Introduction

“It is sad that we had to leave. This is the misfortune of our generation that we all had to leave…such was our fate.”¹ During the last interview in late November 2007 as I was completing my fieldwork, Svetlana reflected on the demise of the Soviet Union and its effects. As I had done with the past six interviews, that day I spent a few hours in Svetlana’s home, sitting at the kitchen table and drinking tea, as the women told me of their past Soviet lives. From my perspective, the interesting aspect of Svetlana’s reflection is not so much the last years of the Soviet Union and the aftermath it points to, but rather the intimate implication of her life that came before. In the very beginning, I decided to carry out interviews with women from the former Soviet Union such as Svetlana, primarily with public health issues in mind. Indeed, throughout the thesis, themes of reproduction, motherhood, and medicine remained central for me. Yet in the process of our conversations, I also discovered women’s strong sense of agency imbedded in their Soviet lives. I realized that even women’s accounts of reproduction and Soviet medicine manifested as critical aspects of their larger notions of agency and self-understanding. This greatly expanded my interests and led me to explore more thoroughly the subjective dimension of women’s self-understanding in late Soviet society.

On my drives back home from the interviews, which often took up to an hour, I would reflect on the previous couple of hours that I had spent with the women. During the first couple of such trips I found myself feeling almost disoriented with what the women were telling me. Our conversations were not turning out the way I had imagined

they might. In the very beginning, I had expected that the interview material I would eventually collect would be replete with women’s denunciations of their Soviet lives, filled with stories of female exploitation and discrimination. For these were often the dominant themes I have been reading about in much of the scholarly literature on women in Soviet society. After all, one must search hard to find a book that does not in one way or another discuss Natalya Baranskaya’s *A Week Like Any Other*, her 1969 novella that poignantly describes the infamous female double burden that came to mark women’s lives in Soviet society. ² Indeed, *A Week Like Any Other*, a historical source produced by a woman from within the Soviet Union, is integral to our understanding of this past. It captured an important piece of the female experience in the late Soviet period. Therefore, Baranskaya’s work is a criticism from within and about a setting that proclaimed female liberation as its revolutionary goal, yet she points out that the Soviet regime did not live up to its own early promises and aspirations. In that respect, *A Week Like Any Other* is a voice of criticism of the structural conditions that made women’s everyday lives in Soviet society difficult. Yet the novella’s criticism is not a denunciation of ideological values of female liberation, but rather a condemnation of the late Soviet regime. This critical distinction is precisely what lay at the core of women’s self-understanding during the course of my conversations with them. Their accounts revealed the intimate ways they appropriated ideological values, which at least partly, embodied their past Soviet lives. Women’s notions of self in the Soviet context come out in stark relief in their present lives in a different value system within the United States. Thus, in light of their current

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experiences, women’s accounts of medicine and their orientation within it poignantly speak to their notions of self and agency in their Soviet lives.

Thus, discussing Baranskaya’s novella only for its revelations of women’s everyday burdens tends to portray women’s experiences in late Soviet society as exclusively exploitative and victimized. Yet time and time again I found myself leaving the women with my recorder, having captured hours worth of fascinating and intriguing conversations that stood in stark contradiction to narratives of victimization. Rather, the stories I was hearing were marked by notions of female agency and an intimate understanding of themselves that were initially surprising to me.

After I completed the first interview in October 2007, on my drive home I kept thinking about the way Raya repeatedly stressed how interesting her life in the Soviet Union had been precisely because of her work. I was not sure what to make of all this just yet, and thought that maybe Raya’s life in Moscow and her strong sense of agency might have been quite different and thus an exception from other women, and especially those hailing from other parts of the Soviet Union. Two weeks later, I met with Rita who had lived for many years in the city of Baku. Rita’s accounts, too, revealed how deeply her self-understanding was tied to an intimate appropriation of liberatory ideology of work. By the end of the second interview, my research experiences have expanded my thinking in ways I did not necessarily anticipate. I realized that my conversations with these women presented me with an intimate dimension of their subjective understanding of themselves within the Soviet context. The most striking aspect in women’s narratives was a central sense of themselves that effectively resisted notions of victimhood.
In her introduction to *In the Shadow of Revolution: Life Stories of Russian Women from 1917 to the Second World War*, Sheila Fitzpatrick discusses the idea of victimhood as an important theme in Russian women’s autobiographies. The sources of victimization in these accounts range from men, to the tsarist government, the Soviet state, and even capitalists. Fitzpatrick tells us that often times these were liberated women who felt themselves oppressed and exploited by the men in their environment. Indeed, victimhood as a narrative style has an important place within Russian women’s autobiographies. Although my focus of women’s experiences in Soviet society examines the late period, the narrative styles of the early period are an apt point from which to address my interviews with women in the post-Soviet context about their former lives. If in the early period many women wrote their autobiographies as they understood themselves to be victims in whatever capacity the source manifested itself, then similarly much of the scholarly literature tends to depict women’s experiences since the post-war period in the similar vein of victimhood. Thus, we must differentiate between the early and the late periods of Soviet power. In the early period, the state was the vanguard or principal agent of transformation. The force of women’s liberation came from the state. Thus, it is possible to argue that in the early Soviet period women understood themselves as victims because Bolshevik ideology was still new and had yet to be appropriated. Many women might not have yet fully identified with the Bolshevik Revolution. This is precisely why the Zhenotdel, the Women’s Department within the Communist Party, was so crucial in the early period as a tool to reach masses of women, mobilize them and raise their consciousness. Lenin himself argued that otherwise women would not feel

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irresistibly inclined to align themselves with the revolution. One had to be brought to consciousness. In addition, the exploitative tsarist regime and ideas of male superiority were still tangible on women’s minds during this early period, and thus possibly contributed to their notions of victimization.

Yet when we examine the late Soviet period, this past was very distant for many women. The state was no longer embodied as an agent of liberation but rather of oppression as encapsulated by the double burden. During the late Soviet period, and despite the ongoing criticisms as voiced by Baranskaya, we may still observe an internalization of revolutionary ideology of female liberation. In this case, however, women themselves were the agents of liberation as they individually appropriated ideology of liberation in opposition to the late Soviet state. During my conversations with women, they effectively resisted narratives of victimization. This critical aspect of negating victimhood in our conversations marks an important shift between the early and the late Soviet periods. Victimhood as a theme rightfully has an important place, but we must be careful not to uniformly apply it from the beginning to the end of the Soviet experience.

Thus, my arguments in this thesis build on our present understanding, but at the same time, it attempts to go beyond by exploring the subjective dimension. The implications of exploring this subjective dimension became evident to me in the course of my interviews as women’s strong sense of agency and an understanding of self intertwined with their intimate appropriation of ideology became a dominant theme. Women did not understand themselves as passive victims and resisted narratives of victimhood. Again, this is not to imply that women’s everyday lives were not difficult in
a society where shortages of service goods made simple activities as grocery shopping stressful and time-consuming tasks. Yet this does not diminish women’s sense of agency and automatically preclude a meaningful experience. During our conversations, an important aspect in resisting narratives of victimhood and passivity lay precisely in women’s personal notions of self in contradistinction to the inefficient late state’s claims to ideology as its true carriers. Thus, interviews facilitate an exploration of the subjective dimension that focuses attention to what the “Soviet experience” meant for women themselves and more importantly how they located themselves within it.

The picture becomes more complete when we integrate the equally important subjective dimension to our exploration of the Soviet past. It is tempting to reflect on the “Soviet experience” in rigid and easily quantifiable exploitative terms given our current knowledge of the Soviet state’s numerous transgressions against its own people. Women are a poignant example of this phenomenon when we trace revolutionary progressive beginnings of female liberation that over time took on more regressive and repressive undertones. Yet despite our current vantage point and biases that are inherent to it, we must understand women’s accounts in the Soviet context in which they occurred for otherwise they become “void of historical understanding, which is achieved by locating actors in the value systems of their own times, not ours.”

Driving home from my last interview with Svetlana, I felt happy and relieved to have completed the fieldwork portion of my research. As I reflected on Svetlana’s comment that hinted at the deeply intimate past, it echoed with something I had been hearing from the women for the past two months. It assured me of the importance of the subjective component in our broader understanding of women’s “Soviet experience” that

I would have to work out in the coming months. What follows in this thesis is an exploration of women’s subjective experiences and the ways in which women appropriated Soviet Communist ideology of female liberation and located themselves within the late Soviet period.
Chapter 1
The “Woman Question” and the Bolshevik Solution

In 1920 Clara Zetkin, leader of the international socialist women’s movement, had several conversations with Lenin on the woman question that later became a pamphlet entitled *Lenin on the Woman Question*. These conversations captured the essence of women’s liberation lying within the aspirations of Bolshevik Revolution.

Lenin expressed such revolutionary goals to Zetkin:

Must I avow, or make you avow, that the struggle for women’s rights must also be linked with our principal aim—the conquest of power and the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat? At present, this is, and will continue to be, our alpha and omega. That is clear, absolutely clear. But the broad masses of working women will not feel irresistibly drawn to the struggle for state power if we harp on just this one demand, even though we may blare it forth on the trumpets of Jericho. No, a thousand times no! We must combine our appeal politically in the minds of the female masses with the sufferings, the needs and the wishes of the working women. They should all know what the proletarian dictatorship will mean to them—complete equality of rights with men, both legal and in practice, in the family, the state and in society, and that it also spells the annihilation of the power of the bourgeoisie.6

These ideas, elaborated in the course of the conversations between Lenin and Zetkin, make clear that for the Bolsheviks women’s liberation was inextricably tied with the revolution as a whole. Women’s liberation could effectively occur only within the bounds of socialism. Class came before gender. As a result of this setup, many scholars also point out the practical implications of this staunch Bolshevik worldview. Gail Lapidus writes, “Not only did socialist theory assign a secondary and even marginal importance to questions of women’s liberation, but the socialist movement had tactical as well as theoretical reservations. It was deeply suspicious of feminist activity as

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potentially bourgeois, separatist, even frivolous; moreover, it would divert energies from more pressing revolutionary priorities.” ⁷ As such, Lapidus upholds that the approach to female emancipation was often tactical rather than truly in the interests of women’s liberation.

Yet in his conversation with Zetkin, Lenin also emphasized the need to bring women to consciousness. This feeds into the larger Bolshevik goals of elevating consciousness and molding rational human beings. While consciousness and transformation applied to all members of society, there was a particular need to address women for they were considered doubly oppressed by the general backwardness of the Russian past, but also by patriarchally minded men. Choi Chatterjee elaborates on the process:

> Backwardness, conservatism, and disinclination to action were not considered innately feminine characteristics but byproducts of a woman’s tragic past. For a party that claimed to be the vanguard of the future, the Bolsheviks were obsessed with history, and women’s history was invariably narrated in the tragic vein familiar to those steeped in the literary traditions of [the nineteenth-century Russian writers, N. A.] Pushkin, Turgenev, and Nekrasov. In the Bolshevik version, however, suffering was neither ennobling nor an inevitable mark of gender. Rather, suffering stemmed from a lack of understanding about the true reasons for their misfortune. ⁸

The Bolsheviks dedicated acute attention to bringing people to understanding and molding them into rational human beings and as such purging of all backwardness associated with Russia. This speaks to the fact that the Bolsheviks did not view the female sex as innately passive, backward or inferior, but rather gendered into such a

condition by their oppressive environment. They fully expected women just as well as men to come to understand the connection between themselves and the revolution.

If the Bolshevik revolution was the path to true and full female emancipation, what were the conditions socialism offered to provide for women’s successful and complete liberation? In line with Marxist writings, the most important requisite to female liberation lay in their economic independence. Socialization of domestic work and child rearing would be necessary to facilitate women’s participation in the public world on an equal footing with men. The state would step in and take over this task on a massive scale. Lenin loathed domestic work and viewed it as a major impediment to female emancipation. In a pamphlet that was published in 1919, Lenin reflected on the degrading role of housework:

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 labor 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 rather when its wholesale transformation into large-scale socialist economy begins. 9

Thus, once the state took over the individual responsibilities by providing large-scale cafeterias, crèches, nurseries, laundries and other services, the woman would be freed from her condition as a “domestic slave” and fully proceed with public life. In a 1918 speech delivered to the First All-Russian Congress of Women, Alexandra Kollontai, a leading female Bolshevik, assured women that housekeeping would cease to be necessary: “All four kinds of housework, by which the family economy is still supported, are doomed to die out with the approaching success of the communist order. It is not

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necessary for working women to cry over the death of this kind of work. Communism will liberate woman from domestic slavery, so that her life can be richer, fuller, happier and freer.” 10 The key assumption in these proclamations rested on the fact that the state would indeed effectively transfer and socialize domestic work and thus free the woman from her domestic slave-like state. Yet the conditions facing the early revolutionary period were not necessarily conducive to an actualization of this process on a substantial scale. Nonetheless, such public services were established even if in a very limited and inadequate capacity. Precisely this contingency for full female emancipation emphasized from the earliest days by Lenin and Kollontai hints at what would subsequently become the infamous female double burden. In that respect, the following passage by Lenin during one of his conversations with Zetkin is almost prophetic:

We know perfectly well that all this is still too little, considering the needs of the working women, and that it is still far from sufficient for their real emancipation. Yet it is an immense stride forward from what there was in tsarist and capitalist Russia. Moreover, it is a lot as compared with the state of affairs where capitalism still holds undivided sway. It is a good start in the right direction, and we shall continue to develop it consistently, and with all available energy, too. You abroad may rest assured. Because with each day that passes it becomes clearer that we cannot make progress without the millions of women. 11

Achievements: legal equality

While the Bolsheviks were not able fully to realize the above-discussed requisite of eliminating domestic work for full female liberation in the early post-revolutionary period, they made great strides on the legal front toward achieving equality. Lenin

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reflected on these revolutionary legal achievements on International Women’s Day (March 8) in 1918:

The Bolshevik, Soviet Revolution cuts at the root of the oppression and inferiority of women more deeply than any party or any revolution in the world has dared to do. Not a trace of inequality between men and women before the law has been left in Soviet Russia. The particularly base, despicable, and hypocritical inequality of marital and family rights, inequality in relation to child, has been completely abolished by the Soviet government.12

The particularly base inequalities Lenin referred to were directly tackled by the Code on Marriage, the Family, and Guardianship (pervii kodeks zakonov ob aktakh grazhdanskogo sostoyaniya, brachnom, semeinom i opekunskom prave) that was adopted by the All-Russian Central Executive Committee on September 16, 1918. This code of laws was unprecedented and stood in opposition to backwardness embodied by the old tsarist order. The wide reach of these laws is remarkable especially when read against the background of the legal constraints imposed upon women in pre-revolutionary Russia.

Yet the Bolsheviks did not intend for these laws to become permanent fixtures; they were meant as temporary measures, characteristic of the transitional period in the struggle to establish a socialist order. These laws were one important aspect of establishing equality between the sexes in areas of life that had previously oppressed and humiliated women.

Title II of the Code dealt with marriage of which section 81 states, “A marriage shall be deemed void if contracted without the consent of either of the parties thereto, or when such consent was given in an unconscious state or under duress.”13 While section 87 asserts that, “The mutual consent of the husband and wife or the desire of either of them

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to obtain a divorce shall be considered a ground for divorce.” 14 Yet another key provision of Title II in section 104 ensured that from a legal perspective, “The change of residence by one of the parties to a marriage shall not impose an obligation upon the other party to follow the former.” 15 Collectively, such provisions of Title II of the Code granted a degree of legal freedom and recourse in personal life to both men and women on an equal basis. Another important achievement of this code of laws dealt with family rights under Title IV. Section 133 asserts, “Children descending from parents who are not married have equal rights with those descending from parents living in registered marriage.” 16 The provision did away with oppressive notions of illegitimacy by ensuring equality from a legal standpoint.

Yet legal equality, irrespective of how revolutionary and far-reaching it might have been, did not translate to automatic equality in practice. This key distinction of formal versus practical equality speaks to the Bolsheviks’ larger goal of changing human consciousness. Lenin acknowledged the discrepancies between formal and actual equality and the need to combat the gap between the two. During one of his conversations with Clara Zetkin he explained:

Unfortunately, we may still say of many of our comrades, “Scratch the Communist and a philistine appears.” To be sure, you have to scratch the sensitive spots,—such as their mentality regarding women. Could there be any more palpable proof than the common sight of a man calmly watching a woman wear herself out with trivial, monotonous, strength- and time-consuming work, such as her housework, and watching her spirit shrinking, her mind growing dull, her heartbeat growing faint, and her will growing slack? 17

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During the same conversation, when Zetkin, herself of German background, asked Lenin about the conditions in Soviet Russia, he replied, “The government of the proletarian dictatorship—jointly with the Communist Party and the trade unions of course—makes every effort to overcome the backward views of men and women and thus uproot the old, non-communist psychology.” The drive to alter human consciousness was of utmost importance for Lenin and the Bolshevik leadership as a whole.

Later Developments: Theory vs. Practice

Subsequent practice indeed did not correspond to the early revolutionary legal and social foundations toward female liberation. In fact, much of what would follow directly contradicted the first revolutionary phase. The women’s department within the Communist Party, the Zhenotdel, aptly embodies the shift of the Soviet state’s approach to women’s liberation. The Zhenotdel was initially established in 1919 as an important tool to raise consciousness and mobilize women. Lenin was an ardent supporter of such a special women’s section. He did not view it as a feminist deviation, but rather as a necessary component in combating women’s particular backwardness as a segment of the population that was doubly oppressed. In a conversation with Zetkin, Lenin expressed the following views on the necessity and importance of a special section to do work among women:

We derive our organizational ideas from our ideological conceptions. We want no separate organizations of Communist women! She who is a Communist belongs as a member to the Party, just as he who is a Communist. They have the same rights and duties. There can be no difference of opinion on that score. However, we must not shut our eyes to the facts. The Party must have organs—working groups, commissions, committees, sections or whatever else they may be called—with the specific purpose of rousing the broad masses of women, bringing

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them into contact with the Party and keeping them under its influence. This naturally requires that we carry on systematic work among the women. We must teach the awakened women, win them over for the proletarian class struggle under the leadership of the Communist Party, and equip them for it. When I say this I have in mind not only proletarian women, whether they work in mills or cook the family meal. I also have in mind the peasant women and the women of the various sections of the lower middle class. They, too, are victims of capitalism, and more than ever since the war. The lack of interest in politics and the otherwise anti-social and backward psychology of these masses of women, the narrow scope of their activities and the whole pattern of their lives are undeniable facts. It would be silly to ignore them, absolutely silly. We must have our own groups to work among them, special methods of agitation, and special forms of organization. This is not bourgeois “feminism”; it is practical revolutionary expediency. 19

The Zhenotdel served a crucial role in directly reaching women in the process of mobilizing them, exposing them to their new legal rights and raising female consciousness. Zhenotdel workers would travel through the country often using makeshift tents to reach women directly in some of the most remote parts. Thus, perhaps one of the most remarkable feats undertaken by the Zhenotdel was their drive to reach women in the newly Soviet Muslim republics. On a basic level, the Zhenotdel was faced with the difficulty of accessing these women who were physically secluded in the homes. At the same time, the men in these republics met the Zhenotdel workers with hostility and brutal violence. These encounters often ended in the vicious murders of the Zhenotdel workers, while the Muslim women who were discovered attending the secret workshops and lectures were publicly killed by their fathers, brothers and husbands. 20 Despite the numerous difficulties and overt dangers, the women persisted and the mass, public

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unveilings of Muslim women became hallmark practice organized by the Zhenotdel workers as “the favorite gesture of baptism into free womanhood in the Soviet East.”

Yet the Zhenotdel, an embodiment of women’s liberation movement on a social level, was thwarted and it was liquidated in 1930. The question arises as to why a department carrying out important work among women and one that Lenin ardently supported would be closed. With Stalin’s ascension, the Soviet leadership asserted that the woman question was solved. It proclaimed that women were now fully liberated, and thus the special woman’s department was no longer necessary. The closing of the Zhenotdel marked the beginning of a regressive phase in women’s liberation. What followed were a series of denunciations of achievements and practices of the early revolutionary period. Such repressive measures affected all areas of life and ranged in scope from the 1936 ban on abortion (legalized earlier in 1920) to renouncement of early family policies resulting in the revival of the family. Divorce was made increasingly difficult and stigmatized. Oppressive notions of illegitimacy were reinforced. For the first time since the 1918 Family Code, children born outside of registered marriages were left with blank birth certificates and thus stamping their life with the demeaning label of bezotsovshina, a derogatory term for someone without a father. With the woman question now proclaimed as solved and most of the earlier achievements replaced by repressive legislation, compounded by wide-scale mobilization of women into the labor force with the installment of the first five year plan in 1928, the female double burden began to fully manifest itself as a permanent characteristic of Soviet women’s experience.

In *The Women’s Liberation Movement in Russia: Feminism, Nihilism, and Bolshevism, 1860-1930*, Richard Stites argues that Bolshevik liberation came in three

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overlapping waves. The first phase spanned the years from 1917-1920 and was marked by legislation such as the above discussed Family Code that granted women complete legal equality with men in all aspects of life. The second stage was congruent with the existence of the Zhenotdel, and according to Stites was the most important phase of women’s auto-emancipation. The last wave would come in the late 1920s with the drive toward industrialization, and marked a retreat from a path to female liberation as symbolized by the untimely liquidation of the Zhenotdel. Stites characterizes this final phase as follows, “The equality and scope of activity sought by women fitted in with the needs of the regime—the need for the labor and mental power of the entire population. This put an undeniably manipulative stamp upon the Soviet experience, and this manipulative tendency also accounted for many of the regressive measures enacted in the last decade of Stalinism.”

Thus, much of the scholarly literature has greatly contributed to our understanding of the female experience in Soviet society by precisely focusing on this exploitative dimension that forcefully came into shape during the third phase. What were the structural components that firmly took roots during the drive for industrialization? A structural analysis lays a framework of the interrelated parts of the double burden that propagated a vicious cycle. Donald Filtzer elaborates on these structural components as follows:

Women became proletarianised, while their domestic burdens remained unabated or grew heavier. They retained almost total responsibility for looking after the home while doing a full day’s labour. In all aspects women were relegated to a subordinate position within Soviet society, a position simultaneously reproduced within the home and at work. It is common to refer to this as women’s double burden, but this terminology is misleading because it implies that these are

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23 Stites, *The Women’s Liberation Movement in Russia*, 419.
discrete phenomena, the one merely an accretion to the other. They are not. Rather, women’s positions at work and in the home mutually determined one another. Their subordinate status in the home profoundly affected the attitudes of male workers and managers, so that discriminations against women in jobs and pay seemed completely natural. Conversely, the perpetuation of women in low paid, unskilled and heavy manual labour reinforced male prejudice (and women’s own aspirations) about women’s ability to do skilled work or to assume positions of authority, be it in society, the work place or the household. 24

The passage poignantly delineates the parts of the double burden, that is, production and reproduction, which were present to varying degrees at every point of the Soviet Union’s existence. Filtzer also hints at the peculiarity of the Soviet woman’s experience in embodying both roles from the very outset. In a discussion of the sociologist’s Emile Durkheim’s theory on women Jennifer M. Lehmann observes, “…the ‘asocial’ nature or ‘constitution’ of women ‘predisposes’ them to nonintellectual functions, a lower, ‘other’ category that Durkheim euphemistically labels ‘affective.’ Whereas ‘intellectual work’ remains a generalization, affective work is defined with precision. Affective functions and family functions are one and the same.” 25 Following Durkheim’s theory, Soviet women fit the bill in terms of their almost exclusive role and responsibility in the domestic sphere partially stemming from subsequent Soviet society’s failure to heed Lenin’s call fully to transfer domestic work to the public sphere. However, a break from Durkheim’s view on women comes at the point as Filtzer puts it they became “proletarianised.” Besides their persistent responsibility in the home, Soviet women were expected to take an active part in productive life. With this structural set up in place and clearly delineated, what often follow are quantitative scholarly discussions of Soviet women in light of their perpetual exploitation, victimhood, and passivity.

Yet even if many revolutionary ideals subsequently found little expression in practice or did so in a compromised way, the leadership’s rhetoric of ideological commitments was always present. Noting the ways in which subsequent Soviet leaders broached the woman question irrespective of its “solved” or “unsolved” status intimates at a legitimizing technique. Taking Nikita Khrushchev as an example, Susan E. Reid writes of his approach to alleviating the double burden, “The main panacea for women’s domestic slavery was found, in accordance with Lenin’s position, in the increase and improvement of communal services such as laundries and communal dining facilities.”

By zealously reviving one of the main early tenets to women’s liberation of transferring domestic work to the public sphere, Khrushchev was not only revitalizing attention to the woman question but at the same time drawing a trajectory connecting himself directly to Lenin. One imagines Khrushchev picking up where Lenin left off in one of his conversation with Zetkin when he asserted, “It is a good beginning in the right direction, and we shall develop it further.”

Similarly, with the coming of Leonid Brezhnev, a period when the woman question was yet again proclaimed unsolved, the same legitimizing mechanism in terms of the woman question may be observed. “The ‘social task’ of ‘great historic significance’ that had been solved was legal equality of the sexes” writes Mary Buckley, “The woman question in its entirety had not been answered after all, but just one aspect of it.”

Whereas Khrushchev focused on Lenin’s arguments of socializing domestic work as a condition to emancipation, Brezhnev took up with Lenin’s achievements in terms of attaining legal equality as another component of female equality.

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liberation. Again, a straight line is imagined connecting Brezhnev’s forthcoming accomplishments for the woman question alongside those of legal equality achieved under Lenin. Thus, the focus of distinguishing between the two, that is, legal equality (*formalnoe ravenstvo*) and equality in practice (*fakticheskoe ravenstvo*) as Lenin often did, became an important focal point in discussions of the woman question under Brezhnev. For Soviet leadership, the woman question thus consistently played a central role as a legitimizing mechanism as true carriers of ideology of female liberation. Yet stepping away from looking at the woman experience in the Soviet Union from above, the question remains as to what all of this meant for the women themselves. To begin to answer this question, we must switch our orientation and re-approach it from a subjective vantage point.
Chapter 2

The Interviews

Interviews with seven women from the former Soviet Union form the core of my study of womanhood and women’s health in the Soviet Union. The interviews provide rich insight into women’s experiences, beliefs, and motives for behaviors, yet conducting them confronted me with methodological as well as practical problems.

In the beginning of the research process, the idea of personally interviewing women was a daunting prospect. Early on during the preparatory stage, I put together a detailed questionnaire containing specific questions. I imagined that by presenting women with concrete questions I would facilitate their responses and ensure a successful interview. On giving it more thought, I recognized that my questions might be overly rigid. I realized that left as such, they might guide women in directions of my own thought processes and biases, restrict them and not let them speak out on their own. Over time, in further preparing for the interviews, it was essential to put aside such anxieties, and in doing so meant letting go of the overly inflexible and rigid questionnaire. By the time of the first interview in October 2007, although I still had prepared questions to address, the nature of the questionnaire was much more flexible and open-ended. This final version represented a lack of control for me as the interviewer, but I was hopeful that this structure would in the end reap more benefits.

Making such a fundamental change to the questionnaire in my thinking about the project as a whole has been one of the most beneficial decisions in the research process. The fact that the interviews were with Russian speaking women makes the changes in this context particularly poignant. Addressing the special role that language plays for its
Russian speakers is a critical point of departure. I am drawing on insights gained by anthropologist Nancy Ries, who studied the role of conversational discourses in a rapidly changing Soviet society under Perestroika. Quite interestingly, in respect to language, Nancy Ries notes:

My earliest ethnographic observations led me to consider talk an especially meaningful arena of value production and negotiation among Russian-speakers. Whereas in other societies the production of social value may seem to occur more prominently in other types of practice, such as exchange or destruction of valued objects, through distinctive consumerism, ritual participation, hospitality or in a host of other ways, in Russia talk in all its manifestations is a markedly significant domain of value creation—perhaps, in part, because other domains of action have been so restricted. This is to say that Russian talk is not just an activity during which value creation is described, but one in which, during which and through which value is actually produced.29

While Ries’ nuanced discussion of talk as a distinct realm of value production focuses on the final years of the Soviet Union, this function of Russian talk is not necessarily restricted to this particular historical period: I suggest it is still relevant in the post-Soviet context as well. I argue that for Russian immigrant communities Russian talk becomes an important sphere of value production. During interviews, as women negotiated their experiences, the function of language as value production in the post-Soviet context became visible. Dale Pesmen, another ethnographer who has worked in Russia during the early 1990’s writes, “Russian’s ‘expressiveness’ connects back to music: the consensus seems to be that there is little that cannot be put into Russian, with its richness, flexibility, openness to creation and poetic play.”30 While language in discussions about women in the context of exploitation portrays and designates them in Soviet society as little more than victims, during interviews, language effectively enabled women to

transform themselves into agents and negotiate a strong identity through a prism of their highly subjective experiences. In effect, women mobilized language in creating a space through which they emerged as agents by taking part in this activity of value production.

At the same time, this important role of Russian language as a function of value production raises an additional methodological consideration. A question arises of whether the meanings women’s past experiences acquired in the process of value production in the current post-Soviet context of our conversations can be linked to their actual experiences in Soviet times. As a whole, I argue that the answer is yes, and there is justification in drawing this link and treating interviews as a genuine reflection into the past. I believe that women’s adherence to intimate Russian/Soviet rituals of kitchen conversations even in post-Soviet times, points to an openness and honesty of their accounts. Secondly, if there were any discontinuities between what actually was and women’s accounts of it, I believe the women would have portrayed their accounts in negative tones, which would have been in line with much of what is currently upheld about the Soviet past. In short, I believe that if I had been able to interview the women under Soviet power their responses would have been similar. I stress that during interviews women’s accounts were not marked by notions of victimhood, but rather they were testimonies of their understanding and location of themselves within a particular historical period. Thus, during our conversations the role of value production in Russian talk was a process that enabled women to reach into this past. That is, the past gave the activity of value production meaning rather than the other way around.

In the course of my interviews, this important function of language as a means of value production became apparent to me, especially during the early stages when I
presented women with my ready-made questionnaire and consent form. It is interesting
to note women’s attention to the questionnaire almost as if its presence represented a
separate entity detached from me as the interviewer. Similarly, women preferred to get
through the formalities of signing consent forms as quickly as possible or even leave it
for later. Women perceived the questionnaire and consent form as extraneous and formal
written documents. This precise approach by women toward the formal, authoritative
state-like consent form and questionnaire exemplifies the specificity of value production
within Russian conversation. Ries observes:

Personal narratives served as the grounds for people to perceive and promote
themselves (individually and collectively) as important, even when they lacked
concrete power or status. This social power was gained through often subtle
discursive inversions of the values, plans, and representations of reality
promulgated from above, from the realm of Communist authority. The narratives
I was hearing thus seemed to be key to the maintenance of a symbolic hierarchy
promoted in Russian socialist…discourses. The chilling irony of men’s jokes and
quips and the solemn tragedy of women’s laments harbored a kind of resistance to
internalization of the official ideals and standards that structured many of the
patterns of daily life…and caused people so much trouble. Listening for such
symbolic inversions with sensitivity to their deeper logics and effects might, I
imagined, provide some understanding of the wider social contexts in which the
political discussions and conflicts of the day were grounded. 31

The processes of Russian conversations take shape in relation to and against the
authoritative late Soviet state. However, my conversations with women took place in
post-Soviet times, and Russians’ lives are no longer marked by the Soviet power
hierarchy. While the state still played an important role in my conversations with women
as the background against which they understood themselves, the inversion mechanisms
are not necessary in current post-Soviet times. It is exactly in this context of a private
informal kitchen setting that my initial presence with these document-like formalities
speaks to their disruptive effect and women’s resistance to the authoritative state-like

31 Ries, Russian Talk, 19.
intrusions. Women did not care to dwell on the form that I presented to them but simply wanted to sign and put it aside.

For women, unconstrained and free flowing talk took place at the kitchen table. The physical act of sitting at the table represents the informal sphere in contradistinction to the official state apparatus. This late Soviet practice survived into my interviews. My conversations with women took place at the kitchen table, an intimate and informal space in Soviet as well as post-Soviet society, where I was treated to many cups of tea. Despite the fact that almost twenty years have passed since the Soviet Union has been dismantled and that we were physically removed from that place, it is quite amazing that women still chose to have the interviews while sitting at a kitchen table, in that sense ensuring, and maintaining the transforming power and space created through language. I realized that the formal questionnaire often acted as an impediment and intrusion into this organic space. Reflecting on this experience now, the original and extremely constraining version of the questionnaire would have made it difficult for women to enter into the imagined space that is created through conversation. It was here while sitting around the kitchen table that women began to talk. Nancy Ries further observes:

...the space created by conversation seemed to be a sacred one, a closed circle beyond which everything vanished for the moment and the vividness of the images being shared was all that mattered...talk was what mattered most for many of the people I knew in Moscow; it was the context in which souls could emerge and artifices fall. 32

The revised and open-ended nature of the questionnaire made it easier for women to create and enter into the sacred space Ries alludes to. The revised questions focused our attention on specific themes, but at the same time gave women greater freedom to speak out without my pushing them into certain directions. Despite the fact that

questions were open-ended, I still noticed that women would often digress either into new or already discussed areas of conversation. To some degree, this is a natural tendency for any conversation, but in terms of the interviews, these deviations also represent a certain resistance to this formal intrusion. No matter how open ended the questionnaire was in its final revised form, to a certain extent it strove to or actually did impose structure to a conversation that by its very nature attempts to free itself of any constraints. This is precisely so because as Ries points out, through Russian language a space materializes in which “souls could emerge and artifices fall.”\(^{33}\) During interviews, as women talked, a process of negotiation was taking place through which female agency could emerge.

In addition to the questionnaire, I also showed women clips from *Moscow Doesn’t Believe in Tears*, a popular Soviet film from the Brezhnev period released in 1979 by Mosfilm devoted to the woman question in its interrogation of female/male identities and gender relations. The film was also successful outside of the Soviet Union; it earned an Academy award for best foreign film in 1980. The story line spans a period of twenty years from 1958-1978 and follows the lives of three girlfriends living in Moscow. Upon my simple mentioning of the film during interviews, women reacted very positively to it. I did not even need to show women the excerpts since they were deeply familiar with the film’s content. During several interviews, I just reminded women of a given scene I had in mind by briefly summarizing it. When I did show the excerpt, women often knew the dialogue by memory. Before we discussed the specific clip I had in mind, I first asked women a few general questions about the film. Specifically, two important questions that I asked that will figure in later chapters are

what women thought was the main theme of the film and with which of the three mains characters they most closely identified.

As already mentioned, women’s initial reactions were telling me how much they loved the film. It is important to differentiate between the questionnaire and the film, even though I brought both. While a questionnaire represents an attempt at structure in this imagined space, the film becomes familiar material, which women molded to their own accounts or referred to as a reference point in the process of negotiating and constructing their identities. The film therefore presents greater freedom in its molding potential, while the questionnaire was a reminder of the ultimate academic purpose of our conversations. This academic aspect represents formality, whereas for Russians talk while sitting and drinking tea or vodka embody and encourage intimacy even between strangers. I did not drink alcohol with the women, but on occasion did with the husband since one cannot refuse a toast.

As the final structure of the questionnaire changed, so did my role during interviews. Initially I envisioned them as a formal exchange with me guiding it in some concrete direction through the rigidity of early questions. While the questions in their revised and final shape still formed a loose trajectory and covered specific themes that might have otherwise been untouched, my role in interviews was by no means as a guiding outsider. Rather, by adhering to Soviet rituals of kitchen conversations, women invited me to be an active participant of this intimate space and process forged through Russian talk. Pesmen writes,

A hostess I had just met told me about the mushroom harvest…she started picking out strings of dried mushrooms to give me…we sat down to dinner, toasts were offered to acquaintance and to Russian soul, though neither she nor her husband had any ‘Russian blood.’…Drink helps one be one's ‘true’ dushevnyi [soulful]
self. After another drink she leapt up and gave me a carved wooden cup; and later, ‘because God loves threes,’ a jar of jam. As Andrei said, ‘Sitting at a table is a process.’

My methodological approach is one that relies on oral history as a means of looking into the subjective experience. Exploring a subjective dimension of women’s experiences in Soviet society shows that they were not simply passive victims but emerge as agents with a strong identity intertwined in their roles as workers and mothers. During conversations, women negotiated and constructed their notions of self and female agency by actively taking part in the process of value production forged through Russian talk. Lastly, this methodological approach has also taken into account my own active involvement in the interview process. In the very course of preparing and conducting these interviews, I realized that my choice of methodology and adaptation of the methodology to the circumstances of “Russian women talk” was an intricate process that in itself was fraught with deep meaning.

_The Women_

This study is based on interviews that I carried out with seven women from the former Soviet Union. I met with these women during the course of two months in October and November of 2007. I recruited women that took part in the study by asking my Russian acquaintances for referrals. As I met with women, I would in turn ask them if they knew any one else who might be interested in taking part in my study. I would call all the women, briefly introduce my project and myself and set up a convenient date for us to meet. All seven women have been living in the United States for various lengths

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34 Pesmen, _Russia and Soul_, 183.
of time, but originally they hailed from all over the former Soviet Union, from a variety of urban settings ranging from Riga to Kiev, Moscow, and Baku. Some researchers may choose to dwell on questions of nationalities, but for the purposes of this study, irrespective of their particular ethnic background, I consider all women as Soviet citizens rather than Jewish, Ukrainian, etc. In fact, it will be evident in later chapters, the women I interviewed often referred to themselves as Soviet people (sovetskie lyudi). The women’s ages ranged from fifty to higher. All were married and had at least one child but no one had more than two. Women were college educated and worked in the USSR in a variety of professions such as engineering and planning.

All interviews took place in women’s homes, and more specifically, at the kitchen table. As soon as I walked into the women’s homes, they would ask me to put my things down and invite me to come and sit at the kitchen table rather than on the couch in the living room or elsewhere in the house. Ries notes, “While talk is a central locus of value production in all societies, in Russia it has been highly marked; consider, for example, the constant references to the ‘kitchen’ as the most sacred place in Russian/Soviet society. There, over tea or vodka, people could speak their minds, tell their stories and spill their souls openly…” 35 The particular place within the home where conversations took place is by no means coincidental. As already discussed, on a symbolic level, the image of the interview materials on the table among teacups is very important, that is, as a sort of intruder into a sacred and organic space.

Earlier I noted that although I did not drink alcohol with the women, on occasion I did with the husband in light of a toast. Although not always, women’s husbands joined us during a few of my interviews. It was never my goal as such to interview the

35 Ries, Russian Talk, 21.
husbands and their presence was never planned. Yet I did not object to their presence and to their contributions to the conversation. I do not believe that the husband’s presence affected a woman’s responses. I did not notice a difference in behavior or in accounts by women when the husband joined us as compared to interviews when a man was not present. In both situations, women spoke comfortably and openly about a variety of topics. In fact, I noticed that men’s stories were also marked by their openness and intimacy. Again, this type of behavior exhibited by both the women and their husbands speaks to the important and intimate Russian ritual of sitting and drinking.

In addition, several of the women whom I interviewed offered to or actually did show me two things: books and photos. The photos were from Soviet days of the women and their families. As for the books, they were either Soviet self-published (samizdat) or related to women’s professional work. On their own, these items do not convey a clear meaning. They acquire it only in the context of women’s larger narratives of work or family. These things come into play as women negotiate and construct their experiences in talking of their roles as workers and mothers. In a space of Russian talk, these physical items reinforced and to some degree validated women’s accounts in that they “can also be read as a symbolic substantiation.” 36

As I was invited and drawn into this personal space, I realized that the interviews evolved into much more than a mere tool of data collection. They turned into an intimate process during which women spoke eloquently and in deeply personal ways of their Soviet lives. At times, their testimony became highly emotional, and several of the women cried as they shared certain experiences. This emotional investment during our

conversations conveys observations made by Pesmen and Ries. As Pesmen observes, the expressiveness of the Russian language privileges it along with music as a conduit of and to soul (*dusha*). The author notes, “although *dusha*-related things are almost always characterized as impossible to fully represent in words, the ‘great, powerful, splendid Russian language’ indicates an equally important aspect of *dusha.*” ³⁷ This emotional dimension in my conversations with women also speaks to Ries’ poignant observation of the intricate role of talk in Russian society through which people truly “tell their stories and spill their souls openly…” ³⁸

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Having described the women and the circumstances of our interviews, I will now individually introduce some of the women with whom I met in working on this thesis. I will introduce two women: Svetlana and Zinaida. Between the two of them, Zinaida and Svetlana aptly illustrate the diversity I strove to achieve in meeting with women in terms of their age, residence within the Soviet Union, and occupations. In focusing on these women individually, I hope that the reader will gain a more intimate understanding of the women whose lives form the foundation of my work.

*Svetlana:*

I interviewed Svetlana on November 17, 2007. Before starting the interview with just the two of us, I spent quite a bit of time with Svetlana and her husband in the kitchen eating dinner. The dinner table was covered with the favorite Russian assortment of potatoes, herring and salad. It is common that Russians put on the table whatever they have. This is part of their notion of hospitality, but it also speaks to the informality of interactions at

³⁷ Pesmen, *Russia and Soul*, 81.
home. Later on, we shifted to the specifics of the interview during which Svetlana talked of her life in the Soviet Union. Svetlana was born in 1950 and had been living in Latvia since she was three years old. She finished a polytechnical institute where she studied economics, the years of her life she reflected on very fondly. She emphasized that to this day she maintains friendships from her university days, despite the fact that her former peers are scattered throughout the world. She stressed the efforts they all make to organize reunions in Riga. Similarly, many of the women I interviewed emphasized maintaining friendship bonds irrespective of circumstances. She married in 1980, relatively late in life according to Soviet standards, and had one daughter. Svetlana began her professional life at a computing center (*vichislitelni tsentr*) after she completed her university studies. Svetlana stressed that work was a key aspect of her life, especially as a young woman. Svetlana and her family left Latvia in the early 1990’s along with countless others, and they have been living in the United States ever since.

**Zinaida:**

I met with Zinaida fifteen days before Svetlana. Another woman I had met with earlier in October, Tamara, referred Zinaida to me. After I was given her number a couple of days later, I called Zinaida to introduce myself and arrange a convenient day for us to meet. Upon arriving at her house and being greeted by her husband, I was invited to sit down at the table. The level of intimacy that developed between us during the interview is remarkable given that this was the first time we met, and resonates with the deeper meanings of Russian talk. Zinaida was born before the war in Kiev, Ukraine. She is married and has two sons. She was as an engineer in the Soviet Union for over thirty years. She worked in Kiev’s *Gorizpolkom*, a city executive committee, where she was
responsible for a group of factories. During our conversation, she showed me the
greeting cards and books she still receives from her organization. It became clear to me
how critical work was to Zinaida’s sense of self to this day. After showing me her books,
photos and reading some of the poetry she writes, before I left, Zinaida rushed to give me
a handful of Russian candy for the road as a gesture of the last couple of hours we spent
sitting at the kitchen table.

Role of Statistics in Literature:

My methodology of oral history facilitates an exploration of the subjective
experience, and in that respect complements the broader literature that often focuses on
the quantifiable dimensions of women’s experiences in Soviet society. The scholarly
literature tends to objectify and designate women as resources through reliance on
statistical data. Mark G. Field’s study of Soviet women in their roles as workers and
mothers alone includes twenty consecutive pages of numerical tables. In table 7 entitled
“Women, by type of employment, 1959,” it breaks down the percentage of the total that
women comprised in productive and nonproductive sectors of the economy. Field lists
his source as Zhenshchiny i deti v SSSR [Women and children in the USSR] (Moscow:
Gosstatizdat, 1963), a resource utilized by several scholars.39 This is an exhaustive
presentation but it poses problems. The tables provide broad estimates of female
employment patterns, but tell us nothing about the question of how women experienced
these roles. Missing are aspects such as an exploration of the intimate relationship of
work to women’s self-understanding. Imagery that this trend tends to evoke is one that

39 Mark G. Field, “Workers and (mothers): soviet women today,” in The Role and Status of Women in the
lacks certain humanity and in turn reinforces a one-dimensional view of women’s experiences.

Statistics strive to maintain objectivity, but at a certain point, quantitative data on individuals and social groups can lose connection with what they are supposed to represent, that is, a human dimension. At times, overwhelming presentation of statistics further add to the portrayal of women as little more than resources to be distributed and utilized as a commodity. While numbers provide important broad aggregates of demographic patterns, they tell little about the individualized experience and how one makes sense of his or her environment. Value production through language is impossible to quantify, but it is critical to understanding of women’s experiences.

Another feature that emerges in literature about women in Soviet society is a theme that points to the exploitation of women and consequently depicts them as victims. This approach, although important to the understanding of women’s lives in Soviet society, raises questions as well. Women tend to become objects rather than subjects of the discussion. The scholarly literature on women, work and motherhood in the late Soviet order stresses women’s perpetual exploitation under auspices of revolutionary ideology of female liberation. Such an outlook presents a one-dimensional and oppressive rather than a multifaceted portrayal of the Soviet experience. Gail Lapidus, a leading scholar on women in the Soviet Union, characterizes the female experience as follows,

…as Soviet experience suggested from the very beginning, there was a critical distinction between mobilization and liberation. The fact that women were perceived as a major economic and political resource was compatible with an extreme degree of exploitation. The terms of female mobilization were therefore
The passage illustrates a key factor in Lapidus’ analysis of the female experience in Soviet society in that she stresses women’s mobilization. Yet she also stresses that this dynamic dimension of mobilization was primarily to serve the needs of the state, and not as a motivation for women to be truly free. Thus, according to Lapidus, mobilization in its final analysis served repressive and exploitative ends. However, in speaking of the “Soviet experience” in such narrow and constraining terms, Lapidus leaves little room for an alternative understanding of this experience, one that is more subjective but at the same time just as legitimate as the quantifiable one the author presents. Furthermore, the passage portrays women as a strictly exploited mass and one that is easily manipulated into believing Communist propaganda about women’s liberation disseminated from above. In this respect, looking at women through a lens of exploitation and victimhood strips them of agency, and obscures an intimate understanding of the ways in which women appropriated and negotiated their notions of self precisely through these socially prescribed roles. I am suggesting that while women maintained a position against the authoritative and formal state and often its ineffectiveness/inefficiency during the late Soviet period, the terminology of revolutionary liberation had substantive effects in the personal ways women appropriated and found meaning in it. The ways women appropriated such ideology in relationship to the late Soviet order is the very process of value production that became apparent during my conversations with women. Interviews get at that subjective dimension and enrich our understanding of the “Soviet experience.”

On the one hand are attempts by the late Soviet state to articulate their version of early

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revolutionary ideology of female liberation as opposed to the intimate appropriation of it by women on their own terms and in deeply personal ways. As will be evident in forthcoming chapters, women integrated Lenin into their personal narratives, but they replied and pushed back on Brezhnev. This point also follows my earlier argument of the ways Soviet leaders such as Khrushchev and Brezhnev attempted to establish direct links between themselves and Lenin in talking about the “woman question.” These were mechanisms to legitimize themselves to women as direct and true carriers of an ideology of liberation. Thus, what follows is an exploration of the ways women maintained an anti-state like disposition of the late Soviet period and its claim to ideology while also revealing the ways in which revolutionary ideology had real substance and meaning in their personal lives.
Chapter 3

On Love and Relationships

In *The Communist Manifesto* Marx and Engels proclaimed:

Abolition of the family! Even the most radical flare up at this infamous proposal of the Communists. On what foundation is the present family, the bourgeois family, based? On capital, on private gain. In its completely developed form this family exists only among the bourgeoisie. But this state of things finds its complement in the practical absence of the family among the proletarians, and in public prostitution. The bourgeois family will vanish as a matter of course when its complement vanishes, and both will vanish with the vanishing of capital.41

This begs the question whether the family would completely wither away or take on some new form in the future society that Marx and Engels envisioned. As such, there was no concrete plan of action for the Bolsheviks to follow in terms of human relationships.

Following the Russian Revolution, the Bolsheviks did away with all legal and religious restrictions in the process of achieving legal equality for women. What followed was a period of great experimentation and uncertainty in the realm of relations between the sexes. Some scholars argue that this point in Soviet history was the only genuine attempt to remake relations between the sexes. If the early post-revolutionary period represented impressive experimentation, with Stalin’s ascension, many of the earlier provisions were renounced, and the family was reinstated as the natural manifestation of relationships and a cornerstone of Soviet society. To some extent, the family represented a sense of stability during a period of upheaval brought about by industrialization and collectivization. Following Stalin, the nuclear family remained an integral part of Soviet society. Many argue that as such, on a microcosmic level, the family represented and maintained the paternalistic order of Soviet society.

Stepping back from the family as an institution and the concrete shape it would eventually take, it is important to enquire into human relations and the attitudes toward them. In this respect as well, the Bolsheviks had much to elaborate and improvise. In the *Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, Engels offered the following projections for relationships in future society:

What we can now conjecture about the way in which sexual relations will be ordered after the impending overthrow of capitalist production is mainly of a negative character, limited for the most part to what will disappear. But what will there be new? That will be answered when a new generation has grown up…When these people are in the world, they will care precious little what anybody today thinks they ought to do; they will make their own practice and their corresponding public opinion about the practice of each individual—and that will be the end of it.\(^42\)

To be sure, following the revolution, the Bolsheviks dedicated much attention to the nature of human relations in their new society. Leading female Bolsheviks spent much of their time elaborating on questions of female and male relations as a necessary component of true sexual equality. Despite such efforts by Bolshevik women, some scholars point to outright misogynistic attitudes of male Bolsheviks. The uneasy existence and ultimate dissolution of the Women’s department (Zhenotdel) within the Communist party, is often used as a case in point in demonstrating male apathy towards women let alone their serious appraisal of sexual equality. Even if on a personal level many male Bolsheviks harbored such feelings toward women, on a legal front every effort was put forth to come close to Engel’s earlier formulations of “sex-love” as the ultimate reason for marriage.

\(^{42}\) International Publishers, *The Woman Question*, 75-76.
Aside from the legislative milestones, what were such elaborations put forth by the Bolsheviks in terms of love and relationships? In “What a Communist Ought to be Like,” Nadezhda Krupskaya (Lenin’s wife) offered the following to her readers:

In his personal life, a communist must always conduct himself in the interests of communism. What does this mean? It means, for example, that however nice it might be to stay in a familiar, comfortable home environment, that if for the sake of the cause, for the success of the communist cause, it is necessary to abandon everything and expose oneself to danger, the communist will do this…It means that the communist puts his personal interests aside, subordinates them to the common interest. 43

This outlook would in turn require for greater freedom in relationships. An individual must subordinate feelings of individual love and instead realize it in his or her love for the collective. Love becomes synonymous with comradeship. Another leading female Bolshevik of the day, Alexandra Kollontai, often portrayed the characters in her stories as lonely. Yet this state of loneliness was an admirable characteristic. The woman resisted her reliance and dependence for bourgeois love and affection of an individual man as her superior. In abandoning elements of dependence, Kollontai reassured, “The many-sidedness of love is not in and of itself contrary to the interest of the proletariat. On the contrary, it makes for the triumph of that ideal of love in mutual relations between the sexes which is already being formed and crystallized in the midst of the working class, namely, of love-comradeship.” 44

Such early fervor in establishing new standards in personal matters for new men and women may appear irrelevant to women’s consequent experiences in Soviet society especially given that subsequent leaders modified, reversed or altogether renounced much

from this early period. Thus, it is critical to investigate how women’s accounts of love and relationships surfaced in our conversations and what role they played in the formulation of female agency and identity. During interviews, women often dedicated substantial amount of time to talking about love and relationships. Often, the background against which women’s accounts took shape is intriguing and revealing.

During a conversation with Zinaida, she framed her views in the following way, “Lenin used to say if there is love then it must be conscious [osoznana] but love is not like this. Love either exists or it does not, and if it does then you love the person who is dear to your heart.” 45 Particularly striking in this passage is the fact that she invokes Lenin’s name in talking about the nature of relationships and love. On one level, Zinaida’s response suggests that Lenin is an authority figure in matters of the “heart.” At the same time, she disagrees with his rational approach to love, and that in itself is also telling. She imagines Lenin not as a hegemonic figure prying into the personal or private sphere. Rather, her account speaks to the ways in which women appropriated and personalized the corpus of ideas postulated from above. She does not ignore or belittle it, but integrates such ideas into her personal account. In the larger context, such ideas of love are complementary with the overall narrative told by women, that is, women emerge as true agents with human dimensions. Their accounts resist being constrained by the late Soviet regime; instead, they incorporate elements of revolutionary ideology into a cohesive and organic, personal whole.

During our conversations, *Moscow Doesn’t Believe in Tears* was more than just a good film for the women; on many levels, it functioned as a reflection of life. As mentioned in Chapter Two, the film follows the lives of three girlfriends living in Moscow over the course of twenty years. Of particular interest is the character of Ekaterina (Katya). In the early part of the film when she is still in her early twenties, Katya becomes a single mother as she tries to maintain her university studies. Despite her early challenges in life, she eventually realizes her professional dream and becomes a director of a large-scale factory. Throughout the years, she stays single until she unexpectedly finds love in a man who holds very rigid views on gender and a woman’s position within the family.

The other two female characters of the film are important in that they serve as alternative, though not necessarily viable, models of womanhood for the women during interviews. The character of Antonina (Tonya) represents the full embrace and happiness of motherhood and family in the construction of Soviet womanhood. In this respect, she falls within the larger construction of late Soviet womanhood, yet her life seems to be solely defined in these terms. Even within her exclusive role as mother, Tonya is still an agent. She is a symbol of post-war elevation of motherhood as healer of society and giving rise to a new generation. On the other hand, the third character, Lyudmila (Lyuda), has no distinct voice in that her main goal throughout the film is to find an established Moscow man. She fails to take control of her environment and emerge as an agent in her life in that she looks at Moscow life as a lottery always hoping to pull the winning ticket. Although she does marry a young hockey player and seemingly finds this
lucky ticket, she ultimately “loses” when her husband’s promising career fails and Lyuda is left with nothing. Essentially, with her capitalistic and opportunistic schemes she has no place in Soviet society and becomes marginalized in the end.

The opening scenes of the second half of the film encapsulate what the three women have come to embody. We first see Katya as she energetically wakes up in the morning, gets ready and drives off to work. We next see Tonya’s morning ritual as she prepares breakfast for her three sons and husband as they sit down at the table. Finally, the film takes us to Lyuda’s apartment where she looks disheveled still in a bathrobe as her drunk ex-husband shows up to borrow money yet again.

During interviews, when I asked which character they identified with the most, all women firmly aligned themselves with Katya. It is through this precise character identification that the film acts as a reference point in its molding potential in constructing and negotiating their identities. What did women have to say about the film? More importantly, what does Katya represent? During our conversation, Raya encapsulated her sentiments as follows:

This is the only film that I adore. From my point of view, the theme of the film is that this is a strong woman [sil’naya zhenshchina]. A woman in such a position can fall in love, simply to love. You know, when I watch this film, it is very close to me.  

Rita echoed some of these sentiments, when I asked her what she believed to be the main theme of the film:

The theme of love. The theme of progress. The theme of this interest toward life. The way a person can fall and then stand straight again. The theme of strength, strength of a woman’s will [zhenskoi voli]. How much a woman can lift herself up…

Women’s accounts reveal a certain orientation, and specifically their approach to Katya. There is a twofold approach in women’s responses. On the one hand, within women’s replies lies a poignant focus on Katya’s admirable strong character in light of the difficulties she has overcome. To them she embodies the essence of female strength. Rita stressed this notion of a woman’s will in particularly challenging situations. During the course of interviews, just as women negotiated their own experiences and emerged as agents in their lives, Katya is also an embodiment of female agency who refuses to be a victim to her circumstances. In this respect, Katya is the Soviet woman ideal in her indomitable will and progress. This aspect of Katya’s character also tends to portray her as somewhat one-sided. For this precise reason, women’s accounts also stressed Katya’s deeply emotional aspect and her ability to love. Their accounts contain an almost polar orientation, in that Katya appears not only strong, but at the same time as human, with an emotional dimension and a capacity to love. In pivoting their responses on Katya through such a dual characterization of her, women resist or push back on constraining portrayals of women in Soviet society.

As the film progresses, we first observe subtle hints that ultimately becomes a central conflict in the film, and one that encapsulates the idea of the late Soviet environment slowly dismantling Katya’s independent and liberated spirit. There are the little elements that illuminate this contradiction of the revolutionary ideal of emancipated woman in a society that vehemently reinforces regressive gender roles. On several occasions, the film points our attention to the fact that Katya is having car trouble. Thus, the car takes on a dual meaning. On the one hand, it speaks to the independent woman that drives it. At the same time, she puts off taking the car to the mechanic. This
embodies the notion of how much easier it would be for Soviet women like Katya to depend on a man that would take care of these little things.

Eventually these little insinuations take front stage when Katya meets a man, Gosha, with rigid ideas of gender roles and a woman’s position within the family. In a telling picnic scene, Gosha who is of yet unaware of Katya’s high professional achievements explains his views, “In a family, a man must be higher in his position. If a wife earns more money or holds a higher professional position, then this is no longer a family.” 48 When Katya’s daughter asks Gosha if he is being serious, he calmly responds that indeed he is. In the environment of late Soviet society, for him it is completely natural to express such ideas. This scene poignantly speaks to the late Soviet regime’s compromised version of liberatory ideology, whereas true revolutionary ideology promised full realization of comradeship. More importantly, this setup speaks to my earlier argument for the need to distinguish between the early and late Soviet periods. During the early period, the state acted as the principal agent of liberation, whereas during the late period, Katya and the women from life like her acted as their own agents while resisting the ineffective late Soviet order.

In a sense, Katya is exemplary of what the revolution has done for the woman question. Yet at the same time, she finds herself in an environment of late Soviet society that is often hostile to this emancipated Soviet woman ideal. There is a rift between the developed raised consciousnesses of woman through her appropriation of revolutionary ideology, and the limiting atmosphere of her contemporary late Soviet order. This contradiction of Katya’s character eloquently speaks to women’s narratives situated against the late Soviet state claiming legitimacy as carriers of revolutionary ideology of

48 See Moscow Doesn’t Believe in Tears, Mosfilm, 1979.
female liberation. Women recognize themselves in Katya, for her life is intertwined with notions of female agency and progress. Yet she seems to be waging a battle against the paternalistic state that is chipping away at her intimate appropriation of revolutionary ideology of female liberation in terms of work, love, and family.
Chapter 4
Women and Motherhood

The question of responsibility of child upbringing has a long history in Soviet society dating to its revolutionary years. Early formulations of the state stepping in to take over the responsibility of child rearing played an important role in the experimental post revolutionary period. Given the material poverty and precarious condition of the state at the time, it was impossible to realize such lofty ambitions on a massive scale. Decades later with the coming of Nikita Khrushchev to power, debates of communal child rearing reappeared on the agenda yet again. Despite the attention that this question occasionally received at different stages of Soviet development, overall children predominantly remained the responsibility of individual parents. More specifically, motherhood continued to play a key role as a revered and vital aspect in the construction of Soviet womanhood.

Soviet veneration of motherhood fully took shape during the decades of Stalinism. A period that urged Soviet citizens to lead lives of heroic deeds, motherhood was of no exception. For this was the heyday of heroine mothers who were theatrically awarded medals for their feats of giving birth to ten or more children. Choi Chatterjee observes:

Mothers of large families were seen as exemplifications of civic virtue and social conscience. Unlike the Victorian construction of maternalism, which exhorted women to fulfill their feminine destiny within the bonds of matrimony, in the Soviet Union, motherhood became a public act. When a Soviet woman had a child, she was fulfilling an important national function: she was ensuring the reproduction of a future generation of socialists who would work for the

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50 See, for example, Melanie Ilic, Susan E. Reid, and Lynne Attwood, eds., Women in the Khrushchev Era (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).
fatherland and protect the motherland from the aggression of fascists and capitalists.  

The important role of motherhood became especially poignant in the post war period.
The state greatly relied on women to counter the staggering wartime loss of life from which the Soviet Union never fully recuperated. Well into the late 1970s, there was still a “shortage” of men. Indeed, women’s reproductive abilities were always valued in Marxist writings, but this particular period of the Soviet Union is depicted as the point at which women’s exploitation under auspices of ideology is most pronounced. Thus, the structural analysis outlines women as vehicles of reproduction and further draws focus on the exploitative view of women as resources. Yet it also tends to obscure the positive meaning of motherhood to the development of self and female identity for women in Soviet society.

To a certain extent, the implication is that there is a complete rift between such models of womanhood and women’s actual experiences of these ideal roles as burdens. I would argue that women’s notions of self were intertwined with the subjective nature of their appropriation of both work and motherhood. Otherwise, what is to be made of the following statement by Zinaida, “I had an aunt who was single, and she regretted greatly that in her time she did not give birth and raise a child even if without a husband. The most important thing in life is to give life to one more person and to be able to raise this human being.” Rather than simply resign her body to its biological capabilities, Zinaida placed great importance on raising a human being. It is interesting to note her

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52 Moscow Doesn’t Believe in Tears points to this persistent imbalance. In a telling scene, two young women are turned away from joining a dating club, as its director points out what they need are men and not more women.
wording in saying human being [chelovek], rather than child [rebenok]. In stressing the latter part, Zinaida simultaneously becomes an agent and at the same time imparts positive meaning to reproduction. Language becomes very important, because through it Zinaida transforms herself into an agent whereas much of the literature strips women of these qualities by transforming them into exploited biological resources through a narrative of victimhood. Zinaida maintained this sense of agency throughout the interview. When I later asked as to why she believed Soviet families were relatively small she stated, “…it is not only giving birth, but it is also necessary to release the person into life so that he can somehow stand on his own.”54 Indeed, many women stressed that a woman must give birth almost as if to fulfill her destiny as such, but the emphasis is shifted from the strictly reproductive/biological aspect to the transforming connotations of motherhood. Through her account, Zinaida effectively transforms herself into an agent in stressing the latter aspect.

Reproduction in the context of the narrative of victimhood portrays women as biological vessels caught in a vicious cycle. That is, they are simply unwilling participants or victims of a bigger superstructure. Contrary to this perspective, my interviews brought out a critical element of rationality in women’s discussions of motherhood. This factor enabled women effectively to push back on the late Soviet state and scholarly depictions of passivity and victimization. This precise disposition against authority and formality by women becomes poignant within the informal and intimate context of our interviews. When asked about factors contributing to her decision to have children, Svetlana explained:

People first think how they can provide, where they can provide, and how much

54 Zinaida, interview by author, NJ, November 2, 2007.
they can provide and raise children. Only then, they give birth. Birth rate, this is not a process, well not a controlled one. It is controlled in the sense that a person decides and gives birth rationally (osoznana).\textsuperscript{55}

As such, Svetlana’s answer is laden with meaning on several layers. In her passage, a critical element of rationality and ownership is apparent in discussions of reproduction. This stance on reproductive behavior becomes more poignant given that abortion was the prime means of birth control in Soviet society. From this passage, two implications emerge, that is, Svetlana’s response is twofold and requires deeper elaboration. Firstly, in maintaining a rational component to her actions enabled Svetlana to push back on discussions of Soviet women as a passive and exploited mass. That is, through the process of value production in Russian talk in the intimate kitchen environment and precisely in contradistinction to state-like imposition, she negotiated her experiences and emerged as the prime actor or agent in her reproductive life. She counteracted or pushed back on notions of passivity and victimization.

Reading her response even more closely, yet another dimension is discernable within this passage. When Svetlana talked about birth rate not being a controlled process she is actually responding to the demographic crisis in the Soviet Union that took on acute proportions under Leonid Brezhnev in the 1970s. This demographic crisis of declining birth rates was critical in republics such as Latvia, which is where Svetlana is from. The precipitously falling birth rates in the “European” republics of the Soviet Union were somewhat masked by overall high birth rates in the Muslim republics. Drawing on the wide range of literature that often relies on statistical data, it poignantly highlights this demographic phenomenon. In a table entitled “average annual rates of increase of principal ethnic groups, 1959-1970,” Mary Buckley illustrates that while the

\textsuperscript{55} Svetlana, interview by author, NJ, November 17, 2007
central Asian nationalities were growing at a rate of 3.9 percent, Latvians were lagging behind at a rate of increase of only 0.2 percent. On the one hand, this uneven trend represented a demographic shift whereby the Slavic people were becoming a minority group within the Soviet Union. Secondly, high birth rates within the central Asian republics did not necessarily equate to an accessible reserve for a dwindling labor source since traditional mores often persisted within these groups. This is precisely why in the Muslim republics the state pushed for women to leave the home and enter the workforce, while in republics such as Latvia, state initiatives encouraged women to do the opposite by having more children.

What were such state initiatives targeted at women like Svetlana who were living in Latvia and other European republics? In “Workers by Hand and Womb: Soviet Women and the Demographic Crisis,” Jo Peers explores the various demographic policies that were put forth to combat the trend’s acute proportions during the Brezhnev years. In attempts to reverse the demographic trend, one area of focus for the late Soviet state was the idea of strengthening the family. In many respects, it is in this context of strengthening the family that the late state reinforced rigid gender notions that I discussed in context of Moscow Doesn’t Believe in Tears. Peers points out, “As is characteristic of post-Khrushchevian policies oriented towards influencing the life-decisions of Soviet citizens, positive inducements for getting and staying married, rather than sanctions against divorce, have been the order of the day.” Other avenues broached in encouraging women to have more children included easing the infamous double burden by increasing social services and introducing new employment legislation and welfare

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56 Buckley, Women and Ideology in the Soviet Union, 173.
benefits. One example of such pronatalist legislation was an introduction of a partially paid maternity leave that was extended for the duration of three years. Thus, scholarly literature thoroughly demonstrates the gravity of the demographic crisis and subsequent efforts by the state to act on women’s reproductive decisions in the late Soviet period.

Yet the question remains as to where the women are within this larger discussion. In light of this, it is critical to step back into the local and informal context of personal interviews against the backdrop of the authorititative role of the state as discussed in the literature. This is precisely so because much of the implications of Russian talk in its capacity of value production takes shape in relation to and against the late Soviet state. Thus, when we read Svetlana’s answer as a couched reply, her acute awareness of this attempt to act upon women, a component stressed in the literature, is apparent. Svetlana’s response enabled her to mold her agency and effectively push back on paternalism and on scholarly depictions of women as exploited victims. Motherhood is constructed and negotiated as key to women’s self-concept, but they effectively do so on their own terms as agents.

Indeed, the Soviet state exhibited a paternalistic approach towards women. Yet interviews with women intimate that they did not passively settle into this relationship. The women’s disposition against formality as it manifested itself by my initial “state-like” presence in their kitchens is critical and telling in this respect. What becomes apparent within the larger narrative of Russian talk is not women’s refusal or rejection of liberatory ideology but the late Soviet state’s version of it. Within women’s narratives, I

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59 Andrej A. Popov and Henry P. David, “Russian Federation and USSR Successor States,” in From Abortion to Contraception: a resource to public policies and reproductive behavior in central and eastern Europe from 1917 to the present, ed. Henry P. David (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999), 228.
discerned that they found meaning and resonated with ideology in their actions, beliefs, and motives. Yet they did so on their own subjective terms in opposition to the state’s claim of the “right” version in light of the demographic crisis and other problems plaguing the late Soviet Union.

In her book *Women and Ideology in the Soviet Union*, Mary Buckley argues that Soviet ideology on women has been predominantly influenced by policy priorities of the leaders and not the women themselves. This focus on ideology expands on arguments by scholars such as Gail Lapidus who contends that a distinction must be drawn between female liberation and mobilization that ultimately served repressive ends. These arguments make sense, but they are largely based on studies of quantitative data and do not take account of Soviet women’s subjective experiences. The literature privileges the state by focusing on its actions (or lack of them) and tends to leave the women out. Examining women’s stories within the informal and intimate context of kitchen conversations, a practice still relevant in post-Soviet times, enriches our understanding of the “Soviet experience” in less static and depersonalized terms.

*Role of medicine within discussion of motherhood*

Thus far, I have discussed the ways women appropriated the prescribed Soviet role of motherhood. In a space created by Russian language, women negotiated motherhood as a critical dimension to the formation of self and identity. Through this process women also effectively forged agency in terms of reproduction. Within the broader context of motherhood, it is also necessary to address medicine in respect to reproductive health as a medium through which women further negotiated their sense of
agency. Critically examining women’s orientation within their accounts about medicine also sheds light on broader implications of interviews. During discussions of medicine, I only posed a few questions to women and they tended to be general and open-ended. In doing so, we were able to keep a focus on healthcare, while enabling women to take the discussion in directions of their own choosing. Paying close attention to women’s focus in conversations and the ways in which they constructed it within the larger space of Russian talk will be important in several respects.

Two important themes came up during our conversations of medicine: backwardness of Soviet medical technology and humanity of healthcare professionals. Regarding the state of technology, the women were able to articulate the difference through their more recent experiences with American healthcare. On the other hand, during conversations women closely focused on the advanced human dimension of Soviet medicine. In discussing the health aspect of their lives, women approached it by thematically constructing material backwardness and heightened humanity as two distinct dimensions of medicine. Zinaida expressed her feelings towards healthcare as follows:

I very much respect Soviet medicine. Our doctors are worthy of this respect. They are deserving of this respect because our medical equipment was not on the same high level as say in America or Israel. But our doctors, even though they did not go to school for twelve years as in America, but real doctors are very responsible people, and with an extensive professional experience, and they helped the ill greatly. I like Soviet medicine very much. Doctors are at the highest level.

Similarly, during an interview with Ella, she echoed the same sentiment, “Medicine was worse in respect to pharmaceuticals, equipment, etc., but as for doctors, no, this is different…”

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60 Zinaida, interview by author, NJ, November 2, 2007.
The way Zinaida, Ella, and other women structured their descriptions evokes imagery that openly points to the shortcomings of Soviet socialized medicine in its inability to provide not only the high level of medical technology and treatments, but at times even the most basic medical supplies. Through this same imagery, it is also important to note women’s focus on the people rather than the circumstances. Women effectively amplified the critical focus on the advanced human dimension when contrasted with the backward technological conditions. This particular orientation enabled women to forge the human dimension to the forefront. At the same time, their dual orientation in conversations about medicine allowed women to speak of what healthcare meant for them in its human form, rather than what it took away. Zinaida further stressed, “I had a woman doctor that with her own hands palpated everything necessary for a diagnosis…”62 In the space created by conversation, Zinaida felt the best way to construct the human dimension of medicine was by focusing on the physical interaction of patient and doctor. The relationship she alludes to is one of two people coming together, and not characterized by power dynamics that would render women as passive victims.

There is an implied contrast in women’s accounts of the human dimension. The human relationships are imagined against the backdrop of technological prowess of the U.S. healthcare system. Zinaida further elaborated:

It is harder for me here. Do you know why? Here you come to a doctor and he does not think about you right away. He immediately gives you a referral for all possible tests. This is a completely different approach to the question. When the doctor receives all the test results, only then he begins to think about the patient. Our doctor used to undertake with a person right away, look and think about the person. This is a different approach to the question.63

When I asked Rita to talk a little about healthcare from the perspective of reproductive health she told me the following story of a somewhat recent experience. She was experiencing some unfamiliar health problems. Upon going to the doctor, she described the appointment:

I asked him what is wrong with me. He said I can only give you an answer in one week. He said this although he is a doctor and he can clearly see what is happening with me. I told him that I was very worried. And he still said, only in one week.  

Here Zinaida and Rita clearly distinguish between two approaches to the same question of patient care. For them notions of medicine revolve around a key construct of human relationships, which is something they are unable to reconcile in their present circumstances. The key human dimension further feeds into their larger notions of themselves as active subjects and counteracts narratives of victimhood.

Women’s accounts about medicine and its role in negotiating female agency becomes more poignant when read against the background of literature on Soviet healthcare especially in respect to reproductive health. Libor Stloukal asserts, “Many abortion clients behaved more as objects of provisions rather than as active subjects capable of defining their needs. Social benefits and services were so taken for granted that they had no stimulating or motivating effects, and often resulted in the passivity and resignation of the majority of the population.”  

This portrayal nicely fits within the larger narrative of passivity and victimhood. Yet during interviews, women talked of actively seeking out well-known and respected Soviet doctors and traveling to Moscow

64 Rita, interview by author, NJ, October 26, 2007.
65 Libor Stloukal, “Understanding the ‘Abortion Culture’ in Central and Eastern Europe,” in From Abortion to Contraception: a resource to public policies and reproductive behavior in central and eastern Europe from 1917 to the present, ed. Henry P. David (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999), 34.
and other capital cities to ensure the best care rather than display such attitudes of passive resignation. In their narratives, some women also showed open contempt for the idea of the infamous “women healers” (*babki* or *znakharki*) practices well known in Russia. During the early years after the Revolution, there were campaigns to educate people of the dangers of these “women healers” and encourage utilization of hospital care. In terms of medicine, this drive reflects the larger Bolshevik project of eradicating entrenched Russian backwardness that the *znakharka* epitomizes, and produce new and rational human beings in respect to health and other aspects of life.

Thus, women’s high regard of healthcare professionals offers a subjective and intimate view. The literature overshadows this dimension in its tendency to portray Soviet doctors as cruel towards women in terms of reproduction. In this sphere of life as in many others, literature often perceives and depicts women as passive victims in Soviet society. Narratives of exploitation and victimization leaves little room for a subjective and empowering understanding of women’s selves in their roles as mothers.

In their argument that Soviet maternity care and medicine in general denies women their dignity and humanity, Holland and McKevitt assert, “Doctors…in the USSR insist that a medical diagnosis is the only reliable way of confirming pregnancy, which undermines women’s confidence in their own bodies.” 66 This argument overlooks the need definitively to confirm pregnancy as early as possible not only to avoid possible complications, but also to enroll women on a proper prenatal regiment. Moreover, Holland’s and McKevitt’s assertion does not make clear as to how insistence of medical confirmation of pregnancy undermined Soviet women a sense of confidence in their

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bodies. In essence, their argument is contradictory in that it talks about confirmation of pregnancy, which would only follow an initial hypothesis made by women themselves about their own bodies. In fact, a reason a woman goes to the doctor is to confirm or refute her own initial diagnosis. Secondly, and more importantly for the arguments of this thesis, the assertion actually works against women and their humanity in that it deprives them of a sense of rationality and agency in wanting to take control of their bodies and health by precisely going to healthcare professionals. In its final analysis, women are yet again depicted as being acted upon by others and as passive victims of a larger superstructure as embodied by medicine. Conversely, women’s approach to conversations about Soviet healthcare enabled them to emerge as agents who were proactive about their health and acting on their own behalf.

Discussions of Soviet medicine also carry implications for the doctors. Holland and McKevitt conclude, “The crux of the problem is a medical model which is narrowly scientific, and does not take account of the emotional and social aspects of becoming a mother.” The further implication is that doctors were perpetrators of this inhuman medical machinery. The connotation becomes even more daunting given that the overwhelming majority of doctors in the Soviet Union were women. If literature depicts doctors as inhumane, during interviews women’s focus on the people rather than the circumstances enabled them to transform doctors into agents in their own right as positive advocates for wellbeing.

It is in this sense that women’s accounts become crucial when analyzed against the background invoking images of medicine lacking a humanity. This is precisely so because women consciously constructed and negotiated a human dimension of medicine

67 Holland and McKeveit, “Maternity Care in the Soviet Union,” 173.
during interviews. The implications of depicting doctors as inhuman and women as passive victims transcend medicine and carry significance for Soviet society and its people as a whole. The repercussion is that they are narrowly portrayed as robotic and trained beings lacking genuine human identities. By the same token, almost exclusive focus of motherhood as a component of the double burden portrays women as machine like vessels constantly running to complete yet another chore that ultimately ends up lacking meaning. An essential connection of these roles to women’s notions of self is obscured or nonexistent.

Within the broader framework of motherhood, my discussion of medicine has demonstrated several key points broached in this thesis. During interviews, women focused on the people rather than the circumstances and stressed what healthcare meant for them. This approach emerged as a theme not only in discussions of motherhood but also work. This is evident within all topics of conversation and it reveals a key element of negotiation during interviews. As they talked about their Soviet lives, the function of language as value production becomes apparent throughout interviews and in this case in discussion of medicine. Value production through Russian talk becomes important in that it pushes back on negative images of women. At the same time, it allows for a subjective and intimate understanding of women’s experiences from which they emerge as active participants rather than as a victimized mass acted upon by outside forces. The overall theme of human relationships in medicine brings our discussion back to the key component of the informal and intimate nature of my interviews with the women. In a larger sense, these very intimate and humane threads within discussions of medicine
stand in contradiction to the formalities of a state-like presence whether in medicine or other aspects of women’s lives.
Chapter 5

Women and Work

In *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, Frederick Engels stated, “…the first condition for the liberation of the wife is to bring the whole female sex back into public industry…”

In congruence with Marxist writings, the Bolsheviks upheld women’s economic participation as a requisite to female liberation as a central theme in the Soviet context. At the same time, discussions of the female experience point to how in this same Soviet context a condition for liberation became a contributing source of female oppression. Indeed, wage discrimination, absence of women in managerial positions even in professions where they largely predominated, and breach of protective maternal legislation in hazardous working conditions, all poignantly expose failures of the Soviet state to women. However, in doing so, the narrative of victimhood also reinforces and transforms women into little more than vehicles of production. Barbara Clements asserts, “…the great majority of Soviet urban women worked the infamous ‘double shift,’ putting in an eight-hour day at their jobs and then coming home to deal with children and housework, tasks made enormously time-consuming by the still-backward economy.”

As such, this offers little toward a more comprehensive dimension of women as workers in Soviet society. In effect, women become the objects of a narrow and one-dimensional experience in which work assumes an aspect of an imposed role in perpetuating and exacerbating the double burden, and consequently tends to lose the deep connection it played in women’s self-understanding. Scholarly literature

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contributes to our understanding of women’s experiences in quantitative terms by thoroughly exploring the exploited position of women in Soviet society. Yet this need not be an exclusive approach and the overall picture can be enriched. Lacking is the exploration of the subjective experience in opposition to the structural approach.

To some degree, heavy focus on the exploitative nature of work carries implications that are at the same time positive and detrimental to an understanding of women’s experiences in the Soviet Union. On the one hand, in respect to work, the structural analysis exposes abuses of women in Soviet society under auspices of ideology and liberation. At the same time, the themes of utilization and exploitation presented in quantitative rather than qualitative terms further deny women a voice and a subjective nature of their experiences. This works to obscure and even deny the existence of a meaningful subjective female experience derived precisely through work.

Scholarly discussions tend to shift attention on the ways the state perceived women as resources to exploit rather than how women perceived themselves in such roles as workers. To be sure, the state mobilized women in their productive and reproductive capacities to achieve its aims, but in turn it provided a space through work precisely where female agency and self-understanding was negotiated. Work could be more than an obligation imposed from above; it could arguably also form an integral source of women’s conceptualization of self in Soviet society. Lapidus states, “women tend to view work from the perspective of their roles as wives and mothers; work satisfaction depends less on the content of the work itself than on its convenience in relation to family responsibility.”70 The assertion obscures the latter point by portraying work simply as an appendage or a chore rather than a woman’s central point of reference. Following along a

70 Lapidus, Women in Soviet Society, 279.
similar trajectory of depicting women in Soviet society, Donald Filtzer states, “The more skilled, better-paid and rewarding the work, the fewer women there were doing it.”71 By exclusively focusing on quantifiable aspects of work, this further suggests that women did not find work rewarding, and obscures the vital role it played in their conceptualizations of self. Furthermore, how does one quantify what constitutes rewarding work? Are the sole criteria a position of authority and high pay? To some extent, objectifying and generalizing an understanding of “rewarding work,” denies women, who are represented as outsiders, this experience. At the same time, it obscures the subjective and intimate role work played in their lives.

Themes of exploitation, especially pronounced in discussions of work, deny a full appreciation of work’s integral role in construction and negotiation of womanhood. Language becomes a transforming tool in that interviews enable women to affirm and maintain strong sense of female agency in retelling their life experiences. In this case, women actively counteract notions of exploitation and passivity to agents through a much more subjective dimension to their experiences as workers. The intricate interplay of work and women’s self-understanding comes to the forefront in a space forged through language. When women talked of their work, the change in their attitude was evident. The following description provided by Zinaida encapsulates the mood of a conversation:

I was satisfied with my work. I was an engineer. I also had a very large and interesting sphere. I had a very interesting job. I would meet with many people at that time. Work was very interesting. I was satisfied with it. It was very lively and interesting…it was very pleasing that I was able to do this work. I completed it with joy. I was able to do it successfully. I felt that I was in the right place. Work was very lively.72

71 Filtzer, “Women Workers in the Khrushchev Era,” 34.
Zinaida stressed what work did and what it meant for her, rather than stating what it took away from her. Work in her narration is repositioned from an exploitative and oppressive experience to one that is deeply fulfilling and quite subjective in nature. In choosing her words and repeating her sentiments, Zinaida reveals how deeply her understanding of self is tied to work as a raised sense of agency comes to the forefront. During our conversation, while talking about her work, Zinaida also showed me a book about her organization. She also read me some of the greeting cards she still receives stressing respect for her humanity (*chelovechnost*).

During a conversation with Rita when I asked her to talk about her professional life, she remembered beginning work as a young woman in her early twenties. Sitting across from her at the table, I could see and feel the changes in her facial expressions while she was talking about these work experiences:

> Work interested me. I liked that my work was moving forward, that everything was going well (*vse poluchaetsya*). That I woke up every morning and someone needed me. That I was needed at work, they were waiting for me. This was interesting, very interesting. In either case, movement forward, progress always interests you. It always propels you forward.\(^{73}\)

Central to Rita’s account is her focus on progress, and not unlike Zinaida’s account an affirmation of one’s humanity and sense of agency. The passages speak to the women’s raised consciousness as active subjects. While we were sitting at the table and talking about work life, as she finished her thought, Rita asked a simple favorite question, *Chai pit’ budem?* (“Shall we drink tea?”) almost as if to underscore the intimacy of the conversation by this important Russian ritual of sitting and drinking.

Through women’s accounts, work emerges as an integral part in the formation of an identity. Work is no longer an oppressive and easily quantifiable experience or simply

\(^{73}\) Rita, interview by author, NJ, October 26, 2007.
a means to economic survival, but essential to identity. To be sure, financial necessity was an important component as to why women worked. This aspect of work is a given, that is, the necessity of two incomes for most Soviet families. However, financial necessity does not have to be the central focus of work, but more or less as a component occupying the external perimeter and representing the objective factor of work. Moving inward from the perimeter toward the center, it takes the shape of a more subjective experience. In giving her reasons for work, Svetlana explained:

I was probably afraid to lose myself. I wanted to be somebody. Even if one tries to develop on their own, it is all not the same, especially in youth. At work, you interact with people, go places, hear and learn something.  

In telling their life stories, language enables women to transform work into a meaningful experience, and without which one cannot fully develop their sense of themselves. In conceptualization of work, women place themselves at the core and in doing so become actors or agents of discussion rather than appearing as objectified and passive victims. When asked as to why Tamara had only one child, one of her reasons was that “…work meant a great deal. It was very pleasant and interesting.” Tamara’s response contradicts Lapidus’ assertion that women viewed work from the perspective of their roles as wives and mothers. In her case, it was actually the other way around. Through the intimate process of Russian talk, work is no longer embodied as a simple appendage but realigned as a central point of reference from which agents emerge.

Taking stock of women’s accounts, work emerges as an initiation into a world of discovery. This reading of work has a dual dimension. The first is more literal in that it speaks to an exploration of the physical environment. During a conversation with Raya,

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75 Tamara, interview by author, NJ, October 27, 2007.
76 Lapidus, Women in Soviet Society, 279.
she stressed that work related activities enabled her to travel throughout the Soviet Union. She told me of the various cities she had traveled to, and noted that Tashkent was the only city she did not visit. Similarly, from Rita’s, Zinaida’s and Svetlana’s accounts we see that for them work meant an opportunity to meet new and interesting people and places. The second connotation of work as a process of discovery is less external, but rather more personal and subjective in that it speaks to self-discovery. Work imparted women with a sense of agency. In their accounts, women stressed being able to complete their work successfully. Women felt they were needed, and that they were in the right place. Work thus represents an integral component in understanding and actualization of self in their Soviet context. For the women, professional work gave rise to a notion of a fully valuable life (polnotsennoya zhizn). Tamara conclusively affirmed, “I loved my work and used to go to work with pleasure.”

Expressions of gender through work

As women talked about work, they touched on the relationship between the sexes, and they talked about the work sphere itself in gendered terms. An integrated analysis of gender as it emerged during conversations allows for a deeper understanding of women’s orientation within their larger narrative of work. Of note are the ways women negotiated gender in the broader context of conceptualization of female agency. As already discussed, women’s agency derived through work developed through women’s mobilization of language in its function as value production. Tamara expressed her sentiments:

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77 Tamara, interview by author, NJ, October 27, 2007.
Once you start work, the rest depends on you. Everything depended on my personal capabilities and desire to work. I was hired with the help of a connection [*po blatu*], and after that, everything depended on me.  

Women’s reluctance to allow room for other explanations to work impediment within their accounts, speaks to how deeply work was intertwined with women’s understanding of themselves and resists a narrative steeped in notions of victimhood. Work becomes a space in which women negotiated identities on their terms.

During the course of our conversations, I asked women to describe interactions with men at work. Women’s accounts and orientation to this simple question deserves elaboration. The open-ended approach to the interview effectively enabled women to speak out without being guided into any specific direction. Remarkably, all women approached the question of their interactions with men at work through purely sexual terms. All women would start out by asserting that they had no intimate ties with men. Zinaida described her experiences with men in the following terms:

> At work, we never looked at men from the point of view of intimate relations. We did not have this at work. However, we had friendships. We even celebrated all Soviet holidays at work. After work, we would get together...cook potatoes, herring, salads, bake sweets. We did not have intimate ties at work. In our collective, everything in this regard was good.

Approaching the topic in a narrow, purely sexually connoted way, enabled Zinaida to bestow a certain innocence and neutrality to the workspace. Emphasizing strong friendship bonds that developed at work and transcend any sexual implications emerges as an important aspect in affirmations of work, a space laden with subjective and meaningful experiences. At the same time, women were able to maintain their sense of agency through work that might have been overshadowed by introducing sexual relations

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78 Tamara, interview by author, NJ, October 27, 2007.
into this space. Women’s dual strategy of affirmations and denial of a sexual implication is suggesting that it was important for them to present work as a gender-neutral arena where the sexual difference did not play a role. Women’s accounts are vested in desexualizing work, which enables them to counter rigid notions of power inequality and female dependency. Even the reference to food and gatherings were not necessarily presented in terms of women doing all the preparing and men the sitting. Thus, even this work component was de-gendered. During her account of work, Tamara mentioned the men bringing cakes for tea, which in its own subtle ways negates notions of inequality.

Women’s responses to this question are revelatory in yet another way, that is, their implications for the broader topic of gender equity in Soviet society. Why did the women not move toward a discussion of gender equality in the workplace? To some degree, this may point to women’s lack of awareness of true gender equity, which as I discussed in chapter one was legally established immediately after the revolution. Yet, Ella’s response on gender relations allows for a deeper understanding, one that points toward language within the informal atmosphere of kitchen conversations as value production:

I personally think that a man does not have to think that he has to provide. This was so in ancient times and left over as a relic…but in a civilized world men and women can do one and the same. 80

Ella’s response intimates that to some degree gender inequity has been resolved by the Bolshevik Revolution. This is not to say that gender equality existed in practice, for otherwise the woman question would not have been proclaimed solved and consequently unsolved at different stages of the Soviet period. However, what this response does represent is a certain degree of female awareness as to what the revolution has done for

the woman question, even if only from a legal standpoint. Noteworthy, too, is that women singled out individual men for holding backward ideas of gender rather than Soviet society as a whole. In doing so, they further hint at a belief that gender problems have been solved by the revolution as an ideological obligation to women. Conversely, women referred to a notion of male pride (muzhskoe samolyubie) in stressing individual men’s behaviors and attitudes towards women.

*Moscow Doesn’t Believe in Tears* invariably functioned as the platform from which discussions of this notion of samolyubie sprang. It also served as a starting point as women’s accounts shifted from the general to the personal. In a scene that takes place during the second half of the film, Katya, her new boyfriend, Gosha, and her daughter are at the kitchen table eating dinner. Katya proceeds to reproach both of them for fighting with some boys that have apparently been bothering her daughter’s boyfriend. To this Gosha abruptly interrupts Katya and warns her: “If you ever allow yourself to take such a tone, then I will not come around here anymore. I will always make all the decisions on that simple basis that I am a man.” 81 We see this exchange play out in front of Katya’s daughter, an example of sex relations that a young woman is exposed to in late Soviet society and one that is a far cry from revolutionary ideals of comradeship and equality. This is precisely the type of psychology that Lenin was concerned with eliminating, yet it was condoned by the late Soviet state. Lenin expressed this view during a conversation with Clara Zetkin:

> Our communist work among the masses of women, and our political work in general, involves considerable educational work among the men. We must root out the old slave-owner’s point of view, both in the Party and among the masses. That is one of our political tasks, a task just as urgently necessary as the formation

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81 See *Moscow Doesn’t Believe in Tears*, Mosfilm, 1979.
of a staff composed of comrades, men and women, with thorough theoretical and practical training for Party work among working women. 82

In the course of my conversations with the women, this telling scene is precisely the context in which their accounts of *muzhskoe samolyubie* surfaced. During a conversation with Zinaida she commented on the scene, “This is purely a male manifestation (*chisto muzhskoe proyavlenie*). He has vulnerable pride (*uyazvimo samolyubie*).” 83 Then Zinaida shifted from the film to a personal account. Analyzing her personal account alongside the film’s scene, we see that it effectively enabled her to resist and counter this type of “un-Bolshevik” behavior. Zinaida remembered and reflected on her parent’s relationship. She described her mother as a woman who was quick to make a decision when a problem would arise. On the other hand, she remembered her father as reserved. She reflected on his approach to problem solving, “He did not give her [Zinaida’s mother] orders, but rather he offered her to think over a second solution to a given question.” Zinaida firmly concluded, “I think that any occurrence must be solved mutually (*oboyudna*). I am not for matriarchy or patriarchy.” 84 Her account eloquently speaks to revolutionary ideals of sex relations grounded on mutuality, and thus it effectively pushes back on late Soviet leadership’s position in reinforcing rigid gender roles in light of the demographic crisis and other problems plaguing the late period. Thus, the film is a poignant observation between the liberated woman that has internalized revolutionary ideology and her late Soviet environment that attempts to compromise this self-realized woman. Noting such distinctions allows for a deeper understanding of women’s construction and negotiation

84 Zinaida, interview by author, NJ, November 2, 2007.
of agency through work. Within the larger space of our conversations, of note are
women’s particular orientations in their accounts from which they emerged as active
participants.

*Women, War and Work: a closer look*

In an earlier discussion about the interview process, I emphasized that women
often digressed in the course of our conversations. It is important separately to consider
this practice during the course of interviews and its implications. Currently, I will draw
on stories of war as an example of this phenomenon. Critically looking at two women’s
accounts of the Great Patriotic War is significant for several reasons. Firstly, it elucidates
arguments about the special function of Russian language. More importantly for the
concerns of this chapter is analyzing women’s construction and negotiation of war
experiences and its larger relation and implication for work.

When I began my interview with Ella and asked her briefly to say a few things
about herself, her initial descriptions centered around two reference points, her early
memories of the war and her professional work. On the one hand, Ella talked at length
about the war and its profound impact on her family and at various points in one way or
another kept coming back to this topic. It is not surprising that as a child to have lived
through this period of Soviet history, she would center many of her accounts around it.
Indeed, it must have been a central experience in many respects. However, what is more
striking is that besides the war, developmentally Ella’s story also centered around work.
Describing her life in the Soviet Union through a prism of these two vital focal points,
Ella reveals how integral work was to her understanding of self in that society. At one
point when talking about war she reflected, “War is the most terrible thing for a child, to such a degree that we became adults.” Ella further remembered, “I was six years old but I still remember our commanders in chief by their last names. We grew up very fast. They used to bomb us in Kiev while we were still there. We arrived to the Urals to starvation. We arrived toward the fall and the harvest was already gone. We used to go to the field and dig frozen potatoes and eat them.” 85 On the other hand and in contradistinction to these harrowing experiences, Ella said the following in reference to work, “I considered life not fully valuable [ne polnotsennoi] if I did not work.” 86 If memories of war represent a certain degree of powerlessness especially for a girl, then recollections of professional work allowed her to construct a strong sense of female agency that is more pronounced when positioned alongside war experiences.

Similarly, Zinaida’s initial introductory account also centered on the war. She started out by mentioning her father’s role within the war effort, “During the war years, from the very beginning and to the end, my father was in active combat. He took part in liberating Kiev and Berlin…” 87 Then Zinaida’s focus shifted to her mother’s and her own role during the war. She continued:

During the war years, I was with my mother in the field army. But I was a child in my eleventh year when the war started. While the front retreated, my mother was in the front lines and I lived through all the joys of retreat, all the bombings, raids, and I lived through all this in the active army as a child. But in 1943 my mother ended up in the hospital, and after that the front abruptly began to advance. My mother stayed behind…she served in the army as a civilian [vol’nonaemnyi]. We stayed back in Russia until the end of the war. Not even until the end of the war. War was still going on when we returned to Kiev. Kiev was completely destroyed, only wreckage all around…but thank goodness we took part in the reconstruction of Kiev…

Several important elements emerge from Zinaida’s account. Through the image of her mother, she actively brought women’s pivotal role into the war effort. In reflecting on her war memories, Zinaida also effectively inscribed herself into the larger war narrative, one of the most profound experiences in Soviet history. In this respect, both Ella and Zinaida place themselves within the larger collective memory of the Great Patriotic War, and as a result bolster female agency in the war experience. The role of female agency is further highlighted as Zinaida stressed taking part in post-war reconstruction even as a girl.

War in these women’s testimonies plays a dual role. For Zinaida, stressing a role in reconstruction represents a personal life long journey of female empowerment through work. Ella who was too young to take part in the reconstruction process in any way; in her account war and the powerlessness it represents emerges as a strong contrast to her professional life as a source of agency, empowerment, and self-awareness.
Conclusion

Toward an Intimate Picture

During the course of my conversations with the women, I often noticed that several of them would talk of their fitness and physical strength in the Soviet Union. This is a simple observation and may at first glance appear somewhat extraneous in the context of this discussion. Yet looking beyond the obvious, the implications of women’s accounts of physical strength and wellbeing are meaningful for the broader arguments I have made in this thesis that feed into larger notions of womanhood. On one hand, this emphasis of strength speaks to women’s sense of independence from men. Their emphasis of the physical condition effectively dispels notions of female dependency and weakness. More importantly and in line with their broader narratives, emphasizing women’s strength negates notions of victimhood, passivity and paternalism. Themes of women’s victimization, whether by the state, men in general, and husbands in particular, did not figure as a key theme or mark my conversations with women. Rather, women understood and perceived themselves as agents in contradistinction to the formality and authority of the late Soviet state. This key point became clear to me through women’s tendency to have the interviews in the informal and intimate context of kitchen conversations, an important Soviet era ritual that stands directly in opposition to the formality of the state.

Thus, stressing physical fitness and strength also points to moral integrity and resistance to the late Soviet state’s “contaminated” and compromised brand of ideology of female liberation. What effectively emerges is a contrast between the strength and
vitality of the female body and the state’s polluted version of revolutionary ideology. The late Soviet state relied on the woman question to legitimize itself to women as true carriers of ideology. Therefore, this internal strength and integrity of the women as manifested in physiological terms lies in their personal and intimate appropriation of ideology of female emancipation in opposition to the state’s version of it.

Women appropriated ideology and understood themselves against the authoritative other, that is, the ineffective late Soviet order. If in the prewar period Soviet citizens attempted transformation to realize the self within the collective, in the postwar, and especially the post-Stalinist, period, we observe an understanding of the self not necessarily aligned with the state but in contradistinction to it. Yet resistance to the late Soviet state does not amount to women’s rejection of revolutionary ideology of female liberation; rather, it speaks to their refusal of the state’s version of it. What emerges is a personal relationship between the women and their subjective appropriation and realization of early revolutionary ideology as expressed through their accounts of work and motherhood in the current post-Soviet context of “Russian women talk.”

My study has aimed to explore these underlying subjective experiences of women in Soviet society as constructed and negotiated by women themselves in the current post-Soviet context. The goal has been to lay bare something that has been overlooked and enter into this ostensibly oppressive past through personal interviews, and come away with a more intimate and subjective layer of women’s experiences. In the space created by our conversations, women emerged as powerful agents with strong identities.

In the intricate process of Russian talk, women push against constraining interpretations of their lives and effectively negotiate their sense of female agency. The
goal has not been to dispute the often regressive and repressive conditions that developed and persisted in Soviet society. On the contrary, this is an important and key component to our understanding of the Soviet past from above. Indeed, the various parts contributing to the exploitative dimension of the Soviet experience exposes flagrant deviations of early revolutionary ideology of female equality and emancipation. Thus, it represents the more or less objective or quantifiable features in space and time of women’s experience in Soviet society. What I have tried to do in this thesis is to go beyond the quantitative structural analysis of the female experience. The goal has been to enter into this ostensibly oppressive environment through interviews and uncover a much more subjective, and intimate layer of women’s experiences from within. How did women perceive themselves and appropriate the vital roles of production and reproduction? The emergence of quite intimate relationships between women and these very roles plays a critical part in their understanding of self in Soviet society. Language in the post-Soviet context becomes a transforming tool with which women tap into their Soviet past to reconstruct a powerful female identity.

My particular methodology of oral history and adaptation of this methodology to the specifics of Russian talk has facilitated an exploration of the subjective experience within Soviet society. In turn, this subjective dimension has revealed the ways in which women’s notions of self were intertwined with their intimate appropriation of liberatory ideology. Women’s accounts of work are particularly poignant in this respect for they aptly reveal how deeply women’s location and understanding of themselves was tied to their professional work. Women emphasized their notions of the centrality of work to fully realizing oneself and without which they considered their lives in Soviet society not
fully valuable. At the same time, women’s discussions of motherhood and family reveal how integral this role was in their larger construction of womanhood. Yet we see that they internalized this role on their own intimate terms precisely in contradistinction to the state’s presentation of the role of motherhood.

Oral history in context of my Russian conversations with women has facilitated an exploration of a subjective dimension to our understanding of the “Soviet experience.” At the same time, I am mindful of the fact that all the women I interviewed lived in urban Soviet settings and were educated. Indeed, it would be futile to compare the life experiences of an urban Soviet woman with those of a kolkhoz woman. My aim has been to explore the experiences of Soviet urban women. I do not claim my findings and arguments of women’s subjective understanding of self to be the norm of the late Soviet period, nor would I argue that they represent an exception either. Irrespective of whether the women and their accounts in this thesis represent the norm or the exception, what it does show is an additional and more importantly subjective dimension to our understanding of the Soviet experience.
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