
The “Safe Haven” from Dictatorship? Family Lives in Hitler’s Germany and Stalin’s Russia

In this essay, I will examine the relationship between two dictatorial states – Hitler’s Nazi Germany and Stalin’s Soviet Union – and their families. Family lives in the two regimes varied across different periods and could not be comprehensively discussed in one short paper. My analysis will hence focus on the early 1930s to 1939, when both states consolidated their political powers and systematically regulated families to stabilize societies. Historical research conducted between 1945 to the 1960s like David and Vera Mace and Leo Martin offered top-down analyses of family policies with emphasis on state-level motivations.¹ Based on these examinations, I will also analyze families’ responses between consent and dissent toward these policies as well as gender, parent-child, and racial conflicts within families. I argue three things: First, in this period, families could not sufficiently provide “safe havens” from dictatorships as both regimes used laws, propaganda, and education to disintegrate families and make them subordinate to states. Next, parallel to coercions, governmental regulations also stabilized family structures and affirmed familial virtues to consolidate dictatorships’ rules. Lastly, these oppressive and impracticable regulations often united families while alienating them from states due to the public’s pragmatic opportunism.

Repressive Regulations: Breaking Familial Unity

Both regimes employed restrictive policies to decompose traditional family units in the 1930s.

Via propaganda, the Soviet government condemned overly intimate familial connections as threats

¹ David and Vera Mace, *The Soviet Family* (London, 1963), p. 45; Leo J. Martin, S. J., ‘Population Policies under National Socialism’, *The American Catholic Sociological Review*, 6: 2 (1945), pp. 67-82.

to the state. A Soviet writer stated in the newspaper: “if love fences the lovers off from the world’s storms and struggles... what sort of love can they have? What sort of people can they be?”² Here metaphors of “fences” and “storms” segregated self-centered love within families from the collective struggle for the nation’s better future. Meanwhile, the double rhetorical questions transformed this distinction into criticisms of the bourgeoisie-like selfishness within both family members and the notion of familial love. The writing, along with other similar literary works, forcefully set the binary opposition between family and the state as a “big family” while invoking public resentment toward the former. They thus built the ideological foundation for the public to actively disclose intimate families as “collaborators of the state’s enemies” during the Great Purge.³

This hostility toward family particularly influenced party officials. Iuliia Piatnitskaia, the wife of a Communist International's leader, recalled her husband’s excessive dedication at work and indifference to family affairs.⁴ This man’s alienation against family coincided with Golfo Alexopoulos’ observation: male spouses who worked for the Soviet establishment endured great pressure from their dual identities.⁵ As politically “hard” vanguards, their over-concentration on family lives was read by the government as passive avoidance from work duties; as heads of households, their irresponsibility at work would implicate punishments on their whole families. While Alexopoulos rightly indicated political insecurity’s destructive effect on families, her conclusion that the Bolshevik terror against families was “highly gendered” was one-sided.⁶

² Mace, *The Soviet Family*, p. 269.

³ Golfo Alexopoulos, ‘Stalin and the Politics of Kinship: Practices of Collective Punishment, 1920s-1940s’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 50:1 (2008), pp. 91-117.

⁴ C. Hooper, ‘Terror of Intimacy: Family Politics in the 1930s Soviet Union’, in Christina Kiaer, Eric Naiman (eds.) *Everyday Life in Early Soviet Russia: Taking the Revolution Inside* (Bloomington, 2006), p. 74.

⁵ Alexopoulos, ‘Stalin and Kinship’, pp. 91-117.

⁶ *Ibid.*

Larisa Vasilieva, Voroshilov's daughter-in-law, recounted the fear male and female family members all experienced: "everyone was afraid of everything... Stalin and the NKVD made everyone feel guilty of something."⁷ While husbands could be questioned by superiors as being politically "soft", wives could be denounced by neighbors due to inappropriate conversations and deeds. These threats from public and private forced family members to not only limit the time they spent together but also constantly check their behaviors at home. Her view explained Jochen Hellbeck's argument that Soviet family members, regardless of their genders and other social identities, collectively endured self-questioning and self-censorship processes in the 1930s.⁸ These practices ensured their safety at the price of sharp deteriorations in family life's qualities.

In contrast to the Stalin regime's oppression of families in all social strata, Nazi restrictions, according to Eric Johnson, were more likely to target particular families with Jewish, political dissenters, and so-called "genetically unhealthy" people.⁹ Johnson's view could be supported by state policies. The 1934 Marriage Loan Scheme, for example, explicitly disqualified Jews or patients with genetic diseases from acquiring financial support.¹⁰ This exclusion corresponded with Nazi family policies' dedication to preventing "non-approved families" from forming politically subversive connections.¹¹ According to statistical results, these policies effectively broke certain familial bounds since divorce cases between Jewish or physically disabled spouse and their healthy, Aryan partners surged across the decade.¹² Nevertheless, a closer examination to the Scheme may widen the scope of Nazi familial oppression's objects. The Scheme's note section

⁷ Hooper, 'Terror of Intimacy', p. 74.

⁸ Jochen Hellbeck, 'Speaking Out: Languages of Affirmation and Dissent in Stalinist Russia', *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, 1:1 (2000), p.90.

⁹ Robert Loeffel, *Family Punishment in Nazi Germany: Sippenhaft, Terror and Myth* (London, 2012), p. 6.

¹⁰ 'Women, the Family, and Population Policy' in Jeremy Jones, Geoffrey Pridham (eds.), *Nazism 1919-1945 Volume 2: State, Economy and Society 1933-39* (Exeter, 1984), p. 455.

¹¹ Paul Ginsburg, *Family Politics: Domestic Life, Devastation and Survival 1900-1950* (New Haven, 2014), p. 354.

¹² Michelle Moulton, *From Nurturing the Nation to Purifying the Volk: Weimar and Nazi Family Policy, 1918-1945* (Cambridge, 2007), p. 96.

asked officials to take home visits before granting loans. These included not only individual inquiry toward each spouse and their neighbors but also “careful observations” of objective evidence like newspapers and pictures.¹³ The questionings directly destabilized spouses’ relationships as they were privately threatened to sell out each other for personal securities. Meanwhile, inspections of personal belongings strengthened their anxiety and disbelief toward each other since one spouse’s suspicious object could bring legal punishment and Gestapo’s attention to both. Similar to the Soviet Union’s case, this incredulity further expanded between families due to spouses’ fear of neighbors’ reports. These investigations, in combination with punitive laws and police forces, could destabilize traditional familial and neighboring trusts. It concurred with Richard Evans’ assertion that multiple Nazi agencies’ joint coercions sufficiently deterred German people despite their races and political beliefs.¹⁴ The failure to acquire security via familial ties would theoretically push the public to more tightly cooperate with the regime. Hellbeck and Evan’s similar narratives hence indicate that the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany’s oppression of families, disregarding their distinctive policies, shared great methodological resemblance in destroying familial ties’ trustworthiness and replacing it with a form of individual-state connection that offered basic self-security.

The two regimes’ repressions of families held another common ground: the separation between children from their parents. In his speech in 1933, Hitler challenged his potential opponents: “while you won’t come to my side, your children belong to the new community already.”¹⁵ Here Hitler separated decayed parenthood in antithesis against children’s

¹³ ‘Women and the Family’, p. 455.

¹⁴ Richard J. Evans, ‘Coercion and Consent in Nazi Germany’, *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 151 (2007), pp. 53-81.

¹⁵ Alessio Ponzio, *Shaping the New Man: Youth Training Regimes in Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany* (Madison, 2015), p. 95.

representation of the nation's healthy future. Interestingly, both groups' significance or harms were analyzed under national contexts instead of familial perspectives. Hitler's immediate introduction of this opposition after seizing governmental control implied the regime's well-planned attempt in building *Volksgemeinschaft* by uniting all Aryans under one national purpose while erasing traditional social divisions. The young generation's sense of belonging to the state and their hostilities with families were cultivated in schools: textbooks asked German students to fight "for Führer and Volk" and encouraged children to denounce recalcitrant parents.¹⁶ Similar teachings existed in the Soviet Union, where children had learned patriotic tales and discipline since kindergarten.¹⁷ These teachings consolidated the young generations' obedience to the motherland as their "super-parent." Their parents, in the meantime, were warned by official state presses to not overly interfere with "the country's future citizens."¹⁸ This resulted in further generational alienations that not only blurred children's notion of familial privacy but also prevented parents' ideological impacts on their kids.

Estrangement may involve active or passive conflicts. Pavel Morozov, a fifteen-year-old Russian kid, expressed his identity "not as a son but as a pioneer" after denouncing his father, indicating the state's success in erasing potential dissenters by provoking generational conflicts.¹⁹ Likewise in Germany, Clifford Kirkpatrick noticed children's neglect of parental instructions during thrilling participation in school activities.²⁰ Kirkpatrick's observation was intriguing since he viewed children's disobedience as merely the escape from parents' strict control rather than the particular outcome of Nazi indoctrination. While this suggestion may be

¹⁶ David Welch, 'Nazi Propaganda and the *Volksgemeinschaft*: Constructing a People's Community', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 39:2 (2004), pp. 213-238.

¹⁷ Mace, *The Soviet Family*, p. 270.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Ginsburg, *Family Politics*, p. 419.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 366.

too absolute, it offered a new angle in studying dictatorships' family policies by analyzing how they combined revolutionary elements in National Socialist or Communist ideologies with children's rebelling characteristics to deepen tensions within traditional families.

Complicated Aims: Stabilizing Families?

Although both regimes restricted families' social roles, they by no means aimed to fully deconstruct traditional family structures and organizations. An example was the two states' equal emphases on pronatalist policies. The 1936 All-Union Code of Family Law subsidized large Soviet families with child-care payments while outlawing abortion except in therapeutic situations.²¹ The illegalization of abortion served to stop birthrate's decline in the early 1930s, while financial rewards that increased proportionally with the number of children the family aimed to accelerate population expansion. Following up the Law, nationwide pronatalist publicity campaigns began. Many articles used biological proof to stress abortion's adverse effects on women's organs and nervous system while advertising new medical treatments that reduced childbirth's pain.²² Meanwhile, broadcasters enthusiastically announced the decrees "protected Soviet mothers' health" and expressed the state's allowance on reproductions between different ethnicities or classes.²³ These informative propagandas consolidated imperative laws' influences by convincing women with scientific objectivity and patriotic duty while eliminating their fears of giving birth. They thus succeeded in the short run to create a six-percent surge in the national birthrate between 1936 and 1937.²⁴ In addition, the government's fading attention on class

²¹ Ginsburg, *Family Politics*, p. 421.

²² David L. Hoffmann, *Stalinist Values: The Cultural Norms of Soviet Modernity, 1917–1941* (Ithaca, 2006), p. 100.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

distinctions hinted at its priority in stabilizing families instead of continuously creating inter-class disputes. The 1936 Law was therefore significant for not only its contribution to short-term demographic growth but also its wider political implication of the Soviet regime's partial concession toward families.

In contrast to Soviet pronatalism's racial and class inclusion, corresponding Nazi policies highlighted the necessity to reproduce racially pure Aryans. Similar to the Soviet Union, Germany's national birthrate also descended sharply during former decades. The decline was skillfully portrayed by Nazi media as the result of the shameful defeat in WWI and economic crises in the 1920s.²⁵ These depictions of Germany's dark past and potential future downfall could invoke spouses' senses of crisis and make them feel responsible to reproduce the new generation for both personal securities and national prosperity. Moreover, the 1933 Marriage Incentive Program offered rewards up to 1,000 marks and reduced fifteen-percent income tax to child-rich families. Although these programs seemed alike to Soviet financial subsidies, they had stronger emphases on reproduction's qualities. As Paul Ginsburg noticed, the Nazi concept of "child-rich" specifically meant healthy, racially "valuable," politically supportive, and socially responsible families.²⁶ Ginsburg's in-depth study on European family politics between 1900 and 1950 gave him a precious comparative perspective to identify accurate ideological connotations behind Nazi and Soviet policies' linguistics. His view hence prevented the blind equalization between child-rich families and general "large families," the latter being more suitable to describe Soviet familial designs.

The Nazi government put considerable effort into maintaining their youth's physical and

²⁵ 'Women and the Family', p. 457.

²⁶ Ginsburg, *Family Politics*, p. 378.

racial health. Special programs like the ‘Mother and Child’ Aid were created in 1934 to assist newborns and their poor mothers with human forces and financial assistance.²⁷ In addition to their practical roles in decreasing infant mortality rates, these programs ideologically conformed the regime’s self-depiction as Germany’s savior that was dedicated to eliminating poverty and cared unbiasedly about lower social classes. Meanwhile, they also provided employment opportunities for birth-related jobs. The number of day nurses, for instance, increased from 1,000 in 1935 to more than 10,000 in 1939.²⁸ The Nazi regime’s care for reproduction was therefore beneficial to not only birthrate growth but also the Party’s ideological coherence and social stability under broader scales.

Pronatalist policy was only a part of the practices both regimes employed to stabilize families. In Germany, household schools were formed to teach female spouses vital in-house skills like cookery, hygiene, and gardening as well as Nazi doctrines.²⁹ The housework classes’ exclusion of politics regulated women’s expected roles within private spheres to consolidate the regime’s social division between men as bread-winners and women as homemakers. Meanwhile, education of Nazi theories like *Volksgemeinschaft* connected women and family lives’ privacy closely with the state’s fate on the public side. This inseparability between public and private proved the Nazi dedication to reaching *Gleichschaltung* – the regime’s control and coordination over all aspects of German society – behind superficial signals in safeguarding individual family spaces. While in the Soviet Union, less oppressive family policies were also increasingly valued in the late 1930s not only due to familial structures’ stabilizing effects on the society but also family’s positive representations. The Central Committee used “kinship ties” to publicly present their political unity

²⁷ *Ibid*, p. 379.

²⁸ Ginsburg, *Family Politics*, p. 379.

²⁹ *Ibid*, p. 370.

and articles stressed respect for elders and care for parents were “a component of communist morality.”³⁰ In these contexts, family’s symbolic value outweighed its practical functions since it became a metaphoric praise for political and social harmony, even though its original meaning was sacrificed for the “big family.” This continuous exclusion of individual families in these pro-family contents rebutted Rebecca Neary’s over-simplified chronological division of Soviet family policies. Neary viewed 1936 as the watershed between anti-family suppression and pro-family stabilization and saw the Soviet official’s diminishing radicalness as the reason.³¹ While the Soviet regime did become more pragmatic throughout the decade, Neary ignored that coercion and stabilization were not mutually exclusive but “coexisted” in both regimes as Alexopoulos stated.³² It is worth noting that Alexopoulos may need to clarify “coexist” ’s meaning since the two trends were nowhere near a balanced relationship. On the contrary, it was the states’ ultimate yet implicit goal to superimpose themselves over families that led to the mixture of support and repression in their family policies.

Failing Interferences and Consequences: Alienation between Family and State

Despite being theoretically feasible, both regimes’ family regulations were harsh and impractical in many circumstances. Retaking their pronatalist policies as examples. While they succeeded in creating immediate birthrate surges, both states’ growths declined again several years after the policies’ implementations.³³ Many German women recounted that regardless of birth subsidies, families who bear fewer children were still better off than those who were child-

³⁰ Hoffmann, *Stalinist Values*, p. 104.

³¹ Rebecca B. Neary, ‘Domestic Life and the Activist Wife in the 1930s Soviet Union’, in Lewis Siegelbaum (ed.) *Borders of socialism: Private spheres of Soviet Russia* (Basingstoke & New York, 2006), p. 113.

³² Alexopoulos, ‘Stalin and Kinship’, pp. 91-117.

³³ Hoffmann, *Stalinist Values*, p. 114.

rich.³⁴ Similarly, according to state statistics, half abortion cases in the Soviet Union during the 1930s were due to poverty and financial aids could not even cover the cost of raising more children.³⁵ Women's hardship was indivisible from real wages' decline in both states throughout the decade, which resulted in a loss of confidence to providing financial support for children's growth.³⁶ Situations further worsened in the late 1930s when many women became employed due to states' needs for workers and personal financial motivation during economic deterioration. While rising labor forces mitigated economic deterioration, women could only get low-paying jobs while their housework pressures did not decrease. Traditional historiography emphasized these dual burdens' heavier exploitations on German women.³⁷ This was partially right since the Nazi regime's clearer division of genders' social functions did exhaust women by naturalizing maternal homecare while marginalizing fatherhood's influence. However, I doubt scholars like Neary who considered Soviet women as being less oppressed due to the state's ideological support of gender equality and its utilization of law to safeguard female rights.³⁸ Their straightforward link between state ideologies and social consequences ignored Soviet family policies, like that of the Nazi regime's, disregard in improving family living standards. Whilst sets of alimony laws prevented husbands' negligence on families, women still suffered from toilsome work in heavy industries that distracted them from family businesses. Families and women's difficulties in the two states were thus not that different. They both originated from the dilemma between nations' whole-scale superimposition over families in theory and the lack of state resources in practice. They also led to similar outcomes that destabilized societies like illegal

³⁴ Moulton, *Purifying the Volk*, p. 136.

³⁵ Wendy Z. Goldman, *Women, the State and Revolution: Soviet Family Policy and Social Life, 1917-1936* (Cambridge, 1993), p. 290.

³⁶ Goldman, *Women and the State*, p. 316.

³⁷ Ginsburg, *Family Politics*, p. 423.

³⁸ Neary, 'Activist Wife', p. 118.

abortion's development, falling consumption of family-related goods, and increasing juvenile criminal activities.³⁹

Family policies' negative influences ultimately alienated families from the states as evident through oral history. Under heavy state censorship in the 1930s, German and Russian citizens could not run the risk of writing private diaries to express their dissents toward the regimes.⁴⁰ This led to a postwar historiographical vacuum of common people's perspectives under dictatorships, resulting in top-down narratives on family lives that were solely based on state policies and documents.⁴¹ Fortunately, various interview programs on former Nazi and Soviet families were organized in the 1970s.⁴² They disclosed families' opportunistic indifference or disobedience to the regimes. Many German mothers recalled their callings of pro-Nazi teachers as "offensive intruders" and their refusals in bringing kids to family advice centers when no material benefits were rewarded.⁴³ Others recounted their fabrication of racial identities to receive marriage loans.⁴⁴ Identical memories were shared by Soviet families who viewed marriage, divorce, and remarriage as methods to acquire financial subsidies from the government.⁴⁵ Their deeds speculatively used state interferences' material benefits to maintain familial stabilities. These self-interested survival strategies proved dictatorships' failures in eliminating families' individuality and uniting people under "big families."

Increasing state pressure even solidified familial ties and recreated safe havens for

³⁹ Mace, *The Soviet Family*, p. 270; Robert G. Waite, 'Teenage Sexuality in Nazi Germany', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 8:3 (1998), pp. 434-476.

⁴⁰ Orlando Figes, 'Private Life in Stalin's Russia: Family Narratives, Memory and Oral History', *History Workshop Journal*, 65 (2008), pp. 117-137.

⁴¹ Tiia Sahrakorpi, 'Memory, Family, and the Self in Hitler Youth Generation Narratives', *Journal of Family History*, 45:1 (2020), pp. 88-108; Figes, 'Oral History', pp. 117-137.

⁴² Sahrakorpi, 'Hitler Youth', pp. 88-108; Figes, 'Oral History', pp. 117-137.

⁴³ Moulton, *Purifying the Volk*, p. 176.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

⁴⁵ Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (Oxford, 2000), p. 141.

information exchanges. In addition to traditional familial and communal harmony's moral influence, practical thinking also consolidated these strong links. As Robert Loeffel indicated, many German citizens who distrusted official presses relied on families and local communities to acquire valuable gossip regarding politics and economics.⁴⁶ His theory was not unique to Nazi Germany as Soviet inter-family connections also gave people political and social advantages according to several interviewees' accounts.⁴⁷ Families' practical and opportunistic unities were hence more flexible than the regimes perceived: while most of them would follow states' coercive policies, they were motivated for practical gains rather than ideological consensus. Furthermore, this pragmatic seeking for survival also made families secretly preserve and develop familial and communal links to receive precious information and avoid being isolated by both states and communities.

Conclusion

In the 1930s, families were generally not "safe havens" in Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union under states' coercive restrictions on family lives. In theory, these regulations would decrease familial securities and maintain their limited stabilities under states' control. However, in practice, they failed to improve people's basic living conditions and consequently alienated families from the regimes while increasing familial unities in many circumstances.

⁴⁶ Loeffel, *Family Punishment in Nazi Germany: Sippenhaft, Terror and Myth* (London, 2012), p. 15.

⁴⁷ Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, p. 140.

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