

Did the family provide a “safe haven” from dictatorship?

Comparing everyday life under Fascist Italy and the Soviet Union, this essay will explore the family as a “safe haven” through the concepts of ‘public’ and ‘private’: examining the extent to which the regimes successfully intervened in the private dynamics of family life. In using the private-public dichotomy as a lens of analysis, the ‘family’ will not only be defined as parent-child biological units, but also encompass a broader range of kinship networks and relations. It will be argued that while the regimes’ interventionist policies forced the boundary between public and private to blur, families often found ways to re-imagine and enforce a new ‘private sphere’ in response, creating their own ‘safe haven’ due to economic and personal necessity. This essay will first outline the regimes’ family policies, before exploring how families were both victims and agents within the dictatorships’ legal policies, welfare organisations, and social institutions.

While both regimes pursued interventionist family policies, ideological inconsistencies and paradoxes frequently framed their implementation. In the USSR, state intervention within family life was carried out differently between Soviet leaders; while Leninist family policy saw the “withering away of the family” in its pursuit of an egalitarian society between the sexes, this concept was reversed by the Stalinist 1936 Family Law Reform, *enforcing* the family unit through pursuing pro-natalist policies; banning abortion, making divorce more inaccessible, and payment incentives to encourage families to have more children.¹ The contradiction between ideological gender parity, versus state policies that relegated women to the private sphere, leads Anna Di Biagio to characterise Soviet family policy as possessing “oscillations, incoherence and open contradictions”,² presenting disparities between its rhetoric and implementation.

¹ Wendy Goldman, *Women, the State and Revolution: Soviet Family Policy and Social Life, 1917-1936* (Cambridge, 1993), p.337.

² Paul Ginsborg, *Family Politics: Domestic Life, Devastation and Survival 1900-1950* (New Haven, 2014), p.421.

In Fascist Italy, family policy was similarly plagued with ideological inconsistency. Family policy was closely linked with the state's 'Battle for Births' campaign, implementing a range of incentives to encourage the creation of larger families; preferable tax policies were given to fathers of large families for example, who were given preference in jobs, housing allocation, and marriage loans.³ Nationwide propaganda efforts to "elevate the maternal consciousness" of women further ensued, with public information campaigns on the most intimate parts of motherhood, from breastfeeding to good childbearing practices.⁴ Yet, intrusive pronatalist interventions posed a series of paradoxes in its implementation: if the family was to be an extension of the state, contradictions existed as to whether women should prioritise the state, or their family first. Most significantly, state policies of autarky and economic frugality paradoxically encouraged families to have smaller families, Victoria de Grazia characterising Fascist family policy as "trapped in a paradox of its own making".⁵ Thus, while both states sought to implement interventionist policies, they were equally plagued with contradictions, leading to inconsistency in implementation.

Both regimes further mapped their conceptions of the family onto the biopolitical control of women. In the Soviet Union, while 'Soviet domesticity' expected husbands to facilitate with housework, women were still primarily expected to carry out the majority of housework and childcare, despite their new 'liberated' role within the public sphere.⁶ In Italy, the domestic, baby-bearing woman played an integral part of Fascism's conception of modernity, an ONMI leader

³ Marisa Sophia Quine, *Italy's Social Revolution: Charity and Welfare from Liberalism to Fascism* (New York, 2002), p.132.

⁴ *ibid*, p.133.

⁵ Victoria de Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women: Italy 1922-1945* (Berkeley, 1992), pp.80-81.

⁶ Katy Turton, 'Gender and Family in the Russian Revolutionary Movement', in Melanie Ilic (ed), *The Palgrave Handbook of Women and Gender in Twentieth-Century Russia and the Soviet Union* (London, 2018), pp.74-75.

declaring: “Fascism has transformed the traditional woman into a modern woman...the mother-breeder [becoming] a technical assistant [as her] job”.⁷

In assessing the reception of the regimes’ family policies, an everyday historiographical approach provides a useful lens through which a full spectrum of reactions can be considered. While orthodox historians have treated macro familial policies as all-consuming, an everyday approach demonstrates family responses as more complex; as Paul Ginsborg describes, family units were “themselves actors in the historical process...subjects as well as objects”, describing how families contested and negotiated the boundaries of imposed state policies.⁸ This complicates the notion of consent and resistance, as families not only supported or steered from the regime’s values, but found ways to be *adaptable* to them. Richard Bosworth describes life in Fascist Italy for example, as a “matter of daily negotiation and decision, its definition constantly liable to change”.⁹ Just as contradictory policies could be found at the top, fascism was also undercut by conditions on the ground, working to create their own private spheres that existed outside the state.

The repressive legal system within both states demonstrated how family structures were both weakened *and* protected: while families were directly impacted by targeted policies, this simultaneously re-invented the existence of a private sphere. In the Soviet Union, the Stalinist Purges became a defining way in which families were torn apart and inescapably impacted by the regime: Oleg Khlevniuk distinguishes between Soviet citizens by those who had a family member who was victim of state persecution, and those who did not, the latter living in constant fear of this prospect.¹⁰ Golfo Alexopoulos extends this notion further, arguing that family and kinship ties

⁷ Quine, *Italy’s Social Revolution*, p.132.

⁸ Ginsborg, *Family Politics*, p.xiii.

⁹ Richard Bosworth, ‘Everyday Mussolinism: Friends, Family, Locality and Violence in Fascist Italy’, *Contemporary European History* 14:1 (2005), p.38.

¹⁰ Oleg Khlevniuk, *The History of the Gulag: From Collectivisation to the Great Terror* (London, 2004), pp.417-18.

were implicitly imagined as “enemies of the state” and thus direct targets of Stalinist repression,¹¹ the privacy of family units symbolising a fundamental threat to the regime. These purges had an inescapably brutal impact on families; in the early 1935 Leningrad purges alone, the People’s Commissariat of Internal Affairs (NKVD) “sentenced 4,833 heads of household and 6,239 family members to camps, exile, and relocation”.¹² Individuals were unable to protect themselves from the sheer scale of state violence deployed on their family members.

In Fascist Italy, *biopolitical* legal violence may be drawn as a comparison; Italy’s Penal Code of 1930 cemented harsh laws against women who attempted abortion, Chiara Saraceno emphasising how “severe punishment...[such as] three years of imprisonment”,¹³ meant family structures were by force of circumstance intruded on, restricting a woman’s control of her body.

Despite legal repression however, both case studies demonstrate that while family structures were involuntarily altered, they also led to the ‘reconstruction’ of a private sphere, as families and private networks bonded against state repression. Cynthia Hooper argues that Stalinist Terror “paradoxically worked to harden kinship networks, rather than to eliminate them”.¹⁴ She cites the example of Piatniskaia, an ordinary Soviet mother who in her diary shames a family for condemning her publicly. Nonetheless, this same family helped Piatniskaia’s son escape and shelter from NKVD guards a year later, her son thanking this family in the preface of the diary’s publication.¹⁵ Similarly, mothers and wives discreetly depended on informal networks and ties to

¹¹ Golfo Alexopoulos, ‘Stalin and the Politics of Kinship: Practices of Collective Punishment, 1920s–1940s’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 50:1 (2008), p.92.

¹² *ibid.*, p.104.

¹³ Chiara Saraceno, ‘Redefining Maternity and Paternity’, in Gisela Bock and Patricia Thane (eds), *Maternity and Gender Policies: Women and the Rise of the European Welfare States, 1880-1950s* (Oxford, 1994), p.205.

¹⁴ Cynthia Hooper, ‘Terror of Intimacy: Family Politics in the 1930s Soviet Union’ in C. Kiaer & E. Naiman (eds) *Everyday Life in Early Soviet Russia: Taking the Revolution Inside* (Bloomington, 2006), p.17.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, 79.

protect family members in prison,¹⁶ reconstructing an ‘informal’ private sphere to protect family members. Sheila Fitzpatrick points to the “resilience of the family”, as the “uncertain and dangerous conditions of life in the 1930s...[made] family members...[draw] closer together for self-protection”.¹⁷ A Harvard Project on Soviet family ties confirms her argument: 58% of urban residents reported on the “family drawing closer” in the 1930s, with 45% of collectivised peasants agreeing.¹⁸ This suggests how adverse conditions, while physically altering the confines of the family, also forced citizens to re-imagine a new ‘private sphere’, to protect themselves against state laws.

This can be seen in women’s *de facto* responses to harsh abortion laws in Fascist Italy; Alessandra Gissi highlights how women of all classes forged networks with midwives to continue practising abortion, even under strict fascist laws.¹⁹ Anthropological studies of Sicilian midwives for example, show how “reputation, public hearsay, [and] networks” meant women were able to undercut the abortion-ban and regain a sense of bodily autonomy,²⁰ depending on private networks that existed outside of the state’s purview.

Social movements and organisations were a further way in which the regimes sought to intervene in family life, relying on wives and mothers to bring state ideals into the home. While these movements successfully blurred the line between public and private for middle-class, urban households, they had an oppositional impact on working-class, and rural families. In the USSR, the *obshchestvennitsa* movement recruited middle and upper class housewives to spearhead and

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 99.

¹⁷ Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism, Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (Oxford, 1999), p.140.

¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁹ Alessandra Gissi, ‘Reproduction’, in J. Arthurs, M. Ebner, and K. Ferris (eds), *The Politics of Everyday life in Fascist Italy: Outside the State?* (New York: 2017), p.103.

²⁰ *ibid.*, p.115.

share the tenets of ‘Soviet domesticity’.²¹ Wife-activists were tasked with influencing domestic patterns within the home, spreading the movement through national and regional industrial conferences.²² To a considerable extent, these movements successfully penetrated the private sphere; not only did the movement mobilise tens of thousands of women, but aligned housewives’ *personal* interests with the state; Sofiia Butenko, a well-known activist wife, described how her personal and public interests became unanimous: “personal happiness – I have it myself, but in our country personal happiness does not and cannot contract the interests of the collective”.²³ This blending of the public and private shaped Butenko’s worldview, her personal interests conflated with those of the state. These activities further equipped many wives with a sense of civic purpose and duty; Galina Shtange, wife of an engineer, wrote in her personal diary of her “growing acquaintance with the world of meetings, conferences...and even business trips”, these activities being “a source of particular enjoyment, satisfaction, and self-respect”.²⁴ Shtange’s feelings demonstrate how family-state activities consumed her own sense of personal value, suggesting how different members of the family unit were successfully socialised into the tenets of the state.

In Fascist Italy, middle and upper class women played an important role as volunteers within the Fascist welfare state; they were tasked with teaching working-class women on different “styles of household operation...and household management”,²⁵ *voluntarily* taking on these roles. Mothers and wives played a particularly influential role in influencing family relations during wartime. During the second Italo-Ethiopian invasion, domesticity was framed as a woman’s contribution to the state’s imperialist cause: female fascist groups for example, trained women in

²¹ Rebecca Neary, ‘Domestic Life and the Activist Wife in the 1930s Soviet Union’, in Lewis Siegelbaum (ed), *Borders of Socialism: Private Spheres of Soviet Russia* (New York, 2006), p.112.

²² *ibid.*, p.114.

²³ *ibid.*, p.113.

²⁴ Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism.*, p.159

²⁵ De Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women*, p.82.

a range of skills, from “[fighting] waste in housework, [to] autarkic cooking” – activities that would contribute not only to the productivity of the household, but the overall productivity of the nation.²⁶ This involved physically altering the confines of family structures within the home; nurseries and creches were created for children so women could perform new tasks and facilitate soldiers’ on the warfront.²⁷ Family structures were thus altered through relegating childcare to the state, paradoxically allowing women to perform their new civic duties.

However, the impact of these organisations fell short along class and geographic divisions, due to the absence of socio-economic stability for working-class and rural families. In both regimes, the ineffective organisation of the welfare state meant many working-class and rural families did not benefit from the state benefits urban and middle-class families received. In Fascist Italy, ruralisation policies, combined with the absence of a family living-wage, meant that the urban working class and peasantry were disproportionately exploited; autarky and pressures on domestic production “[stretched] the resources of the peasant household”, while the failure to implement a family living wage meant by 1931, 45% of Italian families depended on at least two sources of income.²⁸ In the Soviet Union, the family state-security system failed to reach the countryside, with provisions provided to urban families, such as affordable medical services and state-subsidised childcare facilities, failing to reach rural Soviet populations until the late 1960s.²⁹

In turn, this meant that state-directed movements and organisations that appealed to middle-class families, failed to resonate with their working-class or rural counterparts, the latter

²⁶ Perry Willson, ‘Empire, Gender and the ‘Home Front’ in Fascist Italy’, *Women’s History Review* 16:4 (2007), p.487.

²⁷ *ibid*, p.492.

²⁸ De Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women*, pp.85-86.

²⁹ Liubov Denisova, ‘The Politics of Private Life: the Evolution and Transformation of the Soviet Family Code’, in Irina Mukhina (ed), *Rural Women in the Soviet Union and Post-Soviet Russia* (London, 2010), pp.165-167.

possessing a strengthened dependence on family ties and networks. Fitzpatrick's analysis of the *obshchestvennitsa* movement demonstrates how it possessed a "distinctive class base" consisting of elite wives, whose actions frequently felt out of touch with working-class women's interests.³⁰ The impact of rural family organisations in Fascist Italy has been contested by historians; Lauren Forcucci argues that organisations such as *La Massaie Rurali* equipped families with technical knowledge on day-to-day living, such "small-scale farming methods, domestic techniques, childcare and craft production".³¹ Yet, Maria Quine arrives at different conclusions to Forcucci by distinguishing the organisation's impact by class; in the absence of material provisions, these organisations failed to resonate with the realities of scarcity for poorer families,³² requiring more than political ideals for survival.

In turn, working-class and rural families turned to an array of means for survival, primarily through kinship ties. Donald Pitkin for example, writes of the prevalence of "familial extension" in Italy: networks of families that extended across three generations, that were depended on in times of need.³³ The patronage-oriented nature of the Italian welfare system meant "oppositional familialism" ensued; families privately protesting the insufficient working wages they received, resulting in many believing that the "family [was] as a refuge against political intrusions", frequently retreating to "family ties, class subcultures, religious associations...and local resources".³⁴ The prevalence of these networks, meant that despite adverse conditions, families created their own private sphere when needed.

³⁰ Fitzpatrick, *Family Problems*, p.158.

³¹ Lauren Forcucci, 'Battle for Births: The Fascist Pronatalist Campaign in Italy 1925 to 1938', *Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Europe* 10:1 (2010), p.9.

³² Quine, *Italy's Social Revolution*, p.171.

³³ Donald Pitkin, *The House That Giacomo Built* (Cambridge, 1985), pp.12-13.

³⁴ *De Grazia, How Fascism Ruled Women*, pp.112-114.

Many working-class mothers and wives further protected the notion of a ‘private’ sphere through using their bodies as sites of resistance. In the USSR, the ban on abortion under the 1936 Family Code emphasises class differences; women from lower-income households protested the ban, with little material provisions to supplement larger families.³⁵ Luisa Passerini further demonstrates how working class women in Turin politicised the private sphere. In an oral interview with Fiora, a working-class woman, Passerini asked how many children she had. Fiora replied: “I would have had more [more], but you didn’t to spite Mussolini, you see”.³⁶ While the State necessarily shaped how women could publicly conduct themselves, the private sphere arguably became in some ways even more enforced, as reactants used it as a way to counteract intrusive familial policies and campaigns.

Familial, private constructs also existed in spaces that simply could not be penetrated by the State, as Svetlana Boym illustrates through her discussion of the Soviet communal apartment; her ‘thick’ description of the narratives and intricacies of the apartment illustrating how residents were constantly exposed to social dynamics external to the state.³⁷ For example, the hallway, both public and private zone, was frequently “inhabited by old drunks, local fools, youth gangs, and teenagers in love”,³⁸ exposing residents to outer-state forces that made up the fabric of everyday life.

A further way the lived realities of families conflicted with the state, was through the prevalence of opportunism, demonstrated through parents and their children. As the regime policies were a ‘fact of life’, many families were forced to work with and negotiate state familial

³⁵ Goldman, *Women, the State, and Revolution*, p.341.

³⁶ Luisa Passerini, *Fascism in Popular Memory: The Cultural Experience of the Turin Working Class* (Cambridge, 1987), p.150.

³⁷ Svetlana Boym, *Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia* (Cambridge, 1994), p.125.

³⁸ Boym, *Common Places*, p.141.

boundaries, “[lacking] any sense of...a different reality”.³⁹ Indeed, parents often were forced to necessarily react to state provisions, but often had different personal motives for doing so. This is reflected in Olga Kucherenko’s discussion of Soviet junior cadet schools, created for boys from poor socio-economic backgrounds as a body of state-socialisation and protection during wartime.⁴⁰ On the one hand, Kucherenko argues that these schools “became a safe haven”: they reached beyond the influence of the family to establish a line of direct control onto children, with many parents voluntarily enrolling their children within the school.⁴¹ Simultaneously however, parents also leveraged these state institutions for their own motives, and to ensure their children to receive the best opportunities. For example, parents subtly petitioned for the schools to teach a broader range of skills that aligned more closely with their children’s professional and personal interests.⁴² Other parents put their children in schools to “diminish their family’s stigma of being ‘enemies of the people.’”⁴³ In Fascist Italy, enrolment in youth groups further differed according to demographics; a 1939 GIL survey for example, revealed far greater middle-class membership compared to the working class, likely due to opportunities for greater social mobility.⁴⁴ These examples demonstrate how while parents externally subscribed to the state’s family structures, their intentions for doing so were private and personally-motivated.

Thus, while the regimes’ family policies fundamentally changed the way in which family life operated, it did not dismantle the existence of a ‘private sphere’. While the regimes’ repressive

³⁹ Tracey Koon, *Believe, Obey, Fight: Political Socialization of Youth in Fascist Italy, 1922-1943* (Chapel Hill, 1985), p.232.

⁴⁰ Olga Kucherenko, ‘In loco parentis: Junior Cadet Schools in the Soviet Union during the Second World War’, in Hester Barron and Claudia Siebrecht (eds), *Parenting and the State in Britain and Europe, c. 1870-1950* (Brighton, 2017), pp. 231-253.

⁴¹ *ibid.*, p.233.

⁴² *ibid.*, 244.

⁴³ *ibid.*, p.246.

⁴⁴ Tommaso Baris, ‘Consent, Mobilization, and Participation: The Rise of the Middle Class and Its Support for the Fascist Regime’, in Giulia Albanese and Roberta Pergher (eds), *In the Society of Fascists: Acclamation, Acquiescence, and Agency in Mussolini’s Italy* (New York, 2012), p.82.

legal and social measures inflicted change and violence on the make-up of the family, particularly upon the women within them, a subsequent desire for security and bodily autonomy simultaneously strengthened the 'private sphere', through the form of kinship ties and networks. While the regimes found ways to influence the dynamics and interests of middle-class households through appealing to mothers and housewives, the lack of material provisions for working-class and rural households meant such organised social movements failed to resonate, relying instead on private networks in the absence of state provisions. While some parents engaged their children in the social institutions of the state, the personal motives behind this negate the idea that public adherence translated into private 'consent' to these bodies. Thus, families found ways to negotiate and work around the confines of restrictive familial state policies.

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