

# THE EVOLUTION OF SEXISM UNDER GORBACHEV

## ABORTION, POPULATION GROWTH, AND SOCIETAL EXPECTATIONS UNDER PERESTROIKA

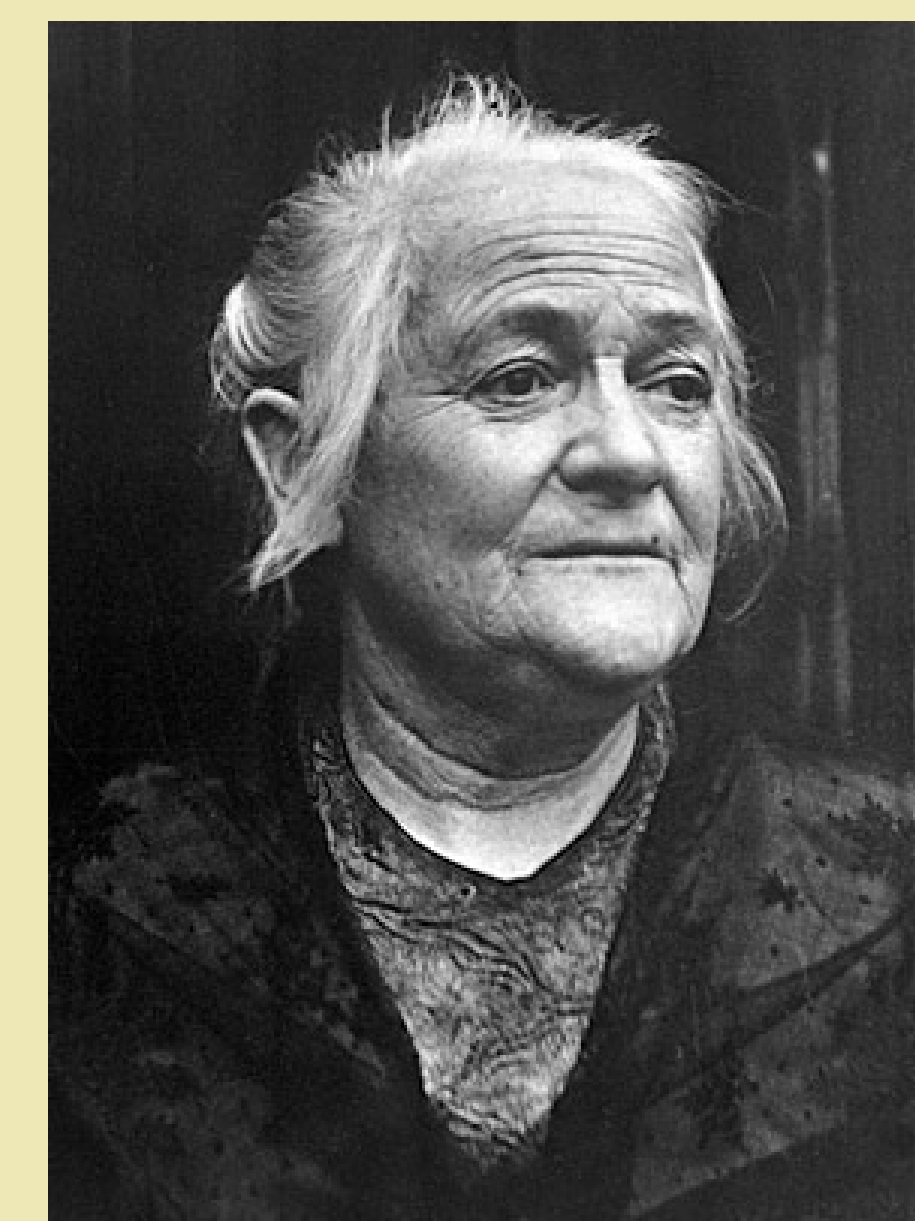
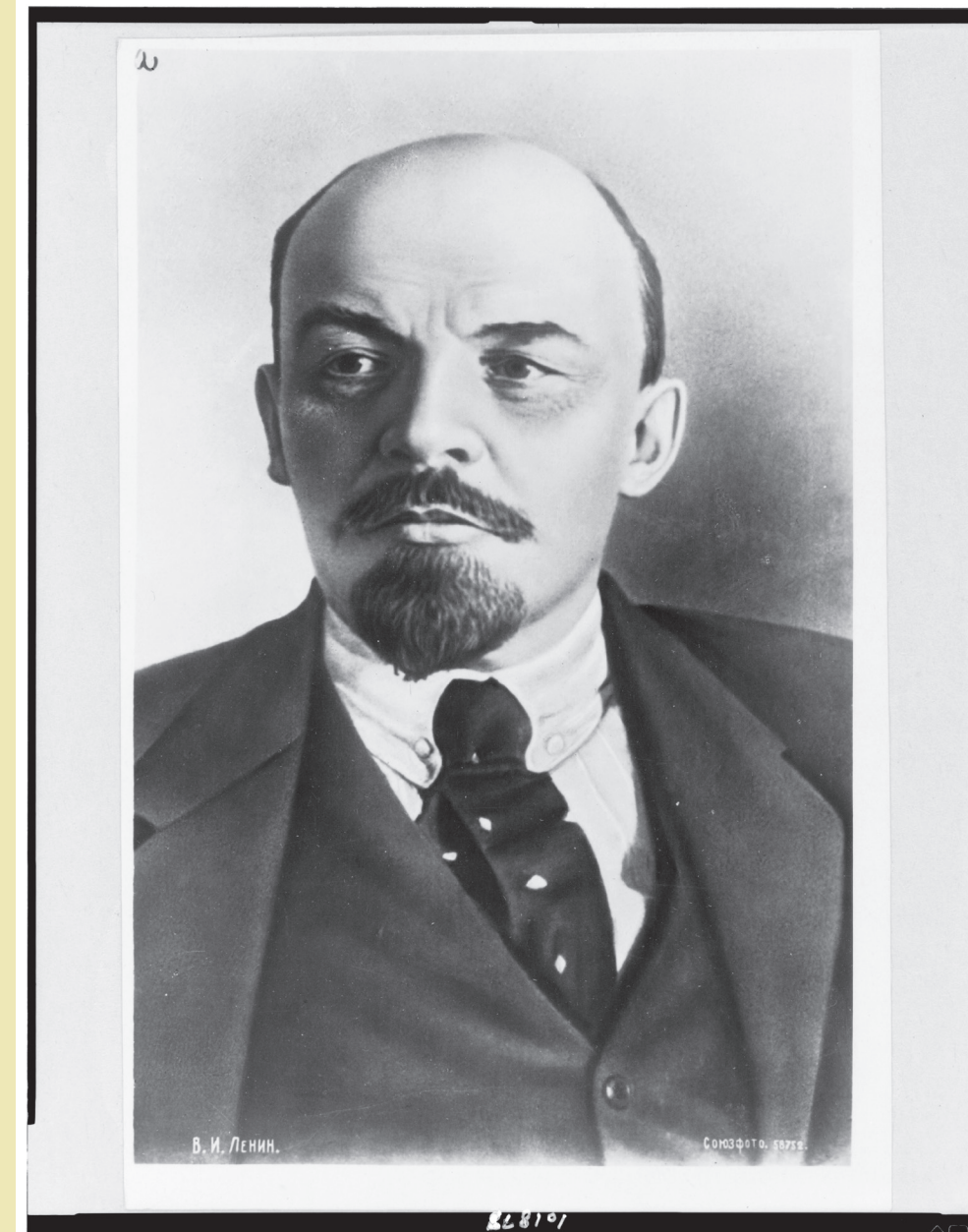
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### THE DOUBLE BURDEN

Because Soviet women were legally required to work, they experienced significant difficulties balancing work and home life. Women were expected to bear the burden of childcare and home maintenance, resulting in the persistent cultural imbalance between the sexes in the child-rearing role. This has been an issue since the very beginning of the Soviet Union with the idea that women's work in the home was preventing them from working to their fullest abilities. The Gorbachev government attempted to relieve some of this burden by increasing maternity leave and benefits for working mothers. At the same time, the government pursued pronatalist policies (such as giving medals to women who had many children) that further entrenched the double burden. No attempts were made to make household goods and food easier to obtain, nor was there any enforcement of equal opportunities and anti-discrimination laws in the workplace.



### THE "WOMAN QUESTION"

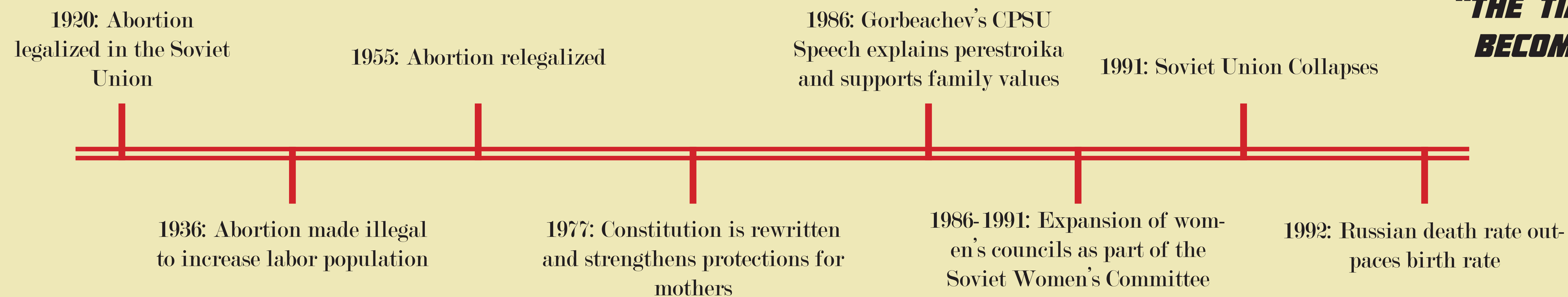
From the early stages of the development of communist ideology, there has been a debate as to what the woman's role in a socialist society should be. Marx, Engels, and Lenin all advocated for the full equality of women and the liberation of women from the home, as household responsibilities took labor away from the workplace. However, in the early years Lenin also advocated against abortion and the use of birth control methods by the proletariat as they were "petty-bourgeois ideas." He instead wanted the expansion and strengthening of the proletariat population.

Clara Zetkin, a prominent German Marxist and proponent for women in the communist movement, remarks on Lenin's support of women and recognition of their importance to a revolution in her *My Recollections of Lenin*. She also discusses Lenin's rejection of "questions of sex and marriage" as these questions distracted proletarian women from the revolution. Finally, Lenin also asserted that women were integral to the revolution, and that "there can be no real mass movement without the women."

The Leninist idea that women could only achieve full equality and emancipation under a socialist system persisted through the Gorbachev era as seen in speeches and government agendas.

**"THERE CAN BE NO REAL MASS MOVEMENT WITHOUT THE WOMEN" - V.I. LENIN**

**"THE TIMES REQUIRE THAT PUBLIC ORGANIZATIONS BECOME MORE AND MORE ACTIVELY INVOLVED IN THE ADMINISTRATION OF THE COUNTRY" - MIKHAIL GORBACHEV**



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### ABORTION CONDITIONS

While Soviet society expressed a matter-of-fact opinion regarding having an abortion (often comparing it to "extracting a tooth"), the procedure itself was excruciating. In the late 1980s, glasnost allowed for more extensive reporting on abortion conditions, which major American newspapers also published. State abortion clinics did not provide anaesthetics, and women often reported that staff were unsympathetic, cruel, and only concerned with getting the operation done as quickly as possible. It was not uncommon for women to instead turn to illegal abortions in order to receive better medical care and treatment. However, these illegal abortions had high infection and mortality rates as a result of poor sanitation.

The abortion rate remained high throughout this period, with the majority of women citing poverty as the primary reason for getting an abortion. It was also common for women to have several abortions over the course of their lifetimes, and women who had already had one child comprised a significant percentage of those seeking abortions. The instability of the Soviet Union and worsening conditions just before the collapse led to increased abortion rates as women were increasingly unable to afford supporting a child.

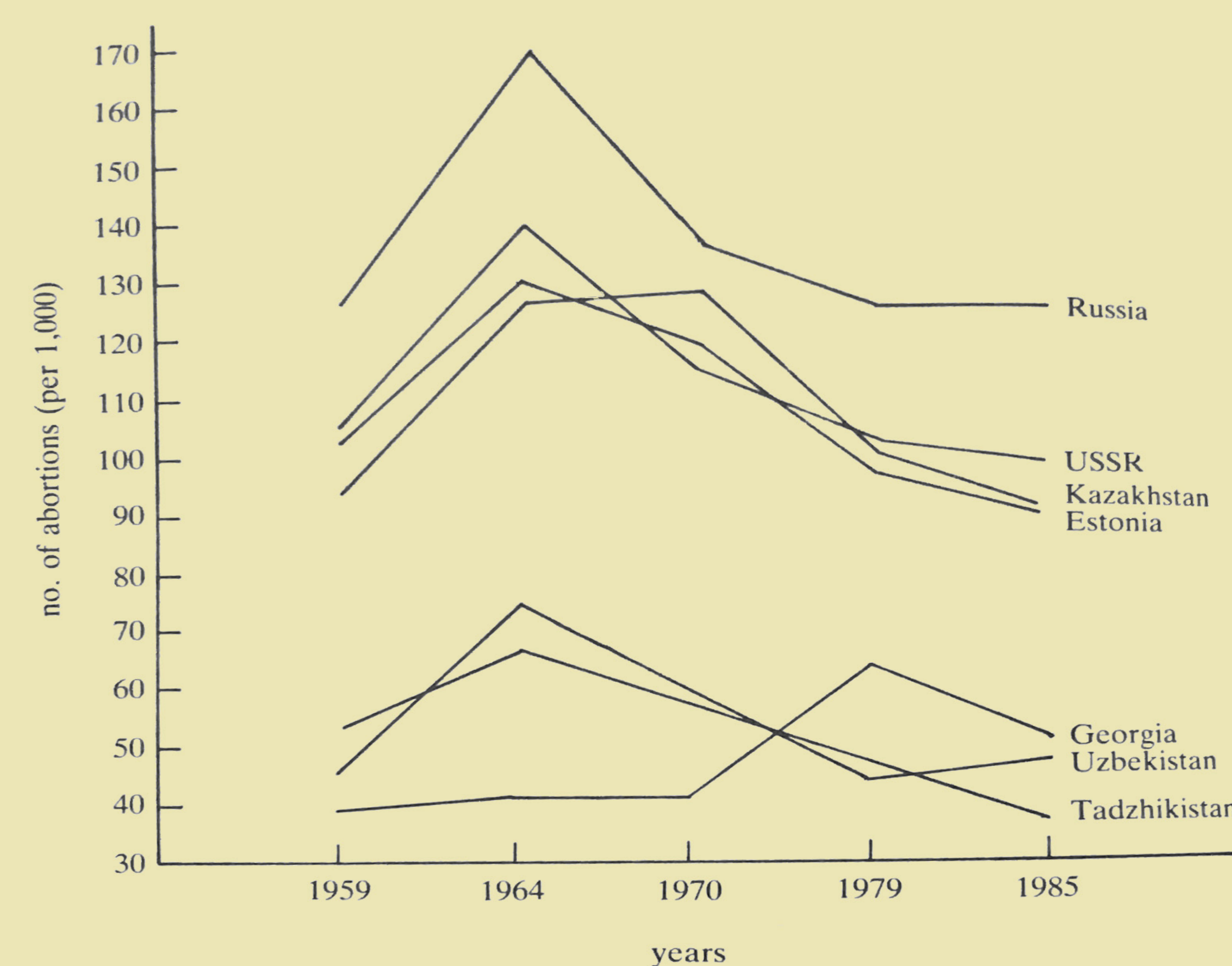


Figure 2.1: Time trends of IA rates (per 1,000 women aged 15-49) in the USSR and some republics, 1959-85

Source: *Naselenie SSSR, 1988* (Moscow: 1989)  
Source: Remennick, Larissa L. "Patterns of Birth Control." *Sex and Russian Society*. Ed. Igor Kon and James Riordan. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1993. 48. Print.

### CONTRACEPTIVES

The biggest problems facing widespread contraceptive use in the Soviet Union were misinformation and underproduction. The Soviet medical community cautioned against the original birth control pill due to the adverse side effects, but even after a low-dose version produced in Hungary and East Germany was introduced it was unpopular because of the misinformation spread in the first place. Doctors and pharmacists commonly emphasized the possible side effects and claimed that staying on the pill for prolonged periods would lead to infertility. Other forms of contraception were not prevalent, and there was no sex education system to encourage contraceptive use. The most common form of contraception was condoms, which were difficult to come by. Only two factories were responsible for supplying the whole bloc and produced them at a rate that allowed only four condoms per man per year. Even after AIDS became a serious concern, condom production did not increase and the condoms that were produced were typically ineffective.