



Autocratic family policy

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Abstract

Families produce people. This presents a problem for autocratic regimes. On the one hand, familial production benefits the autocrat by augmenting the future productivity of the labor force. On the other hand, familial production threatens the autocrat by drawing current resources and loyalty away from the collective. This paper presents a theory of autocratic family policy in which the deciding factor is how much present control over resources an autocrat is willing to forego for future control. I apply this theory to the Soviet Union, arguing that the somersault of Soviet family policies (1917–1944) was a response to this tradeoff under different conditions.

Keywords Family policy · Autocracy · Public choice · Soviet union

JEL Codes D10 · J12 · P26

1 Introduction

In many ways, families are like any other private organization. However, from the state's point of view, families are distinct because they produce people, i.e., the next generation of laborers and citizens. Familial production is so fundamental to the productivity of a regime that an autocrat cannot simply shut them down or easily take over their function. Yet, he cannot allow them to produce freely, since families draw resources and loyalty away from the collective and may even shelter dissident views.¹ How the autocrat selects his family policy will depend on how willing he is to bear the short-run costs of familial production in return for its long-run benefits.

¹ I will use the male pronouns throughout this paper to refer to my theoretical autocrat, not only because the autocratic rulers in the Soviet Union were men, but also because this seems to be the historical norm (much to women's credit).

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The case of Soviet family policy (1917–1844) provides solid testing grounds for a theory of autocratic family policy. By 1918, the Party had legalized unilateral divorce, banned inheritance and adoption, and soon after, became one of the first countries in the world to legalize abortion (1921). Yet, by 1944, all these of policies had been revoked and replaced. The work of a prominent Soviet feminist, Alexandra Kollontai, illustrates this shift. She had been greatly influential in early Soviet family policy debates and held several positions within the Soviet apparatus—including the Commissar of Social Welfare and People’s Commissar of Propaganda. Kollontai’s early speeches contain arguments like the following:

[T]he family distracts the worker from more useful and productive labour. The members of the family do not need the family either, because the task of bringing up the children which was formerly theirs is passing more and more into the hands of the collective (1977, p. 258).

But suddenly, in 1929, she fell silent. It wasn’t until 1948 that Kollontai spoke out one last time to congratulate the Party on its new programs which enabled each woman to “fulfill her natural duty—to be a mother, educator of her children and the mistress of her home” (1977, p. 351).² Such a “reversal of thought” was not unique amongst participants in Soviet family policy formation; indeed, it was the milder alternative.³

This significant reversal has spurred a conversation in history, sociology, and law (Berman 1946; Wolff 1949; Coser 1951; Sverdlov 1956; Petersen 1956; Quigley 1979; Nakachi 2006). A leading explanation for the inconsistency between early and late Soviet family policy is the one promulgated by the Party itself: pragmatic allowances were made for the widespread destitution of women and children, which, in turn, was laid at the feet of the New Economic Policy (NEP) (Goldman 1993). A second explanation focuses on parenting, positing a tradeoff between the cost-effectiveness of parents for raising children against the potential threat that children are influenced in ways that are undesirable from the perspective of the regime.⁴ My approach incorporates both of these perspectives, namely, that the serious social change from the early to late Soviet Union was consequential, and that parenting is both a threat and necessary to autocratic regimes. A more general theory of

² “The failure to write sufficient quantities of sufficiently effusive prose could be seen as political protest on Kollontai’s part, and Stalin undoubtedly saw it as such as was suspicious” (Holt 1977, p. 298).

³ Goldman (1993) lists some of the casualties: “Alexander Goikhbarg, the idealistic author of the 1918 Family Code, and Aron Sol’t’s, an active participant in the VTsIK debates...were both committed to mental institutions. Many other participants in the debate over the Family Code, like Alexander Beloborodov, Aleksei Kiselev, and Pyotr Krasikov were murdered in prison between 1936 and 1939” (p. 340). Leading legal theorists of the 1920s, including Yevgeny Pashukanis and Nikolai Krylenko, were arrested and eventually shot.

⁴ Geiger (1968) points out the shortcomings of the parenting theory in particular: “...it disregards the fact that the time of the inception of the new family policy corresponds quite closely with the point of maximum political disaffection among the population. Forced collectivization had just been completed, the living standard in the cities had dropped to a point much below that of 1928, and the purges and terror were about to reach a high peak. At such a time Stalin could hardly expect that Soviet parents were making special efforts to rear loyal young communists” (p. 101).

autocratic family policy—which emphasizes the tradeoff between the autocrat’s current and future control—better explains both the initial set of Soviet policies and the timing of reversals.

Similar patterns unfolding in other autocratic regimes today strengthen the validity of my theory of autocratic family policy. China is the obvious example, as the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) imposed the One Child Policy in 1979, enforced it to varying degrees, and then abolished it in 2015 (Zhang 2017). Singapore is yet another example, introducing a “Stop-at-Two” policy in 1966 but replacing it with “Have-Three-or-More (if you can afford it)” in 1987. As many developed countries increasingly lift the “marital veil” (Brinig 2000), and as fertility rates decline, a coherent theory of family policy will only become more important in the future.⁵

2 A theory of autocratic family policy

Since at least Tullock (1987), economists have tried to understand the behavior of autocrats. I follow Boettke (1990, 1993), Wintrobe (1990), Anderson and Boettke (1997), Gregory et al. (2011), Gehlbach and Keefer (2011), and others in applying the autocratic framework to the Soviet Union. In particular, Boettke (1993) emphasizes a central fact about autocratic regimes: “*The sole point of the system was to concentrate benefits on those in power and disperse the costs on the citizens*” (emphasis in original, p. 8).⁶ My theory begins from the assumption that family policy is an intelligible part of autocratic behavior, and just like other political decisions, it can be understood with reference to the autocrat’s goals. Gregory et al. (2011) provides further reasoning for the economic approach to autocratic regimes:

If holocausts, ethnic cleansing, cultural revolutions, or Great Terrors did not repeat themselves, attempts to model them (such as in this paper) would be hollow. However, the fact that such tragedies do repeat themselves and appear to be specific to certain types of economic and political systems gives economists license to delve into these matters (p. 41).

If the Soviet Union was alone in experimenting with sweeping family policy shifts, then there would be little reason to spend time on a more general theory. But the patterns of autocratic family policy repeat themselves, even today.

Economists are also increasingly interested in trying to understand the family and family policy using the core economic assumptions of maximizing behavior, stable preferences, and market equilibrium (Becker and Murphy 1988; Doepke and Tertilt 2016; Lafortune and Low 2017). Families produce many things—children, companionship, insurance, meals, care—which perhaps explains why they have often been

⁵ On this point, Juviler (1985) makes the case that “the underlying causes of such [familial] breakdown found in the modern urban life and economy of the USSR are similar to those causes apparently contributing to divorce and declining birthrates in the West” (p. 385).

⁶ Similarly, Stephan (1996) argues that it was not primarily farsightedness but rent-seeking that contributed to the eventual dismantling of the Soviet apparatus.

modeled like firms (Becker 1981; Allen 1990). This paper ties these two literatures in economics—the study of autocrats and the study of families—together.⁷ It is notable that the autocrat often positions himself in place of the father, taking upon himself the role of redistributing income amongst members of the family (as the head of the household does in the Beckarian framework).⁸

What qualifies as “family policy”? Since economists (and autocrats) are interested in de facto changes, many kinds of policies come into play. I narrow this set by emphasizing those which deal explicitly with familial production. Joint production between family members can be further categorized: (1) horizontal cooperation (between spouses or siblings), and (2) vertical cooperation (between parents and children). For example, an autocrat may regulate marriage (spousal cooperation), or prohibit inheritance (intergenerational cooperation).⁹ The autocrat selects family policy that will maximize his control over resources.

2.1 Familial production

Families produce people. The production of an additional person is a process that requires family members to sacrifice resources over a substantial time horizon. Eventually, this new person will grow up to contribute time and talent to society, but for at least a few years, they are economically unproductive. Families organize themselves to bear the short-run costs of new people and to enjoy their long-run benefits.¹⁰

People are produced *privately*. Family members decide when to produce an additional person (Doepke and Kindermann 2019), and therefore, how much labor and capital will be available for non-familial production in any given period. Family members also exchange extensively on other margins. Parents provide emotional support to one another, grandparents pass on religion and traditions to their grandchildren, and siblings share food and chore responsibilities. The everyday, private activity of the family further draws resources and loyalty away from the collective. Thus, the decisions of political actors are impacted by the decisions of families, and vice versa. State revenues depend on the productivity of families, as well as firms. The production plans of families are shaped by the budget constraints that they face, which in part, is determined by public policy.

⁷ I will be using “the family” and “families” interchangeably in this paper, cognizant of the fact that the family (similar to “the firm” and “firms”) can take a variety of forms in society.

⁸ I thank an anonymous reviewer for this point.

⁹ Contrast this with what various economists, e.g., Becker and Murphy (1988); Allen (1990), have argued about the role family policy plays in democratic systems by lowering the transaction costs of contracting across generations and between spouses.

¹⁰ For example, E.O. Kabo argued that the working-class family is “the most profitable and most efficient organization of workers’ consumption and the upbringing of a new generation” (Goldman 1993). She pointed out that the direction of exploitation is not as clear as Marxist thought made it out to be—it was just as likely for the wife to be exploiting her wage-earning husband, since she redistributed the fruits of his labor for familial consumption.

2.2 Autocratic family policy

There are a few ways that familial production, left to families, conflicts with an autocrat's maximization of his lifetime control over resources. First, families are inherently dangerous because they compete with the autocrat for loyalty and can easily foster dissent. Second, insofar as autocratic control is derived from the productivity of the regime, the short-run reallocation of resources toward raising a child will reduce the resources available to the autocrat in the short run. Third, familial production will, however, increase the scope of future autocratic control as it expands the labor force. The deciding factor in autocratic family policy is how much present control an autocrat is willing to forego for future control.

First, familial production increases the risk that an autocrat will lose his power. While many private organizations are eliminated or monopolized by autocrats for this reason, families are even more dangerous but necessary. While many organizations claim resources for private ends, families naturally lay claim to the deep loyalty of their members.¹¹ The everyday functioning of family life is an inherent threat to an autocrat because it absorbs some supply of loyalty from his citizens that he wants to enjoy (Wintrobe 1990). If the autocrat perceives his risk of losing power to be relatively high, the family policy he selects will be less favorable to familial production.

Next, familial production draws labor and capital away from market work, reducing the productivity of an economy in the short run. The family is structured to weather this temporary reduction in income (e.g., when a parent temporarily leaves formal employment to raise the child) with support from the other members (e.g., when a grandparent looks after the child when the parent goes back to work). However, an autocrat enjoys no such support—for the time being, his tax revenues are reduced relative to a no-child situation. Eventually the child will grow up and contribute to the productivity of the regime, but the autocrat will discount that expected benefit according to his time preference and perceived risk. This point is also central to Olson (1993), where he shows that an insecure autocrat will confiscate assets whose tax yield over his time horizon is less than their value. One of those assets is the labor of adults who might be tempted to work and spend time in the home. If the autocrat perceives his time horizon as relatively short, the family policy that maximizes his lifetime control is one that can shift resources to the present. This is accomplished by discouraging familial production.

Importantly, some adult labor is more costly to sacrifice in the short run than others. If an adult is more productive—because of greater human capital, for instance—he or she will be more costly in terms of foregone revenues for the autocrat. These variations in the labor force can be expected to shape an autocrat's decision to encourage/reduce familial production. On the margin, we would expect autocrats to be more willing to sacrifice low-skilled labor in the short run (e.g., uneducated

¹¹ Evidence of this can be seen in the records of KGB interrogations. The Wilson Center has a Digital Archive of some primary source documents: <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/collection/45/intelligence-operations-in-the-cold-war>.

women) toward the production of children than high-skilled labor (e.g., highly educated women). For this reason also, autocratic family policy will be especially biased toward a reduction in certain types of familial production.

Finally, familial production results in additional people who will increase the long-run productivity of the regime. This is significant since population growth occurs not only as a replication process (i.e., more hands and more sets of 24-hours), but a diversification process as well (i.e., different ideas and different talents).¹² Simon (1996) points out that the extent to which the benefits of additional people are realized depends on the economic and political institutions in place. If the autocrat expects to be in power for long enough to reap the benefits of familial production, selecting family policy that encourages familial production maximizes his control over resources.

2.3 Predictions for autocratic family policy

In sum, this theory of autocratic family policy leads to some predictions:

1. Because of the threats inherent in familial production, an autocrat will seek control over it through family policy.
2. The more value an autocrat places on short-run control, the less familial production will be tolerated in his family policy.
3. The more value an autocrat places on long-run control, the more familial production will be tolerated in his family policy.

As has been shown, the time horizon of an autocrat is the key to his choice of family policy.

3 Soviet family policy

On the heels of the 1917 Russian Revolution, the Bolsheviks (under the guidance of Alexander Goikhbarg) issued a series of decrees that immediately banned religious marriages and permitted “no-grounds” divorce. This was soon followed by the abolition of the legal concept of legitimacy, bans on inheritance and adoption, and a statement instituting the full legal equality of men and women. In 1921, the Soviet Union would become the first country in the world to legalize abortion. However, less than a generation later, these policies were reversed and “pro-family” propaganda began to engulf the Russian people. Goikhbarg himself was shut in a mental institution, and mothers with many children were proclaimed to be national heroines.

How was this rapid shift in family policy justified by the Soviet regime? The first codes (1917–1930s) were defended by their coherence with Marxist conceptions of

¹² For example, research has shown that a younger labor force yields greater entrepreneurship and dynamism in the market overall Karahan et al. (2019).

the family. The second set of policies (1930s–1944) were introduced with reference to the new social conditions the regime had to grapple with: the plight of women and children, placed at the feet of the New Economic Policy (NEP), and the cultural “backwardness” of rural villages. Put simply, the changes happened because the Party wanted them to happen. A timeline summarizing the specific family policies of the Soviet Union can be found in Table 1.

To understand the overarching ideological constraints of the Party, it is necessary to visit its roots in communist thought. For Marx and Engels, the family was an economic unit masquerading as a bastion of bourgeois virtue. They likened the relationship between husband and wife to that of the bourgeois and proletariat, or an unpaid prostitute and her exploiter, and despised its connections to religion and tradition. The key to liberating family members would be to remove “the dependence, rooted in private property, of woman on the man and of the children on the parents” (Engels 1847). Once private property was abolished, other aspects of bourgeois family life—specialized work, shared living spaces, inequality from inheritance, and the rearing of children—could be taken over by the community. Marxist thought served as an important focal point for the Party’s debates (Geiger 1968; Boettke 1990). While early Soviet family policy was undeniably an experimentation with Marxist ideas, this fact does not explain the particular policies in which these ideas were embraced and then suddenly pushed aside.

3.1 Early Soviet family policy (1917–1926)

Before the Russian Revolution, the representative Russian family was the *dvor*, a multigenerational household with an average of 6.3 members (Frierson 1987, p. 44). The first wave of Soviet policy targeted two distinctive features of the *dvor*: its multigenerational structure and its support—the Russian Orthodox Church—which had governed marriage and family disputes for hundreds of years. In particular, the ban on inheritance and communal property destabilized the *dvor*, and the early Soviet decree allowing unilateral divorce was a complete shift from the Russian Orthodox rules on divorce (that had been even stricter than the Catholic Church of the West). The architects of the new Soviet family policy saw this as a crucial step: “The complete break of the state power with canonical, religious, ecclesiastical views on marriage makes it possible to free the masses in this respect from the oppression of the priesthood” (“Marital, Family & Guardianship Law,” 1920).

The Family Code of 1918 instituted legal equality between men and women, and women’s participation in the formal workforce began to increase substantially. Beyond the legalization of abortion in 1921 (which remains Russia’s primary form of birth control today), the category of “illegitimate children” was eliminated, and child support was redefined such that a woman unsure about the paternity of her child could insist that all possible partners make her payments as a “commune of fathers.”¹³ Expansions in childcare and communal kitchens also marked Party efforts

¹³ See Allen and Brinig (2012) on how different child support rules can encourage or discourage familial stability.

Table 1 Timeline of Soviet Family Policy

Policy	Discouraging family production	Encouraging family production
Family Code of 1918	<p>No-fault divorce</p> <p>Only civil marriages are recognized</p> <p>Legalized abortion (1920)</p> <p>Abolished adoption</p> <p>Full legal equality for women</p> <p>Eliminated inheritance</p> <p>Abolished distinctions between legitimate/illegitimate children</p> <p>All alleged fathers responsible for splitting alimony ("commune of fathers")</p>	
Family Code of 1926	<p>Registration of marriage and divorce made optional</p>	<p>Reinstated adoption</p>
Family Code of 1936	<p>Increased the number of communal kitchens</p>	<p>Single father assigned alimony payments by courts</p> <p>Parents responsible for criminal behavior of children</p> <p>Largely restricted abortion</p> <p>Increased insurance, pregnancy leave, childcare, payments for large families</p> <p>Fines for divorce</p>
Family Code of 1944		<p>Extended maternity leave</p> <p>Increased allowances to unmarried mothers</p> <p>Restricted alimony rights</p> <p>Increased divorce fines, divorcees required to appear in court and publish in paper</p>

to provide public substitutes for household production. As the Commissar of Education, Anatoly Lunacharsky, wrote in the late 1920s:

Our problem now is to do away with the household and to free women from the care of children. It would be idiotic to separate children from their parents by force. But when, in our communal houses, we have well-organized quarters for children...there is no doubt the parents will, of their own free will, send their children to those quarters, where they will be supervised by trained pedagogical and medical personnel (Shipler 1983, p. 89).¹⁴

It would not be long until the Party devoted many resources toward building and promoting such quarters. However, the Soviet communal kitchens would become infamous for forcing unwilling strangers to cook, eat, and share pots and pans in claustrophobic quarters.¹⁵ Early Soviet family policy was explicitly anti-capitalist and aimed at inserting the state where the market, church, and extended family had traditionally exercised authority.

3.2 Demographic and social trends (1920s–1930s)

By 1922, there was a new social group on the scene: the *besprizorniki*, or homeless orphans. This group of some 7.5 million starving children roamed the countryside in search of food and a family (Goldman 1993, p. 59). Women also increasingly found themselves in disastrous financial condition, bearing the burden of providing for children alone since their “commune of fathers” had disappeared or could not themselves provide support. The rapidly growing industry of prostitution “made a mockery of the idea that women were free, independent individuals who could enter a union on the basis of personal choice” (Goldman 1993, p. 122). The Party responded by introducing legislation in 1926 that held only one man responsible for alimony payments and increased the number of communal kitchens.

As the years of civil war, famines, purges, and rapid industrialization progressed, the Soviet Union underwent two demographic shocks: declining birthrates and an unbalanced sex ratio. These trends, in addition to Stalin’s mass terror and foreign conquest, brought into focus the benefits that families could provide to the Soviet regime. The conditions also were such that households were increasingly smaller and headed by a single woman, instead of generations of cooperating couples as the *dvor* had been.

Since official Soviet censuses (1920, 1926, 1937) are untrustworthy, demographers have only recently reconstructed the population trends from this period. From 1895 to the 21st century, 58% of Russia’s potential population growth was lost due

¹⁴ It is notable that the removal of children from their parents is a theme present in other social experiments, such as the Israeli kibbutzim. Hall (2014) describes how and why this policy naturally unraveled in that setting as well.

¹⁵ See, for example, “How Soviet Kitchens Became Hotbeds of Dissent and Culture” (<https://www.npr.org/sections/thesalt/2014/05/27/314961287/how-soviet-kitchens-became-hotbeds-of-dissent-and-culture>).

to socio-political disturbances, constituting 113 million “lost” people, or over 75% of the present-day Russian population Ediev (2001). Results are displayed in Fig. 1.

The male-female ratio was also drastically skewed from decades of purges, wars, famines, and other catastrophes. Sparse demographic data confirms that the ratio of all males to all females declined from parity at the turn of the century to a “low point of 74.3 in 1946” (Geiger 1968, p. 175). The male-female ratio of those at reproductive age was reduced to 19:100 in some rural areas (Nakachi 2006, p. 40). These demographic shifts were so significant that:

The 1959 census shows twenty million more women than men in the Soviet Union and in the age group thirty-two and older almost twice as many women as men...[a stereotype] sees the Soviet Union as a land of free love, though in reality it is much more a land of broken families. These two realities indicate the significant fact that a very great proportion of Soviet families are headed by women (Geiger 1968, p. 120).

The tenures of Lenin and Stalin had brought an unprecedented degree of social dysfunction to the Russian people.

3.3 Late Soviet family policy (1936–1944)

The first abrupt change to the Party’s position on family policy came with the Code of 1936. Though not admitted in external communication, perceived demographic challenges were scrupulously discussed in the Party’s secret communications (Nakachi 2006). The main concern was that slowing population growth would cause the labor force to dwindle and productivity to suffer even more. Divorce was restricted by fines, abortion was curtailed, and state funds were increasingly allocated toward childbearing women. The “pro-family” posture of the regime was solidified with the 1944 Code, which extended all of these benefits.¹⁶ The Soviet Union began to publicly recognize and send monthly sums to its “Heroine Mothers,” women who had given birth to many children. Additionally, increased investments were made toward facilities for single mothers. Until the fall of the Soviet Union itself, family policy from this point remained relatively stable.

Policy changes are not costless for an autocrat. Regulating the Russian family required whole new departments, training, enforcement, and the silencing of dissenters. As one peasant put it: “The village demands standard laws that are stable. The village demands that wives and brides register. We do not want a situation where today they are tied to one and tomorrow to another, and the court recognizes all this as marriage” (Goldman 1993, p. 224-5). For all its costs, the tumultuous changes to Soviet family policy must have been perceived as valuable to the Party.

¹⁶ This pattern occurred in other autocratic regimes during the same period, such as with the fascist pro-natalist campaign in Italy from 1925 to 1938. Here, Mussolini tried unsuccessfully to raise the birth rate while still expanding his power.

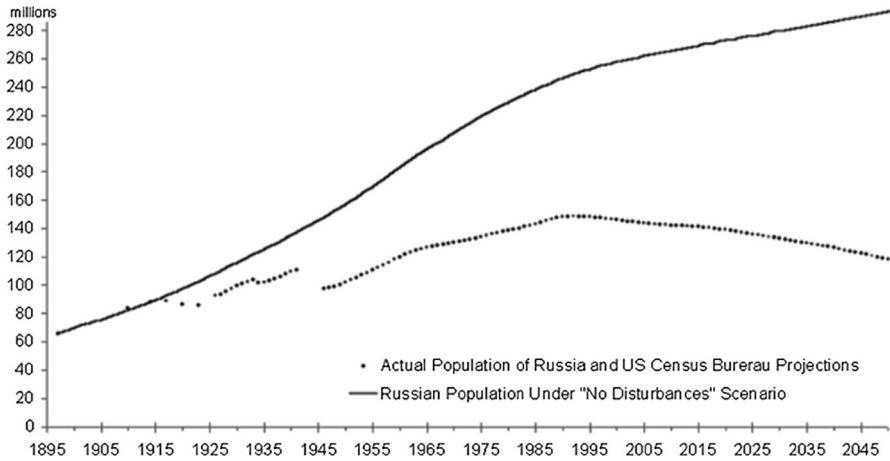


Fig. 1 Russian population vs. potential from a “no disturbances” scenario. *Source:* Figure 6 in Ediev (2001)

4 Testing the theory against Soviet family policy

For an economy and society as thoroughly controlled as the Soviet Union, it would be hard to believe that its succession of family policies had little to do with the goals of the Party. Bundles of family policies, purposefully chosen at particular times, regulated Russian families in a way that maximized autocratic control. The direction of policy incentives for families depended on how willing the Party was to sacrifice short-run control for long-run control. The theory of autocratic family policy featured several predictions, each of which I now address in the Soviet context.

4.1 Prediction 1

“Because of the threats inherent in familial production, an autocrat will seek control over it through family policy.”

For family policy to be effective, the Soviet regime first needed to eliminate competition from the two traditional authorities over Russian family life: (1) the Russian Orthodox Church, (2) and extended family members (especially the patriarch). The first series of decrees—the 1917 Decree and 1918 Code on Marriage, the Family, and Guardianship—did just that. The next important step was to replace traditional patterns of familial production with familial production plans that aligned with Party interests.

In the December of 1917, the Bolsheviks promulgated their first major decree to alter marital contracts in two significant ways: (1) civil marital contracts must replace religious marriage, and (2) either spouse could request a divorce under the new civil rules. The new code was explicitly intended to erase, “centuries of patriarchal and ecclesiastical power and established a new doctrine based on individual

rights and gender equality” (Goldman 1993, p. 49). Third parties, such as the local parish clergy or family patriarch, had long facilitated familial production by acting as specialized enforcers of marital contracts.¹⁷ By introducing a contract that allowed for unilateral divorce, the Soviet regime differentiated its product, introduced a source of instability for familial ties, and began to centralize family planning. The 1918 Code on Marriage, the Family, and Guardianship also disrupted intergenerational exchange within the family with its the ban on inheritance and ban on adoption. As the 1918 Code states: “Children have no right to the property of their parents, nor parents to the property of their children” (Section 160). Children were to increasingly rely on the state for sustenance and education, in return for their lifelong loyalty.

The Party monopoly over familial production extended to the social life of family members as well. Soviet youth programs, like the Young Pioneers and *Komsomol*, functioned somewhat as regulated marriage markets, replacing the traditional matchmaking of older generations. The Party organized large communist youth and adult groups and instituted whole schedules of new rituals to replace those from before. One particularly fitting example is the marriage Soviet ceremony:

The bride and groom sit on a red-draped platform, attended by fellow union members and representatives of the women’s organization...the pair pledge themselves to work mutually to raise the production of the factory (Petersen 1956, p. 31).

Control over the marital contract was essential for the Party, since only then could it then leverage family policy to weaken or strengthen familial production in accord with its own objectives, without distorting incentives from other third parties.

4.2 Prediction 2

“The more value an autocrat places on short-run control, the less familial production will be tolerated in his family policy.”

In addition to ensuring a monopoly over family life, early Soviet family policy was designed to reduce familial production. This benefited the Soviet Communist Party, controlled by Lenin (from 1917 to 1924) and then by Stalin (from 1929 to 1953), since their control was boosted by transferring resources and loyalty away from families to the state. Both Lenin and Stalin worried for years about the security of their power—a fact brutally evident through episodes like Stalin’s Great Terror (Gregory et al. 2011)—and so were happy to exchange risky future benefits from familial production for certain present control. This also helps explain why while traditional family life was disparaged, promiscuity was too—young men and women

¹⁷ In addition to very low rates of annulment, records show that the Russian Orthodox Synod rejected around 70% of all divorce requests (Freeze 1990, p. 738). The primary sympathy toward divorce requests was revealed in cases where spouses had confessional differences, evidence that the clergy realized their small enforcement power outside the Russian Orthodox community.

were expected to spend their newfound time and freedom at work for the Party. I estimate the reduction in familial production during the period of early Soviet policy (1917–1936) in three ways: (1) the divorce rate (a proxy for the spousal cooperation), (2) average household size (a proxy for intergenerational cooperation), and (3) qualitative data on familial relationships from that era. In the words of Stalin: “A true Bolshevik shouldn’t and couldn’t have a family, because he should give himself wholly to the Party” (Montefiore 2003, p. 69)

In addition to banning religious marriage, inheritance, and adoption, the 1918 Code also legalized abortion, recognized the full equality to women, and abolished the legal notion of “illegitimacy” which required all alleged fathers to share child support payments. These policies effectively increased the utility available outside of their families for both men and women. In the terms of family economics, marriage became a bargaining game with the threat point of divorce (Manser and Brown 1980), and spouses could now compare their marital bargaining surplus with a more favorable situation outside of marriage, reducing the attractiveness of marital unions. The consequences of extra-marital sexual relationships were also reduced by the legal allowances for abortion and out-of-wedlock births. This predictably increased the quantity consumed of such relationships, to the point where it is common to find jokes about the noticeable decline in parental cooperation during this period.¹⁸ Less than a decade later, the Family Code of 1926 also contained measures to reduce familial production, notably by removing the civil requirement to register marriage or divorce and by increasing the number of communal apartments and kitchens. The Soviet investment in communal living spaces competed directly with familial production, lowering the demand for family relationships at the margin.

What effects did these early Soviet family policies have on families? First, the divorce rate provides a rough proxy for the reduction in cooperation and loyalty between the husband and wife. Spousal cooperation is important because it is the foundation of familial production, i.e., the production of new people. Table 2 gives rate of divorce, along with its changing “price” according to various policy restrictions.

This is also indicative of curbing the threat of interest group formation which is latent in the family, since a husband and wife may reinforce each other’s dissident views and work together to gain support from the broader community. The Party especially feared the influence that women might wield over the other family members, as women tended to be more sympathetic to religion and would be insulated from propaganda if they remained within their home. Lenin voiced this fear: “The backwardness of women, their lack of understanding for the revolutionary ideals of the man, decrease his joy and determination in fighting. They are like little worms which, unseen, slowly but surely rot and corrode” (Shipler 1983, p. 89). In many

¹⁸ As Alexandra Kollontai referenced in one of her many speeches: “According to statistics given by comrade Kurskii at the VTsIk session, out of seventy-eight cases only three are alimony orders concerning the welfare of children. This is evidence that the women themselves do not believe that the fathers of their children can be found. (Laughter.)” An online archive of her writings and speeches can be found here: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/kollonta/index.htm>.

ways, early Soviet family policy can be read as an effort to make the housewife—in many ways, the manager of familial production—irrelevant. One economist zealously declared that the second Five Year Plan would “achieve 100% socialization of the basic aspects of daily life” (Goldman 1993, p. 314).

Another proxy for the extent of familial production in a society is the average size of a household. Prior to the Revolution, several generations lived under the same roof, so that the independence of a son was a major life event—the *razdel*—which included a series of meetings and rituals (Frierson 1987).¹⁹ By 1927, there were 2.46 dependents per provider, and in 1935, there were 1.59 (Goldman 1993, p. 313). Although household figures are sparse for early Soviet years, the 1959 census adds one more dimension to these numbers: village households had a mean size of 3.9, and urban families averaged 3.5 members (Geiger 1968, p. 174). Correspondingly, there were no significant differences in family size across the socioeconomic groups of farmers, urban workers, and those in white collar jobs. These figures bolster the claim that Soviet family policy was not aimed at one subset of the population but rather at families *qua families*. Accounts of parent-child relationships from this time portray them as strained at best.²⁰

Finally, the Party introduced many public projects at this time which, if not eliminating familial production, at least could move some of it outside of the home where it could be better controlled. Communal kitchens proliferated in the rapidly growing urban centers, and by 1921, “[Moscow] boasted over 2,000 food stations serving 956,000 people, or 93% of the population” (Goldman 1993, p. 128–9). Women were urged not to rely on their husbands as the “breadwinner” but rather to “accustom herself to seek and find support in the collective and in society, and not from the individual man” (Kollontai 1977, p. 250). In its early years, the Party maximized control by transferring loyalty and resources away from family purposes and toward the regime.

4.3 Prediction 3

“The more value an autocrat places on long-run control, the more familial production will be tolerated in his family policy.”

By the late 1930s, the society under Soviet rule had been seriously changed. Years of war, famine, terror, and industrialization, had reduced fertility rates substantially, as shown in Table 3. Policing and monitoring technologies had developed to the point where the Party was no longer as insecure about its grip on power. Stalin had been in power for over a decade and would remain in control for two more.

¹⁹ Aligning with the view of family as an alleviator of transaction costs between its members, the habit of family members to share a home can also be seen as a way to lower the cost of monitoring, thus ensuring that other family members are duly performing their role in familial production (Allen 1992).

²⁰ Elena Bonner’s younger brother is said to have remarked upon the arrest of their father: ‘Look at what those enemies of the people are like, some of them even pretend to be fathers’ ” (Figs 2007, p. 137). Figs (2007) features extensive documentation of other similar occasions.

Table 2 The price of divorce (SUR) and the quantity “Purchased”

Year	1st Divorce	2+ Divorces	Divorce rate
1918 ^a	0	0	–
1924	0	0	11.3%
1926 ^b	0	0	14.5%
1934	0	0	34.0%
1936	50	150–300	–
1940	50	150–300	20%
1941	50	150–300	12.2%
1942	50	150–300	18.3%
1943	50	150–300	20.5%
1944 ^c	600–2100	600–2100	10.7%

All information taken from Berman (1946) unless otherwise noted. Data on divorce rates from 1924–1934 taken from Goldman (1993), and divorce rates from 1940–1944 taken from Nakachi (2006).

^aUnder the Family Code of 1918, a divorce could be obtained by the application of one or both parties to the Civil Registry Bureau.

^bRegistration became unnecessary, and *de facto* divorce and marriage were accepted.

^cUnder the Family Code of 1944, a petition with reasons for divorce needed to be made with a payment of 100 rubles. If accepted, the couple would have the new status marked on their passport and pay a sum ranging from 500–2000 rubles (as directed by the court)

Table 3 Fertility trends for select years from 1913–1943

Year	Births (millions)	Yearly increase/decrease (millions)
1913	6.49	–
1926	6.47	– 0.02
1936	5.35	– 1.12
1937	6.41	+1.06
1938	6.32	– 0.09
1939	6.29	– 0.03
1940	5.75	– 0.54
1941	4.63	– 1.12
1942	2.09	– 2.54
1943	1.36	– 1.73

Gathered from table 2.6 of Nakachi (2006)

Party members, notably the future autocrat Khrushchev, began to show concern about the growth of the Soviet labor force and its future productivity. In response, a second era of Soviet family policy (1936–1944) was introduced that quickly shifted away from discouraging familial production to actively encouraging it. Importantly, this was done in a way that still minimized the risks inherent

in familial production. It is significant that propaganda at that time was “even more notable for being anti-men than for being anti-revolutionary” (Fitzpatrick 1999, p. 143). In addition to the “petty-bourgeois,” two-parent family, a subset of the population, Stalin’s “class of single mothers” (Nakachi 2006), were encouraged to bear and rear children by themselves. This ensured that male or more highly-skilled workers would not reduce their supply of labor to the regime.

First, stable family units became more valuable as the monitoring apparatus of the Party—the Soviet secret police (OGPU and later the NKVD)—developed. Gregory (2009) concludes that during the 1930–1933 deportations, “the unit of repression was not the individual but the *household*” (emphasis added, p. 124). A growing literature investigates the measures used by the Soviet Union to identify and control its population. Passport and residency laws introduced in the early 1930s became the main way that the Party “defined identities and attempted to act upon the Soviet population” (Shearer 2009, p. 844). Shearer (2009) overviews the process:

A passport fixed an individual occupationally, ethnically, and socially through categories written into the passport document... If a person left a locale, he or she was required to “unregister” the current residence and to indicate the new address. Upon arrival at the new address, the passport holder was again required to register his or her passport and new residence at the new location (p. 845).

The timing of these passport campaigns is telling. By the end of 1934, 27 million passports had been issued, making up 20 percent of the adult population (only counting the Russian republic). By the Family Code of 1944, 50 million citizens (of a total 162 million) were passport holders.

Moreover, the Soviet secret police relied heavily upon civilian monitoring as a tool to identify which individuals needed to be deported or eliminated. The failure to denounce treason or counterrevolutionary violations was a criminal offense in Soviet law. Even when family members were cooperating together and loyal, their correspondence and connections could still be utilized. Weiner and Rahi-Tamm (2012) records how this was done:

Between 15 January and 5 May 1941, some 3551 letters from servicemen to their relatives and acquaintances were confiscated and used in investigations of politically suspicious personnel... Based on this information, the men of the 29th Corps were catalogued by “degrees of contamination” (p. 21).

Family members are valuable informers because they have access to the activities, beliefs, and whereabouts of one another. Importantly, Petersen (1956) writes that “[i]n many cases, the families of persons arrested in the great purges of the 1930’s perished with the ‘criminals,’ presumably because it was feared that family resentment would generate new disloyalty to the regime” (p. 32). Stalin notoriously leveraged spousal denunciation as a loyalty test for top Party officials.

The big shift came with the Code of 1936. After decades of protest from the villages and legal mayhem from mothers fighting for their alimony, access

to divorce was restricted, childbearing was encouraged, and the Party explicitly devoted itself to “strengthening” the family. Just as the first wave of family policies was justified by its liberation of women from their familial prisons, the Party now positioned itself as liberating women from their destitution while at the same time trying to increase birth rates. Toward this end, an increasingly prohibitive abortion policy was coupled with increased pregnancy leave and investment in childcare facilities. Between 1928 and 1934, the number of *creches* (centers for infants) had increased from 257,000 to 5,143,400 and day-cares increased from 2132 to 25,700 (Goldman 1993). Some authors also portray this period as a return to middle-class values (Dunham 1990).

The 1944 Family Code, Stalin’s final change to Soviet family policy, fortified barriers to divorce, expanded government support for pregnant women, and honored mothers with titles like “Mother Heroine” which carried substantial monthly payments. Cloaked in language that broadcast its support of families and women especially, Nakachi (2006) argues that the different language in the externally-circulated draft of the Code (*ukaz*) and internally-circulated note (*spravka*) reveals its true purpose. It was intended to maximize the reproduction of the population. Since a larger labor force increases the long-run productivity of the regime, it is hardly a surprise that the efforts toward higher fertility were spearheaded by Khrushchev—the future autocrat himself. Nakachi (2006) illustrates that the “key step” of the Code was to provide state aid to single mothers:

Women would not have to be afraid of getting pregnant, and male partners would not have to be afraid of impregnating their sexual partners. Thus, the new project was designed to encourage both men and women to have nonconjugal sexual relationships that would result in procreation (p. 54).

The main function of shared housing for single mothers was to monitor and prohibit abortion, infanticide, and/or abandonment, which was why the medical control commission, “rather than maternal request, would determine who should stay in these facilities and for how long” (Nakachi 2006, p. 51). Table 4 summarizes the fertility rewards introduced by the 1944 Code.

Nakachi also calls attention to the fact that expansive aid to single mothers would need to be tempered by high barriers to divorce, lest the system be over-drawn.

The creation of the class of single mothers allowed the Party to shift the costs of child-rearing onto a subset of the population with a relatively lower cost of foregone productivity. In other words, if the autocrat had to rely on familial production to some extent, it was better for the Party that house work was not accomplished by their most highly-productive workers. Geiger (1968) illustrates how the policy incentives shaped the relationships of married couples along similar lines:

Though the new party line and legislation kept many estranged spouses from divorcing, it did not solve the basic problem. The wives of busy, politically co-opted husbands...becomes as wifely and motherly as possible, relinquishing any substantial direct involvement in the outer society, leaves such activities to her husband, makes the best of her traditional sex role...and does not hold an outside job (p. 149).

Any family activity beyond those maximizing control of the autocrat would have been out of line with the interests of the Party and therefore discouraged.

Effectively, the Party encouraged family life only in the formal sense with minimal cooperation and loyalty, such that in marriage, “only the common residence of a man and a woman remains, without love, without respect, without common interests and regard for each other” (Geiger 1968, p. 260). The sole policy that remained unchanged in this period was the ban on religious marriage. Soviet policy would remain this way for many years, until abortion and divorce were legalized again in the 1960s.

5 Conclusion

Families have a complex relationship with states, especially when they both produce many similar goods and services for individuals (Breton 1989). As a private organization, the family draws resources and loyalty away from the public sphere. However, families invest heavily in human capital and population growth which will eventually increase the productivity of society overall. Reflecting upon the case of an autocratic regime simplifies the relationship between families and the state. Familial production reduces the current control of an autocrat by fostering competing claims to resources and loyalty. Familial production increases the future control of the autocrat by increasing the future productivity of the labor force. The determining factor for whether an autocrat selects family policy that encourages or discourages familial production is how much he values short-run control relative to long-run control.

I use this theory to understand Soviet family policy (1917–1944), arguing that: (1) early Soviet family policy was designed to reduce familial production at a time when it was largely threatening to the stability of autocratic power, and (2) the later Soviet family policy was designed to increase familial production once the Party was more secure in its power, only insofar as it could increase the birthrates and facilitate identification and monitoring of citizens. I argue that Soviet family policy was consistent in its aim, adjusting to different conditions as it centralized control over Russian family life.²¹

Family policy is increasingly deployed as a political tool by states all over the world.²² As Hall (2014) points out, the family is also an important moderating force on extreme political ideas—from Marx and Engels to Ayn Rand. Moreover, in developed countries today, the “representative family” or household has been undergoing serious change (Greenwood et al. 2021). To build theories and policy that comport with reality, it is important to understand the relationship between states and families. Ignoring the important function of families in society will impair any efforts to

²¹ Here I echo the point made by Gregory (2009) that “it is difficult to ‘prove’ any model of repression; rather we can only show it to be consistent with the most important historical facts” (p. 15).

²² For instance, Russia is still trying to increase its labor force via family policy: “In 2006, then President Vladimir Putin unveiled a program that promised up to \$10,000 in credits and subsidies for mothers who had a second or third child” (Eberstadt 2011).

Table 4 The Soviet system of fertility rewards (1944)

Children	Lump sum (SUR)	Monthly subsidy (SUR)	Honorary title
0	–	–	–
1	–	–	–
2	–	–	–
3	400	–	–
4	1300	80	–
5	1700	120	Medal of Motherhood, II Degree
6	2000	140	Medal of Motherhood, I Degree
7	2500	200	Order of Motherhood, III Degree
8	2500	200	Order of Motherhood, II Degree
9	2500	250	Order of Motherhood, I Degree
10	3500	250	Mother-Heroine
11+	5000	300	Mother-Heroine

Taken from Nakachi (2006, p. 227) Table 2.9. In addition to “carrots” for large families, the same code imposed taxes upon small families: 6% of their income if the couple had no children, 1% for just one child, and 0.5% when the couple had just two

improve social outcomes. To conclude, I echo Geiger (1968)’s reflection on the legacy of the Soviet family: “In the long view of history this special mission—to afford to the individual some privacy and protection against totalitarian encroachment—may prove to have been the Soviet family’s most important function” (p. 331).

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