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The Atlantic Monthly | July 1926

The Russian Effort to Abolish Marriage

"Men took to changing wives with the same zest which they displayed in the consumption of the recently restored forty-per-cent vodka."

BY A WOMAN RESIDENT IN RUSSIA

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The question whether marriage as an institution should be abolished is now being debated all over Russia with a violence and depth of passion unknown since the turbulent early days of the Revolution. Last October a bill eliminating distinctions between registered and unregistered marriages and giving the unmarried consort the status and property rights of the legal wife was introduced in the Tzik, or Central Executive Committee. So much unforeseen opposition to the proposed law developed that the Tzik decided to postpone its final adoption until the next session, meanwhile initiating a broad popular discussion of the project.

Since that time factories, offices, clubs, and various Soviet organizations and institutions have passed resolutions for and against the bill, and the halls have not been able to hold the eager crowds that thronged to the meetings in city, town, and village. One must live in Russia to-day, amid the atmosphere of torment, disgust, and disillusionment that pervades sex relations, the chaos, uncertainty, and tragedy that hover over the Russian family, to understand the reasons for this heated discussion, for these passionate pros and cons.

When the Bolsheviki came into power in 1917 they regarded the family, like every other 'bourgeois' institution, with fierce hatred, and set out with a will to destroy it. 'To clear the family out of the accumulated dust of the ages we had to give it a good shakeup, and we did,' declared Madame Smidovich, a leading Communist and active participant in the recent discussion. So one of the first decrees of the Soviet Government abolished the term 'illegitimate children.' This was done simply by equalizing the legal status of all children, whether born in wedlock or out of it, and now the Soviet Government boasts that Russia is the only country where there are no illegitimate children. The father of a child is forced to contribute to its support, usually paying the

mother a third of his salary in the event of a separation, provided she has no other means of livelihood.

At the same time a law was passed which made divorce a matter of a few minutes, to be obtained at the request of either partner in a marriage. Chaos was the result. Men took to changing wives with the same zest which they displayed in the consumption of the recently restored forty-per-cent vodka.

'Some men have twenty wives, living a week with one, a month with another,' asserted an indignant woman delegate during the sessions of the Tzik. 'They have children with all of them, and these children are thrown on the street for lack of support! (There are three hundred thousand *bezprizorni* or shelterless children in Russia to-day, who are literally turned out on the streets. They are one of the greatest social dangers of the present time, because they are developing into professional criminals. More than half of them are drug addicts and sex perverts. It is claimed by many Communists that the break-up of the family is responsible for a large percentage of these children.)

The peasant villages have perhaps suffered most from this revolution in sex relations. An epidemic of marriages and divorces broke out in the country districts. Peasants with a respectable married life of forty years and more behind them suddenly decided to leave their wives and remarry. Peasant boys looked upon marriage as an exciting game and changed wives with the change of seasons. It was not an unusual occurrence for a boy of twenty to have had three or four wives, or for a girl of the same age to have had three or four abortions. As the peasants of Borisovo-Pokrovskoie bitterly complained: 'Abortions cover our villages with shame. Formerly we did not even hear of them.' But the women, in self-defense, replied: 'It's easy for you to talk. But if you just tried to bear children yourselves you would sing a different song.'

I was once discussing the subject of frequent divorces with the president of a village soviet. 'What makes women get divorces?' I asked him. Just then a girl about eighteen years old entered the room. 'Here is our latest divorcee,' said the president laughingly. 'Ask her.' I turned around, but the girl was no longer there, and from the window I saw her running away as fast as she could. I ran after her and finally caught up with her in the fields outside the village. We sat down on a haystack and I asked the girl to talk to me frankly, as woman to woman.

Tears filled her eyes as she told me that she still loved her nineteen-year-old husband, but that he had forced her to ask for a divorce only two months after they had been married. He now thought he loved another girl in the village and threatened to kill his wife if she did not leave him voluntarily.

I recall another victim of the breakdown of family ties in the villages, a tall, pale, silent Cossack woman. She was divorced by her husband after their first child was born. He then married another woman, had a child by her, deserted both, and returned to his first wife, by whom he had a second child. The woman was deeply religious, and was tormented by the thought that her second child was illegitimate, although her priest assured her that this was not the case, because the Church did not recognize the divorce.

Several peculiar abuses sprang up in the country districts in connection with the shifting marriage regulations. Many women of light behavior found marriage and childbearing a profitable occupation. They formed connections with the sons of well-to-do peasants and then blackmailed the father for the support of the children. In some cases peasants have been obliged to sell their last cow or horse in order to settle such alimony claims. The law has created still more confusion because it is retrospective in its operation, so that women can claim support for children born many years ago.

Other peasants took advantage of the loose divorce regulations to acquire 'summer brides.' As the hiring of labor in Russia is hedged about with difficulties and restrictions for the private employer, the richer peasants in some districts took to the practice of marrying a strong girl for the harvest season and divorcing her as soon as the work in the fields was over.

The new sex relations have also raised certain problems in the cities. During the winter of 1924-1925 some of the older Communists accused the younger generation, especially the students, of indulging in too much dissipation, of squandering health and vitality in loose connections; they blame the girl students for practising frequent abortions. 'You must be either a student or a mother; under present-day conditions you can't be both,' declared one mentor to the modern Russian women students. The latter indignantly replied that love was almost the only cheap amusement left to them and demanded that they be given at least the same opportunity for free abortions that factory women enjoy. Moreover, they retorted that not all the older Communists could serve as a model of pure living.

Some members of the League of Communist Youth, an organization which now numbers between a million and a half and two million young men and women, regard the refusal to enter into temporary sex relations as mere bourgeois prejudice, the deadliest sin in the eyes of a Communist. Some of the provincial branches of the League went so far as to organize 'Down with Shame' and 'Down with Innocence' circles; but these were sharply condemned as rowdy aberrations in the official report on the activities of the League at the last Congress of the Communist Party.

Both in the villages and in the cities the problem of the unmarried mother has become very acute and provides a severe and annoying test of Communist theories. In the early stages of the Revolution the Communists held the theory that children should be reared and cared for by the State. But it soon became evident that the State, especially in war-torn and impoverished Russia, was financially quite incapable of assuming such a heavy burden of responsibility. The figure of ten thousand foundlings, reported for thirty-two provinces of the Soviet Union over a period of six months, illustrates the danger that the present large number of vagrant homeless children may be swelled because of the inability or unwillingness of parents to provide for the offspring of temporary connections.

The session of the Tzik which discussed the abolition of marriage as an institution last autumn took place in the famous throneroom of the Tsars in one of the Kremlin palaces. The gilded walls and ceilings are unchanged, but the throne has been replaced by a simple wooden structure serving as a platform. Here round-faced peasant women with red kerchiefs over their heads, workers in plain dark blouse without tie or collar, commissars in high boots, mingled democratically and argued with equal ardor.

The bill was introduced by the Commissar for Justice, Mr. Kursky, a large man with tremendous blonde moustaches. He pointed out that whereas, according to the old law, the wife had no rights in the case of an unregistered marriage, the proposed law would give her the rights of a legal wife in holding property and in other matters. Another new point was that wife and husband would have an equal right to claim support from the other, if unemployed or incapacitated for work. The woman would have the right to demand support for her child even if she lived with several men during the period of conception; but, in contrast to previous practice, she or the court would choose one man who would be held responsible for the support. Commissar Kursky seemed especially proud of this point because it differed so much from the 'burgeois customs' of Europe and America. In those countries, he said, the husband can bring a friend who declares that he also lived with the woman, and the latter is then left defenseless. In the villages, where some continue to live with their parents long after they are married, the whole family is held responsible if a woman claims alimony, according to the original draft of the proposed law.

When Kursky had finished his report and the floor was open for discussion, so much heated opposition developed that representatives from villages and factories spoke for days at a time, and the list of speakers who wished to be heard seemed to be continually growing larger. The question which chiefly occupied the attention of the debaters was whether giving the

unregistered wife all legal rights would prevent men from making many rash and temporary connections, or whether it would simply lead to polygamy and polyandry.

The Commissar for Internal Affairs, Byelobrodov, argued that the State cannot regard marriage as a purely private affair. It was his view that stable marriages would better ensure the education of the children. He asserted that the break-up of the family was responsible for many of the criminal and beggar children now on the streets.

Another speaker objected to the proposed law on the ground that some women would take advantage of its liberal provisions to form connections with wealthy men and then blackmail them for alimony. Krasikov, a high official in the Commissariat for Justice, contended that it would be most difficult to establish whether people had actually lived in marriage, and drew the conclusion that the law against polygamy would become a dead letter. One debater put the question in more picturesque fashion: 'You want to turn Russia into one huge marriage, where everyone will have married everyone else.'

A working woman from Kostroma, with a shawl over her head, added her voice of general chorus of opposition. 'In our factories,' she said, 'you notice something very unpleasant. As long as a young man doesn't participate in public activities he respects his wife. But as soon as he moves up a little, gets a little more education, something comes between them. He leaves his wife with a child, lives with another woman, and brings poverty and misery to both. I ask the working women to pass a law that will stop the practice of having many husbands and many wives.'

Mrs. Gypova, a peasant woman from Kursk Province, insisted that men and women must not be permitted to live like gypsies, continually changing their mates. The children suffered too much. 'Many husbands who lived peacefully with their wives for twenty years suddenly begin to cry: "We have freedom now. Give me a divorce." Unless some firm limit is placed on frequent marriages and divorces we shall be discussing this question at every session and never get good results.'

The opposition to the proposed law seemed to centre around four points: (1) that it would abolish marriage; (2) that it would destroy the family; (3) that it would legalize polygamy and polyandry; (4) that it would ruin the peasants.

It soon became clear that the bill could not be passed at the autumn session, and a resolution to postpone further action on it until the next session was adopted. About two weeks later a mass meeting was held in Moscow to discuss the proposal. Krilenko, the Soviet public prosecutor, who had a very large share in the framing of the bill and is one of its most passionate advocates,

argued that there is neither necessity, importance, nor even utility in the registration of a marriage. 'Why should the State know who marries whom?' he exclaimed. 'Of course, if living together and not registration is taken as the test of a married state, polygamy and polyandry may exist; but the State can't put up any barriers against this. Free love is the ultimate aim of a socialist State; in that State marriage will be free from any kind of obligation, including economic, and will turn into an absolutely free union of two beings. Meanwhile, though our aim is the free union, we must recognize that marriage involves certain economic responsibilities, and that's why the law takes upon itself the defense of the weaker partner, from the economic standpoint.'

Leon Trotski also pronounced himself in favor of the proposed new law at a conference of medical workers engaged in maternity welfare work. Trotski stressed the point that such a law, by giving more protection to women, would make for the benefit of the country's children.

On the other hand, Mr. Soltz, a prominent Communist authority on legal matters and one of the bitterest opponents of the proposed law, took a very different view of its probable consequences. His argument ran somewhat as follows:—

'We now impose the responsibility for the consequences of loose living on men who are guilty of it, while at the same time we know that they can't undertake the burden of these responsibilities. Women don't get a hundredth part of the alimony to which they are entitled by court decisions because the husbands simply cannot pay. The proposed law seems to favor women, but it will really work out to their disadvantage, because even now husbands run away from their wives and wives run vainly after their husbands and their alimony. Women enter into temporary connections because they think the law will protect them. We must tell them that only registered marriage can involve economic obligations; then they will be more careful. You say we can put alimony defaulters in prison, but if we tried to do this we shouldn't have enough prisons to hold the guilty. Women will defend themselves better if they know that they can't rely on our laws for defense.'

Madame Smidovich expressed the opinion that the family is still needed to fulfill the function of bringing up children and carrying out other obligations which the State is not yet able to assume. She favored the law because she thought a woman would be best defended if her rights as a wife were legally upheld, regardless of whether the marriage were registered. 'Many applauded Soltz,' she added, 'because they already rejoice in the idea that if they are only obliged to assume responsibility for a registered marriage, they can at the same time maintain several other connections without any responsibility at all.'

Madama Kollontai, Russia's foremost feminist leader and first woman ambassador (to Norway), offered an interesting contribution to this discussion. She opposed the bill because she did not think women could collect alimony, especially if their husbands had two families. She was against registration and altogether in favor of free love. As a solution for the vexing problem of children she suggested a scheme of 'marriage insurance,' to be financed by an annual levy of one dollar on every adult citizen of the Soviet Union. This would provide a fund of about sixty million dollars a year, enough to provide for all the babies who might be born as a result of free-love unions. She also remarked that, although the present-day Russian youth is accused of dissipation and loose living, it is often forgotten that prostitution has largely disappeared. (In this connection there is a widespread saying that amateurs spoil the profession.)

If opinion on the proposed law is divided in the cities, the feeling in the villages, where eighty per cent of the Russians live, is overwhelmingly against it. Recently the official Soviet newspaper, *Izvestia*, printed a résumé of peasant opinion in regard to it. Perhaps the most characteristic spokesman was A. Platov, a peasant from Vologda Province, who declared:—

'Marriage among the peasants has not yet become a toy which can be fashioned to-day and broken to-morrow or next week. The new proposal to have many wives and husbands is considered illegal in the villages. Responsibility for the sins of one member should not fall upon the the entire family. Every divorce in the villages brings with it family discords, feuds, trials, revenge, murder, and ruin. One must take into consideration the backwardness of the village population, which feels that the new law will bring polygamy, grief, demoralization, and the dying out of the race.'

In Tetushi, a Tatar village, the meeting of the peasants was described as 'noisy, even stormy.' It began at two in the afternoon and lasted until the following morning. The meeting registered a unanimous vote for the registration of marriage. Although disussion is still going on all over Russia, there seems to be little doubt that the bill, with certain modifications, will be passed at the next session of the Tzik, which will be held in the summer. The more important changes in the draft law, to which the Commissariat for Justice has agreed in deference to the widespread popular protests and opposition, are as follows:—

Unregistered marriage will entail legal rights only in cases where the parties concerned mutually acknowledge each other as husband and wife, where it is established before a court that they lived together and had joint property, either by the testimony of a third party of by the evidence of their personal correspondence or other documents, where there was mutual material support or

joint bringing up of children.

A husband or wife may claim support from the other partner only for one year if incapacitated for work, and only for six months if unemployed. (This change was made as a result of numerous suggestions to the effect that some Russian men are so lazy that they would be glad to marry working women and remain permanently unemployed if they were thereby entitled to claim support from their wives.)

Preference will be given to registered marriages in so far as registration will be considered an absolute proof of marriage.

The whole peasant family will be responsible for the support of the child of one of its members, but the amount given must in no case be so great as to lead to the ruin of the family.

The mere technical details of the proposed new marriage law would scarcely have excited such a flood of ardent popular discussion if the whole problem of sex relations had not been in the forefront of public attention. The discussion simply provided an outlet for the expression of long-repressed feelings on this subject.

The course of the discussion indicated pretty clearly two outstanding developments in modern Russia's attitude toward the problems of marriage, sex, and the family. In the first place, there is an unmistakable reaction, both among the Communists and among the general public, against excessive loose living. Some of the Communists especially stress the point that a comrade who spends too much time in love affairs cannot fulfill his duties to the Party and the proletariat. There is a tendency among Communist writers now to decry excessive preoccupation with sex as a symptom of bourgeois decadence. Among the general population and especially among the peasants there is a keen realization of the difficulties, material and otherwise, which have come up as a result of a too literal adoption of the 'free love' slogan, and there is a desire for more stable domestic relations.

In the second place, it is now pretty evident that the widespread circulation of revolutionary ideas on the desirability of abolishing the family has not by any means eliminated old-fashioned passions of love and jealousy. The police records are full of cases, some of them very terrible, of murders and assaults and suicides committed by women under the influence of jealousy. One such case may serve as an example. A peasant left his village wife and began to live with a working woman in the town. The village wife kept coming and making scenes before the second wife, until the latter, irritated beyond endurance, poured benzine over her rival, set her on fire, and burned her to

death. Such elemental outbursts of jealousy are condemned by the Communists as 'relics of bourgeois prejudice'; but they continue to occur nevertheless, and even Communist women have been known to commit suicide because their husbands'attentions were diverted elsewhere.

The Atlantic Monthly; July 1926; The Russian Effort to Abolish Marriage; Volume 138, No. 1; page 108-114.