

# The history of childbirth as the subject of social and humanitarian studies in Russia\*

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## Abstract

The purpose of this article is an interdisciplinary comparative historical analysis of historical, ethnographic and sociological studies of maternity culture in Russia between the 19th and 21st centuries. The topic was first announced in the 19th century in ethnographic and historical medical studies. An interdisciplinary framework was laid: ethnographers focused on studying the traditional maternity culture, and medical historians concentrated on the development of professional obstetrics. From the 1920s, the superiority of Soviet obstetrics was being substantiated in historical and medical works. During the 1960s and 1970s, demographic and sociological studies of birth rate based upon quantitative methods became relevant. A significant gap between domestic and Western historiography was observed in the 1970s. The topic received an impetus for the development under the new methodological situation of the 1990s. Ethnographers were proving the stability of folk obstetrics amongst the commoners. Social anthropologists turned to the study of the “labour rite” in the urban environment, putting forms of interaction between the doctor and the patient and the symbols of the birth and postnatal period, rather than “institutions”, at the centre of the study. Sociologists unearthed the costs of an etocratic (statist) gender order in the reproductive sphere, which led to women becoming dependent upon medical institutions, turning them from active participants in the process of childbirth into “fragile patients”. Gender historians examined the culture of childbirth through the influence of patriarchy, dependence and medicalisation, and actively introduced a qualitative methodology, which was based upon the study of women’s autobiographical texts. The development of the topic in accordance with new approaches and methodological trends was hampered by the rigid interdisciplinary framework, the conservatism of historical and medical works, the dominance of descriptive research and the lack of analytical work with vast generalisations.

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## Keywords

history of medicine, sociology of medicine, historiography of parturition, history of childbirth, history of obstetrics, maternity culture, medicalisation of childbirth

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The history of childbirth is an integral part of the social history of Russia. Without it, the picture of female history and everyday life, as well as the history of Russian medicine and its social anthropology and socio-

logy, would not be complete. The history of childbirth, being considered interdisciplinary, aroused interest amongst a broad range of specialists in Western European and American historiography (Pushkareva and

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Mitsyuk 2017). Since the 1970s, studies of maternity culture abroad have gone through a methodological turn caused by the introduction of new areas: gender theory, successes of the social history of medicine, the history of everyday life, and feminist anthropology. Childbirth ceased to be part of the history of medicine and was considered in a wide social context. Such a research situation prompted us to turn to the analysis of Russian historiography and ask several questions: how relevant is this topic to Russian social and humanitarian knowledge? What methodological approaches and sources are used by researchers? Have our researchers managed to make the transition from the history of medicine and the traditional history of obstetrics to the history of childbirth in Russia in a wide social context?

Having set that research task, we based it upon an interdisciplinary comparative historical approach and aimed to analyse the widest possible range of works – historical, ethnographical and sociological, connected with the history of medicine in one way or another. Our research tasks were aimed at identifying the main tendencies in the study of the culture of childbirth in Russia in the past, and determining the presence or absence of tendencies characteristic of Western European and American historiography. We believe that the results of our work can be useful to both Russian and foreign medical historians, sociologists and social anthropologists.

## Obstetrics as a subject of ethnological and historical medical research

The interdisciplinarity of the research framework was laid in the works of scientists of pre-Soviet times. Ethnographers considered it their duty to describe the practices of traditional obstetric care they observed in the rural environment (Haruzina 1906). The labour rite was an integral part of the study of life cycle rituals. Russian ethnographers of the 19th century developed a field research programme for the labour rites. In the works of the first Russian female scientists one can find a lot of references to how the practises that we now call “participant observation” and “in-depth interview” (the necessity for compassion to respondents and “participation” and empathy from the researcher (Oakley 1984)) were carried out.

At the beginning of the 20th century Russian science was supplemented with publications on the history of professional obstetrics compiled by representatives of the medical society (Gruzdev 1910). They studied the activities of maternity wards, shelters, clinics and obstetric departments of universities, and meticulously accumulated source material. The stages from “the birth of Russian obstetrics” at the end of the 18th century to the emergence of a “clear national colouring” of Rus-

sian obstetric care at the beginning of the 20th century (Gruzdev 1910, p. 5) were highlighted by V.S. Gruzdev for the first time in the institutional history of obstetrics. The juxtaposition of clinical obstetrics and primitive home practices was the general direction of research. Despite the existence of a nominal line between medical historical and ethnographic studies and the obvious opposition of scientific and folk obstetrics, doctors drew attention to the labour process of the commoners (Mitsyuk and Pushkareva 2017). Local (Zemstvo) obstetricians, who provided home services and therefore were familiar with the inmost details of the lives of common people, were often collectors of ethnographic material (Zhbankov 1891, Pokrovskiy 1884, Benzenger 1879). From the beginning of the 12th century, medical and anthropological research started to be carried out in the urban environment. The authors noted changes in the reproductive behaviour of city women: their early puberty, reduced birth rate, the number of children in families and greater freedom in using medical methods of birth control (Benzenger 1879).

## Demographic and sociological perspectives (the 1920s – early 1990s)

Perturbation factors of the first half of the 20th century affecting demography contributed to an increase in the number of studies analysing ways of increasing birth rate. Their vector had changed drastically: the ethnographic study of obstetric care was rejected, and the topic was transferred from the historic cultural to the medical sphere. The authors of the works were exclusively physicians who believed that only a doctor can write an objective history of medical institutions. This approach formed the disciplinary framework for decades. Descriptiveness became typical for works on the history of obstetrics, and the subject of research was the presentation of the progressive development of individual medical institutions. Obstetric facilities were presented as part of the Maternity and Infancy Care (Bravaya 1929, Konyus 1954). Researchers substantiated the superiority of Soviet obstetrics over foreign, and questioned the experience of pre-revolutionary Russia. High infant mortality in tsarist Russia was associated with the lack of maternity hospitals and the absence of professional midwives (Konyus 1954, p. 18). The work of charitable organisations was viewed as amateurish.

With the numerical dominance of research on the history of obstetric university departments and biographies of obstetricians of the past, M.F. Levi in 1950 made an attempt to outline a holistic history of obstetric care in the USSR, where it was widely believed that the history of obstetrics was “not the history of obstetric care in the strict sense of the word” (Levi 1950, p. 7). His work was also aimed at proving the success of

Soviet medicine. He called obstetric care outside of clinical structures “torture”, and declared obstetric care at home before 1917 “a germinal stage in the history of obstetrics” (Levi 1950, p. 188).

The authors of such works praised the successes of Soviet obstetrics, using exclusively statistics from maternity hospitals and antenatal clinics. Only by the 1960s–1970s, when the statistics became relatively acceptable and comparable with the European ones, were the historico-demographic and sociological publications given an impetus (Darskiy 1979, Antonov 1980). Any quantitative data were absolutised; nobody had yet begun to collect field material. The Soviet social experiment gave numerous reasons to analyse the acquisitions obtained by mothers under the system of socialist protection of maternity, but the negative consequences of the introduction of clinicism in the literature of that period were not being discussed.

However, despite such a tendentiousness of research and the dominance of an orientation towards a “politically correct” line, it was within the framework of historico-demographic research of the 1970s that new subjects were revealed. A.G. Vishnevsky, relying upon a large amount of statistical data, came to the conclusion about the formation of a “new type of birth rate” in post-reform Russia (Brachnost, rozhdaemost, smertnost... 1977, p. 105–135). The approach of B.N. Mironov (Brachnost, rozhdaemost, smertnost... 1977, p. 83–105), who tried to recreate the socio-physiological model of the demographic behaviour of the Russian commoner in the 19th–20th centuries, was considered innovative.

The significant gap between domestic and foreign science became more prominent in the 1970s, when Western sociology and ethnology made a big leap towards the modernisation of humanitarian knowledge. The history of childbirth turned out to be presented in many multidisciplinary studies as a multidimensional process with many storylines, which brought to life the need to analyse new sources and apply new scientific methods and approaches. In the domestic medical literature, the history of childbirth still continued to be regarded as identical to the history of obstetrics.

## **The influence of the anthropological turn and the gender concept on the new development of the subject in the 1990s–2010s**

The study of obstetric care and maternity culture received an impetus for development in the new methodological situation of the early 1990s, related to the development of gender history and the history of everyday life. There was a powerful surge of ethnographic

and historico-anthropological studies, which allowed to change the established beliefs, including the Soviet view of women’s everyday life (Shepanskaya 1994). The fall of the Iron Curtain provided American cultural anthropologist D. Ransel of Indiana University with an opportunity to study women’s everyday life in the Russian outback. He was the first to use the new methodology of generational analysis, showing with its help how the practices related to maternity were reproduced and transformed, and also how the ideology of strict birth rate control under maintaining multiple abortion practices (Ransel 2000) was established under the influence of social and political conditions and the hardships of the Soviet collective farm life.

Inconspicuously but irreversibly, a methodological revolution in science, the necessity of which was mentioned a decade earlier by the American historian R. Porter (Porter 1985), finally took place. “Patients” became the research focus of representatives of the humanities. Social anthropologists were interested in the peculiarities of the behaviour and self-awareness of women in the hospital settings, the forms of interaction between them and doctors, speech images and ways of speaking (discourses) about obstetric care and symbolism of the birth and postnatal period (Rodiny, deti, povituhi... 2001). More often did ethnographers now consider obstetric care as a special rite and an element of urban culture, analyse its symbolic manifestations and describe verbal (statements of pregnant women, women in labour and doctors) and visual (clothing, special items, photographs) expressions of the obstetric culture in the past and present.

Under the influence of the development of gender history and the legitimisation of the topic of sexuality (Pushkareva 1997, Kon 2010), historians of everyday life, who studied the life of the imperial family, stopped ignoring the intimate details of their private lives related to pregnancy, childbirth and breastfeeding (Zimin 2016).

Sociologists demonstrated new vectors in the study of reproductive health. In the 1990s, social anthropologist M. Rivkin-Fish (USA, University of Kentucky) conducted health research in Russia and proposed to consider reproductive behaviour as a key to understanding a number of social and political processes in a post-socialist state (Rivkin-Fish 2005). Representatives of St Petersburg School of Sociology (Zdravomyslova and Temkina 2009) managed to prove that the Soviet reproductive culture was repressive and dismissive of the desires of women, was noted for its low sexual enlightenment, widespread criminal abortion and aggressive obstetrics. For the first time in a century and a half of studying reproductive behaviour and childbirth, researchers began to show preference to quality techniques. Clinical obstetrics in the USSR and Russia began to be considered by them under the categories of pathologisation and medicalisation. Etacritic gen-

der order in the field of reproduction turned into a dependence of women upon medical institutions, turning them from active participants in the prenatal and labour process into “fragile patients”, and childbirth itself as a normal stage in a woman’s life – into a page in her anamnesis (Zdravomyslova and Temkina 2009). Studies by Russian sociologists attracted particular attention in the West (Rodin 2015).

The interest of historians of everyday life to the topic (Belova 2010, Veremenko 2011, Mitsyuk and Pushkareva 2015) was embodied in the work of a scientific group that studied maternity culture in the history of Russia at the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology of the Russian Academy of Sciences (2016). Female historians, supporters of a gender approach to analysing the past, undertook “introducing” the important page of women’s everyday life, which had been ignored in domestic historical science and pushed into the field of medical history (Mitsyuk and Pushkareva 2016, Belova 2016). The phenomenon of the medicalisation of childbirth, which showed that sticking medical labels on normal processes in the lives of women had social consequences, was subjected to historical analysis for the first time. The authors of the project came to the conclusion that the prenatal and postnatal conditions common for women began to be defined and regarded as medical, falling out of the sphere of culture and into the sphere of influence and power of doctors and medical staff. Everything related to emotional experiences around the topic of obstetric care became a special topic for social anthropologists. In addition to the contribution to gender ethnology itself, this research position contributed to the advancement of the previously underdeveloped in Russia direction of the social history of medicine.

Against the backdrop of the work of their colleagues-representatives of the humanities and their attraction of new research approaches, representatives of

the medical society found themselves sidelined from revising the topic of the history of obstetric care. Doctors continued to study the institutional history of obstetric practice, scientific knowledge and clinical obstetrics. Their interests were selective and very fragmented: the history of university departments, maternity hospitals and the formation of clinical obstetrics in local spaces (Sharova 2017). They attracted very few new sources; the main emphasis was placed on the published ones. It was noted that, despite the extensive material collected on the topic, the main attention was concentrated around the development of scientific knowledge, and the approach of Soviet historiography, according to which the history of childbirth was considered as an integral part of social policy in the field of Maternity and Infancy Care and the history of paediatrics, was preserved (Albitskiy, Mikirtichan, Sher 2018).

So, over more than one and a half centuries of its independent existence, the history of childbirth has come a difficult way to take a place not only in the scientific knowledge, but also in the social and humanitarian one. The ethnographic study of folk practices can be considered its beginning, and its development was carried out predominantly in the historical and medical way. In the Soviet post-war period, it was being developed in demographic and sociological studies. Only in the 1990s did specialists in the field of social and humanitarian knowledge – historians of everyday life and ethnographers, social anthropologists and medical historians, social and gender historians – manage to convincingly substantiate the significance of the problem of sociocultural and ethnic traditions of childbirth in the current social processes in Russia. At the same time, medical historians often refuse to take into account the achievements of the representatives of the humanities; their work is dominated by descriptiveness, which prevents their integration into the European and world studies of reproductive culture.

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