

Portrayal of Abortion in Russian Women's Literature

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During the Soviet Union, Russia was said to have been experiencing a demographic crisis. In the post WWII period, Russia suffered a large scale population decline due to a number of factors, primarily the high death rate caused by war, famine, and Stalin's purges, coupled with a low birth rate and a high abortion rate.¹ Abortion, having been illegal under Stalin's rule was re-legalized in 1955 in the hope of curbing the number of illegal abortions performed, and thus lowering the number of maternal deaths due to these unsafe procedures.² Abortion has long been the most viable option for Soviet women to deal with unwanted pregnancies, since other forms of safe, reliable contraception was largely unavailable in the Soviet Union. Soviet women's attitudes toward abortion are illustrated in women's *byt* literature. *Byt* is defined as the monotonous routine of daily life, and is therefore gendered as female. I. Grekova says of *byt*: "For Soviet women, the notion of *byt* encompasses a great many things, including standing in lines, lugging heavy bags of food, riding in overcrowded buses and subways, taking care of children, cooking, doing the dishes, cleaning the house and doing the laundry."³ The goal of this paper is to examine the portrayal of abortion in women's writing. I will be looking at selected works by Natal'ia Baranskaia, Marina Palei, Svetlana Vasilenko, Maria Arbatova, Liudmila Ulitskaia and Irina Velembovskaia.

Among the authors listed, abortion is depicted in the following three ways: 1) as women's desperation to obtain abortions without regard to their health; 2) women's resort to home remedies in order to induce a miscarriage; and 3) the frequency at which women have abortions in their lifetime.

¹ For more information on Russia's demographic crisis see Julie DaVanzo and Clifford Grammich, *Dire Demographics: Population Trends in the Russian Federation*, 2001, RAND, 23 Mar. 2006, 5 Jan. 2007, http://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph_reports/MR1273/.

² Andrej Popov and Henry David, "Russian Federation and USSR Successor States," *From Abortion to Contraception: A Resource to Public Policies and Reproductive Behavior in Central and Eastern Europe from 1917 to the Present*, Ed. Henry David (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999), 237-239.

³ I. Grekova, "Introduction," *Soviet Women Writing: Fifteen Short Stories* (NY: Abbeville Press, 1990), 10.

The fact that some women are fiercely determined to stop a pregnancy at any cost is well illustrated in Marina Palei's short story "The Bloody Women's Ward" ("Otdelenie propashchikh," 1988). Taking place in a maternity ward where abortions are also performed, the story enumerates the horrors of hospitals. In the opening scene, a 50-year-old woman named Znobishina comes into the gynecologist's office seeking her second abortion in two months. Without asking what she came for, the bored and patronizing doctor already knows her story. In this case he is not willing to give her an abortion, saying that he will not risk a jail sentence by possibly perforating her uterus.

The woman, as far as we can judge, has not altogether taken in the bit about the rupture, but has understood the bit about landing behind bars, and, more specifically has gathered that there is no prospect whatsoever of another abortion....

For all that [Razmetalsky] has not lost the ability to marvel. Even after twenty-two years in this practice he still marvels at the unassuming way life shamelessly effects its birth even on scraped and stony ground. The woman can't understand it either, but she does not marvel. Her only concern is to prevent it from happening.⁴

As Palei insinuates, this peasant woman does not think about the ramifications of an abortion in terms of her health, but thinks only about the consequences of having a child. In this passage, the doctor describes the woman's uterus as being "scraped and stony ground" from the recent operation. There is an underlying tone to the story that implies not only do women have very little choice or control over their own bodies, but that they also lack a basic understanding of their bodies.

This sort of desperation of women often leads to illegal abortions, as is intended here by Dr. Razmetalsky's assistant Darya Petrovna. She comes to the woman's rescue by promising to visit later in the week, implying that she will perform the illegal abortion herself. This passage suggests that this sort of under the table arrangement has been arranged more than once, and is something that is silently condoned by the doctor himself.

⁴ Marina Palei, "The Bloody Women's Ward," trans. Arch Tait, *Glas: New Russian Writing* no. 3 (1992): 75-76.

“That’s all, Znobishina,” says Darya Petrovna, parting her lips just enough to let the words out. “I’ll be round to see your Zina on Friday.”

As she disappears through the door it still has not clicked with the woman that she has been saved. As usual Darya Petrovna will do what the doctor is afraid to do, and Razmetalsky, without for an instant betraying that he knows perfectly well what she is up to, finds this arrangement entirely satisfactory.⁵

It has been documented that illegal abortions are chosen over legal ones for a variety of reasons:

1) if it poses a risk to the doctor (as it does in this case), there may be little choice; 2) women may be seeking an abortion past the legal gestation period (i.e. up to 28 weeks); and 3) women want to preserve confidentiality, as records were public, and one often had to give a reason for having a non-medical abortion.

In revisiting the opening scene of “The Bloody Women’s Ward,” Dr. Razmetalsky crudely encourages Znobishina, the peasant woman seeking out yet another abortion, to take care of the matter herself:

“Okay, sweetie pie. Go straight back home,” Razmetalsky finally drones, continuing to wield the razor blade, “and do just as you please. Take quinine if that’s what you want to do, or whatever it is you all poison yourselves with. Try lifting your good husband off the ground. I take it he’s a good size. Your husband is a good size, I suppose?”⁶

A similar scene is more graphically represented in *Shamara* (1990) by Svetlana Vasilenko. When Shamara asks a friend to help her get rid of an illegitimate child not belonging to her husband, her friend responds: “I know of a sure method. My grandmother taught my mother, and my mother taught me...”⁷ Later the scene unfolds with Shamara holding her stomach in pain, and quickly expelling the fetus into a bathtub full of bloody water. She wraps it up into a newspaper and gives it to her roommate to throw away. These two scenes illustrate the dramatic lengths women sometimes go to in their desperation to stop a pregnancy.

⁵ Ibid, 76.

⁶ Ibid, 74-75.

⁷ Svetlana Vasilenko, “Shamara,” trans. Daria A. Kirjanov and Benjamin Sutcliffe, in *Shamara and Other Stories*, Ed. Helena Goscilo (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2000), 52.

Figure 1: Abortions in the USSR in the post-Stalin period⁸

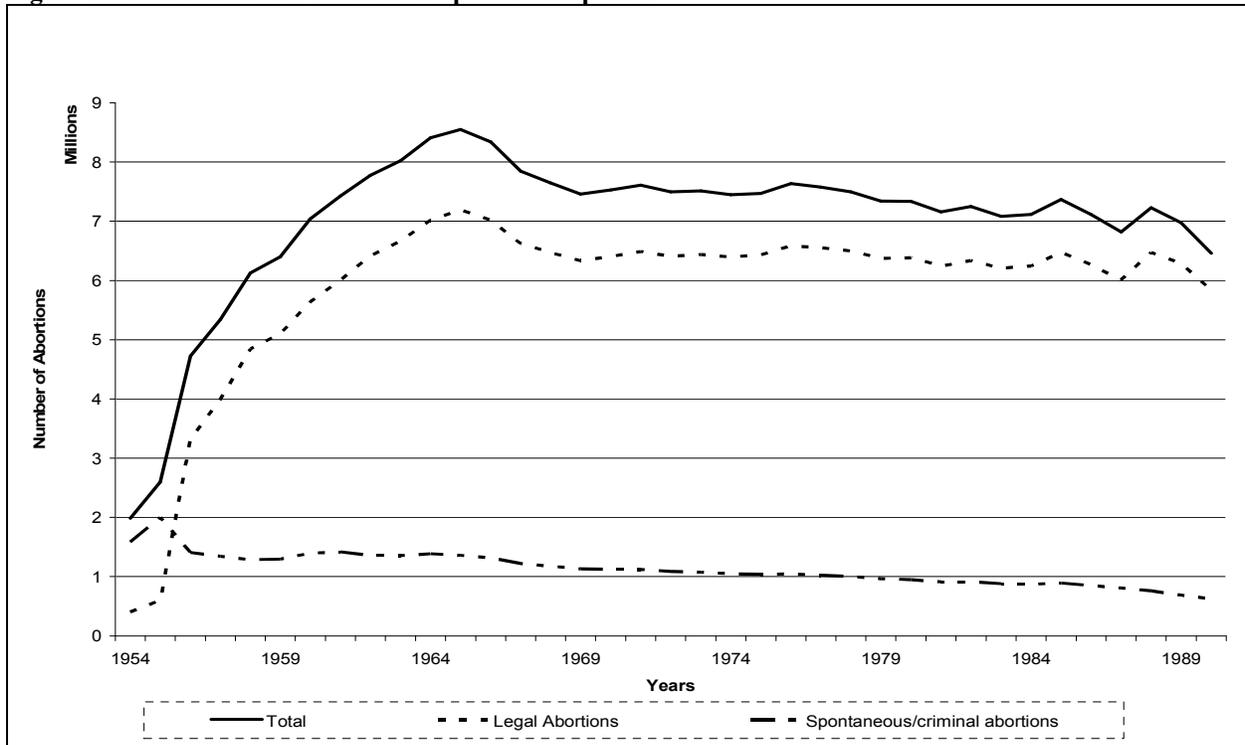


Figure 1 compares the number of “spontaneous⁹ and criminal abortions” to the number of “complete legal abortions registered” in the USSR from 1954-1990. This data was primarily gathered through clinic studies and based on the data provided by medical establishments. Though the number of spontaneous/criminal abortions are comparatively low in relation the legal abortions, it still represents a significant figure, averaging around one million per year during this time frame. One must also keep in mind that illegal abortions were less often reported and represented in statistics, than legal abortions.

⁸ Compiled by author using statistics provided by Alexander Avdeev, Alain Blum and Irina Troitskaia, “L’avortement et la contraception en Russie et dans l’ex-URSS: histoire et present,” *Dossiers et Recherches*, no. 41 (Paris : INED, October 1993), 46 cited in Christopher Williams, “Abortion and Women’s Health in Russia and the Soviet Successor States,” *Women in Russia and Ukraine*, Ed. Rosalind Marsh (NY: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 137.

⁹ Williams defines spontaneous abortions, also referred to as miscarriages, as those caused by external factors like trauma or communicable diseases. It also includes incomplete abortions. See pp. 131.

Complications from abortion were very common and most often included inflammation, hemorrhaging, frigidity, sterility, fertility problems, and early menopause. Women also experienced troubles in having subsequent children, resulting in miscarriages and pregnancy complications. Many of these problems were caused by the unhygienic conditions of the hospitals and clinic, the shortages of equipment, beds, and even staff members.¹⁰

We see evidence of this in women's literature, especially in those that take place in a hospital ward like in Marina Palei's "The Bloody Women's Ward" and in Maria Arbatova's "My Name is Woman". In Palei's short story there are a variety of problems—the water being shut off, the doctor's incompetence at performing abortions, and the deliberate negligence of a deformed infant in the hopes that it will die sooner. Whereas, in "My Name is Woman", the women in line at the abortion clinic tell the protagonist she will be lucky if she gets a shot of a Novocain, since general anesthesia is rarely, if ever, given to patients.

What appears more often in women's *byt* literature is the fact that having multiple abortions in one's lifetime was a common and well-accepted fact of life for Soviet women. This facet of a woman's life is shown in a number of stories: Irina Velembovskaia's "Through Hard Times" ("V trudnuiu minutu, 1965), Natal'ia Baranksaia's *A Week Like Any Other* (*Nedelia kak Nedelia*, 1969), Maria Arbatova's "My Name is Woman" ("Menia zovut zhenshchina," 1997), Liudmila Ulitskaia's "The Orlov-Sokolovs" ("Orlovy-Sokolovy," 2003), and as we have already seen in Marina Palei's "The Bloody Women's Ward."

"Through Hard Times" is about a woman who is taken to the hospital after receiving a severe blow to the head during an attempt to stop a domestic argument between two strangers. While there, she develops a friendship and an infatuation with one of the other male patients. Though the story is neither about birth nor abortion, but about love and relationships, there is a

¹⁰ Ibid, 139.

brief moment when an older couple discussing abortions catches the protagonist Pania's attention:

...Walking by, Pania heard the beautiful but cyanotic woman say as she firmly squeezed her husband's hand in her own, "Vanka, take the money for the abortion to the receiving room. Or else the next time you come, your credit won't be any good."

Pania stopped, struck by an unusual feeling. "She hasn't even gotten over this one, and she's already planning for the next!" she thought with sad amazement. "She loves him!"¹¹

That is all that is said or reflected about the decision to have an abortion in the entire story, but it does bring to light a certain type of mentality of Soviet women. Pania equates a woman's willingness to have multiple abortions, and to even go so far as to plan ahead for them, with love for her husband. This same off-handed reference to abortion is also seen in Natal'ia Baranskaia's novella *A Week Like Any Other*.

In the following scene of *A Week Like Any Other*, Dark Liusia¹² confesses to Ol'ga that the rumor about the plastiglass invention being her own is true. She explains that the reason she gave her idea for the invention to their boss was that she was pregnant at the time, and having decided to keep the baby, she was prepared to leave her job and stay home to raise the child, as her husband had wished. However, unlike Ol'ga, who decided to keep her second child rather than abort it, Dark Liusia opts for an abortion at the very last minute.

"And?"

"And what?"

"What happened to the child?"

"What child? I cried off at the last minute. I had an abortion. I kept it a secret from Suren, like I always do."

"How?"

"I went on a research trip for five or six days..."¹³

¹¹ Irina Velembovskaia, "Through Hard Times," Trans. Joseph Kiegel, in *Balancing Acts: Contemporary stories by Russian women*, ed. Helena Goscilo (Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1989), 130.

¹² The story has two characters both named Liusia. One is nicknamed Dark Liusia (Liusia chernoi), the other Blond Liusia (Liusia belen'koi).

¹³ Natalya Baranskaya, "A Week Like Any Other" in *A Week Like Any Other: Novellas and Stories* trans. Pieta Monks (Seattle: Seal Press, 1989) 47-48.

It is implied through the dialogue that this was neither the first nor the last abortion that Dark Liusia has had. Another curious detail is her choice of words in keeping the abortion a secret from her husband. In the original Russian text, “I went on a research trip” (“edu v komandirovku”)¹⁴ appears in quotation marks. Not only is it a lie, but in Russian it is often used as a euphemism for having an abortion. Ironically, female employees were rarely ever sent on “research trips.”¹⁵ In fact, because most doctors preferred methods like dilation and curettage over vacuum suction, most women were hospitalized for two or three days.¹⁶ In an interview conducted by Carola Hansson and Karin Liden in 1978, one woman said, “It’s taken for granted that if a woman is absent from work for three days she’s having an abortion.”¹⁷

The following two short stories also have a brief, casual reference to young women having several abortions including “My Name is Woman” which takes place during the 1970s. In this scene the 18-year-old narrator, who is still in college, is taken to the gynecologist by her mother when she first finds out she is pregnant. In the clinic, she is not so much asked as what she wants to do, but instead it is decided by both her mother and the doctor that she will get an abortion.

“I’ll refer her for an abortion,” the doctor concluded.
“An abortion, of course,” mother sang. “They’re much too young.”
“You can say that again.” Barely rinsing her hands, the woman immersed herself in the epistolary act.
“Graduate first, then get pregnant,” mother announced solemnly, as if someone had asked her what order to do things in, and as if she had ever taken the trouble to enlighten me on the subject of contraception.
“Their heads are too full of having a good time to know what’s what,” the woman sighed.
“It’s funny she didn’t try to persuade me to have it,” I said when we got outside.

¹⁴ Natal’ia Baranskaia, *Nedelia kak nedelia*, (Paris: Institut D’etudes Slaves, 1980) 27.

¹⁵ Thanks to Aida Lominadze for pointing this out me.

¹⁶ Williams, 142.

¹⁷ Carola Hansson and Karin Liden, *Moscow Women*, trans. Gerry Bothmer, George Blecher, and Lone Blecher (NY: Pantheon Books, 1983), 147.

“She’s had fifteen abortions herself,” mother informed me.¹⁸

Similarly, in Liudmila Ulitskaia’s story “The Orlov-Sokolovs,” mention of abortion is matter-of-factly referenced several times throughout the plot. Tanya, an intelligent, young woman at the top of her class has her first abortion during her first year of college and continued to have an “annual autumn abortion.”¹⁹ Throughout the course of the story, Tanya had at least six abortions for the reason that she did not want to give up on her studies nor push back her potential career.

...Tanya said in a desolate voice, “I think I’m up the creek again.”

He turned on the light and lit a cigarette. She buried her face in her pillow to hide from the light.

“Well, it’s time to go for it, I reckon. Have the baby this time. A girl, O.K.?”

“Oh, I get it. You go for the postgraduate place and I go for a baby and changing diapers.”

If she had been the type to cry, she would have cried then. As he realized.

Tanya filled out the forms for the job at the institute, had an abortion, and took off for the south. Andrey stayed behind to take the qualifying exams for the postgraduate fellowship. Before she left, they went to the registry office and filled out an application to have their relationship officially recognized, which Andrey considered essential.²⁰

Later in the story, when Tanya is pregnant again, this time with her new husband Vitya, she decides to go through with the pregnancy, partly out of vengeance to her ex-boyfriend Andrey. When she and Andrey meet up again, he tries to convince her to leave her husband and come back to him.

“Well, fine. Let’s go around to his house right now and collect your things so that there’s no misunderstanding.” He made the suggestion so confidently that for a moment Tanya believed she would do it.

“I’m pregnant, Andrey.”

“That doesn’t matter. You’ll have to have another abortion. One last time.” Andrey shrugged.

“No,” Tanya said gently. “I can’t do that anymore.”²¹

¹⁸ Maria Arbatova, “My Name is Woman,” trans. Kathleen Cook, *Glas: New Russian Writing* vol. 30 (2003): 46.

¹⁹ Liudmila Ulitskaia, “The Orlov-Sokolovs,” trans. Arch Tait, *The New Yorker* 18 Apr. 2005.

http://www.elkost.com/ludmila_ulitskaya/translations/the_new_yorker.html.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

I have continuously emphasized that the tone that comes across in *byt* literature when talking about abortion is very calm, nonchalant, and usually presents the information matter-of-factly. But I think that this particular passage really brings forth the mentality very clearly, of not only women, but men too. Here, Andrey takes it for granted that abortions are very easily obtained and are culturally acceptable, but even goes further to assume that it is a simple procedure that women go through, when in fact, it is quite the opposite. Neither this story nor any of the others touch upon the emotional or psychological aspects of an abortion; but in Tanya's last line, it can be interpreted that neither she nor her body can take the emotional or physical strain of yet another abortion.

In these excerpts we have seen some figures that to a Westerner are surprisingly shocking—six and even fifteen abortions. Is this an exaggeration or is this truly ordinary for Soviet women? The frequency of abortions is revealed through a combination of sources including studies conducted from 1958 to 1984, it has been estimated that up to two-thirds of the women between the ages of 25 and 34 had abortions.²² In her book *Soviet Women: Walking the Tightrope*, Francine du Plessix Gray interviews Olga Lipovskaya, the editor of the feminist magazine *Zhenskoe Chtenie*, who is described as follows: “Married three times, Olga has had two children and seven abortions. She estimates that she will have had about fourteen abortions ‘before it’s all over;’ she considers fourteen to be the national average, and knows some women who have had twenty-five.”²³

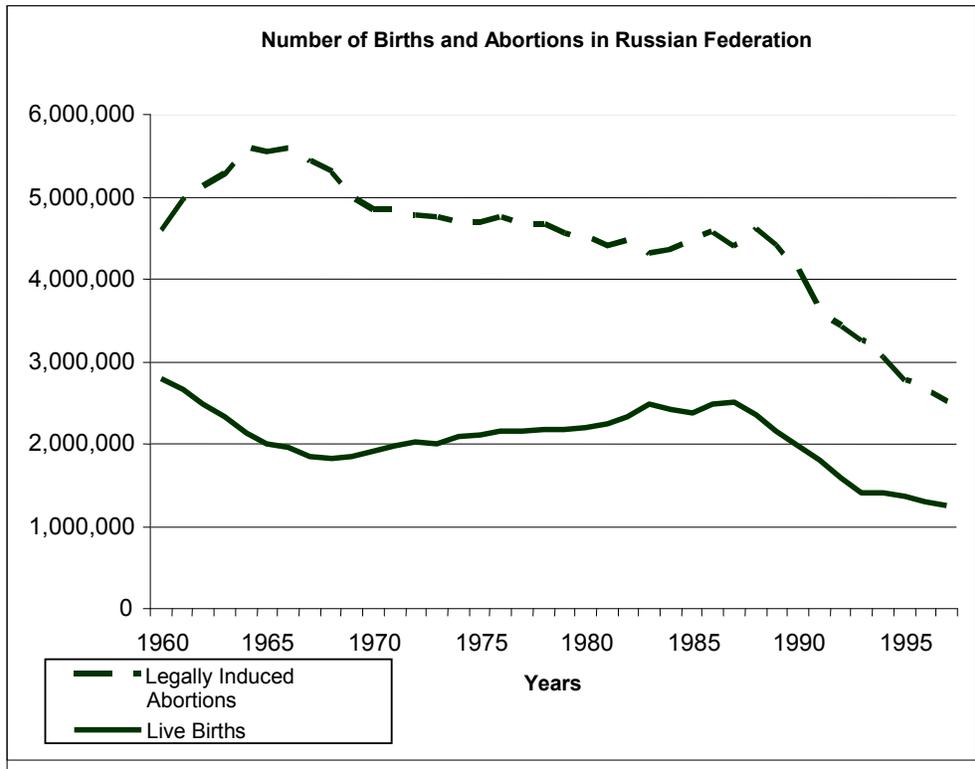
Figure 2 compares the number of live births to the number of legally induced abortions from 1960 to 1997. Until the late 1980s, one can see that the two rates were practically mirror

²² Williams, 136.

²³ Francine du Plessix Gray, *Soviet Women: Walking the Tightrope* (NY: Doubleday, 1990) 18-19.

images of one another. When the birth rate was at its lowest point, abortion was at its highest. As births were steadily increasing throughout the '70s, abortions were slowly decreasing. Baranskaia and Velembovskaia both published their stories in the mid to late '60s, when the abortion rate was at its highest. "The Orlov-Sokolovs" and "My Name is Woman," though written in the late '90s, early 2000s, they took place during the '60s and '70s respectively, while Palei wrote "The Bloody Women's Ward" in the late '80s. Though the abortion rate had significantly dropped since the '60s, it still remained twice that of the birth rate until the '90s when the gap began to close.

Figure 2: Birth and Abortion in Russia, 1960-1997²⁴



Though the abortion rates are astoundingly high in comparison to the birth rates, one must keep in mind that these statistics are usually based on those *legally reported*. The Soviet Union is known for not having the most reliable and obtainable data, which is why numbers and

²⁴ Taken from Popov, 232-233.

figures often vary widely among scholars. But despite all this, one can easily assume that actual numbers were even higher once taking into account all of the illegal, unreported, and self-inflicted abortions performed on or by Soviet women.

Interestingly enough, what is not portrayed in the literature is any sort of moral or religious debate surrounding abortion. Anti-abortion campaigns did appear in the 1970s and '80s. One tactic was to scare women with horror stories of abortions gone terribly wrong, and the other approach was to appeal to women's moral conscious. The campaign failed for many reasons, one of which was the fact that it did take on a moral tone. Other factors included the fact that women's opinions were not heard, their motives for having abortions not addressed, and most importantly, no other alternatives to abortion were provided.²⁵

Women's *byt* literature gives us more information about the reality surrounding abortion and contraception than do official statistics. We see at an emotional level how women relate to unwanted pregnancies: desperately, fearlessly, yet frequently, even finding the means to do so at home. Many women often had resort to abortions since contraception was not always a viable option. The commonality of Soviet women having multiple abortions—legal, illegal, and self-induced—is corroborated with various interviews taken during the same timeframe and also reflected in the high abortion and low birth rates.

²⁵ Williams, 146-147.

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