPSU Draft "Guidelines for the Development of the National Economy of the USSR for 1976-1980."⁷⁸² However, the report to CC CPSU indicated that besides these that other proposals, such as those for a shorter working day and additional vacation for women with two or more children, as well as an extension of the parental leave, had not been included yet because they required "big spendings" but "with a successful progress of the 10th Five-Year Plan" they could be resolved.⁷⁸³ In my view, the fact that demands that had not been implemented had nonetheless been included in the relatively short report to the CC CPSU shows the persistence and strength of lobbying for Soviet women's interests by some of the members of the editorial group (most likely Aleksandra Biryukova and Zinaida Fedorova) who used this as an opportunity to keep pushing for the projects that could be implemented immediately. But the mentioning of demands not yet met also demonstrates that the smooth phrase about the inclusion of some proposals into the Five-Year Plan covered up the fact that the problems concerning working mothers' working regime largely remained unresolved.

In 1976, Commissions on women's working and living conditions and on protection of motherhood and childhood were established which also included SWC members who should ensure implementation of the documents adopted in the UN.⁷⁸⁴ In 1977, a new Soviet Constitution was adopted—the role of such a document in authoritarian state was not as significant (if at all) as it is in liberal democracies, and the Constitution barely affected people's

⁷⁸¹ GARF, P5446, Op. 134, D. 37, l. 147-157.

⁷⁸² GARF, P5446, Op. 134, D. 37, l. 160.

⁷⁸³ GARF, P5446, Op. 134, D. 37, l. 160.

⁷⁸⁴ GARF, P7928, Op.3, D. 3950, l. 62.

lives. But the SWC reported on its members' contribution to it,⁷⁸⁵ and Constitution's clause about gender equality strongly echoed proposals from the IWY Commission's report sent to CC CPSU. The 1936 Soviet Constitution had declared equality between men and women in the SU; the new clause about gender equality was much more detailed, emphasizing the important distinction between legal equality (ravnopravie), and existing equality (ravenstvo). Below are the relevant clauses from both constitutions

1936 ⁷⁸⁶	1977 ⁷⁸⁷
<p>Article 122. Women in the U.S.S.R. are accorded equal rights with men in all spheres of economic, state, cultural, social and political life. The possibility of exercising these rights is ensured to women by granting them an equal right with men to work, payment for work, rest and leisure, social insurance and education, and by state protection of the interests of mother and child, prematernity and maternity leave with full pay, and the provision of a wide network of maternity homes, nurseries and kindergartens.</p>	<p>Article 35. Women and men have equal rights in the USSR.</p> <p>Exercise of these rights is ensured by according women equal access with men to education and vocational and professional training, equal opportunities in employment, remuneration, and promotion, and in social and political, and cultural activity, and by special labor and health protection measures for women; by providing conditions enabling mothers to work; by legal protection, and material and moral support for mothers and children, including paid leaves and other benefits for expectant mothers and mothers, and gradual reduction of working time for mothers with small children.</p>

The last point of article 35, about the gradual reduction of working hours, repeated one of the proposals from the final Commission document to the CC CPSU, which could not have been implemented. Interestingly, Zoya Pukhova, a manager of a textile mill and a prominent SWC member, recalled that she worked in the new Constitution on that point together with Valentina Tereshkova:

As a member of the Constitution Commission I took a direct part in the drafting of the Fundamental Law of the USSR. People sent in hundreds of

⁷⁸⁵ N Fedyushova, *Soviet Women's Committee*, Agentstvo Novosti (Moskva, 1987).

⁷⁸⁶ "Constitution of the USSR (1936)," 1936, <http://www.departments.bucknell.edu/russian/const/77cons02.html#chap06>.

⁷⁸⁷ "Constitution of the USSR (1977)," 1977, <http://www.departments.bucknell.edu/russian/const/77cons02.html#chap06>.

thousands of suggestions concerning the articles of the draft Constitution.

I came to the conclusion that working mothers had to be given more time to look after their small children and their families. That was what many women were asking for in their letters to me as Deputy to the USSR Supreme Soviet.

That was why at the session of the Supreme Soviet, which approved the Constitution in October 1977, Valentina Tereshkova and I proposed adding to Article 35 the point about the gradual reduction of working hours for mothers with small children. This became part of the Constitution of the USSR.⁷⁸⁸

Pukhova did not mention the IWY Commission as a source for the clause's inspiration, but it echoed the discussion she and Tereshkova had observed in the IWY Commission.

In the following years, a number of laws were adopted in the USSR to “consistently reduce working hours, productivity norms, by providing additional maternity leave, lowering the retirement age for women; reduce the working time of mothers.”⁷⁸⁹ For example, in 1981 the Central Committee of the CPSU and the Council of Ministers issued a decree “On Measures to Strengthen State Assistance to Families with Children,” which granted a partly paid paternal leave up to one year, with extra sixth month of unpaid parental leave after one year (which later should be extended to additional one year), an additional three-day paid leave for working women with two or more children under 12 was established, the right to an unpaid leave up to two weeks to look after one's children by agreement with the enterprise administration, an extension of the partly paid leave to take care of a sick child up to 14 days, a 3day paid sick

⁷⁸⁸ Vishneva-Sarafanova, *Soviet Women's World. The United Nations Decade for Women 1976-1985*, 10.

⁷⁸⁹ Tolkunova, “Sovetskoe Zakonodatel'stvo v Period Desiatiletiiā Zhenshchin [Soviet Legislation During the UN Decade for Women].”

leave after an abortion, etc.⁷⁹⁰ In 1981, the AUCCTU and Goskomtrud issued legislation that gave women with children under 15 the priority right to work from home.⁷⁹¹ In 1983, an extension of partly paid parental leave up to one year and up to 1,5 years without pay but with an uninterrupted service record was granted.⁷⁹² In 1984 the AUCCTU regulation implemented 3 days paid sick leave after an abortion.⁷⁹³ In 1984, the new legislation emphasized the right of women with children to work flexible working hours, described the general rules for introducing and implementing flexible working hours, and specified situations with special breaks for breastfeeding, which were counted as working time.⁷⁹⁴

My analysis showed that it took decade to implement some of the proposals that were advocated at the IWY Commission. The 1989 Soviet book that summed up the results of the UN Decade of Women in the USSR stated: “The legal equality of sexes was proclaimed immediately after the Great October Revolution. But factual equality of sexes has not been reached yet.”⁷⁹⁵ Indeed, all the considerable efforts of Soviet women in politics did not result in gender equality. For example, a report on the wage difference in the Soviet Union indicate that the difference persisted and even grew—and the issue of improvement of the status of women’s labor and its remuneration remained an urgent task even after the UN Decade passed.⁷⁹⁶

⁷⁹⁰ “Postanovlenie TSK KPSS i Soveta Ministrov SSSR O Merakh Po Usileniiu Gosudarstvennoi Pomoshchi Sem’iam, Imeiushchim Detei. [Decree of the Central Committee of the CPSU and the Council of Ministers of the USSR On Measures to Strengthen State Assistance to Families with Children.],” January 22, 1981, <https://docs.historyrussia.org/ru/nodes/446694>.

⁷⁹¹ “Postanovlenie Goskomtruda, AUCCTU Ot 29.09.1981 N 275/17-99,” 1981, <http://base.garant.ru/173646/>.

⁷⁹² Tolkunova, “Sovetskoe Zakonodatel’sтво v Period Desiatiletiia Zhenshchin [Soviet Legislation During the UN Decade for Women].”

⁷⁹³ ““Polozhenie o Poriadke Obespechenia Posobiiami Po Gosudarstvennomu Sotsial’nomu Strakhovaniu” (Utv. Postanovleniem Prezidiuma VTSSPS Ot 12.11.1984 N 13-6) [‘Regulations on the Procedure for Providing Benefits for State Social Insurance’ (Approved by the Decree of the Presidium of the AUCCTU from 12.11.1984 N 13-6)],” November 12, 1984, https://www.consultant.ru/document/cons_doc_LAW_8227/f705caf92e39d3c0f2d27917edffe530c2209bfa/.

⁷⁹⁴ “Postanovlenie Goskomtruda, AUCCTU Ot 06.06.1984 N 170/10-101,” 1984, <http://ppt.ru/docs/postanovlenie/goskomtrud-sssr/n-170-10-101-24104>.

⁷⁹⁵ Valentina Lyubimova, *Rol’ Zhenshchiny v Sovremennom Obshchestve (K Itogam Desiatiletiia Zhenshchiny OON)* [Role of Women in the Modern Society (On the Results of the UN Decade for Women)] (Moskva: Nauka, 1989), 75.

⁷⁹⁶ Lyubimova, 99.

5.4. SWC's institutional gains

The surge in international attention and competition in the domain of women's rights presented a unique opportunity for the SWC to expand its influence within the Soviet state apparatus and gain more resources. One of the most remarkable indicators of the SWC's growing prominence was a letter Valentina Tereshkova sent on March 27, 1975, to the Soviet representative in the UN, Yakov Malik. This letter signed by Tereshkova proposed the placement of a dedicated SWC representative in New York to focus on the preparations for IWY events. In her words: "It would seem to us that it would be very useful for the Committee if a representative of the Soviet Women's Committee worked in New York for several months, perhaps until July, who would specifically deal with issues related to IWY."⁷⁹⁷

The SWC played a crucial role in influencing the IWY implementation in the Soviet Union. I have shown above that SWC members actively participated in the IWY Commission, as I showed. They also worked closely with the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs to contribute to the preparation of the UN World Conference of the International Women's Year in Mexico City. Additionally, they took part in the meetings of the International Advisory Committee at the UN headquarters, where discussions revolved around the draft World Plan of Action. The SWC also participated in an international meeting commemorating International Women's Day on March 8, 1975, the first time the UN recognized IWD.⁷⁹⁸

Following the March 8 meeting, the SWC sent another letter to Yakov Malik. Ekaterina Korshunova, a member of the SWC Presidium since 1960 and the Soviet representative in the UN CSW in 1959, 1961-1962, and 1968,⁷⁹⁹ drafted it as a handwritten remark on the letter states. The SWC expressed gratitude for the attention shown to their organization. They also commented on the competitive nature of Western nations ("zapadniki") concerning the

⁷⁹⁷ GARF, P7928, Op.3, D. 3715, L.6

⁷⁹⁸ GARF, P7928, Op.3, D. 3950, l. 11

⁷⁹⁹ Francisca de Haan shared this information with me.

acquisition of information related to the Mexico City conference. Korshunova pointed out that this competition highlighted the urgent need for the SWC to gather relevant information promptly, as the SWC believed that “without proper information, we will not be able to develop our tactics[taktiky].”⁸⁰⁰ In this context, information was a valuable resource that enabled the SWC to enhance its expertise in the field. The demand for equal access to information effectively translated into a demand for access to the UN, which the SWC legitimized through their rivalry with Western counterparts.

The SWC was the exclusive participant from the Soviet side in the NGO Forum or “Tribune,” an event that sparked considerable concern within the Soviet government, which could not have accessed the field other than through reports of the SWC. Reporting on the preparation to NGO Forum was a triumph for Proskurnikova’s participation in the IWY Commission, as I have shown above. After her report, Boris Ponomarev, the Central Committee (CC) Secretary, and Nikolay Petrovichev, the First Deputy Head of the Organizational and Party Work Department of the CPSU Central Committee, engaged in intense questioning regarding the NGO Forum and the composition of the Soviet delegation to the UN Conference.⁸⁰¹ In his subsequent speech, Ponomarev stated: “The most important thing is the international events.”⁸⁰² And emphasized:

The Soviet Women’s Committee should receive the biggest support in all spheres. The Central Committee is following the process, trying, is ready to make an effort, but we should also direct the attention of the heads of different organizations so that what was decided by our Commission,

⁸⁰⁰ GARF, P7928, Op.3, D. 3715, l. 19

⁸⁰¹ GARF, P5446, Op. 134, D. 36, ll. 121-126.

⁸⁰² GARF, P5446, Op. 134, D. 36, l. 142.

which was established by the decision of our highest party and soviet bodies, was implemented.⁸⁰³

The fact that the CC provide support in exchange for the SWC working for the interests of the Soviet state in the international arena, made transparent the transactional nature of such support. Mazurov stated that

our delegations and representatives in both forums, dedicated to International Year of Women, should not forget that in addition to the issues of popularizing the achievements of the Soviet state in solving the woman question, we also have the task of popularizing socialism, fighting for peace, implementing our international policy and implementing the plan of action that was adopted by the 24th Congress of our Party. In this sense, comrades must prepare very seriously to bring the greatest benefit when participating in these forums.⁸⁰⁴

This type of exchange was probably recognized and definitely used by the SWC members for their goals; they seized their opportunities to increase influence their within USSR in exchange for their service outside.

Thus, the SWC came out of IWY with certain tangible gains. First, the imperative to propagate socialism and its achievements provided them with opportunities to create numerous exhibitions, publications, research papers, and other materials focusing on Soviet women.⁸⁰⁵ Second, they successfully increased the number of scholarships awarded to women from

⁸⁰³ GARF, P5446, Op. 134, D. 36, l. 147.

⁸⁰⁴ GARF, P5446, Op. 134, D. 36, l. 154.

⁸⁰⁵ GARF, P7928, Op.3, D. 3950, l. 7-30.

developing countries from only 10 in 1964 to 100 per year in 1975,⁸⁰⁶ up to 120 in 1976,⁸⁰⁷ and up to 1033 in 1985.⁸⁰⁸ Third, the SWC raised the issue of expanding its membership to become more actively engaged in various initiatives aimed at improving the lives and work of women in the Soviet Union. As mentioned in their 1976 report to the CC:

The [SWC] Presidium considers it advisable to expand the membership of the SWC, with the help of which the Committee will be able to ensure its participation in the development of events carried out by party and Soviet bodies and public organizations (AUCCTU, Central Committee of the Komsomol), in order to increase the labor and socio-political activity of Soviet women.⁸⁰⁹

Fourth, in the following year, there was increased cooperation between the SWC and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The SWC managed to carve out additional space for itself within the masculinized and patriarchal field of Soviet diplomacy.⁸¹⁰ As they indicated in their annual report on 1976:

During the year, at the request of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the USSR, the SWC prepared answers to the UN Secretary General's questionnaires on certain aspects of the status of Soviet women and their participation in the national economy and public life in the USSR. The Committee submitted its recommendations for the prospective

⁸⁰⁶ GARF, P7928, Op.3, D. 3950, l. 197.

⁸⁰⁷“Protokoly №№ 1-6 Zasedaniia Prezidiuma KSZh i Materialy k Nim (Otchety, Programma) [Minutes Nos. 1-6 of the SWC Presidium Meeting and Materials to Them (Reports, Program)],” January 27-October 13, 1977, F.P7928, Op. 3, D.4206, GARF, l.63.

⁸⁰⁸ Vishneva-Sarafanova, *Soviet Women's World. The United Nations Decade for Women 1976-1985*, 40.

⁸⁰⁹ GARF, P7928, Op.3, D. 3950, l. 64.

⁸¹⁰ Nagornaya, “Zhenshchiny v strukturakh sovetskoï kul'turnoi diplomatii kholodnoi voïny: prostranstva mobilizatsii i praktiki souchastiia [Women in the structures of Soviet cultural diplomacy of the Cold War: spaces of mobilization and practices of complicity],” 451.

participation of the Soviet Union in UN activities for the period 1976-1980. The Committee also participated in the preparation of the Soviet delegation to the 26th session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women[held in 1976].⁸¹¹

Finally, as a result of IWY, the SWC's report highlighted the establishment of the Commission for the IWY in the Soviet Union,⁸¹² which, as I showed, became a domestic battleground for some SWC members to secure redistribution of resources for Soviet women during the IWY. This Commission fueled the process of establishing permanent commissions to monitor women's working and living conditions on union and local levels.⁸¹³ The SWC took part in other commissions as well:

The [SWC] Presidium considers it advisable for the Soviet Women Committee, taking into account its foreign policy tasks, to take part in the work of the permanent commissions of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, to promote a deeper study and practical use of international documents (conventions, declarations, resolutions) adopted due to the participation of the Soviet Union in the United Nations, its specialized bodies, and international democratic organizations.⁸¹⁴

Thus, the SWC used the opportunity created by IWY to strengthen their positions within the USSR, which they legitimized by their active contribution to the Soviet image abroad. This momentum probably fostered individual careers as well. For example, Aleksandra Biryukova, who was very active in the IWY's Commission was elected to the Central

⁸¹¹ GARF, P7928, Op.3, D. 4206, l.33.

⁸¹² GARF, P7928, Op.3, D. 3950, l. 192.

⁸¹³ GARF, P7928, Op.3, D. 3950, l.62.

⁸¹⁴ GARF, P7928, Op.3, D. 3950, l.64

Committee of the CPSU in 1976,⁸¹⁵ in this way gaining more influence within the Soviet political space, and additional opportunities to promote women's interests during the UN Decade for Women, as I showed in the previous chapter.

5.5. The SWC versus the Soviet dissident feminists of 1979

The rise of a feminist movement in Western countries since the 1960s and the UN Decade for Women (1976–1985) contributed to the development of an independent feminist dissident group in the USSR. In the fall of 1979, a group of women published *Zhenshchina i Rossiia* (*Woman and Russia (W&R)*), a samizdat (self-published) almanac, which marked what a scholar in 2013 called “the resurrection of the feminist movement in Russia.”⁸¹⁶

The W&R core group consisted of artist and poet Tat'yana Mamonova, Tat'yana Goricheva, a religious philosopher who had edited the dissident religious almanac 37; Yulia Voznesenskaya, an Orthodox poet who had been recently released from a Siberian labor camp (1977-1979) where she had been imprisoned for escape from forced exile that she had been sentenced to in 1976 for “anti-Soviet propaganda”; and Natalia Malakhovskaya, an uncensored writer involved with the production of 37. All four were active in the dissident movement before launching their own publication.⁸¹⁷ Mamonova was inspired by prominent contemporary American feminist authors, such as Robin Morgan, Susan Brownmiller, and Kate Millett, whose works she could reach due to her connections in dissident and diplomatic circles.⁸¹⁸ She

⁸¹⁵ “Ofitsial'naia Spravka [Official Biographical Note],” *Izvestiya CK KPSS*, June 7, 1990, https://web.archive.org/web/20080404032917/http://www.hrono.ru/biograf/bio_b/biryukova_ap.html.

⁸¹⁶ Nadina Milewska-Pindor, “The Almanac ‘Woman and Russia’ and the Soviet Feminist Movement at the End of the 1970s,” *International Studies: Interdisciplinary Political & Cultural Journal* 15, no. 1 (December 2013): 5.

⁸¹⁷ Rochelle Ruthchild, “Feminist Dissidents in the ‘Motherland of Women’s Liberation’: Shattering Soviet Myths and Memory,” in *Women’s Activism and “second Wave” Feminism: Transnational Histories*. (London; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 99–109.

⁸¹⁸ Ruthchild, 104.

wrote that she wanted to create a feminist magazine because of the “blatant sexist tendencies” within unofficial art circles.⁸¹⁹

However, the scope of problems *Woman & Russia* addressed turned out to be much bigger. Examples of the latter include the following. *W&R* wrote about the poor quality of healthcare (in "Human Birth" by R. Batalova) and social services (in "Golden Childhood" by V. Pazukhin) in the Soviet Union, about the symbolic oppression of women (in "Rejoice, Redemption from the Tears of Eve" by T. Goricheva), about the double burden women faced (in "The Matriarchal Family" by N. Malakhovskaya), single motherhood (in "The Other Side of the Medal" by V. Golubeva), and women's lives in prisons (in "Letter from Novosibirsk" by J. Voznesenskaya).

The final page of the Almanac contained an "Appeal to Sisters," in which the editors urged women across the country to submit articles and fiction. The Almanac united women from diverse worldviews. However, due to numerous ideological contradictions, their agenda eventually narrowed their focus to women's 'essential' roles as mothers and wives.⁸²⁰ Issues such as sexuality (except for one fictional text), rape, and domestic violence were not discussed in the almanac. In that regard, as I argued in my MA Thesis, the scope of topics addressed in the dissident almanac was remarkably similar to those discussed on the pages of official women's magazine *Rabotnitsa*.⁸²¹

The group secretly printed ten copies of *W&R* and circulated them within dissident circles and abroad. In December 1979, according to the *USSR News Brief*, the KGB threatened Mamonova, Voznesenskaya, and Sofia Sokolova, a contributor to the *W&R*, demanding that

⁸¹⁹ Tatyana Mamonova et al., *Women and Russia : Feminist Writings from the Soviet Union* (Oxford, Eng. : Blackwell, c1984,.), 272.

⁸²⁰ See more on the ideas and conflicts within the group Sidorevich, "The Leningrad Women's Movement (1979-1982): Between Soviet Emancipation and Second-Wave Feminism."

⁸²¹ Aleksandra Vladimirovna Talaver, *Samizdat Magazines of the Soviet Dissident Women's Group, 1979-1982 : A Critical Analysis*, CEU Gender Studies Department Master Theses: 2017/30 (Budapest : Central European University, 2017).

they cease publication.⁸²² The same month, Mamonova wrote a letter to the main prosecutor of Leningrad with a request to stop the harassment by the KGB; she also stated that she was going to continue her feminist activity because she considered their group to be a progressive movement and an essential part of the worldwide democratic movement. This letter appeared in the Paris-based Russian-language émigré newspaper *Russkaya Mysl'* (Russian thought) based in Paris on January 10, 1979.⁸²³

Later in December, a copy of *W&R* reached Paris, where it was translated and published in *Des femmes en mouvements* (Women in Movements) by the French Mouvement de libération des femmes (MLF). The MLF distributed *W&R* to publishers across Europe to raise awareness about “the existence of the women’s movement in the USSR.”⁸²⁴ In 1980, MLF representatives visited Leningrad to meet with the editors of *W&R*. The MLF representatives proposed a reprint of the Almanac through their publishing house, Éditions des femmes, an offer met with enthusiasm, according to Mamonova. Mamonova and her husband distributed copies of the Almanac in Austria, the UK, and the United States.⁸²⁵

Internal disagreements led to a split among the editors already after *W&R*’s first and only issue. Mamonova, supported by her husband and Natalya Maltseva, pursued a Western-inspired feminism and launched a new samizdat magazine, *Rossianka* (Russian woman). Meanwhile, Voznesenskaya, Goricheva, Malakhovskaya, and others organized around an independent women’s religious club, *Maria*.⁸²⁶ Both projects continued for some years but mostly abroad, since, due to the KGB harassment and threats, all four had been forced to leave the country by the summer of 1980.⁸²⁷

⁸²² “USSR News Brief Bulletin,” USSR News Brief bulletin, 1980, <https://kronid.wordpress.com/category/1980/>.

⁸²³ *Zhenschina i Rossia [Woman and Russia]* (Éditions des femmes), 139–41.

⁸²⁴ *Zhenschina i Rossia [Woman and Russia]*, 143.

⁸²⁵ According to the document “Chronicle of 1980”, created by Mamonova’s husband after their exile, from Tat’yana Mamonova’s personal archive, which she sent me by email.

⁸²⁶ Oksana Vasyakina, Dmitry Kozlov, and Aleksandra Talaver, eds., *Feminist Samizdat: 40 Years after [Feministskiĭ Samizdat. 40 Let Spustia]* (Moscow: commonplace, 2020).

⁸²⁷ Vasyakina, Kozlov, and Talaver.



Illustration 13 Soviet feminist dissident Natalija Malakhovskaya (left) and the Danish Minister of Culture Lise Østergaard, at the meeting in Copenhagen in July 1980. Source: Malakhovskaya's private collection.

Illustration 14 A short note about the head of the Soviet delegation and the SWC Valentina Tereshkova at the United Nations World Conference, Copenhagen, in NGO Forum 1980 Newspaper. Source: Forum 80, July 23, 1980. <https://search.alexanderstreet.com/>

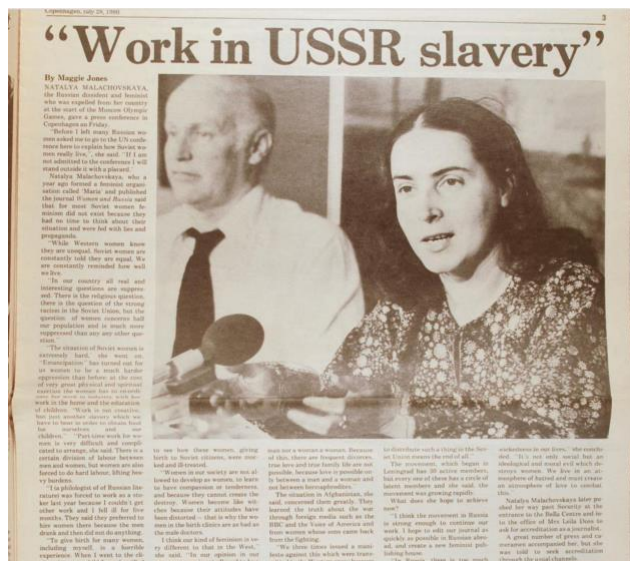


Illustration 15 A note about Natalija Malakhovskaya at the United Nations World Conference, Copenhagen, in NGO Forum 1980 Newspaper. Source: Forum 80, July 28, 1980. <https://search.alexanderstreet.com/>

On July 28, 1980, Natalija Malakhovskaya, one of the editors of the 1979 *Woman & Russia* Almanac, had a meeting with the President of the World Conference of the United Nations Decade for Women, the Danish Minister of Culture Lise Østergaard. Malakhovskaya passed a memo to Østergaard to raise three key concerns on behalf of Soviet women: difficult conditions for women in the USSR doing physical work, poor conditions in Soviet maternity hospitals, and the fate of Tatiana Velikanova, a dissident woman arrested by Soviet authorities. She also held a press conference, as recently discussed by the historian of the dissident group, Anna Sidorevich.⁸²⁸ The World Conference of the United Nations Decade for Women is another name for the Second UN World Conference on Women, where Valentina Tereshkova represented Soviet women with a completely different narrative about women in the SU. *Forum 80*, a newspaper of the NGO Forum during the World Conference, published a short note about Tereshkova some days before Malakhovskaya's press conference.⁸²⁹

The conference newspaper *Forum 80*'s account of Tereshkova and Malakhovskaya's speeches showed that the two women discussed the same topics but from diametral opposed perspectives, neither of which, I would say, was complete without another. Thus, Tereshkova spoke about legislative improvements during the UN Decade for Women in the position of women and legal gender equality in the USSR, which was backed up by "tangible guarantees," i.e. "absence of unemployment," the growth of state-funded childcare, healthcare, and education, women's representation in politics and, finally, she called for disarmament. She "said that peace and disarmament were the pressing need for today's world."⁸³⁰ Malakhovskaya started by stating that "while Western women know they are unequal, Soviet women are constantly told they are equal." She complained about the double burden, the unavailability of

⁸²⁸ Sidorevich, "The Leningrad Women's Movement (1979-1982): Between Soviet Emancipation and Second-Wave Feminism," 292-95.

⁸²⁹ *Forum 80*, July 23, 1980..

https://search.alexanderstreet.com/view/work/bibliographic_entity|bibliographic_details|1533168.

⁸³⁰ Dusan Rovensky, "Down-to-Earth Tereshkova," *Forum 80*, July 23, 1980.

part-time work, the hard physical labor women had to do, and the compulsory employment; she also emphasized the horrible conditions in maternal hospitals. Malakhovskaya differentiated her feminism from what she regarded as the Western version because in the USSR, “man is not allowed to be a man nor a woman a woman.” Lastly, she spoke about the Soviet troops in Afghanistan and protested against their presence there, and spoke about their 30-member feminist “movement” in Leningrad, which was “growing rapidly.”⁸³¹

The SWC Presidium discussed the events at the 1980 Copenhagen Conference at its meeting in September 1980. As Sidorevich has shown, Valeria Kalmyk, one of the Soviet delegates at the Forum, mentioned at the Presidium meeting that “there were some attempts to launch an active and strong anti-Soviet and anti-socialist propaganda” in Copenhagen. Similarly, Valentina Tereshkova noted in her report that the Forum was used by “reactionary forces” “for the purposes of anti-Soviet and anti-Communist propaganda, carried out mainly in the following two directions: the so-called ‘Soviet intervention in Afghanistan’ and ‘human rights violation in the USSR and other socialist countries.’” Furthermore, Tereshkova spoke about Malakhovskaya’s interview in the Conference’s newspaper *Forum 80*, referring to Malakhovskaya as “one of the authors of the anti-Soviet almanac *Zhenschiny v Rossii* (sic), published in many magazines abroad.”⁸³²

This discussion is the only evidence we have of the SWC’s evaluation of the feminist dissident group. It showed that, even if they shared a similar perspective on the scope of the problems women faced—their opinions on the situation in the USSR and on how these problems were being addressed were antipodal. These differences were dictated not only by their attitudes toward the state but also by broader political contexts. Whereas the SWC adopted the socialist perspective on the solution of the woman question, the feminist dissident group

⁸³¹ Maggie Jones, “Work in USSR Slavery,” *Forum 80*, July 28, 1980.

⁸³² Sidorevich, “The Leningrad Women’s Movement (1979-1982): Between Soviet Emancipation and Second-Wave Feminism,” 294.

represented a diverse outlook, combining elements of Western second-wave feminism and Orthodox Christianity.⁸³³ Yet, the lack of solidarity from the SWC towards a dissident feminist group is meaningful for my analysis and shows serious limitations for concerns for “ordinary” Soviet women to be heard.

5.6 Conclusion

This chapter has examined how the SWC functioned within the context of IWY. First, I explored how the SWC positioned itself vis-à-vis the growing Western women’s movement. I showed that whereas Soviet media promoted stories of the confrontation with the Westerners during IWY, the SWC’s tactics were more complex. The SWC attempted to differentiate between the agendas of Western governments and the objectives of women’s movements and fostered connections across the Cold War divide based on the latter to influence global public opinion. The SWC and Soviet media supported the Western women’s movement in their criticism of sexism and the sexual objectification of women, simultaneously claiming that neither of these existed in the Soviet Union.

The SWC referred to the promotion of women’s rights as the best Soviet propaganda. In line with the socialist approach, they saw gender inequality as interconnected with other types of oppression—capitalist, colonial, racist. Western politicians at the time rejected this intersectional approach as “politicizing” and “not feminist,” and so did and do Western liberal feminists and scholars at the time and today; instead they often perceive such framing as serving Soviet foreign politic. There is no doubt it did, but this was possible because the SWC’s views in this sphere aligned with those of the Soviet state’s (professed) politics, which included support for women’s rights in the international domain from this broader, intersectional perspective. First, as Aoife O’Donougue and Adam Rowe have written, the Soviet contribution

⁸³³ Sidorevich, “The Leningrad Women’s Movement (1979-1982): Between Soviet Emancipation and Second-Wave Feminism.”

to the “Declaration of Mexico on the Equality of Women and Their Contribution to Development and Peace” led to the demand to include women in the decision-making process about peace and international affairs on all levels, thus challenging the patriarchal order of international policymaking (articles 2, 25, and 26 in the Declaration of Mexico on the Equality of Women and Their Contribution to Development and Peace).⁸³⁴ The US and Israel voted against the Declaration, but a similar approach slowly became mainstream (yet not successfully implemented), leading to UN Resolution 1325 on “Women, Peace and Security,” adopted in 2000.⁸³⁵ Second, the approach of considering women’s rights as part of other economic and political questions, planted the seed of what became “gender mainstreaming” later on. For example, the Soviet bloc resisted organizing separate conferences on IWY as it would be “like other themed conferences, a gimmick”; instead, they proposed to put IWY on the General Assembly agenda.⁸³⁶

Second, I analyzed the SWC’s role in the implementation of IWY in the USSR and showed that IWY had considerable visibility in the country, which included numerous events and the establishment of a Soviet IWY Commission in the Supreme Soviet. The idea for such a Commission was proposed at the SWC Presidium meeting already in 1974, and the SWC members held key positions in it. Aleksandra Biryukova, Ksenia Proskurnikova, Nina Popova, Zoya Pukhova, Elena Novikova, and many others SWC members in line with long existing politics framed the improvement of the women’s lives in the Soviet Union as a means for international propaganda of socialism, which officially was the Supreme Soviet’s Commission for IWY’s main task.

I have shown that the report of the IWY Commission stated that many issues discussed at the Commission were included in the Decision of the 25th Congress of the Communist Party

⁸³⁴ O’Donoghue and Rowe, “Feminism, Global Inequality, and the 1975 Mexico City Conference,” 97.

⁸³⁵ Cynthia Cockburn, “War and Security, Women and Gender: An Overview of the Issues,” *Gender and Development* 21, no. 3 (2013): 433–52.

⁸³⁶ O’Donoghue and Rowe, “Feminism, Global Inequality, and the 1975 Mexico City Conference,” 91–92.

of the Soviet Union on the CC CPSU Draft “Guidelines for the Development of the National Economy of the USSR for 1976-1980.” This can be read as a sign of the relevant success of those women who lobbied for the redistribution of resources. Yet, the report also showed that one of the main concerns—the reduction of working hours for mothers and alleviation of working conditions for women was not addressed fully, and it took years to implement. However, the fact that the effect of their efforts was rather small and not transformative, and that some of the Soviet solutions to reduce women’s workload turned out to be a disaster in the new economic situation after 1991, are not reasons to diminish or ignore the work these women did. Moreover, the SWC’s efforts to reduce productivity norms for women and redistribute resources in favor of reproduction can be read as an attempt to transform Soviet state and reduce the state’s exploitation of women workers—an issue frequently associated with the Soviet emancipation project.

The chapter explored opportunities that IWY opened for the institutional growth of the SWC, which increased its membership, scholarship amount for women from developing countries, and political presence. Finally, it also showed that the SWC attitude towards feminist dissident group that emerged in Leningrad in 1979 was hostile—the fact that exemplified limitations of the Soviet state feminist case.

Overall, I can conclude that IWY in the Soviet Union did not bring new women’s organizations or substantially shift the agenda—in that regard, I agree with Popa’s and Jarska’s statements that IWY was not transformative in state socialist countries. Yet, it was not like any other year; it boosted the SWC’s position and enhanced the development of women-friendly politics often justified by the SWC members as a means of international propaganda.

Conclusion

This dissertation has examined the role of the Soviet Women's Committee in Soviet policymaking after the second World War, on the basis of primary archival research. It departed from two widespread assumptions about the SWC. The first is that the SWC was just an instrument of the Communist Party that did not make any attempts to advocate Soviet women's interests. The overview of the limited recent research on the SWC's international activities in Chapter One revealed that, even when the Committee was serving propaganda purposes, it still managed to contribute meaningfully to the international women's movement by, for example, supporting work of the WIDF, sending messages of solidarity and providing material support to women's movements in decolonizing countries (albeit not always all that was necessary), and by building connections and internationalism via correspondence and delegation exchange. Moreover, the in-house history of the SWC from 2013 praised its contributions to Soviet legislation, contributions that previous scholarship had not explored. The second assumption I questioned is that the SWC's existence and growth within the Soviet system was self-evident and not in need of any further explanation. I argued that given its initial struggle in establishing contacts with women's organizations abroad, the short-lived existence of other anti-fascist committees that were established at the same time and, importantly, the brief life of its predecessor, the Zhenotdel, the institutional growth of the SWC was not self-evident and required analysis.

My research was guided by five questions, the first of which was: What was the SWC and who were its members? This covers how the SWC was structured and how it functioned and developed over time? The second question related to how the SWC as an organization shaped its members' perceptions of their role in the Soviet state? In particular, what role did the Plena play for SWC members? Thirdly, how did SWC members participate in Soviet policymaking regarding women's rights? The pertinent sub-questions here are: What were the

governmental and party structures through which they managed to influence the policymaking process in the USSR and to what degree were they able to frame political discussions and outcomes in the fields relevant to women's rights and status in the Soviet Union? The fourth question relates to the reasons for considering the SWC the successor of the Zhenotdel, as I suggested in Chapters Two and Four, and more broadly, to what extent did SWC members continue "Bolshevik feminism," and to what extent and when did they divert from it, or adapt it? Finally, what do my findings add to the existing scholarship regarding the SWC, the history of Soviet gender policies, and more broadly, of state feminism under state socialism?

To answer these questions, I examined the SWC's structure and mode of operation using the theoretical framework of resource mobilization. I closely examined the SWC's Plena transcripts and the biographies of some of its members to determine whether their political activities were influenced by their affiliation with the SWC and whether the SWC created an opportunity for Soviet women to participate in policymaking as an interest group. In addition, I applied the state feminism framework to analyze three key policy areas in which SWC members were actively involved: the decriminalization of abortion in 1955, legal regulation of reproductive and productive labor, and the implementation of United Nations-proclaimed International Women's Year (IWY) in the USSR. I assessed whether and to what extent SWC members influenced the framing and outcomes of these policy areas and whether they incorporated the voices of ordinary Soviet women or of the short-lived underground feminist movement (1979-1982).

My research resulted in five key arguments. This dissertation's first and key argument is that although the SWC has often been dismissed in scholarship as a mere propaganda tool of the Communist Party it played a more complex role in Soviet policymaking.

Secondly, it did so by serving as an essential platform for consolidating Soviet women as an interest group within the Soviet political system, even though this was not part of the SWC's

official task of representing the USSR. I found that the SWC's Plena served as a site for the consolidation of Soviet women as an interest group within Soviet Party and government structures and as a space for voicing their demands and differences. I revealed that the bond between SWC members that enabled them to act was built upon shared emotions, which marked the boundaries between Soviet women and Soviet men and between Soviet women and Western women. Creatively reading themselves into the official Soviet discourse, SWC members construed themselves as deserving citizens on account of their engagement in the national economy, productive labor, and their overall contribution to building the Soviet state. Moreover, appealing to their unique female experience in reproductive labor, they carved out a space for political claims, the re-distribution of resources, and special benefits for women. Therefore, I argue that the Plena created a space for developing "epistemological autonomy," derived from SWC members' experience of productive and reproductive labor, and their encounters with foreigners, which allowed them to formulate demands that transcended the Party agenda and official discourse. However, it remains important to emphasize that the SWC members considered themselves and the mission of the SWC as inseparably linked with the Soviet state, which they perceived as a fruit of their own work. I demonstrated that the 1958 SWC Plenum was a crucial space for the articulation of the demand to launch women-only groups on the local level across the USSR, groups that became known as "women's councils" or "zhensoveti" and about whose origins the scholarship is vague and equivocal. My research on the SWC's members tactics in policymaking revealed that their experiences of international women's congresses and official visits as members of Soviet delegations informed their actions in different sites of domestic policymaking, namely, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, the All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions (AUCCTU), and the International Women's Year Commission of the Supreme Soviet. The SWC created a space in which women working in different Soviet governmental and Party bodies were able to build

connections that allowed them to coordinate their actions and support each other in the policymaking process. In other words, the SWC functioned as a professional network of women across different organizations and republics, even though its members were appointed by the local CC CP.

The third key argument of my analysis is that SWC members influenced several policies that significantly impacted the lives of women in the USSR, such as the 1955 decriminalization of abortion, the expansion of state infrastructure for childcare, and labor legislation. I found that SWC members often framed their goals as aligned with the Party line, yet, in substance, they departed from it and subtly reframed the official Soviet discourse on women's emancipation according to their own perspectives. I argue that this differs from what historian Wang Zheng has termed the "politics of concealment."⁸³⁷ While adhering to the conventions of official Soviet discourse, SWC members sometimes reshaped it through their participation in policymaking. A clear example of this is the 1955 decree that decriminalized abortion, which explicitly framed the policy as giving women the opportunity to decide on motherhood for themselves—a reframing that reflected the influence of SWC members. However, I also emphasized the limitations SWC members faced, as they continuously encountered patriarchal attitudes and resistance in the implementation of their proposals.

My fourth finding is that SWC members made active use of letters from Soviet women to shape their policymaking agenda. These letters provided SWC members with legitimacy and they used them, for example, when advocating for the decriminalization of abortion or the redistribution of resources. This indicates that the SWC tried to incorporate the voices of Soviet women into policymaking. However, I also underscored the fact that the SWC was an elite organization, with members appointed by local Party committees. Despite receiving hundreds of thousands of letters from "ordinary Soviet women," the SWC struggled to establish a strong

⁸³⁷ Zheng, *Finding Women in the State*, 17.

bond with them. Many Soviet women did not perceive the Committee as a venue for addressing their concerns—an issue that was explicitly discussed at the SWC Plena. Moreover, the SWC was hostile to the short-lived dissident feminist movement that emerged in Leningrad in 1979 and existed until 1982.

The fifth and final conclusion of my analysis of the activities of SWC members is that in the cases of the 1955 decriminalization of abortion, AUCCTU policies, and IWY, the presence of state feminism can be observed. SWC members shaped and influenced political processes and outcomes in alignment with their own demands and also the concerns Soviet women, as expressed in letters to the Committee. Importantly, my analysis identified two conflicting perspectives on women's emancipation among SWC members of different generations. With regard to the first of these viewpoints, Nina Popova and Maria Kovrigina, representatives of what has been called the "first Soviet generation," presented motherhood as a challenging task in the Soviet state. In line with the Bolshevik tradition and based on letters from Soviet women, they presented reproductive labor as endless and exhausting and, importantly, as an obstacle to the right to motherhood as such. The solution they proposed was the improvement of the socialization of childcare and more communal infrastructure to relieve women of domestic chores. By contrast, Aleksandra Biryukova, a representative of "the last Stalin generation," attempted to advance the idea of special benefits for "working women and women raising small children," and of reducing productivity norms for these groups. This was an alternative approach to addressing the fact that Soviet women were overburdened, which fitted the context in which the utopian horizon of the complete socialization of reproductive labor had vanished. Most of the protective labor laws adopted in the period of the 1970s and 1980s became discriminatory after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, when Russia shifted from a planned to a market economy—the list of occupations prohibited for women is the most striking example. Scholars have interpreted late Soviet policies to reduce the burden of women and alleviate the

combined role of paid employment and motherhood as merely a return to more conservative gender roles, without examining the reasons why the AUCCTU leadership or people like Biryukova advocated for these policies or whether some of the outcomes might have been unintended and at least partially a consequence of the changed economic and political structures.

With these findings, this research has intervened in two scholarly fields. Firstly, it has clearly shown the active role of women in Soviet gender politics after the Second World War. The considerable contributions of SWC members to Soviet legislation have been erased or overlooked in scholarship for two reasons. The first is due to the SWC's ambiguous reputation as an organization representing the Soviet state and the second is related to its members' self-representation. In line with the official Soviet discourse, they generally talked about themselves as indebted to the Party and state, and thus played down or did not acknowledge their own contributions. In addition, when some wrote about topics such as abortion legislation, they were censored, as Kovrigina was in her published autobiography. Adding the stories of women into the picture, as I have done here, highlights the patriarchal attitudes of their male colleagues and the obstacles the SWC women faced in promoting their proposals and also reveals similar patterns in historiography.⁸³⁸

For a long time, the principal “feminist” in Soviet history after the Second World War was Party leader Nikita Khrushchev, to whom the decriminalization of abortion in 1955 was attributed. In her comprehensive 2012 book *A History of Women in Russia*, Barbara Clements stated: “Although Khrushchev never made the woman question a high priority, his administration did institute important changes. In 1955 it legalized abortion, on the grounds that backstreet procedures were harming women’s health.”⁸³⁹ Similarly, in her 2009 chapter on

⁸³⁸ Francisca de Haan, “Introduction,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Communist Women Activists around the World*, ed. Francisca de Haan, 1st ed., Palgrave Handbooks (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), 1–33.

⁸³⁹ Barbara Evans Clements, *A History of Women in Russia: From Earliest Times to the Present* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 254.

women's councils, historian Melanie Ilić suggested they appeared on the initiative of Khrushchev:

As part of an attempt to reinvigorate participatory politics through a broad program of public consultation campaigns, once in office, Khrushchev called for the mobilization of a range of different social groups, and this resulted in the revival of formal women's organizations. As a result, zhensoveti began to be formed throughout the Soviet Union at grassroots level from 1957.⁸⁴⁰

My exploration of the work of SWC members has made visible the women who were behind these political decisions.

The second field to which my dissertation's findings can contribute is that of research on state feminism under state socialism. By following the method developed by the Research Network on Gender and Politics and the State (RNGS), I showed that SWC members were in some cases able to influence policymaking. Importantly, according to the proposed methodology, state feminism is not something that can be characteristic of a state, but rather is something that occurs within policymaking if certain conditions exist.⁸⁴¹ In the case of the Soviet Union, these conditions included the existence of the SWC, the practice of letter writing, the declared Bolshevik commitment to solving the woman question, the relative political liberalization under Nikita Khrushchev, the pressure of international propaganda during IWWY and the Soviet state's need for women's involvement in paid labor. In addition, the authors of the state feminism research framework proposed situating each case "on [a] continuum" consisting of: full state feminism — partial state feminism — unsuccessful state feminism —

⁸⁴⁰ Ilić, "What Did Women Want? Khrushchev and the Revival of the Zhensoveti," 108.

⁸⁴¹ Goertz and Mazur, *Politics, Gender, and Concepts*, 262.

absent state feminism — no state feminism.⁸⁴² The position on this scale is measured by four key questions:

1. To what extent did the WPA (women's political agencies) promote a micro-frame that matched the feminist movement micro-frame?
2. Was the WPA successful in incorporating the feminist movement micro-frame into the dominant frame of the policy subsystem?
3. Did the policy content match the micro-frames of the feminist movement actors?
4. To what extent were women's movement actors in the policy process presenting feminist micro-frames?⁸⁴³

Thus, apart from the existence of a WPA, the level of direct access of women's activists to the political process plays a crucial role in evaluating the kind of state feminism that existed in the given cases. I conclude that the Soviet examples I analyzed in the dissertation were cases of partial state feminism, because the SWC members remained the main representatives of Soviet women in the policymaking process and women activists did not have direct access to the political process. Moreover, the letters and concerns of Soviet women that the SWC members embraced and worked with had to avoid any fundamental critique of the Soviet system, otherwise the women's complaints would have been dismissed, as was the case with the feminist dissident movement. Thus, despite its presence, the Soviet cases of state feminism were partial and had significant limitations.

⁸⁴² Goertz and Mazur, 263–64.

⁸⁴³ Goertz and Mazur, 261.

My work for this dissertation also revealed areas in which further research would be useful. The first relates to cases of SWC members' involvement in Soviet policymaking, which I did not exhaust in the research. As mentioned in Chapter One, SWC members took part in developing the Family Code in 1968, pushed for the establishment of the alimony fund in 1984, and submitted the "Social Justice Law" in 1990.⁸⁴⁴ These cases could provide additional comparative perspectives on the conditions that made state feminism possible.

The second relates to the policies of the AUCCTU (All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions), which I only briefly touched in but which played a considerable role in shaping the lives of Soviet women and is thus deserving of further research. Trade unions were central in regulating labor conditions, workplace protections for women, and social benefits. Additionally, the role of researchers and experts working within the AUCCTU needs closer examination. Specifically, how did their analyses influence policy decisions and to what degree were they able to introduce perspectives that challenged official state narratives on gender and labor, and reproductive and productive labor?

A third potentially rewarding area of further research is related to the fact that while the Soviet Union positioned itself as superior to Western feminism—claiming that socialism had already achieved gender equality—there was an ongoing fruitful ideological exchange between Western feminists and Soviet women, especially from the 1970s. I only briefly touched upon how this exchange informed Soviet sociology (Chapter Four) and media discourse (Chapter Five). The question of how Soviet policymakers and intellectuals engaged with Western feminist ideas presents another underexplored field of Soviet policymaking.

Finally, investigating the role of SWC members in policymaking processes in the national republics could provide more nuanced insights into the gender and racial hierarchies of the USSR.⁸⁴⁵ I showed that women from Central Asian Republics sometimes addressed the

⁸⁴⁴ Galkina, *Komitet sovetskikh zhenshchin: stranitsy istorii (1941-1992)*, 174-175, 643.

⁸⁴⁵ Abman, *Coerced Liberation*.

inequality in the redistribution of resources within the SWC, but it is unlikely that this was the only instance of them having a critical stance towards the inequalities of the Soviet system. To what extent did SWC members in national republics advocate for policies that differed from those promoted at the all-Union level? Did SWC members from non-Slavic republics have a different approach to gender issues compared to their Russian counterparts? What were their relationships with indigenous women?

To conclude, having provided this historical analysis of the role of the SWC in domestic Soviet politics, and having argued that, with all the aforementioned limitations, they did enhance women's status and rights, it is worth mentioning the Union of Women of Russia (UWR), which is formally the SWC's successor. Unfortunately, the UWR works against women's rights by promoting what they call "traditional values," and fundraising for Russia's war against Ukraine.⁸⁴⁶ In line with the Soviet tradition, the Kremlin uses the gender agenda and women's organizations, including the UWR, to advance its geopolitical interests, but in this case it advocates the opposite of what the SWC promoted, namely American Protestant ideas of traditional values instead of women's emancipation.⁸⁴⁷ As I have demonstrated, service to the state was intrinsic to the SWC, but there is a stark difference between the current situation and the socialist agenda for women. Promises of Bolshevik feminism retained their traction for most of the duration of the Soviet Union, giving SWC members legitimacy to advocate for women's rights, even in the authoritarian and heavily militarized state that was the USSR.

⁸⁴⁶ Yulia Gradskaia, "From Defending Women's Rights in the 'Whole World' to Silence About Russia's Predatory War? The (Geo)Politics of the Eurasian Women's Forums in the Context of 'Traditional Values,'" *Sustainable Development Goals Series* 2023 (2023): 29–49, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-38066-2_2.

⁸⁴⁷ Kristina Stoeckl et al., *The Moralists International: Russia in the Global Culture Wars*, 1st edition (New York: Fordham University Press, 2022).

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