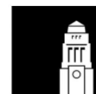

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**Women and Girls in the Post-Stalin Komsomol**

Robert Hornsby

During the period between the death of Stalin in 1953 and the coming to power of Mikhail Gorbachev in 1985, around half of all young people aged between 14 and 28 years passed through the ranks of the Komsomol (Communist Youth League). Across the Soviet Union as a whole, over half of all Komsomol members during the years in question were female. While this was undoubtedly an organisation that showed very limited political agency, since it always remained in thrall to the dictates of the Communist Party, Komsomol membership was an experience – and often a formative experience at that – shared by tens of millions of girls and young women. One can certainly debate the extent to which the Komsomol fulfilled its basic task of raising successive generations to be upstanding citizens and dedicated Marxist-Leninists, but this was nonetheless a key point at which members most closely interacted with, and participated in, the workings of the Soviet system, whether or not they did so with relish.

It has long been established in the secondary literature that the Khrushchev years in particular were a time in which female social and political activism received renewed encouragement and prominence.[1] The repeal of Stalin-era legislation curtailing abortion rights and reducing absent fathers' child maintenance obligations were

[1] See, for example, M. Ilic, 'Women in the Khrushchev Era: an Overview', in M. Ilic, S. Reid and L. Attwood (eds), *Women in the Khrushchev Era*, Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2004, p. 17.

naturally matters which displayed changing state attitudes toward at least some issues affecting young women. Similarly, the expanded production of domestic labour-saving devices and greater attentiveness to female consumer desires became notable features of daily life.[2] Nonetheless, for all that young women constituted a slight majority of the Komsomol's membership roll – and were often among its most dedicated activists – this was an organisation that tended not to think about specific gender matters any more by the post-Stalin years.[3]

While its Central Committee had specialised departments for work with rural youth, student youth, school-age youth, and all manner of other youth constituencies within society, there was no permanent body focused solely or primarily on female affairs within the Komsomol structure, and there were few directives or initiatives explicitly aimed at matters relating to either gender in particular (though myriad actions relating to military conscription and the like were in practice 'for the boys'). While it was never really occupied with advocating specifically 'female' causes on behalf of its

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[2] Natal'ya Lebina, for example, notes the development of synthetic fabrics, dry cleaning establishments, cosmetics products and pre-prepared meals as themes which had a positive impact on Soviet women's lives during the period: N. Lebina, *Povsednevnost' epokhi kosmosa i kukuruzy: destruktsiya bol'shogo stilya, 1960-60 gody*, Moscow: Kriga, 2015.

[3] The early post-revolution years, however, had seen the Komsomol placing great emphasis on the need to work for women's enlightenment, viewing them as 'the most backward element' of society. See N. Noonan and C. Nechemias (eds), *Encyclopedia of Russian Women's Movements*, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2001, p. 145.

members, the Komsomol nonetheless did serve as the prime route for both girls and boys (or men and women) alike to 'get on' in the Soviet system: to enter university and receive a good stipend, participate in all manner of recreational activities, build a career, and maybe even join the Communist Party.

This chapter focuses on the extent to which female members 'got on' within the Komsomol. It firstly addresses the theme of women as senior Komsomol post holders, from the secretaries of district-level organisations through to membership of the Central Committee in Moscow, and then at the grassroots level. As the following pages demonstrate, there were aspects of Komsomol work that can justifiably be commended in these contexts, while others reflected a heavily male-centric system that showed very limited capacity for making real headway on the much-vaunted theme of gender equality.

Women in the Komsomol Elite:

As with the ruling Communist Party to which it was subordinate, officially the highest organ of the Komsomol was its congress, which met every four years to review recent work, set future plans and elect various bodies (most notably a Central Committee) to govern youth work between congresses. These congresses were gala affairs that drew huge coverage in the press and on television, and were often attended by members of the top Communist Party leadership and the major stars of the Soviet cultural and

sporting firmament.[4] Only three to four thousand delegates were elected from tens of millions of members. As such, this was unmistakeably a rarefied political environment and participation was a substantial honour to have bestowed: those present could certainly count themselves among the country's youth political elite. This, in turn, at least raised the possibility that significant opportunities for even more prestigious engagements in one's professional and political life could well be on the horizon.

While they fell short of their standing at more than half of all Komsomol members, female delegates were elected to congress in far greater numbers than one could expect to find either in the ruling Communist Party or in most Western political organisations of the time.[5] At the first four post-Stalin Komsomol congresses, in 1954, 1958, 1962 and 1966, over 40 per cent of all delegates were women. For the time, this was clearly impressive. In this context it is worth noting that, as they made initial plans for the holding of their XII congress (1954), the Komsomol Central Committee in Moscow decided that 38 per cent of delegates (1470 in total) should be

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[4] On the personal experiences of young girls elected to Komsomol congresses, see, for example, A. Shitkov (ed.), *Komsomol'skaya yunost' moya*, Staritsa: Staritskaya tipografiya, 2014.

[5] As Genia Browning noted in 1987, the approximately four per cent of women in the CPSU Central Committee was roughly on a par with the British and US governments of the time. G. Browning, *Women and Politics in the USSR: Consciousness Raising and Soviet Women's Groups*, New York: St Martin's Press, 1987, p. 21

women.[6] Similarly, in the planning stages of a 1953 congress of the Belorussian republic branch of the Komsomol, word came from the Central Committee in Moscow that the proportion of female delegates was to be 'not less than 40 per cent'.[7] A quota of around 40 per cent seems to have remained in place for such events right throughout the post-Stalin years.[8] By the XVIII congress in 1978 that quota had climbed to 45 per cent.[9] That these were fundamentally 'positive' minimum quotas, rather than 'negative' upper limits, was evidenced by the fact that they were repeatedly exceeded in practice. Once plans for the aforementioned XII congress were finalised, for example, it transpired that the decreed quota of 38 per cent had been comfortably surpassed as 43 per cent of elected attendees were female.[10]

In fact, the rate of female participation at congress was a theme that the Komsomol Central Committee kept a close eye upon. When regional Komsomol committees in Stalinskaya oblast' (Eastern Ukraine) and Primorskii krai (Far Eastern Russia) sent heavily male-dominated delegations to one congress – the former sent only four women in a party of twenty-one, and the latter three women in a delegation of fifteen

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[6] RGASPI m-6/14/104/1.

[7] NARB 63/19/ 9/198-9.

[8] On debates about the significance of such state intervention in female political participation, see K. Ghodsee, 'Pressuring the Politburo: the Committee of the Bulgarian Women's Movement and State Socialist Feminism', *Slavic Review*, no. 3, vol. 73, 2014, pp. 538-62.

[9] RGASPI 1s/1s/1127s/1-5.

[10] RGASPI m-6/14/104/5.

– both were publicly rebuked by the Central Committee and held up to the rest as an example of poor practice.[11] The message from the Central Committee, then, was pretty clear on this issue. There is little one can say with any real assurance about what female participation at congress would have looked like without such explicit interventions from the centre, though at least some of the evidence laid out below suggests that in many regions male dominance would have been far more overt than it already was were it not for the need to placate Moscow's concerns on this point.

With congress being convened only once every four years, though, it was in practice the Komsomol's Central Committee, and particularly the Central Committee buro, that ran affairs on a day-to-day basis. Here, away from the ceremonial glitz of the congress, the picture of female participation in the country's youth elite began to look somewhat flimsier. The 1958 Komsomol congress, for example, elected a Central Committee of 121 full members: of these, only twenty-six were women.[12] Out of 215 people voted into all elected Komsomol posts at that congress, only 58 were women.[13] At the XIV congress, 255 posts were up for election in total, 70 of which went to women.[14] Thus, while girls and women made up around 40 per cent of delegates, they were usually less than 30 per cent of those elected to leading posts.

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[11] RGASPI m-6/12/30/21.

[12] RGASPI m-6/13/23/35-54.

[13] There were essentially three types of elected post: Central Committee member, candidate Central Committee member, and member of the Komsomol's Auditing Commission.

[14] RGANI 5/31/206/12.

Progress on bringing women into the Central Committee, then, was steady rather than spectacular, but the very highest ranks were hardest of all to reach. Women were always heavily outnumbered within the Komsomol Central Committee's buro, which constituted the inner elite of the large Central Committee. Nonetheless, a comparison with the Communist Party elite is again stark. Yekaterina Furtseva remained the sole woman to penetrate the highest ranks of the Party leadership (the Presidium and later the Politburo) in the years between Stalin's death and the accession of Mikhail Gorbachev.[15] Over a dozen women did so in the Komsomol during the same time period and, in fact, there was always at least one female buro member throughout the three decades in question.[16] Unlike Furtseva (who managed only four years at the very top) quite a few of those women who did rise to the very highest level of the Komsomol actually stayed there for some considerable years.

The likes of Lyubov' Balyasnaya, Marina Zhuravleva, Tamara Kutsenko, Valentina Fedotova and Zoya Novozhilova were all members of the Central Committee buro for

[15] Furtseva, too, had been a Komsomol secretary in the 1940s. She later joined the CPSU Politburo in the mid-1950s and became especially prominent for her role as Minister of Culture in the 1960s and early 1970s.

[16] On Komsomol Central Committee buro members, see N. Zen'kovich, *Elita: entsiklopediya komsomol'skikh kar'er: samye rumyanye vozdi*, Moscow: Olma, 2008.

well over half a decade during the period.[17] Indeed, Boris Pastukhov has recently stated that when his own time as Komsomol first secretary came to an end in 1982 he recommended Lyudmila Shvetsova (another long-serving buro member) as his replacement in the top job, though Yuri Andropov (in his short-lived role as head of the Communist Party) decided to appoint Viktor Mishin instead.[18] All of these successful Komsomol women duly went on to take up significant posts in and around either the Communist Party Central Committee, government ministries or the USSR Supreme Soviet. A successful Komsomol career could clearly be an effective springboard for young women to advance within the Soviet system. Indeed, few women rose to the top without having a Komsomol background. Most notable since the Soviet collapse has been Valentina Matvienko, a former Komsomol Central Committee buro member and head of the Leningrad regional Komsomol organisation in the early 1980s, who has for some years now been Russia's highest-profile female political figure.[19]

These elections to high Komsomol posts, of course, were not what one might call free and fair. Candidates were nominated and approved from on high, then the voting

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[17] See *Sekretari i chleny byuro tsentral'nogo komiteta komsomola, vozhaki pionerii, predsedateli KMO SSSR, pervye sekretari TsK LKSM soyuznykh respublik*, Moscow, 2003.

[18] B. Pastukhov, *Druzei moikh prekrasnye cherty*, Moscow: Molodaya gvardiya, 2012, p. 234.

[19] After the Soviet collapse Matvienko served for almost a decade as governor of St Petersburg and is at the time of writing Chair of Russia's Federation Council.

process delivered the pre-ordained results. As such, the *nomenklatura* system of appointing cadres was on the whole no friend of aspiring Komsomol women, even if it did deliver a continual (albeit small) female presence at the top. Nonetheless, the question of why female representation among Komsomol professionals was so much better than that in the Party still stands. A cynic might well speculate that there were more opportunities for women in the upper reaches of the Komsomol primarily because these posts did not carry the power or responsibility of leading Party work. Another explanation might be that the high proportion of female Komsomol membership at the grassroots level firstly created a less 'male political culture' there and showed just how many highly competent women there were within the organisation. One's suspicions are largely drawn toward the former, though the appointment system was sufficiently opaque that little can be said with absolute certainty.

Another question which naturally arises from this information is why females' prospects for elevation to the Komsomol elite were not in accordance with their numerical position at congress and in the organisation as a whole. The overarching point, of course, was that the Soviet system was not nearly so advanced on matters of gender equality as regime pronouncements liked to claim. Showcase events such as the congresses saw some expectation that propaganda on equality be manifested for all to see, whether or not that represented reality on the ground. However, even the very top officials had to admit that male chauvinism was a problem that stubbornly persisted, both in a domestic setting and within ruling structures. For example, in a speech which called on members to demand that the Central Committee there ensure a greater female presence in the republic's Komsomol elite, Gaidar Aliev noted that in

Azerbaijan there was a (mistaken) belief among officials that women simply did not have the capacity for such important work.[20] As some of the details below demonstrate, while Komsomol and Party bosses never really showed sufficient determination to make real headway on matters of gender equality, it must also be remembered that they faced some deeply ingrained prejudices and cultural practices that militated against potential achievements on this front.

Whether the call from Aliev was a statement of heartfelt conviction or just another formulaic propaganda gesture is hard to say unequivocally. Nonetheless, as presiding head of the Communist Party in Azerbaijan he could comfortably have driven forward the change he called for, but there is no real evidence that he ever did so. This was by no means unique to Azerbaijan. Indeed, the Communist Party everywhere was very much a part of the problem: not only in the fact that it exerted a decisive influence over who was selected for significant Komsomol posts, but also because of its own admission practices. To gain access to the top ranks of the Komsomol, one increasingly had to be a Communist Party member (thus proving one's political suitability for leadership over the new generation), but this was in itself a considerable barrier for women, since the Party consistently accepted far more male members than female.[21]

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[20] D.M. Muslim-Zade, et al (eds), *XXXI s"ezd LKSM Azerbaidzhana*, Gyandzhlik, Baku, 1984, p. 85.

[21] There was a steady drive across the post-Stalin years to increase the Party presence within the upper strata of the Komsomol. By the 1970s, virtually all secretaries from district level upwards had to be Party members, and many secretaries of large primary

It was also of crucial significance that the Soviet understanding on establishing 'equality of the sexes' was rooted in an overly simplistic notion of equality. Opportunities certainly did exist for women to move up the ranks, but the playing field was never level. Congress was an event that lasted only a few days: short enough that the most troublesome dynamics of this Soviet 'equality' did not have time to reveal themselves fully. The daily life of a full-time Komsomol worker was much harder to manage. Komsomol secretaries at district, town and regional levels often worked extremely long and unsociable hours – fourteen hours or more each day for six days per week was not uncommon according to a review conducted in Latvia.[22] That schedule tended to become more punishing the higher up the ladder one climbed, to the point that regional secretaries and many Central Committee members were all but permanently on duty. The job also entailed lengthy work trips away from one's home area as well as spells of training and study at regional, republican or all-union Komsomol schools that could last from a few days to many months. The continuing 'double burden' of domestic work only served to exacerbate the situation.

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organisations, too. Jerry Hough estimated that one in every five adult men were Party members by the late 1970s, while only one in 20 women were: J. Hough, 'Women and Women's Issues in Soviet Policy Debates', in D. Atkinson, A. Dallin and G. Lapidus (eds), *Women in Russia*, Hassocks: Harvester Press, 1978, p. 362.

[22] LVA 201/6/17/112-116. As the report noted, none of the secretaries surveyed did a 'standard' 41 hours per week.

All this placed often unmanageable demands on female Komsomol workers: most of whom fell into the mid-20s to early-30s age bracket in which family life typically began. Svetlana Pasyukova, for example, recalled at the very start of her career as a Komsomol worker being put forward for a job as a district second secretary away from her home area: a post that would leave little time at all to see her husband and five-year-old daughter. Much as Pasyukova found the work rewarding, she also wrote that it kept her busy almost every hour and every minute of every day.[23] More than a few simply had to walk away from promising Komsomol careers because such work could not be combined with anything like a normal family life.[24] Even for those women who fully imbibed communist ideals and loved their Komsomol work, a career in politics was a hard road to take, regardless of the fact that the doors were officially open to them. As Jerry Hough pointed out in the late 1970s, 'some Soviet women look on political participation less as a privilege and an opportunity than as an onerous obligation'.[25]

Looking at the overall picture of female workers in the Komsomol, one soon notices the pyramid-like structure that often pertained in other professions with a major female presence, whereby the number of women post-holders diminished closer to the

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[23] S.P. Pasyukova, 'My delali obshchee delo', in Yu. Shleikin (ed.), *Komsomol Karelii v litsakh*, Petrozavodsk: Ostrova, 2013, pp. 230-2.

[24] See, for example, LVA 201/1/893/89. This document outlines the case of one Latvian district secretary who resigned from her Komsomol work because she also had two small children.

[25] Hough, 'Women and Women's Issues', p. 371.

top and expanded closer to the grassroots level. A 1963 report on the state of Komsomol cadres policy expressed serious concern at the low female presence among first and second secretaries of RSFSR regional-level organisations, though they also noted that the figure had climbed from only 8.3 per cent of secretaries in 1953 up to 14 per cent by the time of the XIV congress a decade later.[26] The same picture was also true in many of the non-Russian republics (whose national Komsomol organisations carried roughly equal standing to that of the regional Russian bodies). When the Moldovan Komsomol Central Committee came under fire from Moscow in 1961, one of the more prominent grounds for criticism was its failure to promote female members to responsible roles – a problem highlighted by the fact that there were only four women among 37 town and district first secretaries in the republic.[27] These kinds of figures were especially significant since it was overwhelmingly from this level of the Komsomol that Central Committee members were drawn. Thus, there were always fewer female candidates for the highest posts.[28]

As noted above, female involvement did increase further down the ladder, and there was also some steady improvement with the passing years. Details from Karelia help to give some substance to the above picture. By 1968 there were 62 women out of a

[26] RGASPI 1/31/51/22. In the RSFSR there were a total of only six female regional (obkom and kraikom) first secretaries at the start of 1963.

[27] RGASPI 1/31/6/15.

[28] For purposes of comparison, Joel Moses noted that in 1973 less than four per cent of urban and district Party first secretaries across the USSR were women. J. Moses, 'Women in Political Roles', in Atkinson, et al. (eds), *Women in Russia*, p. 336.

total of 100 professional Komsomol workers there. Of the 16 town and district first secretaries in the region there were five women; of the 16 second secretaries there were seven women. Such raw data, though, tell only part of the story. A closer examination reveals very clear gendering of the Komsomol roles that women generally filled. All sixteen of Karelia's Komsomol secretaries in charge of school matters, and all sixteen secretaries in charge of financial matters, were women.[29] This was not far removed from the basic patterns of female professionals' employment in the late Soviet period, with women often heavily predominant as teachers and economists in particular.[30] Work with children was always a feminised area, despite fears in some quarters that this might threaten to raise generations of effeminate young men.[31] Of the five long-standing female members of the Komsomol Central Committee buro named earlier in this chapter, all were in charge of work with Young Pioneers or school children at some point during their tenure.[32] It seems, though, that conceptions of 'women's work' were by no means restricted to chauvinist male

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[29] NARK 779/50/18/12.

[30] On employment patterns among Soviet women during the post-Stalin years, see, for example, G. Warshofsky Lapidus, *Women in Soviet Society: Equality, Development, and Social Change*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978.

[31] Noonan and Nechemias, *Encyclopedia of Russian Women's Movements*, p. 148.

[32] See N. Zen'kovich (ed.), *Samye rumyanye vozhdi: entsiklopediya komsomol'skikh kar'er*, Moscow: Olma, 2008.

attitudes, but were also common currency among many Soviet women, too.[33] Similarly, the kinds of feminist movements that sprang up in many Western countries during the 1960s and 1970s did not have any real parallel among young women in the Soviet Union.

Entrenched notions of what constituted ‘women’s work’, however, did not mean that such tasks were necessarily unchallenging or without real social and political substance. Patronage over Young Pioneers (children aged 10-14 years) in particular was consistently declared a vital aspect of the Komsomol’s work. It was also a duty that still tends to be recalled with some considerable fondness by those involved.[34] This was by no means just ‘babysitting’, but often entailed organising children’s recreational events, such as sporting contests, study groups, youth theatres and summer camps, as well as supervising volunteer policing work and labour tasks, such as collecting scrap metal and waste paper. Other aspects of work regarding young children clearly had real significance at times. In 1959, for example, Lyubov’ Balyasnaya headed up a major Komsomol-led investigation into the state of the country’s children’s homes which uncovered all manner of failings, ranging from highly unsanitary and unsafe living conditions and food intended for children being diverted for private profit, through to staff violence toward children and even the rape

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[33] See, for example, R. Mandel, ‘“No Striving for Glory Here”: an Essay on Women and Leadership in the USSR’, *Frontiers: a Journal of Women Studies*, no. 2, vol. 9, 1987, pp. 16-22.

[34] See, for example, V. Lisitsyna, ‘Glavnoe, rebyata, serdtsem ne staret!’, in *Komsomol’skaya yunost moya*, pp. 71-3.

of young girls.[35] The numerous sackings, Party reprimands and expulsions which followed for officials who had turned a blind eye to all this demonstrated that there was nothing 'token' about such work.

Women at the Grassroots Level:

It was at the level of the primary organisation – the basic Komsomol unit to which members belonged – that female members were most likely to progress to the post of secretary. By 1970 the Georgian Komsomol boasted to Moscow that fifty per cent of all primary organisation secretaries in the republic were female, and most of them were of native (that is Georgian) nationality.[36] In many other places the proportion of female secretaries rose to well above half. Data for 1975 from Sverdlovsk, for example, showed that the region had 4612 primary organisations, of which an impressive 3073 were headed by women.[37] Much of the progress toward these kinds of figures took place during the 1960s: not just under the apparent 'liberalising era' of Nikita Khrushchev but also during that of his rather less progressive successor, Leonid Brezhnev.

For the Soviet Union as a whole the proportion of primary organisations headed by women rose from 49.5 per cent in 1962 to 55.9 per cent by 1969. More interesting

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[35] RGANI 5/37/65/1-65.

[36] MIA 96/23/140/1-13. Records from the same year, however, reveal that women still accounted for only 16 out of 86 raikom and gorkom first secretaries in the republic.

[37] TsDOOSO 61/20/37/1-12.

patterns were also evident below this overall shift. Two thirds of the 15 union republics had less than 50 per cent female primary organisation secretaries in 1962, but almost two thirds had over 50 per cent by 1969. In the Baltic States of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, females represented around 65 per cent of all primary organisation secretaries, while Belarus and Russia were both very close to the 60 per cent mark by 1969.[38] Some parts of the Soviet Union, however, continued to buck the trend in a big way: typically, this included the union republics of Central Asia and the Caucasus. Even by 1969, women still constituted only 25.8 per cent of primary organisation secretaries in Tadzhikistan, and less than 40 per cent in Azerbaijan, Armenia and Uzbekistan.

The predominance of female heads of primary organisations, though, was not spread at all evenly across the different sites in which Komsomol branches existed (such as in factories, on collective farms, in military units or university faculties). Most of all, this female preponderance was rooted in the country's schools (where teachers often doubled up as Komsomol secretaries), and the heavy feminisation of the Soviet teaching profession. Returning to the above matter of the 3073 female secretaries in the Sverdlovsk region, this becomes especially evident. Out of 671 Komsomol organisations in middle schools, there were 534 female Komsomol secretaries; from 455 seven-year schools there were 369 female Komsomol leaders; and from 587 *uchitel'skie* schools there were 521 female Komsomol secretaries.[39] When one looks to Komsomol primary organisations located in industrial workplaces, transport depots

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[38] RGASPI 6/16/347/1-16.

[39] TsDOOSO 61/20/37/1-12.

and the like, women secretaries did still feature in the data, but they were usually in the minority there.

While the Komsomol primary organisation was certainly no bastion of feminism – anything but the most staid girls' fashions were at times liable for censure, and actions such as having an abortion or giving birth outside of wedlock were still likely to be branded 'amoral behaviour' by officials – nor was it a site where serious male chauvinism always went unchallenged.[40] An investigation into discontent among students at one Urals university, for example, demanded that the Komsomol branch there do more to tackle manifestations of drunkenness, hooliganism, theft and 'insufficient respect for women'.[41] Similarly, records from Moscow State University (MGU) show that numerous male students were reprimanded or thrown out of the Komsomol and thereafter expelled from the University for showing negligent or abusive attitudes towards their wives and (sometimes) children.[42] Such expectations of 'proper' behaviour also applied to the organisation's officials. Among the most prominent charges aimed at one dismissed district first secretary in Estonia, for example, were that he had enjoyed 'intimate links with a whole series of women

[40] See, for example, TsDOOSO 61/14/388/4.

[41] TsDOOSO 407/1/18/4

[42] See, for example, TsAOPIM 6083/1/2/1-137 on student reprimands and expulsions at MGU.

whom he had promised to marry' and had been rude and even physically abusive in breaking up with one recent partner.[43]

Similarly, while the Komsomol clearly existed within a male-centred framework, this was not to say that women were in any way invisible. There were, for example, plenty of young women and girls celebrated for their heroics during the war (most famously Zoya Kosmodemyanskaya), for their deeds in the sporting arena, and elsewhere.[44] After becoming the first woman in space in June 1963, Valentina Tereshkova in particular was hailed as a role model for Soviet girls to aspire to because of her great achievements in science and technology.[45] When a short-lived 'Committee for Work with Female Youth' was set up in September 1958, its 42 members included a host of notable women, such as obkom secretaries, the editor of *Rabotnitsa*, the Minster of

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[43] ERAF 31/63/3/102. The secretary in question was also accused of a very dictatorial working style, ignoring colleagues' opinions and treating them brusquely. He was removed from his post and then expelled from the Komsomol.

[44] The Belorussian Komsomol, for example, had its members celebrate local female war heroes including Fedosiya Smolyachkova, Mariya Tolkacheva and Nadezhda Khovren Kova. See NARB 63/37/29/1-91 Similarly, they made great efforts to celebrate a local partisan group that called itself 'the Young Avengers', whose 17 members included ten girls. NARB 63/19/13/204-19.

[45] See, for example, Roshanna P. Sylvester, 'She Orbits above the Sex Barrier: Soviet Girls and the Tereshkova Moment', in J. Andrews and A. Siddiqi (eds), *Into the Cosmos: Space Exploration and Soviet Culture*, Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2011, pp. 195-212.

Health, the director of the Detskii Mir children's department store in Moscow and leading cultural figures, including actresses and ballerinas.[46] Such bodies, though, tended to be both temporary and few. While it generally did not serve as an advocate for distinctly 'female' causes, the Komsomol was entirely prepared to target girls as a specific group for mobilisation as and when this coincided with regime policy. The major drive to encourage young girls to go out to the Virgin Lands in the mid-1950s (primarily in order to start families with male Virgin Landers and 'settle' the region) was just one example of this.[47] In some places they screened films about the 'heroic' entry of women into the labour market following the revolution, or else organised rallies to celebrate female tractor drivers and mechanics in order to inspire girls to greater labour achievements.[48] Gendered mobilisation, though, was not at all the same as tackling wider questions about gender or female roles and aspirations.

It was not just in the number of female Komsomol secretaries that some parts of the country were found to be lacking. The Central Committee in Moscow intermittently directed lower level branches in Central Asia and the Caucasus region to send set

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[46] RGASPI 1/3/990/135. Most famous of them all was Tatyana Samoilova, the star of the recent hit film 'The Cranes are Flying' ('Letyat zhuravli', 1957, dir. Mikhail Kalatozov).

[47] See M. Pohl, 'Women and Girls in the Virgin Lands', in Ilic, Reid and Attwood (eds), *Women in the Khrushchev Era*, pp. 52-74

[48] On the use of films such as 'The First Girl' ('Pervaya devushka', 1968, dir. Boris Yashin), see, for example, *Komsomol'skaya yunost' moya*, p. 88. On rallies celebrating female tractor drivers, see, for example, RGASPI 6/17/581/53.

numbers of local girls – who, it was noted, tended to have quite weak theoretical knowledge and poor Russian language skills – for professional Komsomol training in the capital, laying on lectures and talks for them on themes such as 'the position of women in the USSR' and 'women in branches of the state economy and administration'.[49] When it came to the question of recruiting new Komsomol members, Central Asia and the Caucasus were again a consistent source of concern for Komsomol bosses in Moscow. There was a clear reluctance in some places to admit girls to primary organisations, and stories of families refusing to let daughters join (including in some cases effective imprisonment and violence) were not uncommon.

In 1957, girls constituted only 32 per cent of Komsomol members in Tadzhikistan, and native girls only 13.5 per cent, while native girls represented a mere 17 per cent of members in Turkmenistan.[50] In a 1958 Komsomol Central Committee report the Central Asian republics, along with Caucasus branches in Azerbaijan, Armenia, Chechnya and Dagestan were all heavily criticised. It was noted that the latter organisation had only 21 per cent female members, while there were numerous Komsomol organisations in Tadzhikistan with over 100 members but no females whatsoever.[51] A 1961 report stated that the Turkmen Komsomol was doing especially badly at attracting girls of native nationality to the Komsomol ranks. It mentioned 15 collective farm Komsomol organisations without a single female member, and some

[49] See, for example, RGASPI 24/1/148/31.

[50] RGASPI 6/13/55/10.

[51] RGANI 5/31/108/94.

district-level bodies that had less than one per cent native girls as members.[52] By comparison, admission of native girls to the Komsomol in the Slavic republics was really not a problem. For example, of the Belorussian Komsomol's 1,130,349 members there were 539,814 native girls (out of a total of 662,175 female members).[53]

Presumably on the basis of directions received from Moscow, some Komsomol bodies in these regions did make moves to improve young women's situation. The Turkmen republican Komsomol reported in a 1979 official history volume that it had begun to hold special talks for women, organised visits to universities and other places of higher education, and founded the 'Aina' club (which apparently expanded to 600 branches) where young women could hear lectures, exchange opinions on political matters and enjoy 'cultured recreation' over a cup of tea.[54] Attempts were apparently also made to attract rural women to cultural education classes with talks on themes such as 'the role of women in the construction of communist society' and 'tasks of the ninth five-year plan and the role of women in fulfilling them', as well as making doctors and teachers available to them where possible. Similarly, by the 1960s, the Chechen-Ingush Komsomol, another frequent target of Moscow's criticism on matters relating to female members and staff, began to hold intermittent workshops

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[52] RGASPI 1/31/6/20-6.

[53] NARB 63/19/34/161. This figure represented a sizeable majority of the 884,316 native members of both genders combined.

[54] *Ocherki istorii Leninskogo kommunisticheskogo soyuza molodezhi Turkmenistana*, Ashkhabad: Izdatel'stvo 'Turkmenistan', 1979, p. 276.

and conferences on improving ideological work and training for political activity among local girls.[55] Whether such tasks existed in reality, rather than just on paper (prepared for officials in Moscow and for foreign propaganda purposes), is hard to say for certain, however.

Confidential materials from the region, however, were still troubling at times. Reports on the situation facing girls in Tadzhikistan, for example, noted that a worrying number of native girls of between 18 and 20 years of age (including at least one Komsomol member) were committing suicide because they were unable to cope with their harsh way of life and could see no escape from it. A Central Committee report noted with some disdain that local Komsomol organisations there were adopting a 'position of non-interference' in failing to help desperate young women and had not once tried to help girls known to have been in distress.[56]

Failings like these by local Komsomol members and officials could be a testament to the sometimes shallow penetration of the organisation's message in the region, even among its own officials. At the end of 1956, *Komsomol'skaya pravda* reported from the Kirgiz Komsomol congress that there were still not enough young women graduating from schools, and that a shocking 20 young girls had been seized during 1955, and their abductors were being shielded by the republic's Komsomol

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[55] V. Deriglazova and T.V. Pleshanova (eds), *Checheno-Ingushskaya komsomol'skaya organizatsiya, 1920-84: tsifry i fakty*, Groznyi: Checheno-Ingushskoe knizhnoe izdatel'stvo, 1985, p. 114.

[56] RGASPI 1/31/6/20-6.

hierarchy.[57] The same problem had already been aired in regard to Kazakhstan, where *Kazakhstanskaya pravda* complained that two brothers who had abducted a seventh-grade girl and forced her to marry an elderly deaf-mute were not only walking around free but were being shielded from prosecution by Komsomol officials in the region.[58] In April 1959 *Komsomol'skaya pravda* carried the story of a female Komsomol member from Alma-Ata who had been seized off the street by four men, one of whom had apparently decided to make her his wife. He and all three accomplices were Komsomol members. The girl eventually escaped but received no support from those around her, while the quartet were again protected from above, with none of them even expelled from their local Komsomol organisation.[59]

For the most part, female members were active participants in the broad sweep of Komsomol activity, although there was usually still some differentiation drawn between the sexes. In Karelia, for example, cycle races were organised in teams of three men and three women, with the men covering 25 kilometres each and the women 15 kilometres (the winning team was the first to get two men and two women to the finish line). Athletics contests were again undertaken in mixed-sex teams for sprinting, long jump and high jump, distinguished only by female team members doing an 800 metre run instead of the 1500 metres done by men.[60] While male competitors in civil defence contests had to throw grenades, shoot at targets, assemble

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[57] 'article headline?', *Komsomol'skaya pravda*, 30 December 1955.

[58] 'article headline?', *Kazakhstanskaya pravda*, 10 January 1953.

[59] 'article headline?', *Komsoml'skaya pravda*, 8 April 1959.

[60] NARK 779/33/18/17.

machine guns and crawl under barbed wire, female members of the same team would bandage 'wounded' soldiers and carry stretchers.[61] Similarly, student construction brigades usually included both sexes, but often saw men building houses, schools and sports facilities, whilst women were more likely to be found organising Pioneer camps, leading healthcare seminars and holding fund-raising cultural events.[62]

Conclusion:

At the most basic level of conclusion there are three useful points of reference to draw to the reader's attention: the Communist Party; the West; and the official Soviet narrative. In regard to the first of these, the position of women was unquestionably better within the Komsomol than it was within the Communist Party. In regard to the second, we can say that young women and girls in the Soviet Union had much more accessible routes into their country's political life (whatever the 'quality' of that political life may have been) than did those in the West. Measured against the official propaganda on equality, of course, the reality of female participation still fell some way short of regime pronouncements, as male dominance across the upper ranks of the Komsomol proved both pervasive and constant. To claim, as the Turkmen Komsomol did, that the organisation had brought Soviet girls 'genuine freedom and equality, both in public and at home' would be nothing short of nonsense.[63] Where the

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[61] TsDOOSO 5852/1/104/20-3: example taken from a 1980 civil defence contest at Ural State University.

[62] TsDOOSO 5852/1/45/1-40.

[63] *Ocherki istorii*, p. 295.

Komsomol did prove keen to target its action at girls specifically, it was primarily to advance regime ends, not for the sake of advancing the female cause in general.

The fact that so many millions of girls and women were at one time Komsomol members and / or workers during the period in question clearly made the organisation an important facet of the way in which they experienced and participated in the Soviet system. Indeed, much of the above replicated wider social and political trends of the post-Stalin years: the increased female participation in professional life and accompanying barriers to high-level posts, and the continuing distinction between 'men's work' and 'women's work'. There were plenty of laudable female heroes for Komsomol girls to emulate, but they too existed within these same socio-political dynamics. Even Tereshkova (who became a member of the Komsomol Central Committee after her space flight in 1963) was described in the official literature as a 'cosmonaut, active in public work, member of Supreme Soviet Presidium, happy mother, wife and housekeeper'.[64]

[64] Browning, *Women and Politics in the USSR*, p. 42.