

## Protection of mothers and children in the Russian Empire and the development of the Soviet child health care system

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This article addresses the establishment of a welfare system for mothers and children in the Russian Empire. The research demonstrates that in the 18th century, the foundations were laid for medical and social support for children in life-threatening situations (such as orphans and infants born out of wedlock). As early as the era of Peter the Great in the 18th century, attention was drawn to the need measures to protect foundlings, and during the reign of Catherine the Great, state and charitable institutions were founded to care of children in this category. It is demonstrated that in the 19th century, the key causes of the emergence of understanding and demands for systematic measures by the state and society in providing maternal and child health care were as follows: the classification of pediatrics as an independent medical field; the creation of departments for children's diseases and hygiene at Russian universities; research by zemstvo doctors, the first professors of hygiene and pediatricians on health conditions and the causes of the high mortality rate among children; and the formation of public and professional organizations focused on protecting children's health. The opinion is put forward that at the beginning of the 20th century, Russia stood on the threshold of the construction of a system for maternal and child health care, which included decisive participation by the state. A hypothesis is advanced that theoretical approaches and organizational technologies in the field of medical care for children, and the implementation of foreign experience in the Russian Empire, became important components of the Soviet state system for maternal and child health care.

**Keywords:** *history of health care, Russian Empire, mother and child health care, Soviet health system*

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### Introduction

A state system supporting mother and infant welfare began to emerge in the Russian Empire from the second half of the eighteenth century. Its key elements may be considered as the establishment, alongside private and public charity, of a state system of socialisation for

children in need of assistance and support, an understanding of the need for the state to pay significantly greater and more wide-ranging attention to child health care, and the adoption of international practices.

This article explores the history of child health care in Russia, and explains that, for all its innovation and effectiveness, the maternal and child health care system developed in the totalitarian Soviet state was inseparably linked to the pre-revolutionary system.

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### **Child health care in the Russian Empire in the 18th and 19th centuries**

The history of the Russian Empire after Peter the Great can be divided into two periods: pre-reform and post-reform. Emperor Alexander II's reforms fuelled the development of practically all areas of state and public life, including child health care.

#### ***The establishment of a state system of socialisation for children in need of assistance and support (in the eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth centuries)***

The origins of the state child health care system in Russia dates back to the early eighteenth century. Even under Peter the Great, there was a clear understanding of the need for the state to take care of children born out of wedlock. In 1712 and 1714, Peter the Great issued decrees on the establishment of hospitals for "children of shame" (i.e. illegitimate children). Similar initiatives were continued by his successors. For example, Empress Catherine I issued a decree in 1726 for special homes to be found to take in and care for illegitimate children, and Empress Elizabeth Petrovna issued one in 1747 on the need to establish homes to care for illegitimate children. These decrees covered many aspects of the children's legal status. They were aimed at legally protecting the lives and interests of orphan and illegitimate children — the most vulnerable and defenceless sections of the population, and paved the way for further reforms [1].

In the second half of the eighteenth century, what may be regarded as the first step in the creation of a Russian mother and child welfare system took place. On 1st September 1763, Catherine the Great signed a proclamation to establish a foundling home in Moscow. The main reasons for opening the Imperial Foundling Home<sup>1</sup> were the significant number of children born out of wedlock, and the very high infant mortality rate. We do not have reliable figures for infant mortality in the eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth, but judging by individual sources it was extremely high: one in three children did

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<sup>1</sup> The following passage from the proclamation is pivotal to our argument that the Russian Empire had a state system: "we determine that it shall be a state institution".

not live to their first birthday [2]. In addition, the abandonment, or even murder, of illegitimate babies was widespread. The need to do something about this unhappy situation was highlighted by Mikhail Lomonosov in his well-known letter to Count Ivan Shuvalov, "On the preservation and proliferation of the Russian people", of 1761. He proposed that shelters be established "to avoid such terrible wickedness and to preserve the lives of innocent babes".

These factors led to action being taken in the second half of the eighteenth century to implement specific medical and social measures regarding the care, protection, and upbringing of children, primarily so-called "children of shame" and orphans. This social policy was marked by three significant administrative measures: the opening of imperial foundling homes in Moscow in 1763, and in Saint Petersburg in 1770, the establishment of departments of public welfare in 1775, and the establishment of Empress Maria's Department of Institutions in 1796.

A plan for the imperial foundling homes, incorporating not only shelters but also a maternity home, a hospital and teaching facilities, was presented to Catherine the Great by Ivan Betskoi. These institutions were meant "to protect the lives of infants born into poverty, and educate them for the benefit of society" [3].

The second step was the establishment in the country's provinces of "departments of public welfare", whose responsibilities included establishing and running orphanages, and caring for illegitimate children and foundlings [4].

One way in which children were provided with medical and social support was through charitable activities, including those of the royal household. For example, the history of Empress Maria's Department of Institutions starts in 1796, when an imperial decree made Paul I's wife, Empress Maria Feodorovna, the head of all Russia's social welfare institutions, including the imperial foundling homes. Under her, over more than 30 years, a network of charitable institutions (including for deaf and blind children, and for poor mothers giving birth), orphanages and shelters was established. After her death, an order issued by Emperor Nicholas I on 26th October 1828 established the Fourth Section of the Imperial Chancellory, later known as Empress Maria's Department of Institutions. The initiative

to establish the Imperial Philanthropic Society in 1816 also came from the royal family.

This period also saw the establishment of children's hospitals. The first of these opened in Saint Petersburg in 1834, and was the second children's in-patient facility in Europe [5]. In 1842, a children's hospital opened in Moscow. (This is now the Filatov Hospital.) In 1844, the world's first hospital for young children opened in Saint Petersburg. As such, there were three children's hospitals (with a total of 240 beds) in pre-reform Russia.

It is true that the emerging child health care system did not solve the main problem of pre-reform Russia – child mortality. Even so, in attempting to do so the government and the public did achieve some successes. First, they created a system of medical and social assistance for the most defenceless children – illegitimate children and orphans. Second, the foundling homes and children's hospitals built up experience of not only clinical but also preventive paediatrics (primarily preventing infectious diseases and hospital-acquired infections, and performing vaccinations). Third, the imperial foundling homes became, in their way, experimental laboratories – research centres for developing and testing baby formula.

Another positive aspect of child health care in the pre-reform period was that the conditions were created for paediatrics to become an independent science and academic subject, and, accordingly, for child health care to be seen as a systemic issue.

In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, preserving the lives of infants became a priority. The issue drew the attention of the medical community and professional teachers of medicine. For example, in his letter “On the preservation and proliferation of the Russian people” Lomonosov proposed, aside from establishing foundling homes, carrying out measures to reduce morbidity among newborn children, prohibiting the baptism of children in cold water, and distributing specialist literature to midwives. The first Russian professor of medicine at the Imperial University of Moscow, Semyon Zybelin, in his treatise “Comments on a means by which a not unimportant cause of the slow growth of the population, in the shape of improper food given to infants in the first months of their life, might be prevented” (1780) raised the issue of

correct feeding as a means of reducing infant mortality. The first Russian guide to obstetrics, Nestor Ambodik-Maksimovich's *The art of birthing or the science of midwifery* (1784) devotes a whole section to illnesses of newborn children. In addition, the need for state measures to protect children's health is discussed in dissertations by I. L. Danilevsky (“The government is the best doctor”; for a doctorate in medicine, 1760) and N. Rozhdestvensky (“Discussions of government measures to preserve the life and health of the people”; for a doctorate in law, 1830).

Evidence of the public concern in Russia over the extremely high infant mortality rate comes from the Free Economic Society's announcement in 1833 of an essay competition on the topic “On the causes of the high rate of mortality of children in the first year of life, and measures to prevent it”. The first prize was awarded to Dr. I.R. Likhtenshtedt, who proposed a range of measures to prevent infant deaths from various illnesses (such as protecting the female workforce, establishing special societies to combat child mortality, and creating categories of paediatricians) [5].

The emergence of practical paediatrics in Russia was linked to the establishment of the imperial foundling homes and the opening of the first children's hospitals. Here, physicians visited the wards of sick children on a daily basis over many years, which helped their development as paediatricians.

A key event in the emergence of scientific paediatrics in Russian was the publication in 1847 of the first Russian guide to the field, Stepan Khotovitsky's *Paediatrics*. This emphasised a number of points contrary to popular opinion at the time: a child was not a miniature adult; the development of a child's organs had various specific features in states of both sickness and health; a child's growing body underwent qualitative as well as quantitative changes. Russia's first great paediatrician put forward an extremely important idea: that paediatrics dealt with healthy as well as sick children, and its objective was to protect health and cure illness.

Therefore, between the start of Catherine the Great's reign (1762) and the start of Alexander II's reforms (1861), “protecting the lives of infants” became a priority in Russian public and scientific thought. During this period, the foundations were

laid in the Russian Empire for a state system of medical and social support for disadvantaged children (illegitimate children and orphans), and the conditions were established for paediatrics to become an independent field of medicine.

***The establishment of an approach to child health care from the viewpoint of community medicine (in the second half of the nineteenth century)***

Among the most important of Emperor Alexander II's reforms were those affecting universities, introduced in 1863. As a result of these, the number of higher education institutions significantly increased, and departments of childhood disease and hygiene opened at Russian universities. Russia's first departments of children's diseases were established at the Saint Petersburg Academy of Medicine and Surgery in 1865, and at the University of Moscow in 1866, and the first department of hygiene opened at the University of Kazan in 1869, followed by others at the Saint Petersburg Military Medical Academy in 1871, and the University of Moscow in 1882. The heads of the first departments of children's diseases (Nikolai Bystrov, Nil Filatov and Nikolai Gundobin) and departments of hygiene (Irinarkh Skvortsov, Aleksei Dobroslavin and Fyodor Erisman) were not only outstanding scientists, but also active public figures.

The zemstvo (local government organisations) reforms of 1864 gave rise to zemstvo medicine, an institution with no equivalent anywhere in the world that allowed a significant proportion of the rural population to receive free health care. The measures to reduce child mortality included improving economic conditions; raising public awareness, both generally and in terms of sanitation; combating alcoholism; exempting women from work before and after birth; opening new children's hospitals and establishing various children's institutions; and increasing the number of doctors and nursing staff. The need to recognise that child mortality was a national calamity that was not only damaging the country's economy but also represented a threat to its future development was emphasised [6].

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the best-known societies expressing the public mood and demands with regard to protecting children's lives and health were the Russian

Society for the Protection of the Public Health and the Pirogov Society of Russian Physicians (the Pirogov Society). Members of the former saw one of its objectives as "studying all the living conditions of the younger generation, from cradle to full physical and mental development".<sup>2</sup> At its annual congresses, the Pirogov Society discussed the most pressing aspects of child health care, primarily the high child mortality rate. The medical community used the platform offered by the Pirogov Society not only to discuss possible measures and propose medical and organisational procedures, but also to call for social reforms and for legislation supporting child welfare. For example, at the society's ninth congress it was noted that "night-time work should be prohibited for pregnant women starting from the second half of pregnancy and for breastfeeding women up to their child's seventh month"; that women should receive the exemption from work on full pay "in the last two weeks of pregnancy, and for six weeks after birth"; and that "factories employing up to 200 or more women should be equipped with maternal shelters and crèches where children can stay during the daytime".<sup>3</sup> The issue of mother and child welfare was also raised by the radical opposition. The Russian Social Democratic Labour Party called for "the exemption of women from work for four weeks before and six weeks after birth, on full pay... The establishment at all plants, factories and other establishments where women work, of crèches for babies and young children; the exemption of breastfeeding women from work at least every three hours for at least half an hour".<sup>4</sup>

As such, the work of the first departments of paediatrics and hygiene, the possibilities afforded by the local government of the zemstvos, and the pro-active stance of various voluntary societies in Russia in the second half of the nineteenth century, indicate that the state needed to pay more attention to mother and child welfare.

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<sup>2</sup> "A review of the work of Branch IV, Chapter VIII". 25 years of Research and Practice of the Russian Society for the Protection of the Public Health. 1904, p. 80.

<sup>3</sup> The Ninth Pirogov Congress. Saint Petersburg, 4-11 January 1904, p. 7.

<sup>4</sup> The All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks) in the resolutions and decisions of congresses, conferences and plenums of the Central Committee, Part I. Moscow, 1940, pp. 21-22.

### **Russia's journey towards a mother and child welfare system (1900–1917)**

Researchers have not paid enough attention to the rapid development of the theoretical, social and organisational approaches to creating a mother and child welfare system in the Russian Empire in 1900–1917, a particularly turbulent time (which included the Russo-Japanese War, World War I, and the revolutions of 1905 and 1917). However, it was in this period that the first step was taken towards establishing a state mother and child welfare system: a number of systematic measures were taken to protect the health of mothers and children and reduce the infant mortality rate [7].

There are solid grounds for arguing that the first effective measure to reduce child mortality in Russia was the opening of crèches, at factories, funded by charity, in cities, and by zemstvo in rural areas. The zemstvo doctors at the end of the nineteenth century were effectively pioneers in organising seasonal summer crèches. According to N.A. Russkikh, crèches had been registered at 840 locations in Russia by 1898 [8].

In 1901, Russia's first milk stations opened in Saint Petersburg and Odessa. These innovative institutions were discussed at the Eighth Congress of the Pirogov Society. In his address, Manuil Margulies highlighted the need for each maternity shelter to have special health centres for the babies born there, where they might be brought twice a month for a medical examination. These centres would provide specially prepared milk for babies deprived of their mothers. It was suggested that consideration be given to setting up institutions similar to the "gouttes de lait" (milk stations) in the West, in densely populated and poor urban neighbourhoods. At these institutions, the health monitoring "should consist of a weekly examination of all the children", with their weight, amount of milk drunk in 24 hours, and number of feeds recorded on special forms. As well as their physiological data, all their pathological characteristics were also to be recorded [9].

It was proposed that these milk stations would not just distribute milk to babies, but also monitor their health (i.e. act as health centres). In this respect, Russia differed from Europe, where milk stations only distributed baby food. Accordingly,

there is every justification for arguing that the information in most sources that Russia had just nine child health centres by 1913 is incorrect, since their functions were also performed by the milk stations, of which there were more than 40 at the time [6]. In 1916 alone, the All-Russia Fund for Mother and Child Welfare opened 25 milk stations [10].

At the end of 1904, following an initiative from N.A. Russkikh, the Union for Combating Child Mortality was founded in Saint Petersburg, with the support of leading paediatricians. Branches of it were opened in various cities (nine in total, including Saint Petersburg, Yekaterinburg and Kharkov), and it served as an example for the Society for Combating Child Mortality, branches of which were established in Kazan, Baku and Moscow. Their efforts towards preserving children's lives attracted a wide range of supporters – men of letters, clergy, military figures, doctors and lawyers. The fight against child mortality in Russia became a matter of public concern, and it was natural that the idea of a state mother and child welfare system should be raised.

Child care centres were established by Georgy Speransky in Moscow in 1907 and Abram Gershenson in Odessa in 1908. By 1912, four maternity homes in Moscow had such centres. In Saint Petersburg, five child health centres were operating by 1917.

On 2 November 1910, Speransky opened a baby clinic in Moscow. Later, this became the site of a baby centre, featuring an in-patient department, a health centre, a laboratory, a milk station, and a permanent health and education exhibition on baby parenting.

Between the 27th–31st December 1912, the First All-Russia Congress of Children's Doctors took place. Here, it was proposed that an All-Russia Society of Children's Doctors be set up, and a draft charter for it was presented. However, World War I and the Russian Civil War meant that this idea was not implemented until the Soviet period. The resolution adopted by the congress clearly defines the main areas in the development of a Russian mother and child welfare system. It was noted that the obligations of both public administrations and the state should include mother and child welfare; that each obstetric facility needed to

have a paediatrician; that there was a need for baby health centres distributing milk; and that university courses for future physicians should include teaching on hygiene, nutrition and treatment for babies [11].

On the 23rd June 1912, Russia adopted the Workers' Insurance Act, under which women working in large factories were to receive one third of their monthly wage for two weeks before and four weeks after giving birth. This law was extremely limited in scope, and was rightly criticised by the radical opposition, but it was the first step towards legislative support for mothers.

On 31st May 1913, the All-Russia Fund for Mother and Child Welfare was founded, under the patronage of the royal household. The Fund was chaired by Karl Rauchfuss, a leading scientist and public figure. Its charter sets out its aims and work methods: "...the Fund aims, through protecting the health of women during their pregnancy and childbirth and immediately thereafter, and equally through protecting the health of young children, and particularly babies, to help to reduce child mortality and to increase Russia's healthy population".<sup>5</sup> By 1917, the Fund had established 25 health centres with milk stations, 29 permanent shelters and daytime crèche/shelters, for 800–900 children, and 500 rural summer crèches, which catered for more than 35,000 children. One of its goals was to establish a central institution of mother and child welfare. In general, the development plans for the maternal and child health care system in the early years of the Soviet state closely echoed the Fund's work. The establishment of research centres studying mother and child welfare, in Moscow in 1922, and in Leningrad in 1925, which were a vital component of the Soviet mother and child welfare system, may be seen as an implementation of Rauchfuss's idea [12].

The authors are not aware of any research focusing on mother and child health care under the Provisional Government. There is evidence that the first child health care reforms began immediately after the February Revolution of 1917. Under a Provisional Government directive dated 4th March 1917, the Ministry of Education took over the institutions under Empress Maria's

Department, and special commissars were put in temporary control of them. In March 1917, I. A. Klimov, the head doctor at the Petrograd [Saint Petersburg] Foundling Home, published a plan of foundling home reforms in which he set out the fundamentals of state child care. In his opinion, mother, infant and child welfare needed to be supported by cultural and educational measures, as well as various measures of state care and support: the adoption of laws "protecting maternity, infancy and childhood, the provision of legal support for mothers, the organisation of pregnancy and childbirth insurance and financial assistance, and the establishment of shelters for pregnant women, dairy farms and dairy procurement centres, crèches and nurseries, outpatient clinics for children, children's hospitals, health resorts, and large and small children's homes" [13].

Moscow's paediatricians were also well aware of the need for measures to support mother and child welfare. In April 1917, a joint meeting of the Society of Children's Doctors and the Society for Combating Child Mortality approved a plan of action for mother and child welfare under the new regime, as well as proposals developed by Georgy Speransky for children's institutions, and a training programme for children's nurses and minders [14].

The measures proposed for mother and child welfare between the two revolutions in the early twentieth century (in 1905 and 1917) were put into practice in the Soviet maternal and child health care system. This is further evidence of the continuity between pre-revolutionary and Soviet medical thinking.

### International practices

It has been suggested that the USSR was the first country in the world to address child health care issues on a state level [14]. On the other hand, many of those involved in organising the Soviet mother and child welfare system in the 1920s recognised that the Soviet system borrowed many aspects of its child health care from economically developed Western countries [16–18]. Our analysis indicates that the latter view is more accurate.

In the West, the fight against child mortality in the late nineteenth century and first half of the twentieth was marked by an active movement in

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<sup>5</sup> Charter of the All-Russia Fund for Mother and Child Welfare. Paediatrics, 4b. 1913, pp. 494–495.

support of mother and child welfare. Initially, this took place in France: in the fight against child mortality, the French were the first to establish various mother and child welfare institutions. Crèches for working mothers first opened in France in 1844, and by the end of the nineteenth century had become widespread. In 1890, in Nancy, Professor Adolphe Pinard founded the first health centre for pregnant women. In 1892, in Paris, Pierre C. Budin, Chief Obstetrician at the Hôpital de la Charité, established a health centre for newborn children. In 1893, also at the Hôpital de la Charité, the first “goutte de lait” [“drop of milk”], a milk station for the infants of impoverished mothers, was established. This awarded prizes for breastfeeding and distributed free milk and baby formula [17].

These French forms of open-access care were adopted in Germany, where, from 1896, the state took over child care in Thuringia and other regions of the country. Germany’s network of infant health care institutions gradually expanded. For pre-school children in the country, volunteer regional early treatment centres, where residents on low income were entitled to free assistance, were set up. These offered health monitoring, consultations, and nursing, aimed primarily at disease prevention. These early treatment centres had a fundamental advantage over private doctors. Particular attention was paid to fighting tuberculosis and syphilis.

In 1920, at the German Congress on Infant Welfare in Berlin, Professor Fritz Rott noted that the country had a “not entirely complete, but well planned and much-tested system of measures”, to the design and implementation of which the state, society and private charity had contributed equally [15].

Of all the foreign mother and child welfare systems, it was Germany’s that had the greatest influence on the USSR’s. It is fair to assume that the Soviet Union’s first physicians involved in organising child health care (Vera Lebedeva, Nikolai Althauzen, Mira Reitz, Georgy Speransky, Roman Lunz, Sergei Fedynsky, and others), who were fluent in German and paid multiple visits to treatment and prevention facilities in Germany, had the opportunity to

study the principles of German maternal and child health care, and then to introduce similar practices in Russia (early treatment centres for tuberculosis and skin and venereal diseases, home child health monitoring, health clubs, and so on).

### **Conclusions**

In the second half of the eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth, Russia’s scientific and professional medical and educational community, as well as many cultural figures and members of the ruling elite, recognised the vital importance of raising health children. The first step towards this was to simply to keep children, particularly infants, alive. To this end, a system of medical and social support for children at particular risk (illegitimate children and orphans) was established. Overall, this period saw the conditions established for paediatrics to become an independent branch of medicine.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the university and zemstvo reforms in the country, the active involvement of voluntary and charitable organisations, the extensive spread of community medicine, the results of public hygiene studies by zemstvo doctors and Russia’s first paediatricians, and the first results of medical and social paediatric practices enabled the theoretical foundations to be laid for a range of systematic mother and child welfare measures. It was realised that the state needed to play an active role in organising the maternal and child health care system.

In the early twentieth century, the Russian Empire paved the way for a maternal and child health care system based on a combination of government, public and philanthropic support.

Other countries’ experiences of public and state involvement in maternal and child health care were actively adopted not only in pre-revolutionary but also in Soviet Russia. The Soviet child health care system, in theory and practice, very much state-run (administrative and totalitarian), made use of the organisation solutions for children’s medical services that had been tested out in Tsarist Russia in the early twentieth century, and this helped in its success.

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