

KOMSOMOL AND THE WOMEN'S PROBLEMATIC

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Abstract

Komsomol, an organization for both male and female youth aged 14 to 28, was founded in 1918 in Moscow and continued until the end of the Soviet Union in 1991. The organization was important in shaping the new Soviet society. Due to this, it has become a subject of many scholarly studies. But different from them, this study, utilizing many archival sources, focuses on the role and place of women in the Komsomol. Through archival examples from both Soviet Russia and the Turkic republics in the Soviet Union such as Uzbekistan, Karachay-Cherkess, Kalmykia from the beginning of Komsomol to the WWII era, this study aims to examine and show to what extent women participated in the Komsomol activities, administration and how male members approached them. While doing this, it emphasizes what changed and what continued in time.

Keywords: *Komsomol, Gender Discrimination, Soviet Union, Soviet Women, Soviet Youth.*

Öz

Komsomol ve Kadın Meselesi

Hem erkek hem de kadınların katıldığı Komsomol, Sovyetler Birliği'nde 14-28 yaş arası gençlere yönelik bir teşkilat olup 1918 yılında Moskova'da kurulmuş ve Sovyetler Birliği'nin dağıldığı 1991 yılına dek devam etmiştir. Örgüt, yeni Sovyet toplumunun şekillendirilmesinde büyük bir rol oynamıştır. Bu yüzden birçok akademik çalışmaya konu olmuştur. Bu çalışma, arşiv belgelerinden de istifade ederek kadınların örgütteki yeri ve rolüne odaklanır. Komsomol'un kurulduğu tarihten başlayarak İkinci Dünya Savaşı yıllarını da kapsayacak şekilde ve hem Sovyet Rusya'dan hem de Sovyetler Birliği'nde yer alan Özbekistan, Karaçay-Çerkes, Kalmukya gibi diğer Türk cumhuriyetlerinden örneklere dayanarak, kadınların örgütteki yeri ve rolünü ve erkek üyelerin onlara bakışını inceler ve bu bağlamda değişim veya süreklilik arz eden noktaları vurgular.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Komsomol, Cinsiyet Ayrımcılığı, Sovyetler Birliği, Sovyet Kadını, Sovyet Gençliği.*

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Introduction: The Komsomol

In the Soviet Union, Komsomol youth played an active role in breaking away from pre-revolutionary ideals and in the establishment of a socialist order. Mass manipulation of the Soviet youth through organizations like Komsomol was certainly not new. There have been many examples of this. As Fainsod says that “like most revolutionary movements which attempt a sharp break with the past, the Communist leadership has placed its primary reliance on youth to generate the momentum of innovation”.¹

Komsomol gathered the Soviet youth under one roof and channeled them into socialist goals. However, its formation took some time. In fact, the Bolsheviks did not need a separate youth organization in the pre-revolutionary period. According to Fainsod, this was because the cadres of the Party were themselves largely recruited from among students and factory workers. In this way, the Bolsheviks used young party members to attract the Soviet youth into the party. In the meantime, different influence groups among young people emerged. The most famous of them was the league “Work and Light” founded by P. Shevtsov, a young student from Petrograd. The league rejected the class struggle, instead, encouraged young people to work together according to the principles of fraternity. The increasing influence of the “Work and Light” league on young masses prompted the Bolsheviks to establish a separate youth organization and as a result, under the leadership of Bolshevik V. Alexeiev, the Socialist Association of Young Workers was established with a socialist program based on class struggle. After the establishment of this new organization, Shevtsov's “Work and Light” lost its influence and it was dissolved by the vote of its members in August 1917.²

In the meantime, the Bolsheviks, through “the Socialist Association of Young Workers,” gained the support of a large part of the working youth in large cities.³ Then came “Petrograd Workers' Youth Union” and it was followed by some other new youth groups such as “International Union of Young Workers” in Moscow, “Spartak International Union” in Tbilisi, “International Union of Youth” in Baku. Also, many youth organizations were established in Kharkov, Rostov, Ufa, Chelyabinsk, Yekaterinburg, Perm and Lugansk under the control of the Bolsheviks. All these organizations participated actively in the October Revolution. They, especially “Petrograd Workers' Youth Unions” made great effort to convince proletarian youth to join the Red Army units.⁴

After the October Revolution, the number of youth organizations increased even more. The Bolsheviks expected to control the youth and to unite all young workers and peasants who were in different unions under a single organization. To achieve this goal, the Central Committee of the Communist Party and the local party organs led and supported many activities. With their support and encouragement, youth groups organized congresses in many cities, such as Moscow, Petrograd, Vladimir, Nizhny

¹ Fainsod 1951, p.19.

² Fainsod 1951, p.20.

³ Fainsod 1951, p.22.

⁴ “Vsesoyuznyi Leninskii kommunisticheskii soyuz molodezhi” 1950, pp.465, 466.

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Novgorod and Ural. These activities contributed greatly to the unity of the Soviet Youth, but due to the Civil War, the Komsomol was formed only after the First All-Russian Congress of the Workers' and Peasants' Youth Union (RKSM) held on October 29-November 4, 1918.⁵ Although it declared itself as a "separate" organization, Komsomol acted together with the Communist Party on many issues and made itself labeled as "communist."⁶ The Komsomol made rapid progress in a short time. The number of Komsomol cells, which amounted to 96,000 in September 1919, reached 400,000 a year later in October 1920.⁷

The Komsomol copied mostly the structure of the Communist Party of the Soviet CPSU's structure. At the very bottom of the pyramid were the primary organizations of Komsomol in factories, state farms, educational and other state institutions.⁸ The highest organ in the Komsomol was the All-Union Congress that was to be held every three years.⁹ During the inter-congress period, the Komsomol Central Committee was responsible for the Komsomol.¹⁰ According to the requirements determined by this Committee, to become a member of the Komsomol one had to be recommended by a Party member or by two Komsomol members that were a part of either at least for two years..¹¹ If candidates did not meet the requirements, they had to complete a 6-month training course. This aimed to eliminate the candidate's political incompetence. During this process, the candidate was informed about the laws and program of the Komsomol.¹²

The requirements for Komsomol membership were widely discussed in the Communist Party. The main issue in those discussions was whether Komsomol membership would be limited only to proletarians who were expected to play the main role in the organization, or it should open its doors to the peasantry as well. Related to this question, Komsomol initially followed Lenin's view that "only the proletarian masses can consolidate communist society". However, this idea was criticized by many who thought that Komsomol was not a "section", but a "mass" organization and accept only workers into Komsomol and exclude the others would harm its character.¹³ Despite these objections, Stalin chose to encourage proletarians rather than peasants to join the Komsomol since, in his opinion, participation of peasants in the organization would weaken its socialist character.¹⁴ However, the percentage of peasant population in Soviet Society was considerably high; therefore, the party eventually had to accept their participation in the Komsomol:

⁵ Sulemova 1983, pp.63, 64.

⁶ Fainsod 1951, p.22.

⁷ Sokolov, 1996, p.111.

⁸ Fainsod 1951, p.30.

⁹ Gallagher 2020, p.4.

¹⁰ "Vsesoyuznyi Leninskii kommunisticheskii" 1950, p.273.

¹¹ Fainsod 1951, p.29.

¹² "Ustav vsesoyuznogo Leninskogo" 1941, p.6.

¹³ Gusev 1997, p.10.

¹⁴ Gusev 1997, p.17.

The Communist Youth League (Komsomol) was founded in 1917-1918 in urban centers. Its leadership's perception of the peasantry and its quest to maintain a respectable proportion of workers in the membership impeded expansion in rural areas: in the name of "proletarian purity," many leaders and activists opposed the blanket admission of all but the poorest peasants into their midst. But demographic realities made the Komsomol's outreach to young peasants mandatory: peasants made up eighty percent of the Russian population; their children nineteen years of age or younger accounted for half of the rural population in the mid-1920s. More important, the state and the Party had reduced their rural personnel at the end of the civil war and the Komsomol found itself pressured to fill the gap.¹⁵

After those discussions intensified within the organization, the Central Committee of the Communist Party decided to step in. It published a report in 1926 and stated that politically tested middle-class peasants could be accepted to the Komsomol.¹⁶ After this decision, the number of Komsomol's members grew rapidly. In March 1926, the Komsomol had approximately 1.75 million members; More than half of the working youth in Leningrad and Moscow were already Komsomol members. A few years later, their number was almost twice as that of the Party. Change in admission policy and more liberal and inclusive approach of the Komsomol was due to the collectivization policy of the 1930s and need to concentrate on work in the villages.¹⁷

However, this did not mean that all peasant youth were eager to join the Komsomol. As known, the countryside resisted change more since traditions and religious beliefs were much more deeply rooted among the peasants. Also, they were the most illiterate segment of the Russian society. As a result, among the peasants there was a prejudice against the Komsomol, the representative of the new order. Therefore, enrollment in the Komsomol was quite low in villages. According to Fainsod, another reason for this was that the weakness of the communist apparatus in the villages that strengthened the family influence on peasant youth.¹⁸ However, all these obstacles did not prevent the Komsomol from getting stronger in the villages in time. It eventually turned into a mass organization with the participation of peasant youth. During later years, the Komsomol became even less selective in accepting new members. In fact, as a former Komsomol member said, not to join the Komsomol was harder than to join it.

But for the great majority admission was a routine step, usually taken together with the rest of one's classmates, and almost entirely devoid of conscious motive or emotional appeal. In the words of one interviewee... It was an age at which practically every schoolchild entered the Komsomol and, as another interviewee put it, 'it was more difficult not to join than to join.' ... Truly voluntary participation was almost entirely unheard of. The few genuine enthusiasts who could still be found here and there were 'regarded as rather strange people.' ... For most people the threat of these sanctions

¹⁵ Tirado 1993, p.460.

¹⁶ Gusev 1997, p.22.

¹⁷ Gallagher 2020, p.3.

¹⁸ Fainsod 1951, p.36.

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sufficed to secure the required levels of participation.¹⁹

However, this rapid growth brought up a new problem partly because of less careful way of recruiting members for the Komsomol. As a result, among the millions of Komsomol members, there were those who did not even know or follow the Komsomol rules. This situation caused new discussions. Some said that accepting new members more selectively for the Komsomol would be a better way to follow, while others argued that being selective would lead to “sectarianism” and damage the mass character of the Komsomol.²⁰ For the latter group, the best solution was to find methods and ways that would eliminate lack of interest and inactivity in working with young people. In other words, the solution was to give Komsomol youth tasks that made them feel useful.²¹ The character of a mass organization was not compromised. At the 1936 Congress, it was emphasized that the Komsomol was to be a ‘mass non-party organization, affiliated with the VKP(b) [the Party], which united in its ranks the broad stratum of the progressive, politically literate toiling youth of the town and village’. New requirement for Komsomol membership was not the social origin, but loyalty to the Soviet regime.²²

What the Bolsheviks were trying to do through the Komsomol was much more than just uniting Soviet youth in a communist organization and using them for political purposes. In their mind, Komsomol was to help the regime to create a ‘new Soviet person.’ In fact, Komsomol did what it was expected to do. The most effective way Komsomol used to create “new Soviet citizen” was to organize cultural and leisure time activities for already established theater groups, sport groups and give them political education. According to Gorsuch, “Komsomol clubs were to be a major method of erasing all vestiges of a bourgeois lifestyle and value.”²³ Also, Fainsod said that those activities in Komsomol clubs provided young people with opportunity to escape from intense and incessant political education. However, those events in Komsomol clubs were not entirely apolitical. “Komsomolites participating in a series of evenings devoted to Pushkin discuss papers on such themes as ‘Pushkin and the Decembrists,’ ‘Pushkin on Capitalism,’ ‘Pushkin-Patriot,’ ‘Pushkin and the Present,’ and ‘Pushkin’s Criticism of America’.”²⁴

In addition to those activities, Komsomol paid special attention to how its members dressed and looked since they were an important part of political identity. For instance, wearing tie or clean clothes was considered “unrevolutionary.”²⁵

Besides these, Komsomol members were expected to fulfill some duties based on changing political conditions. During the Civil War, the regime expected the Komsomol to lead the Soviet youth to ‘defending the Socialist Fatherland.’ During those years,

¹⁹ Unger 1981, pp.109, 111.

²⁰ Wissenschafts 1957, pp.604, 607.

²¹ Wissenschafts 1957, p.607.

²² Fainsod 1951, p.24.

²³ Gorsuch 1996, p.191.

²⁴ Fainsod, 1951, p.34.

²⁵ Gorsuch 1996, p.195.

many young people were sent to the front as agitators, commissars, and shock troops.²⁶ As Guillory wrote ‘the Civil War functioned as a “meaningful and sacred event,” providing “ever-present saints and martyrs, places of worship and a heritage to emulate.’²⁷ In accordance with the Komsomol's desire to present the Civil War as a ‘sacred war’ that would unite the youth, in December 1920 was founded the Commission for the Study of the History of the Russian Youth Movement (Istmol). Throughout the 1920s, Istmol collected materials related to the Civil War and organized events and exhibitions to commemorate it. The war helped the Komsomol and the Party to gather millions of enthusiastic youths around their organizations. However, their increasing support for and participation in the Communist Party and Komsomol began to weaken partly due to more liberal policies the regime followed during the NEP Era.

There were many young people who resisted the serious and sometimes puritanical images of Bolshevik ideology and culture and flocked instead to forms of entertainment and recreation which were opposed to Bolshevik ideals. Western movies and flapper fashions were the focus of alternative popular youth cultures which challenged Bolshevik notions of an organized and disciplined community of youth. Some of these elements of youths' everyday behavior was a legacy of the pre-revolutionary period, while others reflected the impact of post-war commercial culture from western Europe and the United States. The problem was made more complicated by the mixed messages conveyed by the introduction of NEP. On the one hand, educators and propagandists told young men and women that a good communist should spend his or her time in the Komsomol club, reading books about Lenin and watching movies about the revolution and the Civil War. On the other hand, the same economic necessities which forced the adoption of the NEP allowed 'bourgeois' capitalists and 'bourgeois' culture to continue to function within the Soviet Union. Hollywood movies and pre-revolutionary romance novels were available throughout the 1920S and at times even sponsored by the government's own agencies who needed the revenue generated by these popular forms to support their own nascent efforts. In this environment, complete adherence to Bolshevik models of appropriate communist behavior and recreation required an extraordinary degree of internal motivation and discipline.²⁸

The Soviet youth was greatly affected by the social changes during the NEP era. Many were attracted by restaurants, night clubs, amusement arcades, movie theaters and theaters opened during those years. As Gorsuch stated, in such social atmosphere, to remain utterly committed to moral norms of communism required personal motivation and inner discipline. At this point the Komsomol that considered itself as an instrument to strengthen Soviet moral codes opened some new clubs that provided the Soviet youth with many courses on different subjects from literature, natural history to politic and social services. In addition, it organized some sports activities, concerts, movies, and theaters. Through these activities, the Komsomol not only aimed to strengthen

²⁶ Gallagher 2020, p.2.

²⁷ Guillory 2012, pp. 546, 547.

²⁸ Gorsuch 1996, p.192.

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communist moral norms but also to recruit more people for its ranks.²⁹

Considering the influence of “bourgeois” culture and liberal tendencies on the youth, the Komsomol during the NEP years aimed to revive loosening power of the Communist Party and to strengthen its influence especially in the countryside. In other words, the Komsomol tried to serve as a bridge between the peasant and the Party.³⁰ Party's special interest in peasant youth also resulted from the increasing popularity of some new organizations formed in villages in the early and mid-1920s. Some of those organizations were weakly connected to the Komsomol. Even some were completely independent from the Party or the Komsomol. The party leaders were deeply concerned about those organizations that were linked mostly to Socialist Revolutionaries and different religious groups) Therefore the Communist Party sent many Komsomol members to the countryside in 1924-25.³¹

In villages, Komsomol youth opened libraries and established clubs. They distributed books, newspapers, posters, and flyers. They participated in cultural and political meetings organized by the Soviet administrators and the Party.³² They propagandized new agricultural technology and informed the public about the activities of the Soviet administration on this issue. In 1925, nearly 60,000 Komsomol members worked in village soviets, committees, and cooperatives.³³ While the Komsomol was leading many such activities and thus contributing to strengthening the influence of the Communist Party, a different story was taking place in urban centers. First, there was an increasing tension caused mostly by Nep policies among the urban youth. In those places, there was nothing left from war enthusiasm. Instead, there was frustration and disappointment:

After the romantic heroics of Civil War battlefields and War Communism, adjustment to the N.E.P. did not come easily. To many, N.E.P. appeared as a retreat from Socialism, surrender after victory. Opposition to N.E.P. was lively and violent in Komsomol circles. A few of the more fanatic committed suicide in protest. Still others found it impossible to make the transition from military to civilian life and sank into a quagmire of despair as unhappy victims of the Revolution which they had helped create. Grumbling among young workers mounted as working conditions failed to register the improvement for which they had hoped, and unemployment increased. Enthusiasm gave way to disenchantment, and the Komsomol organization itself underwent a crisis. By October 1922, the time of meeting of the Fifth Congress, membership had plummeted to 247,000, and Party leaders became seriously alarmed.³⁴ From 1922 on strenuous efforts were made to recapture and consolidate the loyalty of Soviet youth.

As seen, the policies of the NEP period alienated the youth from the Komsomol. However, the first Five-Year Plan (1928–32) which began in 1928 under the rule of

²⁹ Gooderham 1982, pp.507, 508.

³⁰ Tirado 2013, p.430.

³¹ Tirado 2013, p.431.

³² “Vsesoyuzni Leninskii kommunističeskii” 1950, p.467.

³³ “Vsesoyuzni Leninskii kommunističeskii” 1961, 822.

³⁴ Fainsod 1951, p.22.

Joseph Stalin (1928-1953), revived enthusiasm among the Komsomol youth. During this period, Komsomol members, in accordance with the Party's Five-Year Plans, took part in the construction of industrial centers and plants such as the Stalingrad tractor plant, the Dnipropetrovsk Hydropower Plant and new factories in the Urals and Siberia. The city where the Komsomol youths built their new industrial center on the Amur River in the Russian Far East was named "Komsomolsk" after Komsomol.³⁵

The first five-year plan also included the collectivization of agriculture. Not only the kulaks, but also the poor peasants objected strongly to the forced collectivization.³⁶ In response to the widespread opposition-, thousands of Komsomol members participated in the collectivization, which in turn caused more unrest in the countryside. They were actively involved in the struggle with the *kulaks*, the creation of *kolkhozes* and new *MTS*: 'Motor-Tractor Stations'.³⁷ In those years, 'Komsomol members, on a tractor!' was one of the most famous slogans.³⁸ The task of the Komsomol organizations was not limited to fulfill five-year plan goals: 'Youths were sent to the countryside to act as reporters to the Party of "every shortcoming, mistake, breach of discipline, waste," and to combat cultural issues, including illiteracy, superstition, and alcoholism'.³⁹ The Komsomol also struggled with unemployment and poverty in rural areas.⁴⁰

The First 5-Year Plan caused a similar enthusiasm witnessed during the Bolshevik Revolution and the Civil War. However, this period of enthusiasm was interrupted the Great Purge between 1937 and 1939. During the Great Purge, Stalin, through arrests, forced exiles, trials and assassinations aimed to eliminate his rivals and solidify his power. Since Stalin saw Komsomols as potential hotbeds of the opposition, like many other groups or organizations, the Komsomol was also affected by the crisis. Between 1937 and 1939, top leaders of the Komsomol such as O. Rivkin, L. Şatskin, P. Smorodin, N. Çaplin and V. Bubekin, the editor of Komsomolskaya Pravda were harassed, some were arrested and many, together with their families, were announced as "state enemies".⁴¹ A. V. Kosarev, first secretary of the Komsomol, was dismissed during the 'Great Purge' of 1936-38 and most of the senior officials of the organization disappeared: 'At the height of the *Yezhovschina*, a veritable reign of terror was unleashed among Komsomols as well as Party members. Denunciations were rife in all the local organizations. Expulsions took place in the hundreds and thousands as the N.K.V.D. relentlessly pursued the so-called 'Trotskyite-Bukharinist-German-Japanese-Fascist spies, diversionists, murderers, double-dealers, hostile elements, and enemies of the people' who were alleged to have infiltrated the Komsomol organization'.⁴² At the

³⁵ Fainsod 1951, p.23.

³⁶ Zickel 1971, p.71.

³⁷ Fainsod 1951, p.23.

³⁸ "Vsesoyuzni Leninskii kommunisticheskii" 1950, p.468.

³⁹ Gallagher 2020, p.6.

⁴⁰ Tirado 2013, p.440.

⁴¹ Krivoriçenko 1988, p.16.

⁴² Fainsod 1951, p.25.

end of the Purges, out of 93 members selected at the 10th Congress of the Komsomol Committee in 10-21 April 1936, 72 members were dismissed and A. V. Kosarev, a leading figure of the Committee was executed.⁴³

The disappearance of the most senior Komsomol cadres during the 'Great Purge, led to confusion, unrest and disappointment among the Komsomol members. The Great Purge, just as with NEP, was a traumatic event in the history of the Komsomol. Nevertheless, World War II (or Great Patriotic War as called by Russians)- restored the unity within the Komsomol and increased its desire to fight for their socialist country. During World War II, Komsomol youth were actively involved in the defense of the homeland.⁴⁴ Komsomol youth also continued their activities in the villages during the war. The majority of the workers in the kolkhozes were young people under the age of 18.⁴⁵

The Komsomol and Female Members: *Komsomolka*

The elimination of gender inequality was one of the major goals of the Russian Revolution. To achieve this goal, the Soviet administration enacted many laws from early years of the Revolution and tried to improve percentage of the female labor force in workplace. In addition, it opened many kindergartens, and laundries to free working women from the burden of traditional female roles and make life easier for them. However, despite those efforts, due to economic problems and budget cuts, those programs were halted. As Gorsuch put it correctly, "despite changes in law and rhetoric after the revolution, conditions of economic deprivation reinforced traditional gender roles."⁴⁶ In this matter, the only achieved goal of the Soviet Union was to make the participation of women in all spheres of workforce possible. It is important to look at how Komsomol approached toward this gender and women issue. Did the Komsomol have enough female members? Did the male-dominated approach in the Communist Party also exist in the Komsomol? Did female Komsomol members actively participate in the work of the organization and what duties were assigned to them? This article tries to answer all these questions.

Komsomol helped the Soviet government by propagandizing its policies and goals and by motivating the youth to fulfill those goals. It was expected to the same on women issue, to encourage women to join the Komsomol and support party's programs and policies. As a result of its efforts, many women became a member of the Komsomol. Gorsuch wrote that by joining the Komsomol, those new members expected to have equal rights and opportunities with male members in the organization: "they sought authentic equality and a society that refrained from the scornful relationships and hooliganish escapades [typical] of the male part of the school."⁴⁷ However, Bernstein wrote that Komsomol was not a popular place the Soviet women wanted to be a part of in the 1920s. As a matter of fact, he stated, that radical male activists accused women

⁴³ Krivoričenko 1988, p.18.

⁴⁴ Gallagher 2020, p.48.

⁴⁵ Krivoričenko 1988, p.25.

⁴⁶ Gorsuch 1996, p.640.

⁴⁷ Gorsuch 1996, p.636.

who had a feminine appearance or showed interest in dance or fashion of being "bourgeois" and the same men were disturbed by the presence of women in the Komsomol: "Women can make themselves look more masculine and face "exclusion and alienation" or they could maintain their feminine appearance and risk accusations of harboring bourgeois desires. Komsomol women somehow found themselves in a no-win situation."⁴⁸ As a result, women in Komsomol faced a non-egalitarian attitude. Due to this approach, the number of female members of the organization was quite low for some time. Indeed, women made up 15 percent of the Komsomol membership in cities and only 8 percent in villages.⁴⁹ This was approximately 20 percent in 1926.⁵⁰ This low percent of female members in the Komsomol continued in the 1930s as well. A document on Uzbekistan Komsomol from 1934 points to this problem:

Of the 2060 Komsomol members in the Margilan district, only 196 were women. [Similarly], at the printing factory in Margilan, only 12 out of 260 Komsomol members consisted of women. Belitsk *Kolkhoz* in this district had even one woman among its 45 members. Likewise, 20 members of the III. International *Kolkhoz* was consisted of all men. In Zelen district, out of 1754 Komsomol members only 62 were female. The most important branches of Yusulov, Leninizm and Telman *kolkhozes* had not a single female member. In Andican, there were only -257 women out of 3488 members. This number was 309 out of 3699 in Namangan. These statistics demonstrate how low women participation in the Komsomol was. For instance, while only three women joined the Komsomol in Samarkand and Bukhara in 1934, there was not a single participation in Zaymin.⁵¹

Again, in Karachay Autonomous Region and at the First Young Working Women Congress held on 6-10 October 1935, the same problem was pointed out and it was stated that the Komsomol was not successful recruiting young girls and therefore the number of female members was quite low. Delegate Sayevskoya, who attended the congress from the Ust-Djeguta (Karachay-Cherkess) region underlined the reluctance of young girls to join Komsomol and ascribed this result to inadequate efforts and works of Komsomol members to convince and attract women in the Collective farms to join the Komsomol: "Among young girls, Komsomol members do not work well. In our collective farm, after implementing the decision of the Central Committee of the All-Union Leninist Young Communist League [Komsomol], only eight girls out of 81 in the Collective farm applied to the Komsomol."⁵²

There were several reasons for low number of female members in the Komsomol. The main reason was "male-dominated" structure and view of the women in the organization. Tirado wrote that the movement of communist youth emerged "as an urban male phenomenon" in 1917⁵³ and it seems this tendency continued as before

⁴⁸ Bernstein, 2013, p.104.

⁴⁹ Tirado 1996, p.347.

⁵⁰ Gorsuch 1996, p.637.

⁵¹ The Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RGASPI), f. 1, op. 23, d. 1074, l. 35.

⁵² İz stenogrammi I syezda 248.

⁵³ Tirado 1996, p.345.

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even after the Komsomol undertook the youth movement. In a Komsomol Congress held in Moscow in 1928, a female member defined the organization as a "Man's Club"⁵⁴. Another reason for smaller number of female members in the Komsomol was the negative approach toward the women in the Party and the Komsomol that looked down on women. Where this attitude derived from is an important issue to look at.

"Since women were exploited under the Tsarist regime, they were both pitied and scared" said Buch and this fear played a determinant role in both Party's and Komsomol's view of the women.⁵⁵ Komsomol administration/leaders defined men as "revolutionary", while describing women as "backward".⁵⁶ Tirado points out this attitude as well: 'Komsomol shared with other communist organizations, the general view that women were "the 'darkest,' most backward layer of the Russian population, a dead weight and a potential source of counter-revolution." The League leadership expected that peasant women would be more resistant to indoctrination because of their political underdevelopment and their strong family ties .⁵⁷ Defining women as "underdeveloped", male members of the Komsomol excluded women from the Komsomol clubs, factory cells and upper party ranks or cadres.⁵⁸

Besides this attitude, Komsomol, especially its local branches, had just a few programs or works for the women. The most they did for their female members was to organize women congresses. Having noticed this and expecting more from its local representatives, the Central Committee of the Komsomol warned them and asked them to undertake more programs and activities for women.⁵⁹ Among those that criticized the Komsomol came Jenotdel first. In a statement in 1925, Jenotdel reported that while disregarding how peasant women worked hard in villages, the Komsomol paid greater attention and effort to hire men for many jobs. Jenotdel demanded that by taking living conditions in rural areas into consideration, Komsomol should have more activities, political or cultural, appropriate for women in villages. Jenotdel made similar points in a Central Committee Meeting in 1926. In its conclusion statement, Jenotdel wrote that the Works the Komsomol did for its female members were not enough. To solve this problem and to increase women participation in the youth leagues, the Komsomol should work hand in hand with Jenotdel.⁶⁰ Despite its important role, the prejudice toward the women in the Komsomol was not the only reason for lower number of female members in this organization.

There were also problems deriving partly from traditional family structure and budget cuts or crises. Traditionally women were expected to take care of their children and housework and these responsibilities prevented them part in the Komsomol

⁵⁴ Mally 1996, p.79.

⁵⁵ Busch 2011, p.406.

⁵⁶ Gorsuch 1996, p.638.

⁵⁷ Tirado 1996, p.348.

⁵⁸ Gorsuch 1996, p.638.

⁵⁹ Tirado 1996, p.357.

⁶⁰ Tirado 1996, pp.348, 349.

activities.⁶¹ There were some kindergartens opened during the Civil War but most of those schools were closed due to economic problems during the NEP Era.⁶² When they were open, women in the Komsomol had priority to send their children to these schools. However, this ended with the beginning of some problems during the NEP years.

Another reason for relatively low numbers of female members in the Komsomol was the parents' pressure. Due to possible objection of their parents, most of whom saw the Komsomol as an "immoral" organization, many women did not join the Komsomol even though they attended its meetings.⁶³ Such traditional approaches and pressure on women were more determining factor in Soviet republics with Muslim populations. Female members were not attending meetings or even when they attended, they were sitting aside and not joining discussions. Also, they were attending Komsomol meetings with their traditional outfits, burkas. Komsomol Central Committee argued that the main factor in fighting against this traditional view seeing women as a slave was progressive approach Komsomol organization and members had toward the women:

Komsomol members should help legal authorities to investigate suspects in such crimes as polygamy, dowry and abduction of girls that were defined also as feudal and traditional of remnants of pre-Soviet times and allow the youth to discuss such problems among themselves. Determinant factor in fighting against the traditional view seeing women as a slave was Komsomol members' approach toward the women in Soviet republics. First, with their good behavior toward their sisters, wives, they should set an example for others.⁶⁴

Peasants' suspicion of the Komsomol was in some places resulted in attacks of peasants on the Komsomol members. "For example, in a village where the Komsomol took the initiative of organizing an infant center, young peasant men chided the komsomol'tsy who worked at the Iasi? Elsewhere, a komsomolets was beaten on his way home by a belligerent drunk who took offense at the League's efforts to teach women read".⁶⁵ In those reactions of peasants, some Komsomol members played a determining role Tirado writes that some urban Komsomol members looked down on peasants, who, in their opinion were backward and illiterate.⁶⁶

In Tirado's opinion, another reason form female member crisis in the Komsomol was sexual harassment, profane language, and rude behavior of some male members.⁶⁷ Moreover, there were some cases of rapes that some Komsomol members were involved in. An archival document reports those rapes in Uzbekistan as follows:

Another proof of barbaric attitudes towards women was the recent cases of group rapes in Uzbekistan. Karimov, a student, and Komsomol member in the Kaganovich district, raped his teacher, then 11 more people raped the teacher in 12 days. Eight of

⁶¹ Gorsuch 1996, p.640.

⁶² Gorsuch 1996, p.655.

⁶³ Gorsuch 1996, p.641.

⁶⁴ RGASPI f.1, op.23, d. 1179, l. 30.

⁶⁵ Tirado 1996, p.350.

⁶⁶ Tirado 1996, pp.352, 353.

⁶⁷ Tirado 1996, p.350.

them were Komsomol members and one was Komsomol secretary. Said Aliyeva, a student of the pedagogical course, was a victim of these systematic rapes, who was raped by both the director of the Zaymin pedagogical course, Danukalov (he was the son of a rich landowner) and his brother, Nazar. In addition, a Komsomol member in the "Ikhtiad" *kolkhoz* in Andijan, named Ibrahimov and a friend of his raped Urambayeva, one of the collective farm workers. After this crime was heard, the village Soviet Presidium, decided to fine the first rapist 150 rubles and the second 75 rubles. It also decided to transfer these people from the granary where they were working to construction and digging work. In the Buta Kara village Soviet, 7 tractor workers raped a 16-year-old collective farm worker. The Komsomol's attitude in all these cases was usually limited to reporting the incident or crime to the prosecutor. In most cases, these crimes were not punished.⁶⁸

Another archival document wrote that Kasimov, the head of the Komsomol canteen, together with the Komsomol's cook and the father of Saitov, a 19-year-old teacher in the Komsomol, got drunk together and later Kasimov and the cook attempted to rape Saitov the teacher. Even though she escaped rape, Saitov and her father were beaten up and were threatened to death by Kasimov and the cook.⁶⁹ The same document stated that Turkmenabad Komsomol Senior Secretary Nurmamedov and bureau members Penkin and Elin forced two young female Komsomol members to have sexual intercourse with them, but the girls objected. Upon this, they expelled these girls from the Komsomol.⁷⁰ Such events in the Komsomol alienated female members from the organization.

The gender-oriented approach in the Komsomol also affected the positions of female members within the Komsomol. The female members were mostly assigned to the reading rooms in the villages and were expected to help the schools.⁷¹ In addition to these, they performed tasks such as working with the children in the Pioneer organization, organizing club meetings and tidying up afterwards.⁷²

The tasks assigned to women within the Komsomol were those that were seen usually as "women's work" and considered relatively unimportant. For example, very few women took part in the anti-religious work of the Komsomol. Tirado stated that this was due the fact that women believed in spirits, the evil eye, and miraculous events more than men. Another factor was that they felt the pressure of the family and society more directly and therefore they were afraid of their reactions.⁷³

Having a sexist view of their colleagues, the Komsomol leaders thought that women had no rights or authority as men did. Even when they had higher positions, women were not supported by their male colleagues.⁷⁴ As a result of this, of 18

⁶⁸ RGASPI f.1, op.23, d. 1074, l. 37, 38.

⁶⁹ RGASPI f.1, op.23, d. 1074, l. 37, 38.

⁷⁰ RGASPI f.1, op.23, d. 1074, l. 38.

⁷¹ Tirado 1996, p.365.

⁷² Gorsuch 1996, p.652.

⁷³ Tirado 1996, pp.359, 360.

⁷⁴ Tirado 1996, p.361.

members of the Komsomol Central Committee in the late 1920s, only 1 was a woman.⁷⁵

This sexist approach prevailed in all levels and activities in the Komsomol. Examining the image of the Komsomolka (female Komsomol member) in the Komsomol theater, the Leningrad Working Class Youth Theater (*TRAM*), Mally pointed out the fact that the administrators in *TRAM* were all men and it had predominantly a male structure:

Although the creative center was composed of men, young women were better represented in Komsomol theater groups than they were in the general organization. One 1928 Leningrad survey listed drama circles as the favorite activity of female participants in Komsomol clubs, while it was only fourth on young men's list of preferences. Figures for the Leningrad *TRAM* show a growing female contingent in the 1920s. Out of thirteen core actors in the Gleron club theater that became the basis for *TRAM*, three were women. Some Komsomol leaders used women's visibility in theater groups as a mark against them, complaining that women were more interested in play acting than in the difficult political tasks of the organization. Young women were not only excluded from leadership positions but also were assigned to the lowest positions in rank at *TRAM* hierarchy. Out of 7 actresses in Leningrad *TRAM* travelling to Moscow in 1928, four were at the rank of (*sotrudnik*), while only 5 out of 16 actors had the same title.⁷⁶

Changing economic conditions, especially rapid industrial growth and collectivization program increased the demand for female workforce.⁷⁷ However, this increase in demand and actual numbers of women in both industrial and rural workforce did not eliminate gender inequality. In the same years, the same previous sexist and prejudiced attitude toward the women continued in many spheres in the Komsomol:

There were few women in the Komsomol's leadership. Female members in Samarkand Komsomol were sitting separately from everyone else and there was not a single woman in the leadership. Recently, Gubayduline, a Komsomol member of Tatar origin, was elected as the Committee secretary of the sewing factory in Bukhara. The Komsomol city committee argued that just because a member was a woman, she could not be elected to the secretariat on the ground of affirmative action. At Andican, Namangan and Zelen Komsomols, there was not even one women secretary or administrator. In whole Uzbekistan, there was only one female secretary for a completely different reason. Maneyev, the secretary of Bukhara Komsomol Raykom, had first been accused of hiding that some members of Tashkent Komsomol were drinking alcoholic beverages; then she was proved to be innocent of this accusation and as an apology for this male-accusation, they appointed her to this post.⁷⁸

World War II enabled women to settle in male-dominated areas of the economy. Thus, women were transferred to sectors where men were previously dominant, such as heavy industry and construction. In 1942, 60% of the workforce in the defense industry

⁷⁵ Gorsuch 1996, p.653.

⁷⁶ Mally 1996, p.81.

⁷⁷ Tirado 1996, p.365.

⁷⁸ RGASPI, f.1, op.23, d. 1074, l. 36.

was women.⁷⁹ During this period, it was also possible to see women as tractor drivers, and the number of women tractor drivers was not small at all. In the January 1, 1941 issue of the Communist newspaper, the female tractor drivers of Komsomol was mentioned as follows:

Together with the entire people, the Armenian Komsomol showed heroism and courage during the Patriotic War at the front and in the rear. ... A lot of work has been done in the republic to train tractor drivers. Now many Komsomol girls have mastered the tractor business perfectly. Komsomol member Sirush Simonyan from the Eylar collective farm in the Kotayk region has been driving a tractor since the beginning of the war. The energetic girl taught the tractor business to her two Komsomol friends in a short time. The three of them created a Komsomol brigade. Patriotic girls do double or triple the quota. Not only boys, but also girls master military matters.⁸⁰

After men were sent to the front, Komsomol's female members were also sent to courses on how to use new agricultural machines. In the news of *Dagestanskaya Pravda* (Dagestan Truth) dated November 24, 1941, it was stated that the Komsomol Regional Committee, together with the regional directorate, organized courses on the preparation of artificial insemination equipment in the collective farms of the Ahvahsk region of Dagestan. The news also reported that 16 mountain women participated in these courses and started working successfully after completing the courses.⁸¹

With the World War II, women became more apparent in economy and joined the army. 500,000 women served in the Red Army and there were some military units consisting only of women. However, it was not easy for women to be accepted in the army since some male officers did not see them fit for military service. Therefore, women were initially assigned to health services.⁸² However, women in general, Komsomol members in specific were determined to join the army and fight. During the first week of the war, they sent 20,000 letters to the authorities to show their determination to serve in the army but they all were rejected.⁸³ However, when Russians began to fight the Germans at several fronts and had enormous losses after the Stalingrad Battle broke out in August 1942, women were also recruited and sent to the front.⁸⁴ The mobilization of women was mainly undertaken by the Komsomol organization. As a result of its training programs, 222 thousand women became expert warriors, 6097 mine experts, 4522 machine gun experts, 7796 rifle experts, 15,290 automatic rifle experts and 102,333 sniper women.⁸⁵ In addition, many female Komsomol members were assigned to the front.⁸⁶ However, just 5 months before the outbreak of Stalingrad, female Komsomol member in Chuvashia expressed their intense

⁷⁹ Reyes 2017, p.5.

⁸⁰ "Korrespondentsiya "Komsomol Armenii-Rodine"

⁸¹ "Soobsheniia s predpriiatii"

⁸² Cardona and Markwick 2009, p. 242.

⁸³ Vaughan, 2018, p.25.

⁸⁴ Cardona and Markwick 2009, p. 240, 242.

⁸⁵ Arbaç 2019, p.254.

⁸⁶ Cardona and Markwick 2009, p.242.

desire to go to the front in the following letter, in which they practically begged the Komsomol Regional Committee:

We, girls of the Komsomol-first aiders of the village. Poretsky, patriots of their Motherland, brought up under the leadership of the Leninist Komsomol, taking into account the current situation on the fronts of the Patriotic War, when everyone, young and old, strives to help the front defeat the insolent pack of Hitler's cannibals who trampled the wonderful grain of Ukraine and Belarus with their filthy boot, who wanted to enslave the peoples of the Soviet Union who did not know slavery and violence, we are burning with the desire to go to the front and take revenge on Hitler's brown pack for all the suffering inflicted on our people.⁸⁷

The most famous of the female Komsomol members who participated in the war and showed heroism was an 18-year-old partisan named Zoya Kosmodemyanskay. She fought against the German army when it came near Moscow. To prevent its advance, she set fire to a barn but was immediately caught, tortured, and executed by the Germans.⁸⁸ Another female Komsomol member serving in the Red Army was Vera Sergeyevna Koshaeva who was sent to the front in 1942. A paramedic sergeant and paramedic, Koshaeva fought in Stalingrad and on the southern fronts and was wounded twice. She was particularly known for her heroism in the defense of the Dnieper. Koshaeva, after holding a small bridgehead on the right bank of the river Dnieper, volunteered to disperse the German machine gunners who were trying to cross the river. She was seriously injured during the expedition. The intelligence data she acquired during her reconnaissance helped the Soviet soldiers gain the upper hand against the Germans. For this reason, she was given the title "Hero of the Soviet Union" on February 22, 1944.⁸⁹

Another example was Galina Konstantinovna Petrova, Chief of the Marine Corps of the Primorsky Army, medical instructor, and a Komsomol member. Petrova became known with a night-time landing operation in the Kerch Strait. As the Soviet landing craft approached the Crimean coast, Germans saw it and opened fire on it. Together with other marines, Petrova repulsed the fierce attacks of German infantry and tanks and saved the lives of more than 50 wounded Red Navy soldiers and officers. Due to this contribution, she was awarded the title of Hero of the Soviet Union on November 17, 1943.⁹⁰ Russians were not the only Komsomol women who won medals for their usefulness in the war. Another was the Azerbaijani Z. Husseinova, the leader of the Komsomol brigade in the 1st Mine of the Stalingrad oil mines administration. The Komsomol brigade under his leadership provided 318 tons of oil, which was more than the planned amount, just in January 1943.⁹¹ The other one, Aksana Khaglysheva, a nurse from Kalmykia, won two Orders of the Red Star and a medal of military merit for her bravery in battle.⁹²

⁸⁷ Party archive of the Chuvash regional committee of the CPSU, f. 6, op. 50, d. 2, l. 52.

⁸⁸ Tippner 2014, p.371.

⁸⁹ RGASPI f.1, op.32, d. 69, l. 40.

⁹⁰ RGASPI, f. 1, op.32, d. 69, l. 41.

⁹¹ İmanzade 1957, p.61.

⁹² "Statya K.Chubanova o podvige".

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The heroism of Komsomol women during the war and the awards they received did not mean that they were not subjected to any sexist discrimination in the army. As a matter of fact, there was a distinctly sexist approach to female Komsomol members within the army. Male officers did not recognize or respect their leadership qualities. Another problem faced by female soldiers was sexual harassment. Also, there were only a few female officers appointed to the highest positions in the Rifle Brigade.⁹³ The Central Committee of the Komsomol was also aware of this sexist attitude in assignment of tasks and ranks in the Komsomol and it condemned it as a bourgeois behavior. For the Central Committee, any discrimination against the women was unacceptable and it had no place in communist organizations like the Komsomol:

The percentage of women in the Komsomol rapidly increasing. At this moment, Komsomol has millions of young female workers and collective farmers. Despite this significant success, Komsomol organizations could not take advantage of this rising activism among women and favorable conditions created by socialist successes to raise politically and culturally conscious children. Underestimating such a key role of women and not believing in women's power is in fact a manifestation of the old bourgeois attitude towards women. For this reason, the Central Committee of the Komsomol requests the Komsomol to fight against this underestimating view of the women and their significant role in building socialism and to support women in their works in all Komsomol organizations to educate young communist women.⁹⁴

For Komsomol Central Committee to overcome this problem, it was necessary to take some steps: Based on their education levels, to encourage female Komsomol members to participate in all political and educational activities, to establish schools and organize women groups if needed, to pay special attention to the needs and demands of female members especially mothers. In addition, Central Committee urged all Komsomol members and non-partisan youth to reconsider their unfriendly (non-comrade) attitude and rude behavior toward women and young girls and warned them this kind of behavior could result in dismissal from Komsomol membership.⁹⁵

The inadequate number of female members due to the sexist approach and other factors in the Komsomol seems to have disappeared in the post-Stalin era. Indeed, between 1953 following the death of Stalin and 1985 when Mikhail Gorbachev came to power, about half of all youth between the ages of 14 and 28 were Komsomol members, and more than half of all Komsomol members were women.⁹⁶ According to Hornsby, this was because the laws that were enacted during the Stalin era that restricted women's rights were repealed. However, Hornsby also pointed out that the sexist approach within the Komsomol was not over and the number of women in leadership positions is very small: The repeal of Stalin-era legislation curtailing abortion rights and reducing absent fathers' child maintenance obligations were naturally matters which displayed changing state attitudes toward at least some issues affecting young women. Similarly, the

⁹³ Cardona and Markwick 2009, p.257.

⁹⁴ RGASPI, f. 1, op.23, d. 1179, l. 25, 26.

⁹⁵ RGASPI, f.1, op.23, d. 1179, l. 26, 27.

⁹⁶ Hornsby 2018, p.1.

expanded production of domestic labor-saving devices and greater attentiveness to female consumer desires became notable features of daily life.... Another question which naturally arises from this information is why females' prospects for elevation to the Komsomol elite were not in accordance with their numerical position at congress and in the organization as a whole. The overarching point, of course, was that the Soviet system was not nearly so advanced on matters of gender equality as regime pronouncements liked to claim. However, even the very top officials had to admit that male chauvinism was a problem that stubbornly persisted, both in a domestic setting and within ruling structures. For example, in a speech which called on members to demand that the Central Committee there ensure a greater female presence in the republic's Komsomol elite, Gaidar Aliev noted that in Azerbaijan there was a (mistaken) belief among officials that women simply did not have the capacity for such important work.⁹⁷

Conclusion

When a young woman joined by hoping that they would have freedom and equality with men, they were certainly disappointed. An analysis of some archival documents and secondary sources on this issue shows that there was a sexist prejudice toward the women in both the Communist Party and Komsomol. Due to this approach, female members were discriminated against. In male members' opinion, women were the most backward and therefore the most dangerous of the whole society. Therefore, female members were excluded from many significant and upper-level positions.

In this, traditional family structure and some economic problems also played an important role. Responsibilities such as childcare and housework prevented women from participating in Komsomol activities. In addition, parents' pressure on young girls was an obstacle to their participation. As a result of this pressure, some women either did not join Komsomol meetings or, even when joined, refrained from becoming members.

Sexual harassment and attacks also discouraged women to become a Komsomol member. Sexist prejudice and approach played a determining role also in post assignments in the organization. Women were mostly assigned "feminine" and unpolitical works. Women were also excluded from administrative positions. This resulted from sexist view of women who in many men's opinion lacked strength and ability to lead organizations and teams. World War II and the conditions and needs it created allowed women to have "manly" jobs and weakened previous sexist approach toward women. However, sources indicate that despite important tasks they undertook and successes they achieved, women were still discriminated against even in the Red Army. In sum, like Communist Party, Komsomol organization failed to realize hopes and to meet their female members for equality and freedom. However, in post-Stalin era, there was a rise in the number of female members in Komsomol. In this period, more than half of the members were women. This was mainly due to the cancellation of some laws that had been restricting the rights of women in the Soviet Union.

⁹⁷ Hornsby 2018, pp.2, 9.

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RGASPI, f. 1, op.23, d. 1179, l. 30.

RGASPI, f. 1, op.32, d. 69, l. 40.

RGASPI, f. 1, op.32, d. 69, l. 41.