Marriage and Divorce in Revolutionary Russia:

A Demographic Analysis

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When the Bolsheviks came to power in 1917 they intended to break down the traditional “bourgeois” structure of the family in order to equalize the status of men and women, and they implemented a number of policies toward this end in subsequent years. The 1918 Family Code secularized marriage, made divorce easily obtainable, and granted equal rights to illegitimate and legitimate children. In 1920 the Soviet Union became the first country in the world to legalize abortion; the procedure was legal and free if performed in a hospital, and the practice became widespread in the 1920s. These changes in family policy and abortion access were far ahead of their time relative to other countries, and were intended to make marriage a union of equals, freeing women from their dependence on men and marriage for security.¹ What were the

consequences of these changes in family law for Soviet women?

This paper analyzes changes in family structure and household formation in the early Soviet period, and how these were influenced by the Bolsheviks' radical policy changes affecting marriage and divorce.² Using previously unexploited data sources, the paper pieces together what is known about demographic change in this period, particularly changes in marriage rates, divorce rates, and birth rates. How did marriage and birth rates change during the tumultuous period of 1914-1922? Did divorce rates soar when divorce became easily obtainable? A key issue is whether the implementation of ultra-liberal divorce laws affected women’s bargaining power within marriage and their options on the marriage market. In normal circumstances such laws would be beneficial to women (as discussed below), but in the unique context of revolutionary Russia – with the large loss of male life during this period – this legislation likely had unintended consequences for marital stability and family formation. This issue is analyzed using data on marital status by age and province from the 1926 Census, and is compared with similar data from the 1959 Census, a period also characterized by significant gender imbalance but with much stricter divorce laws. While data limitations hamper a full assessment of these questions, the results indicate that many more women than men were divorced by the early-to-mid-1920s, due to the much higher remarriage rates of men. It is likely that this led to a higher share of female-headed households and children being raised in a single-parent home. On the other hand, the ease of divorce appears to have induced higher marriage rates than was the case when divorce was much more difficult, suggesting that the ultra-liberal divorce laws dampened the effect of male scarcity on the proportion of women who were able to marry. Overall, the

² While of interest, due to data limitations the impact of the legalization of abortion on women is not explored here.
evidence suggests that the changes to Soviet family law implemented by the Bolsheviks did impact household formation in a powerful way, with some intended as well as unintended consequences for the well-being of Soviet women.

I. State and family: legal and institutional change in the early Soviet Union

a. The Pre-revolutionary Setting

Russian women lived in a highly patriarchal world prior to the 1917 Revolution. Marriage and family life were governed by Tsarist laws that gave few rights to women; according to these laws a married woman owed “unlimited obedience” to her husband and was required to share the same residence with him as marital separation was illegal. A married woman could not work outside the home or get an education without the permission of her husband, and her husband’s consent was required to obtain an internal passport which enabled domestic travel beyond twenty miles from one’s official residence. Domestic abuse was common among peasants and was not considered grounds for separation or divorce. Children born outside of marriage had no legal standing or rights of any kind, and abortion was prohibited by law. In contrast to women in most European countries, however, a married woman in Russia


4 Engel, Breaking the Ties, 121-22.

5 Note, however, that abortions were reported to have occurred with some frequency in this period, with as many as 20 percent of pregnancies being terminated by abortion at the end of the
was allowed to own and inherit property independently of her husband.⁶

Recognized marriages occurred only within the church and divorce was granted upon completion of a long, complex, and costly procedure through the Ecclesiastical Court. Due to the opposition of the Russian Orthodox Church to divorce, in practice divorce was reported to be nearly impossible to obtain in pre-revolutionary Russia.⁷ For example, in 1914 the Orthodox Church granted 3,714 divorces, which translates into a crude divorce rate of .023 divorces per 1,000 population in that year.⁸ In comparison, the crude divorce rate in the United States in 1920 was significantly higher at 1.6 divorces per 1,000 population.⁹

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⁶ Goldman, Women, the State and Revolution, 49-50. Note that in practice, however, the prohibition on separation and a wife’s required obedience to her husband limited the control a woman had over her property, as pointed out in Engel, Breaking the Ties, 82.


⁸ The divorce rate of .023 is calculated by dividing the 1914 population figure of 159 million for the Russian empire by the number of divorces granted by the Church that year; for the population figure, Andrei Markevich and Mark Harrison, “Great War, Civil War, and Recovery: Russia’s National Income, 1913 to 1928,” The Journal of Economic History 71:3 (September 2011): 676; the number of divorces is reported in Table 2.1 of Wagner, Marriage, 70.

Within this institutional setting, women and men married at relatively young ages, and marriage was near-universal. For example, according to 1897 census data, the average age at first marriage was 21.4 years for women and 24.2 years for men, which was more than two years younger than the average age at first marriage in France at the time, as well as in the United States where the average age at first marriage was 23.7 for women and 27.4 for men in 1900. Few women remained unmarried; for example only 5.1 percent of women in the 40-49 age group were single at the time of the 1897 Census. In comparison, in the United States in 1900 nearly 8 percent of women aged 45-54 had never been married. Fertility rates were relatively high at an estimated 47.8 births per 1,000 population in 1913.


11 Vishnevskii and Volkov, Vosproizvodstvo, reported in Pressat, 320; Carter et al., Historical Statistics.

12 Goskomstat Rossii, Naselenie Rossii za 100 let (1897-1997): Statisticheskii sbornik (Moscow, 1998), 84.
At the turn of the century the typical woman in Russia had little freedom or individual rights. Expected to marry and bound to a husband upon marriage, Russian women’s subordinate status was embedded in the legal code and enforced by both Church and state. Despite the limited changes in women’s legal status in Russia in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, however, social and economic changes were underway which facilitated increased opportunities for women in the pre-revolutionary period. The Industrial Revolution spread to Russia in the late 19th century, leading to the development of cottage industries employing women in craft and needle work, as well as new opportunities in factory work in the growing cities. Women’s educational opportunities also expanded, at first primarily benefitting noble women but gradually spreading to the merchant and middle classes. Social change for peasants, however, came much more gradually and most peasant women continued to lead lives as agricultural workers with little opportunity for education or mobility.\(^{13}\)

Views on marital relations were evolving as well in this period. The social acceptability of wife-beating and domestic abuse was on the wane – particularly among the nobility and merchant classes – and women increasingly petitioned the government for legal separation from their husbands in the late 19th century.\(^ {14}\) Nevertheless, divorce remained an option available to few women, and means of independent support in the case of divorce were almost non-existent. This patriarchal system was soon to change, in ways that brought greater freedom than women might have imagined, along with great disruption in population and family structure during the years of the upheaval that began in 1914.

\(^{13}\) Engel, *Breaking the Ties*, 121, 131, 136-137.

\(^{14}\) Ibid., 6.
b. The revolution in family legislation

Within only two months of coming to power in 1917, the Bolsheviks had issued their first decrees on the secularization of marriage and establishment of liberal divorce laws. These initial decrees, combined with legislation implemented over the next three years, led to sweeping changes in the legal and institutional structure of marriage and the family in the early Soviet Union. On many dimensions these institutional changes were the most progressive in the world, amounting to a revolution in women’s rights and role in society. This section briefly describes these changes and discusses the predicted effects of this ‘revolution’ in women’s rights in the Soviet Union.¹⁵

One of the goals of the Bolshevik leaders was to do away with the traditional structure of the family to equalize the status of men and women. In the Bolsheviks’ view, women should be freed from the drudgery of household chores and child rearing, achieved by the substitution of state services such as communal dining facilities and day care centers for services provided by women in the home. While historians have debated whether the Bolsheviks wanted to actually eliminate the family as the basic social unit, there is little doubt that they intended to rid society of the influence of tsarist laws and pre-revolutionary customs and traditions regarding marriage, divorce, and women’s role in society, and to establish the equality of women and men.¹⁶

The first two decrees beginning this process were published in December 1917. They

¹⁵ This summary of the legislative changes in family law in the early Soviet Union is based on Becky L. Glass and Margaret K. Stolee, “Family Law in Soviet Russia, 1917 - 1945,” Journal of Marriage and the Family 49 (November 1987) and Goldman, Women, State and Revolution.

¹⁶ For a comprehensive discussion of Bolshevik attitudes toward women and women’s role within the Bolshevik Party in the revolutionary period, see Wood, The Baba and the Comrade.
gave legal status to civil marriage only, rather than religious marriage, and made divorce obtainable at the request of either spouse. A complete Code on Marriage, the Family and Guardianship detailing these and further changes to marital and family law was ratified in October 1918. The 1918 Family Code declared the equality of men and women, in effect abolishing the inferior legal status of women under the pre-revolutionary regime. Women no longer had to seek the permission of their husbands to work, and retained full control of their earnings as well as property; neither spouse could claim the property of the other. The 1918 Code also gave equal rights to illegitimate and legitimate children and entitled children born outside of marriage to parental support.

The procedure for obtaining a divorce was remarkably simple under the new legislation: either spouse could request a divorce without specifying any grounds for the divorce. An uncontested divorce was registered in the local bureau of statistics (known as ZAGS offices), while disagreements over custody, alimony, and child support were referred to the courts. In practice the registration of divorces (as well as marriages, births, and deaths) was hindered by the slow establishment of ZAGS offices in conditions of civil war, increasing the difficulty of discerning patterns in divorce and marriage in this period (data issues are discussed further below). This system of divorce was in place until 1926, when the procedure became even simpler as the courts were no longer involved in divorce cases; a spouse could register a divorce in a ZAGS office and the other spouse would be notified three days later (known as the period of “postcard divorce,” a system which lasted until 1936).  

To put this revolution in family legislation in perspective, virtually no other country in

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the world had implemented such liberal legislation on divorce in the early 1920s (although many western countries had secularized marriage by this time). In the United States, for example, unilateral divorce – divorce at the request of one or both spouses – only first became available in 1969 in the state of California,\(^\text{18}\) nearly a half a century after unilateral divorce became available in the Soviet Union. Similarly, divorce laws in many European countries shifted from no-fault divorce (requiring the consent of both spouses) to unilateral divorce only in the mid-1970s.\(^\text{19}\) Although much of this progressive legislation was later reversed in the USSR in the 1930s, the Soviet Union had nevertheless implemented new policies and institutions that had the potential to revolutionize women’s role in the family and in society in a way that had been untested previously in any other country. Did this legislation have the intended effect of freeing women from the patriarchal norms and customs of the pre-revolutionary period? How did the new laws affect marriage, divorce, and family formation? These questions are taken up below.

c. Predicted effects of the new legislation

It is clear that one would predict an increase in divorce rates upon the adoption of the December 1917 decree and 1918 Family Code, as individuals in unhappy marriages would now


be free to dissolve the marriage in a relatively straightforward manner. But the availability of unilateral divorce would likely influence other aspects of family life and family formation well beyond divorce rates. In particular, the ease of leaving a marriage might lead to an increase in marriage rates, since the option of unilateral divorce effectively decreases the cost of marriage by weakening the binding nature of the marital contract. Perhaps most importantly, the availability of unilateral divorce affects the bargaining position of spouses within existing marriages. Under the previous regime of complex, costly, fault-based divorce, bargaining power within the marriage rested with the spouse who most desired the marriage to remain intact. Under unilateral divorce, bargaining power is shifted to the spouse who most wants to dissolve the marriage. The shift in bargaining power can be manifested in numerous ways, from the mundane – a husband takes on a greater share of household chores – to the substantive – a husband no longer beats his wife because she can now easily exit an abusive marriage. The power of unilateral divorce to fundamentally change household relations has been demonstrated in the United States: in states which implemented unilateral divorce laws in the 1970s, rates of domestic violence and female homicide by their spouse declined more rapidly than in states without unilateral divorce. In other words, it appears that women in abusive relationships gained the power under unilateral divorce to end the marriage or credibly threaten to leave the marriage, both of which were associated with a decline in violence toward women in those states.

It is impossible to know if unilateral divorce benefitted women in this way in the Soviet Union, given the lack of data on domestic violence and spousal homicide in this period.


21 Anecdotal evidence supports this idea, however. According to Goldman A song sung by rural
However, the shift in bargaining power within marriage and on the marriage market would likely have other effects, at least some of which are testable using available data.

One important consequence of the 1918 Family Code is that, through liberal divorce laws, it conferred the ability not only to divorce but to *remarry* as well. This could fundamentally change the options available on the marriage market for men and women. While under normal circumstances the option to remarry may have limited implications for marriage market behavior, demographic circumstances in the early Soviet Union were far from normal: due to the years of Revolution, World War and Civil War, by the early 1920s the number of women in the country significantly exceeded the number of men – and this ‘male shortage’ was particularly acute for men of marriageable age. For example, according to 1926 Census data, the number of women aged 25 to 29 exceeded the number of men of that age by nearly 800,000 in Russia in that year. The sex ratio (the number of men divided by the number of women) for the age 25-29 cohort was .804, compared with a sex ratio for those aged 25-29 in the 1897 Census of .928.  

In this context, liberal divorce laws could exacerbate marital instability, as relatively scarce men divorce and remarry in what has been called ‘serial polygamy,’ i.e. one man successively marrying and divorcing several women. According to one recent study, it is the interaction of the divorce law and the unbalanced sex ratio in the population that could give rise

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women in this period included the lyrics: “Time was when my husband/Used his fists and force/But now he is so tender/For he fears divorce.” Goldman, *Women, the State and Revolution*, 171. See also the essay on domestic violence by Sharon Kowalsky in this volume.

22 As reported in Goskomstat Rossii, *Naselenie Rossii za 100 Let*, 39 – 40.
to such patterns. How one interprets ‘serial polygamy’ is subject to debate: while divorce may represent a negative outcome, for some women it may be preferable to be married and later divorced than to never have been able to marry at all. Without liberal divorce laws, male scarcity could lead to fewer women ever having married than would otherwise be the case. This would also lead to a larger share of children being raised by single mothers, assuming that most children remained with their mothers upon divorce of the parents.

To summarize, the change in family legislation in the Soviet Union is predicted to increase both marriage and divorce rates in the country. The male scarcity resulting from war losses will further increase divorce and (re-) marriage rates under the divorce legislation, but the overall proportion (ever) married in the population is likely to be higher than in the absence of the ability to divorce. While ideally one would also like to examine other possible effects of the family legislation such as the impact on fertility rates, abortion, and out-of-wedlock births, data on these outcomes are unavailable for this period.

II. Demographic change in the early Soviet Union

a. Data

Few reliable data sources are available to assess the impact of these legal changes on marriage and family formation in the early years of the Soviet Union. In light of this, the approach taken here is to piece together the fragmentary data that are available to assess the effect of these changes on women and the family. The main data sources are vital statistics data

from some of the 51 provinces (gubernii)\textsuperscript{24} of Russia, published data from the early Soviet statistical yearbooks of the 1920s, and data from the 1920 and 1926 Censuses. Given the upheaval affecting the country in the 1914-1922 period, virtually all of the data used here are unreliable in one or more ways. This section briefly describes some of the known problems and inconsistencies with the data used in this paper.

\textit{Census data:} The Soviet Union conducted its first census in April 1920, but it omitted about 28 percent of the population due to the civil war and related difficulties; the excluded regions include Belorussia, the Crimea, the Transcaucasus, the Far East, and parts of the Volga, the North Caucasus, and Siberia.\textsuperscript{25} Limited data from this census were published in 1928, consisting of the age and sex distribution of the population by region (by single year of age) and the number of men who participated in the wars of 1914-1917 and 1918-1920, along with the number of people with physical difficulties. These data are used here to document the size of cohorts born in the 1914-1922 period.\textsuperscript{26}

A comprehensive census was conducted in the Soviet Union on December 15, 1926

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\item \textsuperscript{24} The Russian Empire was divided into territorial subdivisions called gubernii. Under the Soviet Union the territorial subdivisions were called gubernii or okrugi (1926) or oblasti, krai, or autonomous republics (1959). These territories are roughly equivalent to U.S. states.
\item \textsuperscript{26} Tsentral’noe statisticheskoe upravlenie SSSR, \textit{Itogi perepisi naseleniia 1920 g.} (Moscow, 1928). The second census conducted in the Soviet Union occurred in 1923, but this census was confined to urban areas, comprising only about 17 percent of the population at the time. Data from this census appear to be unavailable and are not used here.
\end{enumerate}
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covering the entire territory of the country. Detailed data from this census were published from 1928 to 1935, including data on the distribution of the population by age and marital status which are used here.\textsuperscript{27} This census is widely considered to be the highest-quality and most comprehensive census conducted in the Soviet Union, although like other censuses it exhibits problems of ‘age heaping:’ an implausibly large number of people report their ages to end in ‘0’ or ‘5’.\textsuperscript{28} To minimize the effects of age heaping, the census data are aggregated into 5-year age intervals (20-24, 25-29 and so on) to conduct the empirical tests described below. It also appears that children aged 0, 1 and 2 were undercounted in the 1926 census; according to one estimate, the percentage of undercount is 5 percent for the 1924 birth cohort, and 10 and 11 percent, respectively, for the 1925 and 1926 birth cohorts.\textsuperscript{29} The data used here are for the birth cohorts of 1914-1922 so this source of bias is unlikely to affect the trends in cohort size discussed below.

\textit{Vital statistics data:} Prior to the secularization of marriage in 1917-1918, information on marriages, divorces, births and deaths was collected in parish registers maintained by local churches. Following the adoption of the 1918 Family Code, ZAGS offices were established across the country with the responsibility of registering all vital events. The conditions of revolution and civil war greatly hindered the collection of vital statistics data; while in 1921 the Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD) was put in charge of ZAGS administration, it is

\textsuperscript{27} Tsentral’noe statisticheskoe upravlenie SSSR, Vsesoiuznaia perepis naseleniia godu 1926 (Moscow, 1928 - 1935).

\textsuperscript{28} Barbara A. Anderson and Brian D. Silver, “Demographic Analysis and Population Catastrophes in the USSR,” \textit{Slavic Review} 44, 3 (Autumn 1985), 524-525.

reported that the vital statistics data become reasonably reliable only beginning in 1926. The first vital statistics for the country as a whole after 1917 are available only beginning in 1920-1922, and only the average for these years is published. The vital statistics data used here were published in the early Soviet statistical yearbooks. These data are supplemented by vital statistics data published by Stanislaus Kohn in 1932, who reported data on the number of marriages and births for a limited number of provinces for 1914-1917. While Kohn argues that these data are the best available for the period, it is highly likely that vital events were underreported even in well-functioning ZAGS offices in these provinces in these years. Moreover, the data for the selected provinces for the years 1914-1917 are unrepresentative of the


32 Stanislas Kohn, *The Cost of the War to Russia: The Vital Statistics of European Russia During the World War 1914-1917* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1932), 148-152. The main source of the Kohn data is Narodnyi Kommissariat Zdravookhraneniia, *Trudy Komissii po Obsledovaniiu Sanitarnyh Posledstvii Voiny 1914-1920*, M. M. Gran, P. I. Kurkin, and P. A. Kuvshinnikov, eds., v. I (Moscow and Petrograd, 1923). This commission assembled information from the Office of the Medical Inspector, local medical offices and local statistical committees on the number of marriages, births and deaths for some of the provinces of European Russia.
country as a whole, as it is likely the provinces least affected by war and revolution that succeeded in continuing to collect vital registration data. Despite these problems, the data are used here to summarize the trends in marriages, divorces and births during the period of war, revolution, and civil war, subject to the caveats noted above.

b. Trends in vital statistics

Figure 1 illustrates the number of marriages registered from 1912-1926 in seven provinces of the RSFSR, along with those registered in the cities of Moscow and Leningrad.\(^{33}\) With the exception of Arkhangel’sk province, data do not exist for any province for the years 1918-1920. In addition, the data points shown for 1912 are averages for the years 1911-1913, and the 1921 data are averages for the years 1920-1922. Despite the limited data, a number of common trends are evident across provinces: marriages declined significantly between 1913 and 1916, by roughly 20 percent on average across these provinces, reaching a low point in 1916. The number of marriages rebounded in the early 1920s and exceeded the 1914 level in most regions. The crude marriage rate rose sharply in 1918 in Arkhangel’sk province but it is impossible to know whether this was unique to that province or occurred more generally across the country.

Births follow a trend nearly identical to that of marriages: they decline dramatically from 1914 to 1917 (by an average of 40 percent across the provinces for which data are available),

\(^{33}\) The provinces are Arkhangel’sk, Iaroslavl, Nizhnii Novgorod, Saratov, Tula, Tver’, and Vladimir. None of these provinces was part of the front during World War I, and with the exception of Arkhangel’sk and Saratov, they were not directly affected by fighting between Red and White forces during the Civil War.
then increase in the early 1920s (Figure 2). As with marriages, the crude birth rate in Arkhangel’sk province spikes in 1918. Estimates of the crude birth rate for the Soviet interwar territory by Andrei Markevich and Mark Harrison also show an increase in 1918 so this may have occurred beyond Arkhangel’sk (see Figure 3). Census data from 1920 and 1926 corroborate these trends, indicating a sharp decrease in cohort size for children born between 1914 and 1917, an increase in cohort size for those born in 1918, with further increases in the early 1920s as shown in Figure 4. As noted above, the decline in marriages and collapse in the birth rate shown in Figures 1 - 4 are likely to underestimate the actual trends in the country as a whole.

Table 1 collects the available data on other vital statistics. The infant mortality rate (available only for Moscow and Leningrad) was high in this period but was generally trending downward in both cities. The crude divorce rate (divorces per 1,000 population) was relatively high in the large cities of Moscow and Leningrad, and generally rising in the early 1920s. The divorce rate in Arkhangel’sk was more typical of the country as a whole, as the overall crude divorce rate in Russia in 1926 was 1.5. For comparison, the crude divorce rate in the United States in same year was nearly identical at 1.54 divorces per 1,000 population but divorce rates were significantly lower in most European countries.

34 Markevich and Harrison, “Great War, Civil War, and Recovery,” Table A9 (Appendix), 26.

35 Surprisingly, cohort size appears to have increased slightly in 1921-1922 despite the widespread famine in that period.

36 Divorce rates for the European USSR and several European countries in 1925-1926 are given in Goldman, Women, the State, and Revolution, 106-107. The 1926 U.S. divorce rate is from U.S. Bureau of the Census, Statistical Abstract of the United States (Washington, D.C., 1929),
III. A revolution in Soviet marriage? Evidence on the impact of male scarcity and the liberalization of divorce

It is clear that the Revolution, World War I and the Civil War disrupted the normal patterns of family formation and led to the postponement of marriage and child bearing for many women. As demonstrated in the previous section, however, marriage and birth rates appear to have largely recovered by the early 1920s. It is argued here that the long-term legacy of the 1914-1922 period for Soviet women was not the postponement of marriage and child bearing that resulted from the tumult of these years, but instead the change in the institutional foundation of the family according to Soviet law. By severing the links between the child and the marital status of the parents, by giving legal status to illegitimate children and requiring paternal support, and by allowing divorce at the request of either spouse, the Bolsheviks fundamentally changed the marriage contract and the marriage market itself. This section presents evidence on some of the predicted effects of these legislative changes, focusing on the changes to the divorce law.

To begin, by 1926 the marital status of men and women differed dramatically. As shown in Figure 5A, men were much more likely to be married than women, with the proportion married of men reaching nearly 95 percent at age 35 and over. In part this was due to the significant number of widows in the country (Figure 5B), but women were also more than twice as likely to be divorced than men. The share of women and men who were divorced is shown in Figure 5C, with the proportion divorced by age in the United States in 1920 shown in Figure 5D for comparison. As demonstrated by these figures, Soviet women were two to three times more...
likely to be divorced than Soviet men in 1926 (depending on the age group), while U.S. women were only slightly more likely to be divorced than U.S. men. These data support the argument that Soviet men did, in fact, divorce and remarry at much higher rates than did women. This “serial polygamy” idea is further corroborated by data on marriages by previous marital status for the Russian Republic (RSFSR) in 1926: according to these data, in 1926 88,130 male divorcees re-married in that year, compared with 75,507 female divorcees re-marrying in that year. The 1926 Census reports the total number of divorced men age 15 and over in the country as 151,229, compared with 402,633 divorced women. Given this difference in the stock of divorced people by gender, it is clear that divorced men were substantially more likely to re-marry than were divorced women in the Soviet Union.

Men were able to marry, and remarry, at much higher rates than women due to the large gender imbalance in the population that resulted from war casualties. As men become scarcer, their position in the marriage market improves: in France following World War I, for example, in regions with higher war mortality men were more likely to marry, and were more likely to marry women of higher social class, than in regions with lower war mortality. The same is likely to be true in the Soviet Union, except that the consequences of the gender imbalance may

37 This argument is made by Afontsev et. al., “The Urban Household in Russia and the Soviet Union.”
38 Tsentral’noe statisticheskoe upravlenie RSFSR, Estestvennoe dvizhenie naselenia RSFSR za 1926 god (Moscow, 1928), 74 – 77.
have differed due to the ultra-liberal divorce law in effect at that time. In France, divorce was rare both before and after the war; in 1921 0.4% of women age 20 to 29 were divorced, as compared with 2.4% of Soviet women in that age group in 1926.\textsuperscript{40}

The effect of this gender imbalance, i.e. the sex ratio (number of men divided by number of women), on marital status can be tested by examining differences in marital status across the provinces of Russia. The sex ratio varied widely across provinces; for example the sex ratio for the 25-29 age group ranged from .63 in Kostroma province to 1.24 in Murmansk province in 1926. Given the scarcity of men relative to women in Kostroma, one would predict a higher proportion of women married in Murmansk than in Kostroma. Similarly, a higher proportion of men will be married in Kostroma due to their highly favorable position on the marriage market. However, with easily obtainable divorce this impact may be muted – relative to difficult divorce – because scarce men can easily divorce and re-enter the marriage market.

These predictions are tested below using data from the 1926 and 1959 USSR Censuses on the distribution of the population by region, sex, marital status, and five-year age group for 75 regions in the Russian Republic.\textsuperscript{41} The analysis focuses on individuals age 20 to 49 in 1926 (or 1959), i.e. born in 1877 to 1906. This age range is selected because it is the age during which most decisions regarding marriage and fertility are made; it also captures the age cohorts most

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., “Marrying Up,” p. 150.

\textsuperscript{41} Details on the 1959 Census data are provided in Elizabeth Brainerd, “Long-term Consequences of Sex Ratio Imbalance: The Impact of World War II on Russian Women,” unpublished manuscript, Brandeis University, May 2012. The question on marital status in the 1959 census asks only whether an individual is currently married; no information is available on divorce, previous marriages, or widowhood.
affected by the decline in the sex ratio, along with nearby cohorts who were less affected by war deaths. The sex ratio is calculated as the number of men divided by the number of women in each region, where the age group for women is two years younger than that of men in order to capture the typical age difference between bride and groom.\textsuperscript{42} The 1959 period is of interest because divorce was nearly impossible to obtain at this time. Due to the large population losses of World War II, in 1944 Soviet leaders implemented a new Family Code in order to encourage marriage, and particularly child-bearing. The 1944 Family Code also made the procedure for divorce so much more expensive and complicated that it has been described as effectively a “prohibition on divorce.”\textsuperscript{43} If divorce laws affect marriage market behavior, the impact of the unbalanced sex ratios on marital status will differ between these two periods.

The empirical strategy exploits these differences in the sex ratio across provinces to

\textsuperscript{42} For example, the sex ratio for women in the 30-34 age group is calculated as (all men age 30-39)/(all women age 28-37) in each region. While somewhat arbitrary, this definition allows for women marrying older men as well as competing with younger women. This definition is also useful because the numerator and denominators both span 10 years; this helps to minimize measurement error in the sex ratio due to ‘age heaping,’ i.e. an implausible number of individuals with ages ending in either “0” or “5”, indicating lack of knowledge of the exact year of birth. As long as both numerator and denominator contain an equal number of ages ending in “0” and/or “5” – and providing that men and women do not differ systematically in the inaccuracy of their age reporting – this definition will minimize the measurement error due to age misreporting.

identify the effect of unbalanced sex ratios on the marital status of men and women. Ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions using the 1926 and 1959 census data are estimated by 5-year age group using specifications of the following form:

\[ Y_{aj} = \beta_1 R_{aj} + \beta_2 \ln(\text{pop}_{aj}) + \beta_3 \ln(\% \text{ urban}_{aj}) + \mu_k + \varepsilon_{aj} \]  

where \( R_{aj} \) is the sex ratio for age group \( a \) in region \( j \); \( \mu_k \) are large region fixed effects (i.e. dummy variables for large regions such as Central, Far East, Siberia, etc.), and \( Y_{aj} \) is an indicator of marital status such as the proportion married, the proportion divorced or the proportion single.

As has become standard in the economics literature investigating the impact of sex ratios on marriage market outcomes, all regressions also include a control for the log of the size of the population of the opposite sex which controls for the thickness of the marriage market. The large region dummies control for regional attributes such as attitudes towards marriage and divorce. Because urban and rural marriage markets may differ a great deal – in culture, norms, and ‘thickness’ – the regressions include a control for the share of the urban population in each region. The coefficient of interest is \( \beta_1 \), which indicates the sign and size of any impact of the sex ratio on the proportion married (divorced, single) of men or women across regions.

Descriptive statistics for these data are given in Table 2 (averages across all age groups are presented). Table 2 illustrates the low sex ratios in both 1926 and 1959 resulting from war losses, and the lower marriage rates for women in both years. For 1926 the data also reflect the higher rates of widowhood and divorce for women compared with men.

The first set of regressions uses the proportion of women or men who are single as the dependent variable; results are shown in the first two columns of Table 3. For women, a lower sex ratio is associated with a higher share of single women; this effect is statistically significant for all age groups. Greater male scarcity (i.e. a lower sex ratio) also makes it much less likely
that men remain single, as shown in column 2. The effect of gender imbalance on the likelihood of divorce is weaker, but is suggestive that greater male scarcity increases the likelihood of divorce for women; results for men are statistically insignificant. These results are consistent with the ‘serial polygamy’ view, in which greater male scarcity leads to higher divorce rates, and men – but not women – re-marrying after the divorce. As discussed previously, this pattern could only occur in the presence of liberal divorce laws.

The regressions shown in Table 4 further probe the impact of the divorce laws on marital status by comparing results for 1926 and 1959. As noted previously, the 1959 period is of interest because of the difficulty of obtaining a divorce at this time; the 1944 Family Code had made the procedure prohibitively complex and expensive. If divorce laws affect one's propensity to marry, and re-marry, the impact of the unbalanced sex ratios on marital status will differ between these two periods.

The results shown in columns (1) and (2) of Table 4 indicate that, in both 1926 and 1959, regions with greater male scarcity (a lower sex ratio) experienced a lower proportion of women married; these results are statistically significant at less than the 1 percent level for most age groups. Similarly, men were much more likely to be married in regions with low sex ratios in both years (columns (3) and (4)). These results are as expected, indicating that in conditions of greater male scarcity women are less likely to marry and men are more likely to marry.

In order to discern any differential impact between 1926 and 1959, the coefficients in Table 4 can be transformed into standardized coefficients which re-scale the coefficients so that they are in comparable units. The results of this exercise are shown in Figure 6. To interpret these graphs, the coefficient on the sex ratio for the 30-34 age group for women in 1926 (for

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44 Ibid.
example) indicates that a one standard deviation decrease in the sex ratio is associated with a 5.4 percentage point decrease in the proportion married for women. As is clear from Figure 6, the effect of male scarcity on the proportion married for both men and women is much larger in 1959 than in 1926. In other words, with the easily accessible divorce of 1926, male scarcity had a smaller impact on the share of the population who were married than did the male scarcity of 1959. The difficulty of divorcing in 1959 appears to have made men less likely to marry and particularly to remarry, which had boosted the proportion of women married in 1926. This suggests that the “serial polygamy” phenomenon of the 1920s occurred to a much greater degree in the post-World War I period than in the post-World War II period, most likely due to the difficulty of divorce after the second World War.

IV. Conclusion

The cataclysmic events of 1914-1922 had a profound effect on family formation in Russia during this period. Marriage and birth rates declined sharply in 1914-1917 before recovering to, or exceeding, earlier levels in the mid-1920s. Divorce became much more common, and for men, re-marriage emerged as a new and widespread marital institution in the wake of divorce. Women were much more likely to remain divorced.

By this standard it seems that the Bolsheviks succeeded in changing the traditional structure of the family in the Soviet Union. Women were now able to leave abusive marriages, and it is likely that the change in divorce legislation gave women greater bargaining power if they chose to remain in a marriage. But it is also likely that the legislation had unintended consequences, given the male scarcity that women faced in this period. Evidence on the aftermath of World War I in France and World War II in the Soviet Union indicates that rates of
out-of-wedlock childbearing and abortion both increased in regions with higher levels of sex ratio imbalance, and it is likely that these patterns characterized Russia in the 1914-1922 period as well.\footnote{Abramitzky et al. “Marrying Up,” 137; Brainerd, “Long-Term Consequences,” 19-21.} Given the ease of divorce in the Soviet Union after 1918, one would expect that more children were raised by single mothers in the 1920s than would otherwise have been the case, but the impact on children of the changes in marriage and divorce laws and demographic patterns remains to be explored. It is also possible that the marital instability that took hold in this period had long-term effects on the institution of marriage itself in the country, leading individuals to view marriage as transitory rather than a long-term commitment. These conclusions remain speculative, of course, until more data emerge on family structure and marital stability for this period of Soviet history.
Selected Bibliography


Tsentral’noe statisticheskoe upravlenie (TsSU), *Statisticheskii ezhegodnik 1922 i 1923 g. (vypusk pervyi)* (Moscow, 1924).

Tsentral’noe statisticheskoe upravlenie RSFSR, *Estestvennoe dvizhenie naseleniia RSFSR za 1926 god* (Moscow, 1928).

Tsentral’noe statisticheskoe upravlenie SSSR, *Itogi perepisi naseleniia 1920 g.* (Moscow, 1928).

__________, *Narodnoe khoziaistvo Soiuza SSR v tsifrakh: kratkii spravochnik* (Moscow, 1924).

__________, *Narodnoe khoziaistvo Soiuza SSR v tsifrakh, god 2-oj* (Moscow, 1925).

__________, *Vsesoiuznaia perepis’ naseleniia goda 1926* (Moscow, 1928 - 1935).


Fig. 1 Total marriages, selected regions, 1912 - 1926 (thousands)

Sources: see Appendix.
Figure 2. Total births, selected regions, 1912 - 1926 (thousands)

Sources: see Appendix.
Fig. 3  Crude birth rate, 1910 - 1926

![Crude birth rate graph]

Fig. 4. Cohort size by year of birth, RSFSR

![Cohort size graph]

Sources: see Appendix.

Table 1. Selected vital statistics of the Russian Empire and early Soviet Union
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Infant mortality rate (deaths &lt; 1 yr per 1000 births)</th>
<th>Crude divorce rate (divorces per 1,000 pop.)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Moscow</td>
<td>Leningrad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1912</td>
<td>268</td>
<td>238</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1913</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1914</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1915</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1916</td>
<td>218</td>
<td>270</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1917</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1918</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1919</td>
<td></td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1920</td>
<td></td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921</td>
<td>232</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1922</td>
<td>245</td>
<td>228</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1923</td>
<td>159</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1924</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1925</td>
<td>134</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1926</td>
<td>134</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: see Appendix
Figure 5. Marital Status by Age, 1926 Census Data

A. Percentage Married by Age, 1926

B. Percentage Widowed by Age, 1926

C. Percentage Divorced by Age, 1926
D. Percentage Divorced by Age, U.S., 1920

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>20-24</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-29</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-34</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-44</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45-54</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55-64</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65+</td>
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</tr>
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</table>

% Divorced
Table 2. Summary Statistics, RSFSR 1926 Census

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Min.</th>
<th>Max.</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>AGE 20 - 49, 1926 CENSUS</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex ratio</td>
<td>.809</td>
<td>.126</td>
<td>.600</td>
<td>1.66</td>
<td>474</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion single</td>
<td>.119</td>
<td>.120</td>
<td>.008</td>
<td>.528</td>
<td>474</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion married</td>
<td>.759</td>
<td>.100</td>
<td>.450</td>
<td>.929</td>
<td>474</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion widowed</td>
<td>.095</td>
<td>.082</td>
<td>.004</td>
<td>.341</td>
<td>474</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion divorced</td>
<td>.017</td>
<td>.009</td>
<td>.002</td>
<td>.056</td>
<td>474</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion single</td>
<td>.167</td>
<td>.192</td>
<td>.008</td>
<td>.709</td>
<td>474</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion married</td>
<td>.804</td>
<td>.198</td>
<td>.263</td>
<td>.979</td>
<td>474</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion widowed</td>
<td>.011</td>
<td>.011</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td>.082</td>
<td>474</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion divorced</td>
<td>.007</td>
<td>.003</td>
<td>.002</td>
<td>.023</td>
<td>474</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Min.</th>
<th>Max.</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>AGE 20 - 49, 1959 CENSUS</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex ratio</td>
<td>.771</td>
<td>.192</td>
<td>.427</td>
<td>1.78</td>
<td>450</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion married</td>
<td>.642</td>
<td>.128</td>
<td>.328</td>
<td>.884</td>
<td>450</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion married</td>
<td>.747</td>
<td>.281</td>
<td>.159</td>
<td>.982</td>
<td>450</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3. Correlation between Sex Ratio and Marital Status, RSFSR 1926 Census  
(Coefficient on *Sex Ratio* is shown in each cell)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent variable</th>
<th>Proportion single</th>
<th>Proportion divorced</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Women (1)</td>
<td>Men (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age group:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-24</td>
<td>-.313*</td>
<td>-.359*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.191)</td>
<td>(.197)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-29</td>
<td>-.197***</td>
<td>.172**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.078)</td>
<td>(.084)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-34</td>
<td>-.150***</td>
<td>.229***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.052)</td>
<td>(.049)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-39</td>
<td>-.085**</td>
<td>.182***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.038)</td>
<td>(.050)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-44</td>
<td>-.109***</td>
<td>.158***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.039)</td>
<td>(.045)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45-49</td>
<td>-.088**</td>
<td>.126***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.035)</td>
<td>(.037)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

***Significant at the 1%, **5%, *10% levels. Each cell shows the coefficient on *Sex Ratio* (number of men divided by number of women) for OLS regressions run separately by age group, marital status and gender. All regressions include large region dummies, % urban, and log(male pop.) (for women) or log(female pop.) (for men). Standard errors corrected for clustering within provinces. Regressions are weighted by population size. N = 76 for all regressions.
Table 4. Correlation between Sex Ratio and Proportion Married, RSFSR 1926 and 1959 Censuses
(Coefficient on Sex Ratio is shown in each cell)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent variable</th>
<th>Proportion married</th>
<th>Proportion married</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Women, 1926 (1)</td>
<td>Women, 1959 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Men, 1926 (3)</td>
<td>Men, 1959 (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age group:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-24</td>
<td>.347* (.210)</td>
<td>.364* (.217)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.239*** (.051)</td>
<td>-.026 (.024)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-29</td>
<td>.195*** (.075)</td>
<td>-.192** (.084)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.188*** (.059)</td>
<td>-.231*** (.055)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-34</td>
<td>.248*** (.064)</td>
<td>-.222*** (.052)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.249*** (.071)</td>
<td>-.255*** (.048)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-39</td>
<td>.242*** (.059)</td>
<td>-.175*** (.049)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.287*** (.063)</td>
<td>-.156*** (.040)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-44</td>
<td>.169*** (.048)</td>
<td>-.170*** (.042)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.356*** (.096)</td>
<td>-.111*** (.022)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45-49</td>
<td>.133** (.050)</td>
<td>-.159*** (.035)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.409*** (.121)</td>
<td>-.114*** (.015)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

***Significant at the 1%, **5%, *10% levels. Each cell shows the coefficient on Sex Ratio (number of men divided by number of women) for OLS regressions run separately by age group, marital status and gender. All regressions include large region dummies, % urban, and log(male pop.) (for women) or log(female pop.) (for men). Standard errors corrected for clustering within oblasts. Regressions are weighted by population size. N = 76 for all 1926 regressions; N=75 for all 1959 regressions.
Figure 6. Standardized coefficients from regressions in Table 4

Note: graphs show standardized coefficients from the regressions shown in Table 4 above. Standardized coefficients are calculated as $\beta_{SR}/SD_{MAR}$, where $\beta_{SR}$ is the coefficient on the sex ratio shown in Table 4 and $SD_{MAR}$ is the standard deviation of the proportion married in each age group.
Appendix: Data sources

Figures 1 and 2: Total number of marriages and births

Marriages and births, 1913-1917:
Kohn, Cost of the War to Russia (1932), 148-149 and 151-152..

Marriages and births, 1912, 1921, 1923:
For 1911-13 all data, 1920-22 all data, and 1923 pop. total, births, marriages, divorce, CBR, CMR, CDR: Trudy tsentral'nogo statisticheskogo upravleniia (TsSU), Tom VIII vypusk 5, Statisticheskii ezhegodnik 1922 i 1923 g. (Moscow), 350 (1911-1913); 351 (1920-22); 352 (1923). Note that this data source gives vital statistics for the average of 1911-13, which is indicated in Figures 1 and 2 as the 1912 data point; similarly for 1920-22 which is shown in Figures 1 and 2 as the 1921 data point. An additional source for 1923 total births, marriages, and divorces is TsSU, Narodnoe khoziaistvo soiuza SSR v tsifrakh, statisticheskii spravochnik (Moscow 1925), 40-42.

Marriages and births, 1926:
TsSU RSFSR, Estestvennoe dvizhenie naseleniia RSFSR za 1926 god (Moscow, 1928), 22-51.

Arkhangelsk guberniia data source for all data series:
Arkhangel'skoe gubernskoe Statisticheskoe Biuro (Arkhangel'sk, 1925), 154.


Figure 3: Additional sources for crude birth rate:

Moscow, Leningrad, Saratov: reported in Wheatcroft (1997), from official publications of local statistical offices. Russia (all, urban, rural crude birth rate): Goskomstat Rossii, Naselenie Rossii za 100 let (1897-1997); Estestvennoe dvizhenie naseleniia RSFSR za 1926 god (Moscow, 1928).


Figure 4: Census data:

Tsentral’noe statisticheskoe upravlenie SSSR, Itogi perepisi naseleniia 1920 g. (Moscow, 1928).
Tsentral’noe statisticheskoe upravlenie SSSR, Vsesoiuznaia perepis’ naseleniia v godu 1926 (Moscow, 1928 - 1935).
Table 1: Selected vital statistics

For infant mortality rates 1910, 1912, 1925, 1926, and for Moscow and St. Petersburg 1911-1913, 1916, 1921-1926:

Estestvennoe dvizhenie naselenia RSFSR za 1926 god (Moscow, 1928), xxxiii.

1926 CBR, marriage rate, divorce rate, M/F ratio at birth, IMR:

Estestvennoe dvizhenie naselenia RSFSR za 1926 god (Moscow, 1928), 2-7.

Male and female births, male and female infant mortality, marriages and divorces 1926:

Estestvennoe dvizhenie naselenia RSFSR za 1926 god (Moscow, 1928), 22-51.

Moscow data sources:
1913-1917 Cost of the War to Russia, 48., 72, 73, 96, 149.
1911-13, 1916, 1921-1926 IMR: Estest. dvizh. nas. RSFSR. xxxiii
1925 (CBR), 1926: Estest. dvizh. nas. RSFSR, 7, 13
1921 (average of 1920-1922): Statisticheskii ezhegodnik 1922 i 1923, 351.
1923: Narodnoe khoz. siyuza SSR v tsifrakh (Moscow 1925), 40.

Leningrad data sources:
CBR 1913-1917: Cost of the War to Russia, 96

No. of marriages 1913-17: Cost of the War to Russia, 149.
1925, 1926: Estest. dvizh. nas. RSFSR, 7, 9
1921 (average of 1920-1922): Statisticheskii ezhegodnik 1922 i 1923, 351.
1923: Narodnoe khoz. soiuza SSR v tsifrakh (Moscow 1925), 40.