

First Policies Authorizing Abortion

(selected excerpts)

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The first known government policy authorizing abortion was enacted by the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics by its Decree of 18 November 1920. The decree stated in part:

By working for socialism, and by introducing the protection of maternity and infancy on an extensive scale, it feels assured of achieving the gradual disappearance of this evil [abortions]. But as the moral survivals of the past and the difficult economic conditions of the present still compel many women to resort to this operation, the People's Commissariats of Health and of Justice . . . have decided:

1. To permit such operations [abortion] to be made freely and without any charge in Soviet hospitals, where conditions are assured of minimizing the harm of the operation.
2. Absolutely to forbid anyone but a doctor to carry out this operation.
3. Any nurse or midwife found guilty of making such an operation will be deprived of the right to practice, and tried by a People's Court.
4. A doctor carrying out an abortion in his private practice with mercenary aims will be called to account by a People's Court. ("Decree on Abortion")

The decree refers to abortion as an evil against society, but nonetheless determines to permit it on the grounds of protection of women from unsafe abortions. It further asserts that abortions will decline. In reality, by the end of the decade, abortions exceeded live births in many Russian cities; and by 1932, abortions in the U.S.S.R., mostly in Russia and the Ukraine, surpassed 1 million per year. Moreover, Soviet state-sponsored abortionists continued to subject women to unsafe and inhumane treatment throughout the existence of the Soviet Union.

During the 1920s and 1930s, 10 other nations authorized abortion for limited reasons, mostly in Europe. For example, in June 1938, Sweden approved an "Act Relating to the Termination of Pregnancy," with the following provisions:

- I. Pregnancy may, in accordance with this Act, be terminated:
 - (1) where, owing to the presence of disease, physical defect or infirmity in the woman, the birth of a child would entail serious danger to her life or health,
 - (2) where the woman became pregnant in the circumstances mentioned in . . . the Penal Code (rape, attempted rape, intimidation, forbidden intercourse) and involved gross violation of the woman's freedom,
 - (3) where it may reasonably be assumed that the mother or father of the expected child will, owing to hereditary disposition, transmit to their offspring, insanity, mental deficiency, or serious physical disease.

Pregnancy may not be terminated after the twentieth week of pregnancy for any reason other than the presence of disease or physical defect in the mother.

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