The Family in Soviet Russia

By Sidney Webb

[The following article is the last in a series of six which Sidney Webb, the leading exponent of Fabian socialism in England, has contributed to Current History. In these articles he has presented an account of many phases of the Communist experiment in the Soviet Union, basing his discussion upon personal observation and his long experience in the study of social problems.]

On no part of the life of Soviet Russia is there in other countries so much difference of assertion (if not of opinion) as on what is happening to the institution of the family. On no subject, perhaps, is it so difficult to make either an accurate or a convincing statement covering either all aspects of the inquiry or all parts of the U. S. S. R. Let us try to build up, from some significant fragments of the problem, the nearest approach that can be made to a general conclusion.

We must begin by realizing the nature and the magnitude of the changes that the revolution has wrought in the position, first of the women of Soviet Russia, and then of the children and adolescents. Here, paradoxically enough, we may fairly leave out of account the only classes of women and children about whom Western Europe and America ever knew much! The tiny fraction of aristocratic women, together with the governess-trained wives and daughters of the lesser nobility, of the higher government officials, of some of the rural landlords and of the few wealthy employers, have practically disappeared from the Russian community. Some few were killed in the wild uprising of the peasantry in the first few months of the revolution, and some more in the outrages and reprisals that marked the ebbing and flowing tides of the rival soldiery in the two years of civil war, for which the “White” armies, strengthened by the contingents of the United States, Japan, Great Britain, France and Czechoslovakia, were at least as much responsible as the Soviet Government. Many more have naturally died in the fifteen years that have elapsed. But by far the greater number got away in the successive emigrations, and they and their families now permanently form part of the population, not of Soviet Russia, but of France and Italy, Austria and Poland, Rumania and Greece, Great Britain and the United States. Only the minutest fraction of what was itself never more than a tiny section of the whole population is now in the U. S. S. R., and this infinitesimal remnant seems silently to have disappeared into the proletarian mass.

How much Russia has lost, on the disappearance of practically all its upper and middle class women of leisure with their standards of value and their refinement of manners, it would be hard to estimate. Of educated women engaged in professional work (as doctors, scientists, teachers or writers, or in music, dancing or the drama) the number was formerly relatively small; and of such of these as have not emigrated with the wealthier classes, a considerable proportion seem to have accepted, more or less sympathetically, the new régime, under which they promptly found their feet and continued their careers amid the rapidly growing number of women professionals.

What we have to concentrate attention on is, none of these relatively small groups, but the great bulk of the adult women of pre-war Russia, at
least nine-tenths of the whole, who were either the hard-working wives, daughters or widows of peasants, fishers or hunters or of independent handicraftsmen, or else domestic servants in superior households, or (in relatively small numbers) factory operatives, chiefly in textiles. There is little information available as to what that mystic entity "the family" in fact amounted to among these vast hordes of hard-working women, but pre-war native literature gives a dark picture. The great majority of them were illiterate and superstitious and in complete subjection to their husbands or fathers. It is not usually remembered that a large proportion of them, possibly as many as one-fourth, were Mohammedans, and were habitually veiled, with the status and ignorance that this implies.

Housing is still the weakest point in Soviet Russia, but in Czarist times, the homes of nine-tenths of the whole population, whether in town or country, were universally unsanitary, overcrowded and filthy, to a degree unknown in any but the worst of the city slums of Western Europe. The peasants were as continually decimated by disease, recurrent famine and premature death as in the Europe of the Middle Ages. They had next to no medical attendance. No doubt mothers loved their children, as they do everywhere, but it is clear that the child damage-rate and the infantile death-rate were alike enormous. Practically every workingwoman was aged before she was 50. As to the marital fidelity of husbands or the chastity of the unmarried daughters, there were naturally no statistics. But he would be the most sentimental of optimists, with the least possible acquaintance with peasant or factory life, who could imagine that, in these respects, pre-war Russia was any different from the Britain or the Germany of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, about which we seldom think or speak.

Now let us see what changes have occurred or are in progress. The first thing that the Bolshevik revolution brought to the women of Russia was their complete legal and constitutional emancipation; the second was their education on an equality with men; and the third was such a planning of the social and economic environment as could be devised to lighten, as far as practicable, the exceptional burdens of the maternal and domestic functions incident upon their sex. Thus women over 18 were at once given votes on the same conditions as men, with equal trade-union and co-operative membership, and equal eligibility for promotion. All occupations and all positions were thrown open to both sexes. No distinction is made between the sexes in wages or salaries, holidays or insurance benefits. No woman is deprived of her job on marriage, though she may, and often does, prefer to abandon it, perhaps only for a term of years, for child-bearing and motherhood. The laws relating to marriage and divorce, and their privileges and responsibilities, have been made the same for women as for men. It must be added that women working in industrial factories have been accorded certain special privileges and protection in the interests of the children no less than those of the mothers, such as sixteen weeks' continuous leave of absence on full pay round about their confinements, the right of taking time off without loss of pay to nurse their babies every few hours and the provision of a crèche at every industrial establishment, at which the young children may be safely left throughout the working day.

These changes, which few would object to characterizing as reforms, were, unlike so many that we have heard of, not merely enshrined in legislation. The visitor to the U. S. S. R. cannot fail to see them nearly everywhere in operation. In the various technical schools he will notice nearly as many girls as boys, learning
to be engineers or carpenters, electricians or machinists. In every factory that he passes through—and not merely in the textile and clothing trades—he sees women working side by side with men, at the lathe, the bench or the forge, often sharing in the heaviest and most unpleasant tasks as well as in the skilled processes. Women work in and about the mines and oil fields equally with the men. On board the Soviet mercantile marine there is a steadily increasing number of women sailors, engineers and wireless operators, usually dressed as men, as well as stewards and cooks and cleaners. A large majority of the school teachers and more than one-half of all the younger doctors are women. In all the offices women swarm not only as stenographers but also as translators, confidential secretaries and responsible executive assistants.

Not a few institutions and establishments in the U. S. S. R. are under women directors or managers, often having under them many hundreds of men as well as women. Thus the present director of the vast Park of Culture and Rest at Moscow, which has 3,000 men and women employed in its varied establishments, is a woman. Women are found elected in nearly all the Soviets, to the number, in the aggregate, of certainly hundreds of thousands. There are, here and there, women Commissars (Ministers of State) in one or other of the constituent republics; they are to be found in nearly all the Ministers' collegiums; and there are always women at the head of some of the government departments. Mme. Kollontai, after filling other important offices, was for years the Minister representing the Soviet State successively at Mexico City and Oslo, and is now Minister Plenipotentiary at Stockholm.

It is universally taken for granted that, so far as pay is concerned, not only is there no distinction of sex but also no inquiry as to whether a woman is or is not married or the mother of children. There is, accordingly, in Soviet Russia no such discouragement of matrimony as exists in Great Britain and some other countries, where the hundreds of thousands of women who are school teachers, civil servants and municipal employees are, in effect, forbidden to marry, under penalty of instantly losing their employment.

All this concerns, however, in the main, the women of the rapidly growing cities and other urban aggregations all over the U. S. S. R., together with such of the vocations, like teaching, doctoring and administration, as have to be exercised in town and country alike. The great majority of the women of Soviet Russia, as well as of the men, are connected with agriculture (together with hunting and fishing) or essentially with rural pursuits. What has happened to the wives and daughters in the 25,000,000 families of individual peasants, fishers and hunters? To them the revolution has brought the same legal and constitutional emancipation as to the women in industry and the professions. Even in the extensive areas in which Islam prevailed, the women have been set free, and many millions have abandoned the veil and are themselves learning to read and write, while rejoicing in being able to send their children, girls as well as boys, to the local school, and in an increasing number of cases to the technical college or the university.

The Soviet Government, in fact, is undoubtedly bringing to the country dwellers, year by year, a steadily increasing measure of the opportunities in education, medical attendance and social insurance now enjoyed by the cities, although in all these advantages the country necessarily lags behind the towns. Thus, while in the cities there are varied educational opportunities for all the girls as well as for all the boys, and nearly every child is at school, this is naturally not yet
the case throughout all the vast area from the Baltic to the Pacific, and from the Persian frontier to the Arctic Ocean, including much that is occupied by primitive tribes or nomads. A steady stream of additional doctors, largely women, is, year by year, sent into the villages; while the number of maternity and general hospitals, large or small, accessible to at least a proportion of the villages, increases annually.

It must, however, be admitted that so long as agriculture is carried on by tiny peasant holdings of land, often dispersed in strips as in the England of the Middle Ages, there can be little improvement in the home environment or social position of the wives, daughters and widows. Thus there has so far been comparatively little alteration, except in legal status, in the beginnings of sanitation and in a little better provision of medical attendance and schooling, among the 30,000,000 or 40,000,000 of population who are still in that position. But these are now the backward areas.

The greatest change in the social circumstances of the peasant women began only five or six years ago with the concerted movement for the substitution of the collective farm for the individual small holding. This movement is still in progress, and reaches different heights in different places, both the number of collective farms and the degree of their collective organization showing a steady annual increase. Down to 1932 about 18,000,000 peasant holdings, with about 70,000,000 of population, had been more or less merged in about 226,000 collective farms, in some districts occupying the whole of the agricultural land. We need not consider here the vicissitudes of the movement, or the mistakes and failures that accompanied its progress, often, it is to be feared, with great cruelty to the recalcitrant kulaks (the relatively wealthy individual peasants). Nor can we critically scrutinize the measure of economic advantage, in the way of mechanization and increased production which has, in varying degree, already resulted from the change. The very low level of efficiency, alike among the workers and in the management, plainly brings down the produce to terribly poor rations wherever and whenever the weather is unfavorable. Here we can deal only with its effect on the position of the women and children.

In a collective farm it is usual for the peasants to retain their own individual dwellings (or to erect new ones), each with its own garden ground, its own cow, and its own pigs and poultry. Only in a tiny proportion of cases does the collective farm take the form of a commune in which all the production is carried on in common and the whole proceeds are shared. Usually it is only the grain that is sown and harvested in common, the proceeds being divided between the government which has supplied the tractors (and often the seed and fertilizer), on the one hand, and the cooperating workers, male and female, each in proportion to the days or hours of labor actually contributed, on the other hand.

The collectivization does not usually stop at this point. The open meeting of adult residents, in conjunction with its elected committee, by which every collective farm is governed, presently begins to make such improvements as a modest grain store or a primitive silo, an improved dairy on modern lines, a new school building or a village hall, and presently a clubhouse, with its library, its dance floor and its cinema. Later there may be a crèche where the children can be safely left when the mother goes to work in the dairy or in the fields, a common kitchen and dining room in which such as choose may take their meals or purchase cooked food, and even a few bedrooms at a low rent for single men or widowers. Naturally, all this takes time, and the farms
differ as much in the rate at which the collective amenities expand as in the order in which they are adopted. What delays progress is the sly skulking and neglect of work manifested by many of the sullen peasants, together with the inefficiency of the management, which naturally has to be overcome, very largely by painful "trial and error."

But almost from the start there begins, for the women, a social revolution. Life as lived in the old cluster of timber-framed mud-huts that used to be the peasant village and labor as spent in solitude on the scattered strips of each peasant's holding become alike transformed. No one can know by personal inspection what is happening on as many as 226,000 collective farms. But a significant confidential report was lately made, not by any transient visitor but by a well-qualified informant who had seen the farms repeatedly in many different provinces, to the effect that, whatever the degree of efficiency attained, while the old man peasant had only unwillingly come into the new organization and was still sullen about it, his wife and also his children almost invariably rejoiced in the change. For the first time in their lives they draw, by way of advance, a regular monthly sum of money for their individual spendings. Instead of working "all the hours that God made," as only peasants can work, they have now an eight-hour day (even the cows are milked three times in the twenty-four hours, and seem to prefer it so). Instead of the loneliness of isolated labor in the field they have, very generally, the pleasure of working in company. Instead of the dark, silent, muddy village in the evening, they have now, in greater or smaller degree, music and dancing, the radio, the cinema, the gramophone, sometimes a growing collection of books, and even occasional lectures. Even if the village cannot easily visit the city, the world is brought to the village. The resulting emancipation of the wife and mother, as well as of the children, cannot easily be estimated. This is what has been happening during the past seven years, in varying degrees and at very different grades of efficiency of collective administration, to two-thirds of all the village population of Soviet Russia.

Let us now consider the changes affecting the children and the adolescents who, since not far short of one-half of the entire population of the U. S. S. R. is under 18 years of age, must number some 70,000,000. The biggest change since 1914 is that, instead of only one-third of the children (and these largely of the middle and upper classes) attending any sort of school for any period whatsoever, at least four-fifths of all of the children under 14 are now going through a greatly improved and considerably extended education curriculum. For every such child elementary schooling lasts at least to its fourteenth year, and in 1932 this school population numbered 21,900,000, half of them girls. This is an astonishing total—about three times the number in 1914, and one in eight of the whole population, being nearly as high a percentage as in Great Britain, and not so very far short of that in the United States.

An ever-increasing proportion of girls as well as boys go on to organized technical schools of secondary grades, nearly all of which are deliberately specialized in training for a particular set of cognate occupations. Beyond this stand, on the one hand, the array of factory schools where the young industrial recruit is, for months, actually taught the operating of the various machines, before he can be trusted with production, and on the other, a bewildering number (something like 1,000 in the U. S. S. R.) of technical colleges—these mostly remarkably well equipped—and both the old and the new universities, admission to which is facilitated not only by an effective preference
for the sons and daughters of proletarian parents but also by substantial maintenance scholarships.

In addition, something like 10,000,000, namely, all the young people between 8 and 25 who choose to join, are organized apart from schooling or employment in the threefold voluntary companionship of Octobrists (8 to 10), Pioneers (10 to 17) and Comsomols (17 to 25) in what competent observers describe as apparently the most promising course of mass training in “civics” that the world can show, in preparation, so far as concerns those of them who manifest outstanding character, for eventual admission at 25 to formal candidature for membership of the carefully chosen, highly exclusive and strictly disciplined Communist party.

This stupendous planning of the training of the children and youth of the entire Soviet State is, we may well believe, only imperfectly in operation. Like everything in Soviet Russia, the conception is superior to the execution. There is a great shortage of qualified teachers of every kind and grade. Many of the schools are still in unsuitable or extemporized premises. Accommodation is often insufficient, and occasionally the school works in two shifts. The quality of the instruction in the higher schools and colleges varies greatly, and matters are not improved by the recent expedient of shortening the term of training in order to turn out a larger number of half-trained engineers, doctors, teachers or what-not to meet the nation’s most pressing needs. In all these respects, however, there is, every year, definite improvement. The U. S. S. R. is probably the only country in the wide world that during the past three years has been continuously increasing the public expenditure on education.

But more important than the plan for the education of the Soviet youth is the new spirit in which the present generation is growing up. To the parents, in every form of propaganda, the main insistence is on respect for the emerging personality of the child and the utmost possible development of his or her individuality, having always in mind that the child is the future citizen and producer, whose individual capacity must be raised to the utmost. In the home, as in the school, there must be only the most sparing use of mere prohibitions. The child should always be induced to choose the more excellent way. To strike a child is, by Soviet law, a criminal offense. Parents are taught that punishment of any kind is felt by the child as an insult, and should as far as possible be avoided. Self-government must be aimed at in home and school, even to the discomfort of the elders, and even if there has to be some discreet “weighting of the alternatives” by parent or teacher in order to steer the choice.

To the child, even from tender years, in infancy as in adolescence, the incessant lesson is its obligation to serve, according to its powers, successively in the household, in the school, in the factory and in the State. To this end the children’s needs are ceaselessly attended to. So far as government administration can insure it in so vast a country, whoever else goes short the child always has a full ration of milk, of clothing and of schooling, together with hospital and other medical attendance. Making every allowance for the imperfection of vital statistics, all the evidence points to a great and continuous decrease in the infantile and child death rates.

There are toys and games in every institution and on sale within reach of every parent, with ample provision for play and recreation out of doors as well as indoors. But the toys are as deliberately planned as the curriculum or the books—no tin soldiers and few dolls, but abundance of bricks for building, miniature tools for actual use, and working models of locomo-
tives, airplanes and automobiles, through which it is intended and hoped that the whole population may in time acquire "machine sense." The visitor may see, as the slogan on the gay poster decorating an infant crèche: "Games are not mere play, but preparation for creative labor." When the elder children go into camp in the Summer they are shown that it is immense fun not to "play at Indians," but to help the peasants in their agricultural work; one party of twenty was proud to be told that they were ranked, in the aggregate, as four grown men. The Pioneers find their joy largely in the voluntary "social work" that they undertake in groups, helping the younger or more backward children in their lessons, "liquidating illiteracy" among the adults of their neighborhood, clearing away accumulations of dirt or débris, forming "shock brigades" to reinforce the workers where production is falling behind the plan or when some special task has to be got through with a minimum of delay.

And these children stick at nothing! The Moscow Pioneers took it into their heads the year before last to wait upon many of the directors of the theatres and cinemas in order to give their own views upon the current productions, and to expostulate on their shortcomings and defects. In a small urban district some 200 miles from Leningrad the Pioneers undertook to "liquidate" the excessive consumption of vodka that prevailed. They got put up in every workshop the following appeal on posters manufactured by themselves: "We, your children, call on you to give up drinking, to help us to shut drink shops and to use them as cultural institutions, pioneer clubs, reading rooms, &c. * * * The children whose parents drink are always backward at school. * * * Remember that every bottle you drink would buy a textbook or exercise book for your child. * * * Respond to our call and give us the chance of being well-developed, healthy and cultured human beings. We must have healthier home surroundings. (Signed) Your Children, the Pioneers of [the district]."

This emancipation of children and adolescents, together with the constant encouragement of their utmost participation in social work of every kind, makes of course for a "priggishness" among the young and an attitude of criticism of their lax and slovenly elders which is not altogether pleasing to the bulk of their fellow-citizens of mature age. Thus the new cult of hygienic living among the Pioneers may be excellent, but their irritating habit of "opening windows in other people's houses" is frequently complained of by elderly relatives. But as an instrument of lifting the people of Russia out of the dirt, disease, illiteracy, thieving and brutishness of pre-revolutionary days the self-governing democracy of Communist youth appears to be extraordinarily well devised.

There arises the interesting question: "What is the sexual morality that is being evolved among the 5,000,000 or 6,000,000 Pioneers and Comsomols?" For this widespread organization of the Soviet youth involves intimate social intercourse between boys and girls. They are constantly together. They meet continually, not only in school or college but also in the hierarchy of meetings, committees, representative conferences and executives that constitute the League of Communist Youth. They associate in sports and games, in "social inspections" and "shock brigades" and in all sorts of voluntary social work. Hygienic self-control seems to be the dominant note, together with full responsibility for any offspring, a re-
sponsibility enforced by the strictly administered law as to parental maintenance of children by father and mother alike, according to their economic capacity. Subject to this emphasis on personal hygiene and parental responsibility, there is undoubtedly considerable freedom in sex relationships according to choice, without any sense of sin, but with the constant reminder that efficiency in study or production must not be impaired. You must not waste time or strength on sex. To do so is like indulgence in betting and gambling, alcoholic drink and even the smoking of cigarettes—"bad form" among the Comsomols.

Now these great and far-reaching changes among the women, children and adolescents of Soviet Russia, paralleled, of course, by no less important changes among the men, must inevitably have caused changes of like importance in the institution of the family. These changes require analysis. We may note, to begin with, that there is no sign of any decay of the family group which mankind has derived from its vertebrate ancestors, and which doubtless owes its great survival value to the advantage to the offspring of maternal devotion and prolonged personal care. Not even the most hostile critic reports any deliberate abandonment of children by their parents. Mother-love seems to be the same in Soviet Russia as elsewhere, and Soviet fathers appear to be just as much interested in their children as British or American. The children form just as much a part of the family circle as with the American or British wage-earning class. The crèche, the school and the college take the young people out of the home just about as much as the same institutions, within comparable income grades and similar household resources, do elsewhere. Whether children and adolescents are less obedient to their parents or more than contemporary British or Americans, it seems impossible to compute. The answer to any such criticism is that the young people in all countries in the twentieth century are much less under their parents' thumbs, perhaps even less under their parents' influence, than was the case in the nineteenth century. There seems available no specific evidence that this particular emancipation has gone further in one country than in another.

What the foreign observer of Soviet intercourse among relatives chiefly notices is a great deal more frankness of speech and honest simplicity of judgment than among the more sophisticated and—to put it bluntly—more hypocritical middle-class families of the Western world. There is, perhaps, less cant. The child who is definitely taught to regard drunkenness as a degrading habit can hardly help applying the lesson to its own father equally with anybody else's father. The Pioneer is definitely taught that he has the duty of "liquidating illiteracy" in his own as in other people's families. The rebellion against dirt and unhygienic living has to be relentlessly carried on in all households. The Russian youth, in fact, is told that he ought to be just as much ashamed of bad behavior—meaning anti-social behavior—in those related to him as in himself. In short, the Pioneer and the Comsomol have to be at once persistent crusaders and active assistants in the nation's struggle toward better homes and better habits, as well as toward increased production. Whether in the long run this makes for better families or better tempered ones, or for worse, may be a matter on which opinions differ.

But what many critics have at least subconsciously in mind when they ask about the family in Soviet Russia is what they would regard as sexual morality in the parents. How do Russian husbands and wives compare in fidelity with those of other countries? There is, unfortunately, no available
yardstick for this comparative measurement. Moreover, comparison should be made class by class. If the inquirer belongs to the upper or middle classes of Europe or America, he must be reminded that the corresponding grades of the Russian population no longer exist in the U. S. S. R. The comparison can only be made between the peasant or artisan of the Western world and the Soviet wage earner in town or country.

It will be admitted by every visitor that to outward appearance Moscow and the other great cities of Soviet Russia are not only far more "decent" than they were under the Czar but also more than nearly all cities elsewhere. Dance halls, night clubs and cabarets have been almost universally suppressed. The Soviet stage, like the Soviet films, is concerned with other interests than sex and stands at the opposite pole from Hollywood. The supersession of profit-making publishing by that of the public authorities has, even more than the rigorous censorship, swept away all pornographic literature. Even the dancing of the Western world, with its promiscuous embracing, is forbidden as unhealthy eroticism, except where it is tolerated for foreigners only at one or another of the expensive hotels. There is, it is noticed, far less solicitation in the Moscow streets (and what there is, almost entirely foreign on both sides) than in any other European city of equal magnitude. All the evidence goes to show that among the Russians prostitution in the ordinary sense of the word has practically disappeared.

On the other hand, there is undoubtedly in Soviet Russia a greater freedom than in many other countries in sexual intercourse, based on mutual attraction and friendship, among the unmarried of both sexes and all ages. Such unions, which are utterly without sense of sin, are condemned neither by law nor by public opinion, and they often turn into successful permanent marriages. Divorce is at the will of either party, but there is a strict enforcement of the legal responsibility of both parents for the maintenance of any offspring, according to their respective economic capacities. Anything like promiscuity, with or without marriage, is now seriously reprobated by opinion. "I do not want to inquire into your private affairs," Stalin is reported to have said to an important party member who was leading a scandalous life, "but if there is any more nonsense about women you will go to a place where there are no women."

We may perhaps sum up by saying that the great increase in personal freedom brought about by the revolution, together with the almost universal falling away of religious and conventional inhibitions, undoubtedly led, for the first decade or so, to greater instability of family life and to looser relations between the sexes based on mutual friendship. At the same time organized commercialized vice, in all the forms common in great cities of the West, rapidly diminished, even, as some competent observers declare, to next to nothing. During the past few years public opinion seems to have been moving strongly in favor of—to use a native expression—"stabilization," and any tendency to prompt, reckless or repeated divorce meets with condemnation. No general or centralized statistics permit of comparison between the numbers of divorces and those of marriages. Such figures as have been published for particular cities and years appear to show totals (and local variations) in Soviet Russia not markedly unlike those of parts of Scandinavia and different States of the United States.