



The Stalin Society:

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Women in the USSR

“My country and I are one. If things go well with my country, they will go well with me. When shells burst in Leningrad, when the enemy spoils and demolishes our palaces, museums, houses, I feel as if the Germans are shooting at my heart, and my heart says to me: Be brave, be honest, keep in step with the soldiers”

Anaya Pavlova, YCL member who died heroically in siege of Leningrad

Presentation to the Stalin Society by Ella Rule, March 1998

Women in the USSR

The emancipation of women is a major rallying cry of the socialist revolution. Since the oppression of women arose as a result of the institution of private property in the means of social production it follows - because socialism is based on the abolition of private property in the means of production - that socialism lays the firmest possible basis for the definitive re-emancipation of women.

But as we know, economic basis and ideological superstructure are not always in harmony, and old ideas of women's inferiority and old methods of social organisation which prevent women from participating fully in the life of society (the 'men's world!'), do have to be consciously dismantled. For this scientific leadership is required, guided by thorough understanding of Marxism, to counteract all kinds of knee-jerk reactive concepts of women's liberation that lead nowhere. The Soviet Union in Stalin's time enjoyed just such a leadership and therefore was able to take giant strides in promoting the emancipation of women by reintroducing them into social production on an equal basis with men. It was in the Soviet Union that the world first saw women entering all the trades and professions traditionally closed to them everywhere. Nevertheless we encounter many petty-bourgeois ladies who do not consider this to be any indication at all of women's emancipation. This is because their idea of liberation is governed by their class instincts and not by science.

One unscientific idea of what constitutes 'liberation' is that which equates liberation with not having to do any work. In fact, this is a thoroughly bourgeois concept of liberation. The bourgeois does not have to do any work because he lives off the work that others do. Those others may be tempted to see their liberation in terms of being parasitic, like the bourgeois. Needless to say, this is not the kind of emancipation that socialism offers.

So let us consider briefly what is meant by the emancipation if it does not mean freeing women from the need to work.

What Women's Oppression Consists Of

The nature of women's oppression is summarised by Engels as follows:

"As regards the legal equality of husband and wife in marriage, the position is no better. The legal inequality of the two partners, bequeathed to us from earlier social conditions, is not the cause but the effect of the economic oppression of the woman. In the old communistic household, which comprised many couples and their children, the task entrusted to the women of managing the household was as much a public and socially necessary industry as the procuring of food by the men. With the patriarchal family, and still more with the single monogamous family, a change came. Household management lost its public character. It no longer concerned society. It became a private service; the wife became the head servant, excluded from all participation in social production. Not until the coming of modern largescale industry was the road to social production opened to her again and then only to the proletarian wife. But it was opened in such a manner that, if she carries out her duties in the private service of her family, she remains excluded from public production and unable to earn; and if she wants to take part in public production and earn independently, she cannot carry out family duties. And the wife's position in the factory is the position of wives in all branches of business right up to medicine and the law. The modern individual family is founded on the open or concealed domestic slavery of the wife, and modern society is a mass composed of these individual families as its molecules. In the great majority of cases today, at least in the possessing classes, the husband is obliged to earn a living and support his family, and that in itself gives him a position of supremacy, without any need for special legal titles and privileges. Within the family he is the bourgeois and the wife represents the proletariat."

To summarise: the characteristics of the oppression of women are:

1. Women taken out of social production and denied access to it.
2. Women confined to unproductive household tasks providing little interest or stimulation.
3. Women financially dependent on men and therefore subjected to their whim.
4. Which leads to loss of social status and women being equated to children and slaves.

The book to read on this subject is Engels' *Origin Of The Family, Private Property and the State*, from which the above quotation was taken. All available evidence suggests that under primitive communism, before society split into classes, before property in the means of production ceased to be social and became private, women's status in society was at least as high as that of men. This is shown by the fact that primitive societies tend to have goddesses rather than gods and maternal linearity rather than descent in the male line. In fact I was told the other day that in Kerala, South India, there can be found very strong vestiges of this in customs and traditions that have remained unaltered for 4,000 years. While tribal leaders in the area are always male, the males concerned are required to be unmarried. Clearly, therefore, they cannot have legitimate children of their own. When they die, they are replaced by the unmarried son of their mother's eldest daughter! And reputedly the real power lies with the mothers, rather than with the kings. Interestingly entitlement to the Pharaoh's throne in Ancient Egypt descended matrilineally, although the society was patriarchal. This obviously reflected the historical existence of mother right among the peoples involved, in a time long forgotten. Tradition had prevented the overthrow of matrilineal descent. As a result, it was traditional for the son of the Pharaoh destined to become king to marry his sister upon whom the throne devolved!

After human society has spent several thousand years, including all its written history, under male domination, one has the impression that the inequality between the sexes is due to inborn psychological factors that make men 'aggressive' and 'dominant' and women 'passive' and 'submissive' by NATURE. All kinds of spurious comparisons tend to be made with certain species of animal where the male is naturally dominant - ignoring the species where the female is dominant or where there is no social difference between the sexes. However, the fact that in human society women's submission to the male has only existed as a corollary of the split of society into classes and the consequent accumulation of private property in the hands of individual males, shows that there is nothing biologically inevitable about women's inferior status.

This is more than borne out by the experience of the Soviet Union. Were it not for the living experience of socialism there might still have been room for argument as to the interpretation of the evidence in support of the existence of mother right in primitive society. The Soviet Union, however, settled the biological question once and for all by giving millions of women the chance to do the jobs that previously only men had access to, and the women themselves proved that they could do them as well as any man, provided, that is, that the

playing field was even and they were not weighed down with the burden of household chores and child-minding responsibilities that prevented them attending to their jobs.

When society split into classes, which it did as soon as production technology opened the way for human beings to produce more than they themselves needed to consume in order to survive, making slavery a practical and attractive proposition, the individual men who appropriated the surplus labour of the slaves began to become very wealthy. Wanting to ensure that when they died their wealth passed to their own flesh and blood, they hauled the women who were to be the prospective mothers of their sons out of social production and imprisoned them in the home to ensure they could guarantee the paternity of their issue. The monogamous marriage - the wife as the private property of her husband - the norm that subsists to this day - carrying out domestic chores not as a service to society but only as a duty to her husband - is the whole basis of women's oppression and their inferior status in society.

This meant that the way society organised domestic chores was changed throughout society and monogamy and domestic slavery spread to all classes of society, including those families with little or no property to pass on to legitimate issue.

From the point of view of the women, however, the effect was the same. They had no access to social production, where all the important developments in the advance of human understanding, technology and culture were taking place, but were confined to household drudgery and relative ignorance. Being relatively ignorant, uneducated and unstimulated by participation in the core life of society, they appeared in comparison to men to be childlike and feeble.

One of the oppressive aspects of monogamy (which in fact exists only for the women, their husbands - being landed with wives who are, through no fault of their own, generally pretty boring - invariably looking for fun and games elsewhere!) was that women caught in adultery tended to be meted out terrible punishments, while men got away either Scot free or with very little penalty.

What socialism does is to abolish private property in the means of production so that the motivator of women's enslavement disappears. There will be no individually wealthy men and therefore there is no need for women to continue as private domestic slaves. They will be free once more to do their work as work for society as a whole rather than work for a private individual - their husbands.

This does not mean, however, that marriage disappears, that women stop

having children, that men cease to have any rights or duties towards their children. People get a lot of pleasure and satisfaction from marrying and living together, bringing up their children, enjoying their grandchildren together and enjoying their freedom together in their later years. What is removed from marriage is the subjugation of wife to husband, either legal or a de facto subjugation based on financial dependence.

Hence what a socialist society must do, therefore, to ensure women (and men) can get married and bring up children if they want to as equal partners is:

1. to make sure all unequal laws that subject women to men are repealed - eg. laws which allow men to divorce but not women; laws which allow men to determine their children's fate, denying any say to women unless their husbands happen to allow it; laws barring women from working in certain fields or from education, etc.

2. to make sure women are financially independent of their husbands, ie. that they have access to the same kind of jobs at the same kind of wages as men.

3. to make sure that women get to the cutting edge of social production alongside men. Some brands of bourgeois feminist crusaders consider that emancipation consists of receiving from the state wages for doing housework and childcare as a private service to a man. Socialism, however, is duty bound to take women away from the stultifying petty drudgery and isolation of the home and reintegrate them en masse in the mainstream of society. For this reason "wages for housework" is a reactionary slogan that seeks in its way to perpetuate women's exclusion from the important things happening in society.

4. to ensure as far as possible that when women do go out to work alongside men, they are not disadvantaged by their household responsibilities. This means that social provisions must exist to take over the lion's share of women's domestic responsibilities. There must be crèches, kindergartens and nurseries where small children will be well looked after. There must be laundries where the household washing is taken care of and public dining rooms to take away the daily chores of shopping, cooking and washing up.

To sum up:

Socialist Measures to Emancipate Women are:

1. Repeal all oppressive and discriminatory laws.
2. Open up paid employment opportunities for women - to the full.

3. Integrate women at the highest levels and in mainstream employment.

4. Provide the social facilities that enable women to work on an equal basis to men.

These, then, are the key factors to work at in determining whether women's emancipation is being advanced or not.

Women's Emancipation In The Soviet Union

1. Legal Discrimination

If we look at the Soviet Union, we will see that it made enormous progress on all these fronts. As regards the laws which sanctified the oppression of women, these were all scrapped as one of the very first acts of the victorious proletariat in 1917.

However, repealing laws, or passing laws for that matter, can never achieve anything in isolation. There must in addition be implemented measures bringing about change in practice.

2. Opening The World Of Work To Women

Table 1 (page 7) shows the increase in the number of women workers in the USSR between 1929 and 1937 alone. We see a rise from just over 3 million in 1929 to over 7 million in 1934 – more than doubling in just 5 years!

Table 2 (page 7) shows the increasing percentages in relation to the workforce as a whole, so we can see that women are increasingly represented in such "male" domains as large-scale industry and transport – for the first time in history.

3. The Cutting Edge

Women need to get away from the periphery to work at the heart of society; the kind of work that is essential to the development of society as a whole. Table 3 (page 8) shows this happening in the Soviet Union. The percentage of women working as domestics, for instance, we can see had dropped to a minimal level by 1937, while those working in education and public health, industry and building, state and public institutions, trade, transport and public education had risen dramatically. This was certainly not the case in Western Europe at that time, where most women who worked were still domestics, as had been the case in Czarist Russia.

Table 1: The Number Of Women Workers In The USSR (millions)

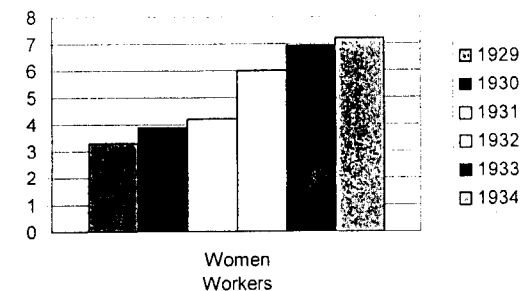


Table 2: Percentage Of Women In Total Number Of Workers & Employees

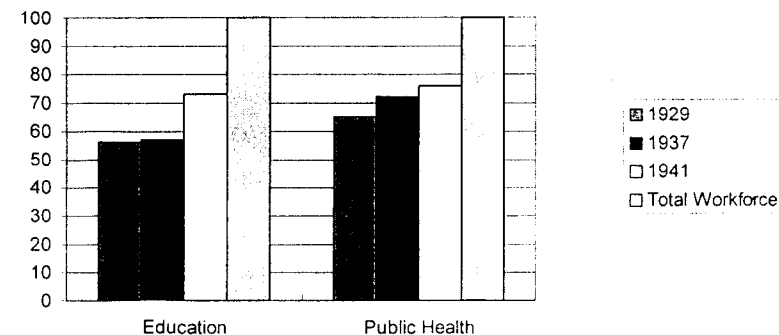
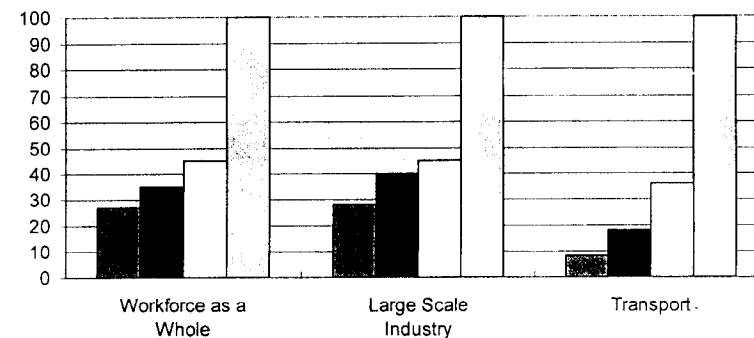
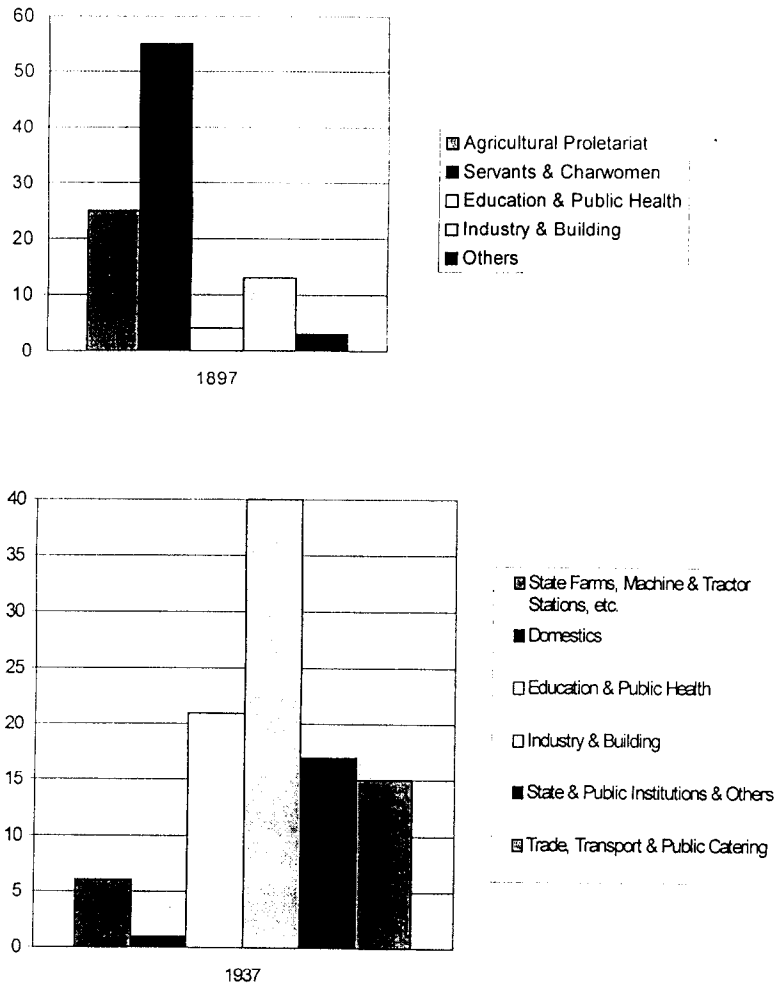


Table 3: Percentage of Women Workers In Various Branches Of The Economy To Total Number Of Women Workers



Soviet women took all kinds of occupations hitherto closed to them. They became tractor drivers and road menders, engineers, doctors, collective farm managers, astronomers, scientific workers, Party and government workers, etc.

In 1940, 4,000 women worked as engine drivers, not one single woman being employed in this job anywhere else in the world. Women engineers and technical workers went from 3,600 in 1930 to 170,000 in 1940. Before the revolution there were 2,000 women doctors in the USSR. In 1949 there were 126,000. And the women gave as much in quality as they did in quantity. They became Stakhanovites (ie. workers whose initiative and resourcefulness led to important improvements in methods of production), Stalin Prize winners for their special contributions to knowledge and skill and Medal winners for their Labour Heroism.

Perhaps one of the most famous examples is that of Maria Demchenko who started a campaign to harvest 500 centners of beet per hectare (ie. 20 tons per acre, as compared to the average annual yield in the Ukraine, where Maria worked, of 5 tons per acre). Maria Demchenko had been born in a poor peasant family, but, after taking an agricultural course, she very quickly came to the fore among outstanding organisers in socialist agriculture. In the year that Maria and her detachment set out to grow 500 centners per hectare, they were plagued with difficulties. In spring, frost destroyed half their seedlings. In summer, there were 106 days of drought and a pestilence of harvest fly. All these difficulties were fearlessly and scientifically overcome, and the resultant beet harvest was of 523 centners and 70 kilograms per hectare! Maria Demchenko's example was emulated by others, who surpassed even her record: the detachment led by 16-year-old Hannah Shvidka produced 576 centners per hectare, and that of 64-year-old Anna Kosheva, 670 centners per hectare!

According to Anna Louise Strong, the American journalist, Maria Demchenko went to Moscow where she was introduced to Comrade Stalin. She told him she had come to see the leaders. Stalin's reply was, "But you are a leader now." How far women had travelled since the October Revolution first set them along the road to their liberation! Where were these women who 'lack initiative', prefer routine jobs, fear responsibility, etc.? Certainly not in the Socialist Soviet Union.

While politics remained notoriously male-dominated it is important to see that women were making a debut in that field as well and advanced very far

during the Stalin era. In 1922 only 5 women were elected to the Central Committee of the government of the Soviet Union. In 1937, 189 were elected to the Supreme Soviet and in 1946, the number was 277, 21% of the total.

That women did not reach 50% of posts is a legacy of old traditions and old ways of thinking that do not crumble all at once, but give way gradually under pressure from the force of example. A legacy we have today from the Soviet Union is that the General Secretary of a major communist organisation is a woman, Comrade Nina Andreyeva, quite clearly in that position because of all that organisations' members, she had the greatest political knowledge, experience and acumen. In 1917, such women could not be found, but in the Soviet era, every opportunity was provided to enable women to participate in government and politics, and very many did.

The fact that women were now working in the forefront of social production means that they must of necessity have had access to all the educational facilities open to men. Illiteracy among women in the 15 years from 1920 to 1935 fell from 77.5% to 6% just for a start. By 1940, the percentage of women to all students in higher education was 49.3%

4. Social Facilities

"The liberation of women, their equality with men, are impossible and will remain so, as long as woman remains outside social productive labour and restricts herself to housework. The liberation of women will not be effected until they participate en masse in production on a social scale, and when they devote to housework only an insignificant part of their time." (Engels, *Origin of the Family*)

You can open as many careers to women as you like, but there will always be a limitation on women pursuing these opportunities if they continue to be expected to do a full day's housework and childcare on top of their paid job.

Of all the roles that women perform in the home, that of full time child rearer is closest to their hearts. Most women won't be too distraught if the tidying doesn't get done all that often, or if they eat out rather than cook at home, but no-one wants to skimp on their children's welfare. This is why the highest priority has to be given in a socialist state to making social provision for the care of children which will be even better than that which the proudest mother could supply at home. To what extent the Soviet Union achieved this can be seen from Table 4 (page 11).

Table 4: Crèches & Kindergartens in the USSR

Places available in crèches

1927	550
1929	56,066
1938	723,651
Seasonal crèches	3,490,889

Places available in kindergartens

1927	107,500
1936-7	1,056,800

Places available in summer playgroups

1927	192,900
1936-7	3,214,500

In addition, in 1940 a decree was passed to the effect that in all new residential construction, 5% of the floor space was to be designated for nursery facilities.

Dr Sheila Manton was an eye-witness to what all this meant for Soviet women in practice. She is a woman zoologist who visited the Soviet Union in 1951, and wrote the following about the provisions for children in the USSR, in her book 'The Soviet Union Today':

"The provisions for children, which I saw, were of such high standard in buildings, equipment and most of all in the personality of the women in charge of the children, that I would gladly have sent my own children to such places when they were small..."

"Before my visit to the USSR I had some sympathy with a view often expressed in England that the social services available to mothers in the Soviet Union might undermine the stability of the home, and have other undesirable effects. Having seen the standard of these services and the system in operation,

I am, on the contrary, of the opinion that they strengthen the family unity.

"A sufficiency of domestic help enables a mother fully to enjoy her children and home, which is not easy if one pair of hands has to minister unaided to the needs of a large family and provide space and occupations for the children at the same time. The nursery facilities enable a mother to provide the best for her children, who also benefit by their short spells in a social environment where their needs for occupations are fully met, and I think that the children appreciate the mother better."

In addition to the above facilities, there were large numbers of children's holiday camps by the seaside and in the country, special children's sanatoria for sickly children (in 1934 from Moscow alone, 60,681 children went to Summer camps, 3922 to sanatorium camps and 13,876 to special camps for children up to B years old). Dr Manton also describes these camps in her book:

"We had several opportunities of seeing the holiday provisions for children which, in suitable happy and healthy surroundings, are considered to be a prime necessity. Very few children were seen in the streets and parks of Moscow at the end of July and early August, apart from happy parties returning from holidays, each child carrying a small bag and often a large bunch of flowers. We visited a "Pioneer Camp" for six- to fifteen-year-old children of employees of the Ministry of Coal near a place called Tourist, less than an hour's journey from Moscow.

"Here, on a hill among woods and fields and spread over a large area, wore the dormitory houses with double windows, and central buildings with dining arrangements on airy verandas, hall and stage) etc. The whole, when completed in 1952, will have cost about £300,000 (16 million roubles) and will be used each year for two shifts of six weeks accommodating 800 children at a time.

"Everything was provided for organised and unorganised games, dancing, gymnastics and competitions both indoors and outside. Hobbies and handwork of all kinds flourished, separate rooms dealing with the several branches. Small groups of children were returning from the woods laden with wild raspberries ..."

"At the rest home near Moscow of the Institute of Energetics (industrial power), primarily built for students, we found a separate set of buildings catering for toddlers, as well as another for elderly people. Here, in a dormitory bungalow with large verandas, the three- to six-year-olds were sleeping. Other bungalows provided playrooms and opportunity for handwork of all kinds. We

found all sorts of sewing, cutting out, paper work, posters, models, basketry, collections of flowers and insects, very much as in the Pioneer Camp. Suitable music was laid on from loud-speakers in a clearing of the wood, and other little ones were returning from games and a ramble in the neighbourhood. They showed us their tame rabbits mice and hedgehogs

"A Soviet woman can send her children to a camp one year and take them on a family holiday another year. The cost of sending children to holiday centres is nominal. Of the maintenance cost of 700 roubles for each child at the Pioneer Camp at Tourist the parents contribute 200 roubles. It is possible for parents in all parts of the Union to send their children far afield for holidays, travelling from the Moscow region as far as the Black Sea. In 1950, we were told that over five million children spent their summer holidays in pioneer camps, sanatoria and other children's institutions, the camps and summer playgrounds being provided by the State and by public and industrial organisations."

On top of this, schools remained open after school hours and in the school holidays to provide useful and amusing entertainment for the pupils (children were not obliged to attend, but the vast majority did in fact attend because they enjoyed it so much) and mothers did not have to worry about what the children were doing after school finished but before they got back from work. Most blocks of flats provided a room for children to meet in with play facilities. There were special children's clubs to enable them to be constructively occupied after school, children's cinemas, theatres, Pioneer Palaces, etc., etc. Trained personnel were provided at public parks where mothers could leave their children to play under guidance and supervision. There were milk kitchens to provide the right food for children who were not being looked after in crèches. All these facilities were either entirely free or so cheap that everybody could use them. All were provided at well below cost.

It was not only public childcare facilities which developed to such a huge extent, but also public dining rooms and communal laundries, both designed to relieve women's drudgery. The provision of cheap meals for children in communal restaurants was developed to cover the majority of school children. In addition, the number of workers fed by communal restaurants in the towns of the USSR increased enormously: for example, the number of workers fed by communal restaurants increased from 750,000 in 1928 to 14,800,000 in 1932! In Moscow, by October 1933, two-thirds of the population were being fed by communal restaurants, and in the whole country, 72% of the school children

had meals in communal restaurants.

Women in the Great Patriotic War

The emancipation of women pays dividends for socialist society. Not only are women's lives more satisfying and fulfilling than anything they have ever known previously, but society as a whole benefits from their newly-released talents and their efforts on its behalf. Nowhere did this become more apparent than during the Great Patriotic War.

It was largely the women of the Soviet Union who maintained production in the war years. Just before the war, in 1941, women comprised 45% of all workers in industry. By the end of 1942, the figure was 53%. The percentage of women employed increased from 25% to 36% in railway transport, from 58% to 73% in education, and from 76% to 83% in the medical services. Women tractor drivers increased eleven-fold, women combine harvester operators seven-fold, and tractor brigade leaders ten-fold.

Examples of projects carried out thanks to the women of the Soviet Union: the building of the third Moscow underground line (women also manned the underground service generally, working as mechanics, crane operators, electricians, train drivers, etc.); the building of the defence fortifications around Moscow; coal mining. Further, over 20,000 women railway workers were decorated for distinguished services in ensuring the transportation of supplies needed for the front and for the national economy, and for exceptional achievements in restoring railway transport under difficult wartime conditions.

In the collective farms, women were taking over from their husbands, brothers and sons who had left for the front. They worked indefatigably to protect the happy new life they had helped build in their socialist state. For example, in the Sotsorevnovanye Collective Farm, Moscow Region, with women doing most of the work, the potato harvest increased from 7,305 centners (pre-war) to 15,722, and the vegetable crop from 12,330 centners to 28,589. In addition, they purchased millions of roubles worth of bonds and war lottery tickets in order to advance money for the construction of aircraft and tanks.

In the Kaganovich Collective Farm (Kuban Region) Cossack women, with far less machinery and fewer horses than the farm had had pre-war, were able to deliver to the state 4.5 times as much grain as in the last pre-war years, having increased the per capita output per farmer from 37.6 to 63 centners per annum.

This mutual benefit - women from socialism and socialism from women - was particularly poignantly expressed by Anya Pavlova, a Young Communist League member who died heroically in the siege of Leningrad. She wrote:

"I often think of our country's fate. For, after all, my country and I are one. If things go well with my country, they will go well with me. When shells burst in Leningrad, when the enemy spoils and demolishes our palaces, museums, houses, I feel as if the Germans were shooting at my heart, and my heart says to me: Be brave, be honest, keep in step with the soldiers."

Revisionism reverses women's progress towards emancipation

From 1956, however, revisionism undermined this precious relationship. It is after all not possible to attack socialism without attacking women's emancipation.

Nedelya of 12 May 1968, for instance wrote:

"In the current economic period it would probably be more reasonable to leave the wife free at home with the children. . . women were needed for production during the first decade. Today this need no longer exists."

This reflected a whole trend in Soviet propaganda, to the effect that men earning a decent wage could well afford to let their wives stay home and give the children 'proper' care!!

This propaganda is typical of the anti-Soviet propaganda of revisionism, playing on remnants of backward ideas, encouraging them to revive and claiming it to be the duty of a socialist state to have regard for people's wishes for backwardness.

What was happening here was not that caution was being exercised in the speed of moving forward to allow time to counter backwardness. This is, of course, essential if progress is going to be made. What is happening is that backwardness is actually being promoted and praised and put forward as a model to be followed. It is this kind of essential distinction that revisionists always 'overlook'.

But still, not all the efforts of revisionism could shove the emancipated Soviet women back into a bottle. Hard hit by the restoration of capitalism, which has caused the social facilities on which they depend in their now traditional

right to participate in social production, they have special reason to curse the restoration of capitalism. And in the demonstrations in the former Soviet Union in support of the return of communism, masses of women are at least as active and involved as men.

