
Rebecca Balmas Neary


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REBECCA BALMAS NEARY

In recent years, scholars of Russia and the Soviet Union have sought to incorporate gender relations and the concept of daily life (byt) into their work to better understand Russian and Soviet politics, society, and culture. One phenomenon which is particularly revealing in both these regards, yet which has received only cursory scholarly notice, is the wife-activists’ movement, also known as the obshchestvennitsa movement. This social movement of the middle and late 1930s, which mobilized housewives for voluntary social service work while encouraging their domestic endeavors, has been dismissed as a “bizarre” or “saccharine” footnote symptomatic of the neoconservative values described by Nicholas Timasheff in The Great Retreat. Closer study of the movement, however, reveals a phenomenon more complex in character and significance.

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1See, for example, Svetlana Boym, Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia (Cambridge, MA, 1994); Elizabeth Wood, The Baba and the Comrade: Gender and Politics in Revolutionary Russia (Bloomington, 1997); Eric Naiman, Sex in Public: The Incarnation of Early Soviet Ideology (Princeton, 1997); and Victoria Bonnell, Iconography of Power: Political Posters under Lenin and Stalin (Berkeley, 1997).


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Rather than indicating a retreat from the revolutionary, the obshchestvennitsa movement illustrated the attempt to formulate a new and uniquely Soviet culture of daily life (kul'tura byta) in the 1930s, and to devise a system of gender roles which would reinforce that culture. Important elements of the new byt included an officially approved domestic sphere permeated with public consciousness and an approach to the woman question which combined emphasis on women’s maternal “nature” with the socialist insistence on their participation in public life. By means of the social work she undertook and as a model homemaker and mother, the wife-activist served as a liminal figure helping to effect the transition to a new Soviet way of life. An analysis of fundamental elements of the wife-activist’s official persona—mother and social mother, housewife and “mistress of the great Soviet home” (khoziaika bol’shogo sovetskogo doma)—sheds light on this venture.

THE MOVEMENT OF WIFE-ACTIVISTS

From 1934 until 1941 the obshchestvennitsa movement involved tens of thousands of women in the “construction of daily life” through their voluntary public activism and influence in the domestic sphere. Participants, primarily the wives of factory managers and engineers, but also of army officers, Stakhanovites, and workers, strove to educate and instill “culturedness” (kul’turnost'), improve health and hygiene, and impart social and political consciousness. To this end, wives undertook a wide variety of tasks: they organized social, cultural, and educational events and discussion circles (kruzhki) for workers and their families; they oversaw cafeterias, nurseries, and shops; they organized collective hikes and marksmanship contests; they repaired and decorated workers’ dormitories and maintained hygienic standards in factory workshops.

According to its official founding myth, the obshchestvennitsa movement began in 1934. Appalled by the abysmal living conditions he found in new industrial settlements in symptomatic of the “Great Retreat” see Fitzpatrick, Cultural Front, 233; Schrand, “Industrialization and the Stalinist Gender System,” 231–32; and Susan Reid, “All Stalin’s Women: Gender and Power in Soviet Art of the 1930s,” Slavic Review 57 (Spring 1998): 158.

4 I use the terms “domestic life” and “domestic sphere” to refer to home life and family life. Historians studying gender issues often employ the term “private sphere,” as does Habermas in his seminal The Structural Transformation of the Private Sphere (Cambridge, MA, 1993). This formulation is problematic in the Soviet context, where the term “private life” was often used with regard to individual consciousness. For an exploration of public and private consciousness in this period see Jochen Hellbeck, “Fashioning the Stalinist Soul: The Diary of Stepan Podliubnyi,” Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas 44:3 (1996): 344–73.

5 Due to the semi-official character of the obshchestvennitsa movement, it is difficult to obtain an accurate total number of women involved. Kashkina concluded that approximately eleven thousand women were involved in the movement prior to the May 1936 All-Union Conference of Wives of Managerial and Engineering-Technical Workers in Heavy Industry; the movement expanded significantly after that time (“Dvizhenie,” 243). Official materials usually referred to “many thousands” or “tens of thousands” of activists. It is also difficult to assess the degree of genuine voluntarism in the movement. Wife-activists’ work was voluntary in the sense that it was not overtly coerced (although there was doubtless social pressure to participate) and was unpaid.

6 Kul’turnost’ can be translated as “culturedness,” or “cultured behavior” (Boym, Common Places, 34). Vera Dunham, the first scholar to explore its significance for Soviet culture, describes kul’turnost’ as a “program for proper conduct in public ... a fetish notion of how to be individually civilized.” See In Stalin’s Time: Middleclass Values in Soviet Fiction (Durham, 1990), 22.
the Urals, Heavy Industry Commissar Grigorii (“Sergo”) Ordzhonikidze noted with pleasure some flowerbeds planted in front of an electrical substation. Discovering that they were the handiwork of the substation manager’s wife, Klavdiia Surovtseva, it purportedly occurred to the commissar that her actions might serve as an example for other factory managers’ and engineers’ idle wives.7 A similar initiative had already been noted in Ukraine, where former opera singer and factory director’s wife Evgeniia Vesnik had established a poultry farm for families at the Krivoi Rog industrial settlement.8 To Ordzhonikidze, the story goes, the work of these “enthusiasts” heralded a “new, still-unknown movement”—one which he promptly set about publicizing in hopes of fostering a union-wide wives movement.

There may well be some truth to this tale of origins “from below.” That Surovtseva and Vesnik might have taken such initiative would not be surprising, given the combination of desolate living conditions, wives’ inactivity, and a national climate of mobilization. In any case, it is clear that the Commissariat of Heavy Industry (Narkomtiazhprom) and Ordzhonikidze himself were crucial in expanding and systematizing the movement. Within the party and state hierarchies, Comrade Sergo served as the movement’s patron. He was instrumental in defining its priorities, and the commissariat was the driving force behind the 10–12 May 1936 All-Union Conference of Wives of Managerial and Engineering-Technical Workers in Heavy Industry.9 The conference, which inaugurated the wives’ movement as an organized, nationwide phenomenon, was held at the Kremlin and attended by over three thousand women, as well as numerous dignitaries, including Stalin.10 A similarly important if less-publicized role was played by the trade unions’ Intersectoral Bureau of Engineers and Technical Workers (VMBIT). VMBIT, a kind of interindustry trade union body for engineering and technical workers with sections in the various trade unions, was instrumental in expanding and organizing the wives’ movement. From 1934 on, it served as the principal liaison between factory- and institution-level wives’ councils and the trade union bureaucracy.11

Clearly, officials in VMBIT and Narkomtiazhprom had a vested interest in improving the level and availability of social services and cultural activities. Ordzhonikidze and his cohort were all too cognizant of the link between quality of life and labor productivity, as the industrialization drive suffered from high labor turnover rates and worker disaffection.12 The unions, for their part, had been made to answer for workers’ living conditions

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8Za industrializatsiino, 24 March 1935; E. E. Vesnik, Nash opyt (Moscow, 1936).
9Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv ekonomiki (RGAE), Moscow, f. 7297, op. 1, d. 155, l. 149; Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii (GARF), Moscow, f. 5548, op. 16, d. 66, l. 81.
10Vossoiznoe soveshchanie zhen khoziaistvennikov i inzhenero-tekhniksikh rabotnikov tiazhehelo promyshlennosti: Stenografcheskiy otchet (Moscow, 1936).
11GARF, f. 5548, op. 16, d. 3, l. 12–13. The wives’ council (Sovet zhen) was the movement’s main organizational unit, the nucleus of a larger aktiv at the factory-wide level (Obshchestvennitsa, 1939, no. 11:26, 1940, no. 3:27, and 1941, no. 4:9–10).
as of 1934 and, despite committees in most unions devoted to “cultural daily-life issues,” had been largely unsuccessful in responding to these problems.\(^{13}\)

Nevertheless, the wives’ movement was not a purely instrumental means to meet ends defined by the industrialization drive. Raising living standards and the level of education had been among the revolution’s goals, and it is certainly conceivable that many wife-activists enthusiastically struggled to realize their fulfillment. Years later, despite arrest and imprisonment, Evgeniia Vesnik recalled that “the zeal of construction, the heroics of socialist workdays, and the genuine romance (*podlinnaia romantika*) of the Bolshevik transformation of Russia could not but thrill us.”\(^ {14}\)

In the wake of the May 1936 conference of managers’ and engineers’ wives and a December 1936 all-union conference of army officers’ wives, the *obshchestvennitsa* movement expanded rapidly. The All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions provided one million rubles to foster wives’ councils’ initiatives, and a journal, *Obshchestvennitsa*, began publication under the auspices of the Commissariat of Heavy Industry. Subsequently, the movement expanded outside of heavy industry and the military to encompass light industry, transport, academia, forestry, and other sectors of the economy and society. Growth slowed by mid-1937, however, following Ordzhonikidze’s death, a significant drop in trade union funding, and the purges. In the immediate prewar years the tenor of the movement evolved as wives focused on enforcing labor discipline and on training women to replace men at work in the event of armed conflict. With the German invasion in 1941, women were mobilized on a Union-wide scale to serve the war effort and the movement of wife-activists ceased to exist as a discrete phenomenon, even as many of its activities were extended to the entire female population.

**THE OBSEHCHESTVENNITSA AS MOTHER AND SOCIAL MOTHER**

Although a hallmark of the *obshchestvennitsa* movement was its flexibility, its ability to adapt to local needs and party dictates alike, one set of duties remained constant: wife-activists nurtured, educated, instilled culture, and provided comfort—tasks commonly associated with modern motherhood.\(^ {15}\) Some of these activities were overtly maternal in character; for example, wife-activists assiduously tracked the scholastic progress of their children and sought to prepare meals for them utilizing the latest nutritional information. Husbands of *obshchestvennitsy* were also the objects of maternal solicitude as wives strove to create a comfortable domestic setting for them. Wife-activists’ mothering, however,

\(^{13}\)See, for example, GARF, f. 5548, op. 13, dd. 1 and 2, and f. 5457, op. 22, dd. 72, 74, 81, and 82, passim.

\(^{14}\)“Nepartiinye bol’shevichki,” *Uchastnitsy velikogo sozidaniiia* (Moscow, 1962), 215. Although it would have been impossible for Vesnik to repudiate the movement’s work and official motivations, this source was published during Khrushchev’s “thaw,” and might therefore be considered relatively candid. Furthermore, the words chosen to evoke the era’s mood are more expressive than a rote formulation of loyalty.

extended beyond the home to encompass Soviet society as a whole. Thus obshchestvennitsy not only checked their children’s homework but also established juvenile cultural kruzhki; in addition to attempting to provide balanced meals at home, they supervised meal preparation in factory cafeterias; not only did they decorate their own apartments, but they also placed flowers and hung curtains in workers’ dormitories. In short, wife-activists undertook an assortment of activities which could be subsumed under the rubric of social mothering.

The emphasis on Soviet women’s maternal role was not unprecedented. Radical as some Bolshevik pronouncements on the demise of the family unit may have been, childbearing and some degree of maternal nurturing had always been encouraged in the Soviet Union. Even Aleksandra Kollontai, who claimed that the new regime would “lift the burdens of motherhood from women’s shoulders and transfer them to the state,” also acknowledged that “Communist society is not intending to take children away from their parents or tear the baby from the breast of its mother.” And, as Elizabeth Wood has pointed out, women were urged early on in the Soviet period to serve as mothers of the revolution, employing their “tender hearts, caring hands (and) sharp eyes” to protect the nascent Soviet order and supervise its potentially unruly citizenry.

Yet by World War II the Soviet understanding and prioritization of motherhood had evolved in important ways. A heightened emphasis on motherhood as a civic contribution and a broadened definition of maternal responsibilities combined with pronatalism and official co-optation of the family as a potential locus for the instillation of Soviet values. The increased emphasis on motherhood was codified in 1936, when new legislation banned abortion and provided material incentives for large families. The Stalin Constitution, adopted that same year, provided ideological ballast for the new laws, identifying motherhood as a Soviet woman’s right and duty.

The family’s perceived importance to state and societal well-being and the related notion of motherhood as public service were hardly unique to the Soviet Union. In Western countries maternalism—ideologies and policies glorifying motherhood and applying to society such maternal values as caring, nurturing, and morality—dated back to the late nineteenth century and played an important role in shaping emergent welfare states. Although turn-of-the-century European concern for mothers’ and children’s welfare facilitated political agency for women, who participated in crafting relevant policies, this aspect of maternalism was undermined in the interwar years. Maternalism retained many of its original notions, but amid economic and social upheaval, increased political authoritarianism, and the threat of renewed military confrontation, opportunities for


17 Wood, Baba and Comrade, 66.


19 Mothers of a New World, 2.
women’s political action were curtailed. Instead, European states and the Soviet Union alike sought to co-opt families in general and mothers in particular in the interests of social stability, national health, and military preparedness. This version of maternalism was an important element prewar Soviet culture, giving rise to the macabre coexistence of purge and terror with a discourse of “caring, nurturing, and morality,” of which the phrase “Stalin-like care for people” (stalinskaja zabota o cheloveke) was but one prevalent example.

As biological and social mothers, obshchestvennitsy were essential components of Stalin-era maternalism, and they had analogs in interwar Europe. The British Endowment of Motherhood and “wages for housework” campaigns, as well as French advocacy of family social insurance, likewise sought to recognize the civic value of wives’ and mothers’ domestic undertakings. The Nazi Frauenwerk and Italian Opera nazionale per la maternita ed infanzia, like the obshchestvennitsa movement, combined state intervention with voluntarism on the part of socioeconomically privileged women in an attempt to encourage reproduction and remake working-class and peasant households in the service of party and state.

Soviet maternalism and the obshchestvennitsa movement differed fundamentally from their European counterparts, however, in the extent to which they were rooted in the ideology of gender difference and the cult of domesticity. To be sure, Soviet maternalism was predicated upon an essentialized view of women’s “special” ability to nurture. At the same time, the notion of woman as “angel in the home” had less resonance in the Soviet Union because it had little Russian precedent; the bourgeois housewife was not a prevalent figure in prerevolutionary gendered imagery or social reality. Furthermore, while West European policy and rhetoric discouraged (and, in some cases, outright prohibited) women’s participation in the labor force, an opposite trend prevailed in the Soviet Union. There, childbearing and child-rearing, as well as some degree of homemaking,

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20 Wife-activists played no discernible role in policy formulation, although they had an influence at the level of implementation and, in some instances, attained a public role and celebrity identity through participation in the movement. For a comparison of interwar Soviet and European maternalism see Hoffmann, “Mothers in the Motherland.” On celebrity identity see Sheila Fitzpatrick, Stalin’s Peasants (Oxford, 1994).


23 Mothers of a New World, 10. There were other important disparities. The wife-activists’ movement was more loosely organized than either the Frauenwerk or the Italian ONMI, which were institutionalized entities more closely tied to the party and the state (Koonz, Mothers in the Fatherland, xxiii; De Grazia, How Fascism Ruled Women, 59, 65; Saraceno, “Redefining Maternity,” 205–6). Also, German and Italian women’s organizations were subject to the eugenic and racist agendas of Nazism and 1930s Italian fascism, which the Soviet Union, however destructive its own hunt for “class enemies,” eschewed.


25 Women were eventually mobilized for employment in Western Europe with the entry of European countries
did not preclude women’s work outside the home. Quite the contrary—Bolshevik ideology and the exigencies of the five-year plans meant that women were strongly urged to combine the two.26

In addition, while interwar maternalism in many countries proclaimed the family’s importance for national well-being, only the Soviet Union had previously sought to socialize many of the family’s social and economic functions and collectivize daily life. The culture of byt promoted in the middle and late 1930s therefore had to reconcile official approval of family centered domestic life with this earlier stance. The result was a Stalin-era quotidian culture in which elements of collectivized daily life (cafeterias, nurseries, state-organized leisure activities) coexisted with an officially sanctioned domesticity in which women were urged to be homemakers, helpmeets, and mothers. Wife-activists played an important role in both collective and domestic arenas. They volunteered at kindergartens, remodeled workers’ communal living quarters, and organized amateur entertainments. At home they ran a modern and rationalized, cozy and cultured household with an eye to boosting spousal labor productivity and raising proper socialist offspring.

In her brief analysis of the obshchestvennitsa movement, Sheila Fitzpatrick contends that this coexistence of socialized byt and domestic life can be broken down along social group lines. In her view, a privatized domestic sphere was the preserve of the Stalin-era “new class,” the feminine representative of which was the obshchestvennitsa. Wife-activists and their lifestyle were Socialist Realist exemplars of “life as it is becoming,” which, Fitzpatrick concludes, included a neotraditional family life in which a wife’s responsibility to husband and children took clear precedence over civic obligations. Worker and peasant women, on the other hand, were still required to work outside the home, and were thus exempt from the socialist patriarchy.

However insightful Fitzpatrick’s characterization of the obshchestvennitsa movement, her argument requires qualification. First, while the movement was dominated by the wives of industrial managers and engineers, it was not purely a phenomenon of the “new elite”: there was strong, consistent encouragement to recruit wives of rank-and-file workers, a trend which escalated along with the purge of managers and engineers in 1936–37.27 More importantly, while Fitzpatrick accurately notes the wife-activist’s significance as a symbol of future socialist byt, this symbol was not a static representation of traditional family values. Rather, the obshchestvennitsa was a symbol of transformation, a process in which she was, ideally, actively involved—helping to remake others as well as herself into new Soviet citizens. An important part of this transformation, and one in which the

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27Appellations given the movement and its participants support this assertion. Originally referred to as dvizhenie zhen ITR (movement of wives of engineering-technical workers), over the course of 1936 the more inclusive terms dvizhenie zhen-aktivistok (movement of wife-activists), dvizhenie obshchestvennits (obshchestvennitsa movement) or, occasionally, dvizhenie zhen-obshchestvennits (movement of wife-obshchestvennitsy) became the standard (Kashkina, “Dvizhenie,” 71). On purge-era anti-elitism see *Obshchestvennitsa*, 1937, no. 6:2–3, 1938, no. 3:26, 1938, no. 5:6–9, and 1939, no. 1:27.
wife-activist was intimately involved, was the creation of a domestic milieu and familial relations imbued with a collective ethos applicable to all social groups.

Wife-activists’ role as agents of transformation is considered by Vadim Volkov to be part of a broader “Stalinist civilizing process” intended to create cultured individuals in a modern society. As a part of this process, personal appearance and leisure pursuits became a matter of public policy and concern. Volkov describes how attributes of the civilized Soviet individual evolved over time: neat dress, cultured speech and a cozily appointed home were the external markers of “culturedness” in 1936 and 1937, whereas demonstrable knowledge of a wide-ranging Soviet cultural canon took precedence in 1937–38. By 1938, in light of the purge era’s renewed vigilance, material manifestations of kul’turnost’ were repudiated in favor of a more contemplative “mastery of [the principles of] Bolshevism,” aided by the publication in that year of Stalin’s Short Course party history.

Wife-activists were deeply implicated in the Soviet mission civilatrice on a number of levels, as Volkov points out. Their neat grooming and stylish dress were not merely markers of social status but also indicators of kul’turnost’. Their seeming preoccupation with curtains, lampshades, tablecloths, and flowers demonstrated how to construct one’s domestic environment in a cultured manner. Volkov discusses the obshchestvennitsa movement exclusively in connection with the 1936–37 campaign for externally manifested kul’turnost’. While this was an important impetus for the movement’s development, wives were also involved in subsequent stages of the “Stalinist civilizing process.” Articles in Obshchestvennitsa emphasized the importance of acquainting children and workers alike with the oeuvre of Pushkin or Tolstoy, showed wife-activists how to organize discussion circles to propagate the Soviet cultural canon, and later encouraged them to augment their own political education. As mothers and social mothers, obshchestvennitsy thus gave birth to and reared the future’s “new Soviet men and women” while working to raise the cultural level of existing generations of Soviet citizens.

THE OBSCHESTVENNITSA AS WIFE AND KOHIAIKA BOL’SHOGO SOVETSKOGO DOMA

The obshchestvennitsa’s duties as mother and social mother were augmented by an equally important wifely role. The wife-activist was, after all, by definition a married woman, and a significant part of her official identity revolved around her role as her husband’s helpmeet at home and in public life. She also served as what Ordzhonikidze dubbed the “mistress of the great Soviet home” or “housewife to the nation." What being a model

29See also Dunham, In Stalin’s Time, 41–58.
30In reality, some obshchestvennitsy were widowed, divorced, or had never been married (GARF, f. 5452, op. 31, d. 67, ll. 7–15).
31Pravda, 10 May 1936; Vsesoiuznoe soveshchanie zhen komandnogo i nachal’stvuiushchego sostava RKKA. Stenograficheskii otchet (Moscow, 1937), 80; V. Shveitser and B. F. Mal’kin, eds., Zheny inzhenerov—Obshchestvennitsy tiazheloi promyshlennosti (Moscow, 1937).
Soviet wife entailed in practice was not always clear, however; official ambivalence and husbands’ and wives’ perceptions of mixed messages from above complicated efforts to attain official goals.

To an extent, wifely duties overlapped with motherly responsibilities: a wife was expected to provide a nurturing home environment for her husband, ensuring that he ate and slept well and that his leisure time was spent productively. In addition, the wife-activist was expected to complement her husband, the two composing halves of a socially and politically conscious whole. The factory director (or engineer, or Stakhanovite, or Red Army commander) husband and his obshchestvennitsa wife served in theory as benevolent mother and father figures to the workers and soldiers under their supervision. While he firmly directed the enterprise toward fulfillment of its plan, she endeavored to improve the daily life of workers, soldiers, and their families, thus working indirectly to the same ends as her spouse. A wife was meant to be her husband’s “closest comrade,” a source of support, comfort, and strength. With her dedication to family and society alike, the once-backward housewife might even serve as an example to her spouse.

This exemplary role was not new, nor was the extension of housewifely duties to society at large. Elizabeth Wood traces how these notions were deployed during the Civil War era to combat desertion and economic sabotage and reveals their origins in prerevolutionary assumptions about women’s “naturally” superior morality and acuity. What was new, however, was the systematic attempt to imbue domestic life with official values and the related effort to inculcate a sense of joint spousal responsibility for public behavior and performance. In addition, while during the Civil War worker and peasant women’s social housekeeping duties supplemented their economic contributions to the revolution’s defense, the obshchestvennitsa’s domestic and social mothering and housekeeping was her contribution to the construction of socialism.

To help build socialism in their capacity as wives, it was crucial that women understand the connection between domestic life and civic duty. As an organizer of officers’ wives in the Leningrad Military District asserted, “mature” commanders’ wives comprehended that “the private is interwoven with the public. ... Borders between the[m] must not exist.” For participants in the obshchestvennitsa movement, this meant developing a sense of personal responsibility for their husband’s work, comprehending that “the great world of interests in which our husbands live has become our world. The joys of the factory—these are now our joys, its failures, our failures.”

In practice, sharing their husband’s “world of work” had multiple implications for wives. First of all, it entailed influencing his labor productivity both indirectly and directly. Indirectly, obshchestvennitsy were urged to deploy the domestic arts to improve their husband’s disposition or “moral condition” (moral’no sostojanie). For those unclear about the link between domestic comfort and on-the-job performance, Obshchestvennitsa made the connection explicit. One group of metallurgists’ wives had

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33Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi voennyi arkhiv (RGVA), Moscow, f. 9, op. 36, d. 1820, l. 130.
34Obshchestvennitsa, 1936, no. 1:3.
expedited plan fulfillment, it would seem, by talking. And what had such fruitful dis- 
sussion been about?

About husbands. About husbands’ work. About ... domestic comfort. About the 
handkerchief that (wives) must put in their husband’s pocket, should he forget to 
do it. About the button which must be sewn on—a missing button can aggravate 
one’s husband in the shop. 

Readers were reminded that “a tender word, a clean home ... can improve a person’s 
mood” and finally were pointedly asked, “Do you understand ... if your husband lags 
behind, we all lag behind!”

Wives were also urged to take a more direct approach—not only to talk about their 
husbands, but to talk to them. They were to utilize the intimacy of the marital bond to 
wield a positive influence, to insist that their husbands meet state-mandated production 
norms. As attendees of a reception for wives in the civil aviation industry were informed, 
dangerous working conditions made their husbands’ “moral condition” all the more im-
portant. The wife’s role was correspondingly vital:

A wife can discourage or encourage. We say all the time—in the party, the 
unions, the Komsomol—that in order to approach a person ... one-on-one, it is 
necessary to know their character, their habits, etc., and who can know better the 
character of a person than his closest friend, his wife? That is why the wives’ 
movement ... has such great cultural, political, and state significance.

The wives of rank-and-file workers were also urged to take an interest in their husband’s 
job performance—indeed, they were among the first targets of this approach when, in 
1933, Krupskaia appealed to miners’ wives in this regard. It later fell to obshchestvennitsy 
to convey the importance of wives’ obligation—a task complicated by the fact that work-
ners’ wives often considered their visits an unwelcome intrusion. The chairwoman of one 
wives’ council related that, when asked what their husbands did on the job and how much 
they earned, workers’ wives responded, “I don’t know, and why should I, as long as he 
brings home enough for me?”

If wives were encouraged to prevail upon their spouses to further state and party 
goals, husbands were urged to do the same, in this case by enhancing social and political 
consciousness. Wives’ movement propaganda often promoted a paternalistic marital rela-
tionship in which the husband lovingly but firmly took responsibility for the education for 
his wife. This theme was especially prevalent in the Red Army, where the educational 
and cultural level of officers’ wives was lower than the stereotype of the wife-activist as

35Ibid., 1940, no. 8:13.
36GARF, f. 5451, op. 20, d. 79, l. 9.
37Zhenshchina strany sovetov ravnopravnym grazhdanin (Moscow, 1938), 86–90. See also Kotkin, Magnetic 
Mountain, 218–21; and Pomoshchnitsy politotdela (Moscow, 1934).
38GARF, f. 5451, op. 20, d. 79, l. 9.
39This tutelary role dates back to prerevolutionary days (Engel, Mothers and Daughters, 80–85; Wood, Baba 
and Comrade, 21–25).
“cultured” woman might suggest. According to one official depiction, for Tekla Sergeeva, wife of a Moscow infantry division’s political chief, “evenings at home often turned into instruction sessions ... as [she] received advice from her husband on how to work more efficiently. At times [he] criticized her, but she was not offended.”

Despite such prescriptions for husbandly behavior, spousal apathy or outright hostility frequently greeted wives’ participation in the obshchestvennitsa movement. Addressing a conference of wives and women’s organizers in the Belorussian Military District, one activist summarized the dilemma:

Comrades—we have rightly criticized the political departments, the commissars, the party organizations [for inadequate work among army wives] ... yet we have left aside one figure ... the husband. ... He is like Othello, jealous of his wife and forbidding her to go to meetings. Where is the husband as director and organizer, as educator and instructor of his wife? ... a husband must be his wife’s closest comrade, he must teach her and not stand aside from her education. The husband may be a great commander, a splendid civic leader (obshchestvennik) ... but once he gets home he wolfs down his dinner [and] picks up the newspaper ... not asking his wife if she’s read such-and-such an article ... we must demand of husbands that ... they not be spectators and guests in their own homes.

The appeal of a stay-at-home wife as status symbol and domestic convenience was not limited to the military. In 1937, Ordzhonikidze rebuked similar “Othellos” in civilian industry, proclaiming that men who stood in the way of their wives’ participation in social work would “amount to nothing—not a decent citizen, not a true husband, not a father, not an engineer!” Despite such apparently impressive official support for wives’ social activism, recalcitrant husbands usually received little more than a rebuke from trade union or party committees, reinforcing uncertainty about wives’ domestic and public priorities.

Although husbands and wives were officially encouraged to form strong comradely bonds and take responsibility for one another, there were limits to support for family life in the 1930s. In a state where one’s first obligation was to the collective, the fear of oppositional familism—unresponsiveness or resistance to appeals on behalf of the motherland resulting from strengthening family ties—ran high. The party could claim to have had some experience in this arena: tolerance of the private sphere during NEP was believed to have resulted in a weakened sense of social responsibility and loyalty to party...
and state. Women in general, and wives in particular, were blamed for perceived moral laxity and decreased vigilance; wallowing in torpor induced by domestic (or sexual) bliss, men neglected their public duties in favor of feminine temptations.

By the mid-1930s NEP’s relative social and cultural tolerance was a thing of the past. Nevertheless, anxiety persisted about whether women’s supposed domestic orientation and emotional nature made them particularly susceptible to divided loyalty. Organizers of the obshchestvennitsa movement worked to combat the perceived threat in a variety of ways. During the purges of 1936 and 1937, for example, the editors of Obshchestvennitsa obliquely warned wife-activists that

In truth, have we not examples of how wives of Trotskyite saboteurs, knowing about their husbands’ actions, adapted their “activism” in social work in order to allow their husbands to do greater harm? ... The wife ... must remember that the enemy is always cunning and the history of treason and espionage contains many examples of women used willingly or against their will.

Willing or unwilling, activist wives of “enemies of the people” were usually presumed guilty by association. They were arrested along with or soon after their husbands, although they generally met with a relatively milder fate—incarceration rather than execution.

Even in less extreme cases, wives were cautioned not to let their “tender hearts” overrule what they saw with their “sharp eyes.” This motif ran through the movement’s rhetoric from the outset, but grew in importance as war loomed nearer, particularly during the campaign for labor discipline in late 1938 and 1939. Wife-activists were expected to expose and condemn infringements no matter how close to home:

Housewife comrade Parfenova appeared ... with the announcement that some workers had come to work in a drunken condition and that this disturbed production. As an example, she told of her own son machinist Aleksandr Parfenov, who was among the drunkards. ... Another housewife, comrade Makarenko, at this juncture also publicly condemned the disgraceful behavior of her own son, Nikolai Makarenko, a truant.

These actions were described as evidence of Parfenova and Makarenko’s “selfless loyalty to the party of Lenin-Stalin.” As such, they made clear that while a wife-activist’s duty to tend to her family might equal or even supersede her public calling, it would not be at the

45 Naiman, Sex in Public, 5–12; Von Hagen, Soldiers in the Proletarian Dictatorship, 166–68; Wood, Baba and Comrade, 173–79.
47 Obshchestvennitsa, 1937, no. 6:2–3.
48 For one prominent example see E. Ia. Vesnik’s account of his mother’s arrest, imprisonment, release, and rehabilitation in Daru, chto pomnuiu: Memuary nanudoego artista (Moscow, 1993), 19, 22–25.
49 Obshchestvennitsa, 1939, no. 1:25.
expense of state power and economic productivity. A true socialist family, it was implied, would perceive no conflict between the two.

As important as the wife-activist’s influence on her family was her public calling as khoziaika bol’shogo sovetskogo doma. As a wife, the obshchestvennitsa worked to raise her husband’s labor productivity—as a “housewife to the nation” she sought to do the same for the workers under his command. To this end, wives provided “cultural services for workers”: from cafeteria meals, more comfortable dormitories, and child care to film screenings, lecture series, and soirees dansantes. They were assured that their efforts helped production go “smoothly and happily.”50 While obshchestvennitsy may have been “mistresses of the great Soviet home,” they were not entirely surrogate wives—many of their activities were intended to ease the domestic burdens or raise the cultural level of women workers.51 Wife-activists may have performed on a grand scale tasks traditionally considered “women’s work,” but such endeavors benefited women and men alike.

Analyzing the obshchestvennitsa’s wifely persona, one must ask to what extent this was a subordinate identity signalling an abandonment of the Bolshevik commitment to women’s emancipation dating from the 1930 dissolution of the Zhenotdel (party Women’s Department) or the pronatalist legislation of 1936.52 Undeniably, the “Bolshevik feminist” activism evinced by some members of the Zhenotdel disappeared after 1930, and open discussion of the “woman question,” was muted by the era’s political climate.53 At the same time, the revolution had never destroyed widely held beliefs about men and women’s “fundamental” character traits. Even many who agreed that men and women should have equal rights and opportunities believed just as firmly in essential differences between the sexes which dictated what roles men and women were best suited for. In addition, many had considered the women’s department to be no more or less than the party’s handmaiden, an instrumentalist view originating in nineteenth-century radicals’ belief that the primary objective of women’s emancipation was to serve the “greater good.”54

The obshchestvennitsa movement was firmly grounded in these gendered assumptions and this ethos of service to the greater cause. The latter was heightened in the Stalin era, when the central relationship in one’s life was not between spouses or family members, but that between the individual and the state. And the relationship between wife-activists and the state was complex. On the one hand, by making their families and their husband’s “world of work” their central concerns, wife activists seemingly repudiated an independent source of identity. Yet the obshchestvennitsa was very much a public figure,

50GARF, f. 5548, op. 16, d. 66, l. 193 ob.
51Ibid., d. 3, l. 115 ob.
53On “Bolshevik feminism” see Barbara Evans Clements, Bolshevik Women (New York, 1997).
54On Soviet formulations of gender differences see Frances Bernstein, “What Everyone Should Know about Sex: Gender, Sexual Enlightenment, and the Politics of Health in Revolutionary Russia” (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1998). On instrumentalist views of the woman question see Engel, Mothers and Daughters; and Wood, Baba and Comrade.
unlike the Victorian “angel in the home” or NEP’s “doll-parasite.” Furthermore, wife-activists were lauded as “builders of socialism” and assured that their participation in the Soviet project made them, at least in theory, the equal of their husbands. While it may seem that activist wives were “denied their own achievements,” many women considered the social work they carried out to be “their own achievement,” gaining a measure of self-fulfillment, even fame, through participation.

THE OBSHCHESTVENNITSA AS “NEW SOVIET WOMEN”

In addition to providing social services, the wife-activist served an important symbolic function: as a role model or ideal type, she could be added to the 1930s pantheon of aviation heroes, traktoristki, polar explorers, and Stakhanovites. In visual and narrative representation, these larger-than-life figures were protagonists in a Socialist Realist drama in which hoped-for future developments were portrayed “in the guise of the present” and served to prescribe behavior and attitudes.

In the middle and late 1930s, official imagery essentialized all women to a greater extent than in the past, emphasizing their reproductive function. Even the woman collective farmer, who was the target of a vydvizhenie (professional advancement) campaign and to whom, scholars have contended, pronatalist or neoconservative values applied least, was subject to this kind of maternalization. The journal Krest’ianka, intended for the new Soviet woman in the countryside, liberally interspersed among its photos of prize-winning traktoristki and odes to agricultural stakhanovki depictions of glowing mothers and their dimpled offspring, articles such as “Caring for New Mothers,” and photomontages captioned “We surround our children and mothers with ever-greater care.”

At the same time, the independent, self-assured woman worker or collective farmer remained a pervasive image. Prominent journalistic portrayals of the rabotnitsa smiling beside her lathe or the kolkhoznitsa waving from the seat of her tractor indicated that motherhood was not the only exalted role that women could fill. Above all, officially

55 On the “doll-parasite” see Wood, Baba and Comrade, 176–79.
56 Vsesoiuznoe soveshchanie zhen khoziaistvennikov, 9–10.
57 Reid, “All Stalin’s Women,” 158. Evgeniia Vesnik, Klavdia Surovtseva, Valentina Khetagurova, and others were celebrated for their work as obshchestvennitsy. All three described the gratification and fulfillment provided by participation, as did wives’ testimonial at conferences and in the press. While these sources cannot be approached uncritically, it is fully conceivable that women gained satisfaction from the fame or material rewards the movement afforded, or out of genuine commitment to the construction of socialism. In this regard see Igal Halfin and Jochen Hellbeck, “Rethinking the Stalinist Subject: Stephen Kotkin’s Magnetic Mountain and the State of Soviet Historical Studies,” Jahrbucher fur Geschichte Osteuropas 44:3 (1996): 436–63.
60 Krest’ianka, 1936, no. 1:16, and 1935, no. 4:22–23.
prescribed roles vaunted Soviet women’s ability to combine work and child-bearing. In “Work and Motherhood,” a feature article in Krest’ianka, award-winning traktorista Sonia Laskova found herself pregnant and was concerned about her ability to maintain her level of achievement in agricultural production. Her husband reassured her that motherhood was an honor, one she could surely add to her other accomplishments. Readers looking askance at his certitude were assured that the “new Soviet marriage,” in which wives and husbands were equal partners, and the planned expansion of child care facilities, enabled the combination of work and motherhood.

Another noteworthy shift in gendered representation in this period affected the image of woman-as-activist. To generalize, the plainly dressed, severely countenanced kommunistka was replaced by the nonparty obshchestvennitsa, with her permanent wave, fur-collared coat, and stylish cloche. While the stereotypical kommunitka of the early Soviet period might have been a Nadezhda Krupskaya—plain and stern—or a Konkordia Samoilova—principled and selfless—the model wife-activist, as represented by Evgeniia Vesnik or Klavdiia Surovtseva, was devoted and hardworking, but softer and less militant, as would befit the denizens of a land in which life had become “better” and “more joyous.”

This altered imagery is in keeping with the emphasis on grooming and external manifestations of kulturnost’ observed by Volkov, and also recalls Stephen Kotkin’s assertion that a shift occurred in the 1930s from creating socialism to defending or protecting it. In light of such a shift in the spirit of the times, it is understandable that a prevalent image of the female activist might be transformed from the militant Zhenotdel member to a more maternal caretaker figure.

Feminized without being overtly sexualized, ideal female types of the middle and late 1930s combined an aura of maternal comfort and feminine civility with a strong civic consciousness and enthusiasm for hard work. However striking the domestic aspect of the obshchestvennitsa movement, its dominant theme—the central topic of wives’ conferences, the journal Obshchestvennitsa, and official correspondence—was this work. In the realm of representation, the social mothering and civic housekeeping undertaken by obshchestvennitsy in cafeterias and nurseries constituted their “job” as surely as the rabotnitsa’s position in the factory or the kolkhoznitsa’s place in the fields.

In the 1930s a number of conditions fostered official interest in developing a social movement composed of housewives. First, the Soviet state and Communist party sought to mobilize all sectors of society to attain the interrelated goals of industrialization, agricul-

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61 Ibid., 1936, no. 25:12.
63 Kotkin, Magnetic Mountain, 357.
64 Bonnell notes that portrayals of peasant women were also softer and more rounded in this period (Iconography of Power, 116). Even khetagurovki—unmarried young women who followed komsoi’ska Valentina Khetagurova to the Soviet Far East to build socialism—fit this characterization. Their energy and enthusiasm were emphasized in official propaganda, but so was their “womanly” talent for making even the untamed Far East cozy and home-like. See N. I. Dubinina, Ty pozovi, Dal’ni Vostok! (Khabarovsk, 1987); and my “Deveshki s kharakterom: The Khetagurovki and Women’s Migration to the Soviet Far East, 1937–1940” (Paper prepared for presentation at the annual convention of the AAAASS, 1998).
tural collectivization, and military preparedness. It would seem logical that otherwise nonemployed women be urged to provide social and consumer services to improve living conditions and foster labor productivity. The climate of mobilization, participation, and enthusiasm, combined with such “traditional” concerns as aid to women and children, doubtless elicited a positive response from many women. Second, social upheavals resulting from NEP, industrialization, and collectivization evoked widespread desire for a stable social order, including well-defined roles for men and women and a strong Soviet family. Finally, as society progressed toward central preconditions of Soviet socialism (industrial development and collectivized agriculture), attention turned to the need for a coherent culture of daily life.

The movement of wife-activists responded to these conditions in two fundamental ways. By providing social and cultural services and exerting a positive influence over their husbands and children, *obshchestvennitsy* helped bring the new society and culture into being. As ideal types, wife-activists provided a template for one kind of new Soviet woman.

Formulating a Soviet *kul’tura byta* and a related system of gender roles proved to be complicated endeavors. It was difficult to uphold notions of gender difference and domesticity (however public-spirited) while claiming to reject women’s subordinate status and simultaneously promoting alternative, nontraditional role models for women. One result with crucial implications for the *obshchestvennitsa* movement was uncertainty about wives’ public and domestic priorities. Husbands often insisted that they, their children, and their home held pride of place, and their confusion (or deliberate obfuscation) was not convincingly allayed. At the same time, wives uninterested in social work could consider the movement’s domestic aspect license to remain at home, while those preferring civic duties to domestic tasks could marshal official support for their choice.

Not even *Obshchestvennitsa*, the official mouthpiece of the movement, provided clear guidelines in this regard. In 1939 the journal printed the letter of a Magnitogorsk metallurgist’s wife who wanted “passionately” to take up social work, but had not done so due to opposition from her husband. She turned to the journal’s editors for advice, and they in turn solicited responses from readers. Published replies agreed that wives had a civic obligation, but opinions diverged regarding its character. One respondent strongly advocated social work, scathingly likening the husband to a “barin who can’t fall asleep unless a serf tickles his tootsies,” while another declared that assisting one’s husband and rearing children were sufficient to “justify oneself as a member of society.”

Despite these complexities, the notion of civic obligation intrinsic to the wife-activists’ movement clearly struck a chord with or, at the very least, was internalized by many women. The diary of *obshchestvennitsa* Galina Shtange serves as a case in point. Shtange described her social work as transcending “narrow family interests” and linked her per-

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66 *Obshchestvennitsa*, 1939, no. 6:46, and no. 9:25–26. It is possible that the letter and responses were fictitious, in which case the absence of a clear “party line” only underscores the complexity of the issue.
sonal sense of fulfillment to her efforts on behalf of the regime rather than on behalf of her family. As a document, the diary itself demonstrates the interpenetration of private and public life: handwritten entries surround and are interspersed with pasted-in newspaper clippings, photos, and conference passes. On a fundamental level, then, while Soviet quotidian culture and gender roles were not fully systematized prior to World War II, the attempt to transform and imbue them with a socialist consciousness, clearly manifested in the obshchestvennitsa movement, was nevertheless a significant part of the civilization that was 1930s Stalinism.

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67 Intimacy and Terror, 170, 172–73, 189. I am grateful to Jochen Hellbeck for his suggestions in this regard.
68 On this aspect of Shtange’s diary see ibid., p. 166.