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Motherhood in *Murzilka*:

Constructing Maternal Ideals for Soviet Children, 1956 – 1964

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Abstract

The Soviet project relied upon its citizens becoming parents, particularly after the vast loss of life suffered in the Great Patriotic War. Not only did Soviet citizens need to have children, they also needed to parent them effectively and bring them up correctly as Soviet citizens. This article focuses on the representation of motherhood within the popular Soviet children's magazine Murzilka *in the years 1956 – 1964 and the role of these mothers as transmitters of matriculture. It identifies particular models of motherhood (tender, loving mothers; working mothers; burdened mothers; deficient mothers) and examines how such models were depicted in stories, poems, illustrations and readers' letters and how they were depicted as interacting with their children. In depicting mothers, model or otherwise,* Murzilka *not only sought to influence its child reader, the future parent, but also the parents of that child, who perhaps read with or to their offspring. What versions of motherhood did the magazine present to its readers and how did these*

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idealised, and sometimes problematised, models serve as agents of matricultural dissemination?

Keywords: Soviet children's magazines; motherhood; double burden; femininity; matriculture.

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Résumé

Le projet soviétique reposait sur le fait que ses citoyens deviennent parents, en particulier après les pertes humaines massives subies pendant la Grande Guerre patriotique. Non seulement les citoyens soviétiques devaient avoir des enfants, mais Ils devaient également les élever correctement et leur inculquer les valeurs de citoyens soviétiques. Cet article porte sur la représentation de la maternité dans le magazine populaire soviétique pour enfants Murzilka *entre 1956 et 1964, ainsi que sur le rôle de ces mères en tant que transmettrices de la matriculture. Il identifie des modèles particuliers de maternité (mères tendres et aimantes; mères qui travaillent; mères surchargées; mères défaillantes) et examine comment ces modèles étaient dépeints dans les histoires, les poèmes, les illustrations et les lettres de lecteurs, ainsi que la façon dont sont représentées leurs interactions avec leurs enfants.*

En dépeignant des mères, qu'elles soient exemplaires ou non, Murzilka *cherchait non seulement à influencer ses jeunes lecteurs, futurs parents, mais aussi les parents de ces enfants, qui lisaient peut-être avec eux ou leur faisaient la lecture. Quelles versions de la maternité le magazine présentait-il à ses lecteurs et comment ces modèles idéalisés, et parfois problématisés, ont-ils servi d'agents de diffusion de la matriculture?*

Mots-clés : magazines soviétiques pour enfants; maternité; double fardeau; matriculture

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The post-war Soviet Union was resolutely pronatalist.[1] Its very existence relied upon its citizens becoming parents, particularly after the catastrophic loss of life suffered during the

[1] For an excellent analysis of the post-war pronatalist policy of the USSR, see Mie Nakachi, *Replacing the Dead*: *The Politics of Reproduction in the Post-war Soviet Union* (Oxford University Press, 2021).

Great Patriotic War.[2] Not only did Soviet citizens need to have children, they needed to raise them correctly in the Soviet way of life. One of the means by which the state sought to educate children in order to ensure appropriate socialisation was through the print media. One such example was the hugely popular monthly magazine *Murzilka*, targeted to Soviet children aged between six and ten years old.[3] *Murzilka* was an official magazine of the *Komsomol* (the youth arm of the Soviet Communist Party) and functioned as an important instrument of instruction for the youngest members of Soviet society who were expected to join the ranks of the *Oktiabrata* (Little Octobrists), the communist youth organisation for young children.[4]

Murzilka was published in Moscow and distributed widely throughout the Soviet Union, with print runs in the millions; in 1958, circulation reached one million copies, increasing to 1.5 million in 1963.[5] According to the magazine's own estimates, each copy of *Murzilka* was passed on between five and ten times, potentially reaching between 7.5 to 15 million Soviet children in 1963.[6] The magazine featured stories, articles, poems, letters and illustrations and a recurring motif was the mother.[7] Like all official media in the Soviet Union, *Murzilka* was produced within the framework of Socialist Realism which prescribed idealised depictions of reality rather than strictly realistic ones.[8] This article explores how motherhood was represented within this official aesthetic and how official Soviet matriculture was transmitted on the pages of *Murzilka* in the period 1956 to 1964.[9] These

[2] The German – Soviet war of 1941 – 1945 is known as the Great Patriotic War in Russia; its war dead are estimated to be 27 million: Mark Harrison, 'Counting the Soviet Union's War Dead: Still 26–27 Million,' *Europe-Asia Studies*, 71, no. 6 (2019), 1036–1047. Further losses were suffered by Soviet people in the years before and after the war due to repression, war, occupation, and deportation.
[3] For a comprehensive discussion of *Murzilka*, see for example Felicity Ann O'Dell, *Socialisation Through Children's Literature: The Soviet Example* (Cambridge University Press, 1978).
[4] Typically, children would then join the Young Pioneers. For more on the *Oktiabrata*, see Jim Riordan, 'The Role of Youth Organisations in Communist Upbringing in the Soviet School,' in *The Making of the Soviet Citizen*, ed. George Avis (Croom Helm, 1987), 136–160.
[5] Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial'no-politicheskoi istorii (Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History) (RGASPI), f. M81, op. 1, d. 20, l. 2: letter dated 1964 signed by *Murzilka* editor A. Mitiaev. *Murzilka* remains in print today and is the world's longest-running children's magazine, recognised as such by the Guinness Book of World Records in 2011.
[6] Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv literatury i iskusstva (Russian State Archive of Literature and Art) (RGALI), f. 631, op. 36, d. 105: Transcript of a May 1951 meeting of the children's literature section of the Union of Writers of the USSR.
[7] Across the 108 issues published in the nine-year period 1956 – 1964, mothers alone featured as characters in 136 separate works compared to fathers who appeared alone in 73 works. 106 works depicted both a mother and a father together.
[8] For more information on Socialist Realism, see Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual* (University of Chicago Press, 1981).
[9] Although *Murzilka* was available throughout the Soviet Union, its representations did not reflect the full ethnic diversity of the population and overwhelmingly privileged Russian cultural contexts.

years are particularly significant as they encompass the period of profound political and cultural change which followed Stalin's death in 1953 and his denunciation in 1956. Commentators at the time decried the state of Soviet youth, and discussions and debates on how best to deal with their declining moral state became increasingly prevalent.[10] The correct socialisation of children into the Soviet way of life took on even greater urgency.

The Soviet Union, emerging from the revolutions of 1917 and the Bolshevik consolidation of power under Lenin, was underpinned by an official Marxist ideology of egalitarianism. The fledgling Soviet state sought to advance the emancipation of women through the dismantling of the bourgeois patriarchal family model.[11] Women were recognised as an integral part of this new, improved society, as workers striving to build communism.[12] However, human biology required them to reproduce and it was this biological imperative that inexorably set Soviet women apart from Soviet men, who had but one task: to build communism through labour.[13] In the immediate post-war period, the Soviet state increasingly foregrounded motherhood as a demographic necessity. This preoccupation with motherhood continued into the 1950s and 1960s, and can be understood as part of a broader ideological and demographic project in which women's reproductive roles were central to national stability. Soviet women and mothers were positioned, then, as both bearers of children and workers, a dual role which structured their representation in official discourse throughout the existence of the Soviet Union.

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[10] For more on this see Ann Livschiz, 'De-Stalinizing Soviet childhood: the quest for moral rebirth, 1953-58,' in *The Dilemmas of De-Stalinization: Negotiating cultural and social change in the Khrushchev era*, ed. Polly Jones (Routledge, 2006), 117–134.

[11] For more on the Marxist theoretical underpinnings of the 'woman question' see Richard Stites, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Russia: Feminism, Nihilism, and Bolshevism* (Princeton University Press, 1978), 233–277.

[12] The speed and scale at which women entered the workforce in the Soviet Union was unprecedented; see Wendy Z. Goldman, *Women at The Gates: Gender and Industry in Stalin's Russia* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 1.

[13] For all that the Soviet state in its infancy claimed to be a country of gender equality, this was nominal only and the *zhenskii vopros* (woman question) was never resolved. There is a rich historiography which looks at Soviet gender roles; the lot of Soviet women in particular has been well-researched. See for example Lynne Attwood, *Creating the New Soviet Woman: Women's Magazines as Engineers of Female Identity, 1922–53* (Macmillan, 1999); Barbara Evans Clements, *A History of Women in Russia: From Earliest Times to the Present* (Indiana University Press, 2012); Melanie Ilič, ed., *Women in the Stalin Era* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2001); Melanie Ilič, Susan E. Reid & Lynne Attwood, eds., *Women in the Khrushchev Era* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); Melanie Ilič, *Soviet Women - Everyday Lives* (Routledge, 2020); Gail Warshofsky Lapidus, *Women in Soviet Society: Equality, Development, and Social Change* (University of California Press, 1978); Stites, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Russia*.

This article approaches matriculture as a heuristic category, following Marie-Françoise Guédon conceptualisation of the term and Clifford Geertz's understanding of cultural symbols as both models *of* and *for* reality.[14] As Rowlatt explains, matriculture encompasses all the ways in which a culture understands and conceptualises mothers and motherhood and its relationship with women, gender and femininity.[15] Within this framework, matriculture refers to recurring patterns through which maternal norms and ideals were depicted for the *Murzilka* readership. Across the corpus of 108 issues in the period 1956 – 1964, these patterns frequently foregrounded maternal care, domesticity, femininity, and labour. Through their repetition across textual and visual forms, these representations contributed to the construction of particular ideals of motherhood as cultural knowledge that could be communicated directly to children.

Tender, Loving Mothers

Melanie Ilič describes Soviet motherhood as "revered culturally."[16] Mothers in the Soviet Union "were expected to be caring, patient and serene," all whilst raising children to be ideologically sound citizens of the future.[17] Academics such as David Hoffman, Lisa Kirschenbaum, and Elizabeth Waters have discussed what Claire McCallum calls the "well-documented sentimentalisation" of Soviet motherhood.[18] In the September 1956 issue of *Murzilka*, the poem *Gde tsvety?* (Where are the flowers?) by Ovsiy Driz (1908 – 1971) and translated from the Hebrew by O. Karysheva appeared. In it, a young boy searches everywhere for the flowers he can smell but cannot find:

> I'm looking – I don't see flowers.
> I see my mother at the window.
> Mum returned from the field,
> Where she was working until late.

[14] Marie-Françoise Guédon, 'Introduction,' *Matrix: A Journal for Matricultural Studies* 1, no. 1 (2020): 3–7; Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (Basic Books, 1973), 93–94.
[15] Linnéa Rowlatt, 'Two Roads to Travel: Matriculture in the United States of America 2024,' in *Matriculture, Shamanism, and the Authority of Women: The Powers That Be,* eds. Linnéa Rowlatt & Angela Sumegi (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2025), 186.
[16] Ilič, *Soviet Women - Everyday Lives*, 110.
[17] Ilič, *Soviet Women - Everyday Lives*, 110.
[18] Claire McCallum, *The Fate of the New Man: Representing and Reconstructing Masculinity in Soviet Visual Culture, 1945-1965*, (Northern Illinois University Press, 2018), 96; David Hoffman, 'Mothers in the Motherland: Stalinist Pronatalism in Its Pan-European Context,' *Journal of Social History*, 34 (2000): 35–53; Lisa A. Kirschenbaum, *Small Comrades: Revolutionizing Childhood in Soviet Russia, 1917 – 1932*, (Routledge, 2001) 133; Elizabeth Waters, 'The Modernisation of Russian Motherhood 1917 – 1937,' *Soviet Studies*, 44:1 (1992): 123–135.

She brought with her
The scent of mint and camomile,
The scent of clover – the whole field
She brought home with her. [19]

The poem depicts a romanticised version of Soviet motherhood: this woman worked long hours in a physically demanding role yet the scent of flowers which accompanied her highlights her femininity. This directly counters contemporaneous criticism of the Soviet system and its 'masculinisation' of women through mandatory employment.[20] The woman in the poem is celebrated as a mother: her son is clearly happy that she has returned, suggesting that she is a good mother. The double burden of labour and motherhood is not referenced at all. This poem not only romanticises the role of mother but also offers a sentimental portrait of rural life, a common trope in Soviet literature and visual culture.[21]

Such a depiction, however, belies the reality endured by those who were employed in the Soviet agricultural industry, which according to the 1959 census, stood at 53% of all working women.[22] Dodge and Feshbach wrote of the "heavy physical labour" and "unskilled, backbreaking work" inherent to agricultural employment and the lack of stimulation endured by the "brigade[s] of farm women bent to their tasks in the field."[23] Soviet rural dwellers were also limited in their access to education, amenities, and consumer goods while female collective farm workers in particular were often denied full access to certain welfare benefits, including maternity pay.[24] Furthermore Soviet peasants could not simply move elsewhere in search of better living or working conditions; their movement was severely restricted following the introduction of the internal passport system in 1932.[25] Nevertheless, not one of these hardships is referenced in the *Murzilka* poem.

[19] *Murzilka*, September 1956, 11.
[20] For an overview of such criticism found in the Soviet press, see Lynne Attwood, *The New Soviet Man and Woman: Sex Role Socialisation in the USSR*, (Macmillan, 1990), 165–182.
[21] See for example Philippa Lewis, 'Peasant Nostalgia in Contemporary Russian Literature,' *Soviet Studies*, 28, no. 4 (1976): 548–569 and Clark, *The Soviet Novel*, 227.
[22] Norton T. Dodge & Murray Feshbach, 'The Role of Women in Soviet Agriculture,' in *Soviet and East European Agriculture*, ed. Jerzy F. Karcz (University of California Press, 1967), 265.
[23] Dodge & Feshbach, *The Role of Women*, 280 and 295.
[24] See Liubov Denisova, *Rural Women in the Soviet Union and Post-Soviet Russia*, transl. I. Mukhina, (Routledge, 2010), 165–167; Lapidus, *Women in Soviet Society*, 104–105.
[25] See Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Stalin's Peasants: Resistance and Survival in the Russian Village after Collectivization* (Oxford University Press, 1994), 92–102.

Annette Kolodny argues in the American context that rural and natural landscapes are frequently coded as feminine and associated with nurture, fertility, and maternal abundance.[26] Victoria Bonnell discusses the gendering of the countryside in the early Soviet period and the hierarchical relationship between urban (male) and rural (female) spaces.[27] Recent scholarship frames water within matricultural systems that link femininity to rural environments, reinforcing the rural space as a site where feminine symbolism is constructed rather than simply reflected.[28] Similar associations can also be found within Eastern Slavic folklore where, as Réjeanne Lacroix demonstrates, certain trees were connected to feminine symbolism.[29] These underlying codes linking femininity and the rural environment reinforce both the mother's feminine qualities and her nurturing nature within the *Murzilka* poem and highlight for readers the ideal version of motherhood which encompassed femininity and work alongside maternal duties.

Just a few years prior to the publication of the *Murzilka* poem, the Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev had launched the Virgin Lands campaign which saw hundreds of thousands of volunteers cultivate previously unfarmed land in a bid to increase Soviet agricultural output.[30] The scheme was promoted as a grand adventure to young *Komsomol* members. In July 1954, an article appeared on the front page of *Pravda*, the primary newspaper of the Soviet Communist Party, inviting young women to the Virgin Lands.[31] Accompanying the article was a photograph of six female Virgin Landers in romantic, floaty dresses with neatly styled hair. There were several campaigns targeted specifically towards Soviet women to encourage them to settle in the Virgin Lands and tens of thousands of women heeded the call every year.[32] The sentimental portrayal of the farmworker mother in

[26] Annette Kolodny, *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters* (University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 3–9.
[27] Victoria E. Bonnell, 'The Peasant Woman in the Stalinist Political Art of the 1930s,' in *The Aesthetic Arsenal: Socialist Realism Under Stalin*, eds. Matthew Cullerne Bown and Brandon Taylor (Yale University Press, 1993), 152.
[28] See *Matrix: A Journal for Matricultural Studies*, 4, no. 1 (2025): *Women and Water: The Flow of Matriculture*. URL: https://journal.networkonculture.ca/index.php/matrix/issue/view/3, accessed 3 October 2026.
[29] Réjeanne Lacroix, ''It Takes All Kinds of Trees to Make a Forest:' Trees Associated with Feminine Folklore in the Eastern Slavic Folk Calendar,' *Matrix: A Journal for Matricultural Studies*, 3, no. 1 (2023) 51–76. URL: https://www.networkonculture.ca/activities/matrix/issues/vol3_iss1, accessed 3 October 2026.
[30] For more on Khrushchev's Virgin Lands campaign, see for example Martin McCauley, *Khrushchev and the Development of Soviet Agriculture: The Virgin Land Programme 1953 - 1964*, (Macmillan, 1976).
[31] *Pravda*, 17 July 1954, 1.
[32] As Michaela Pohl points out, women were sent to the Virgin Lands to become wives and rear animals rather than become agricultural specialists: 'Women and Girls in the Virgin Lands,' in *Women in the Khrushchev Era*, eds. Melanie Ilič, Susan E. Reid & Lynne Attwood (Hampshire, 2004), 53–54.

Murzilka mirrored the widespread depiction of women Virgin Landers at the time, pressing upon readers the romanticism of farming and the rural idyll, priming them perhaps for a similar destiny. As discussed above, though, such sentimentality glossed over the hardships of rural life for Soviet women.

In the March 1959 issue of *Murzilka*, the poem *Maminy plat'ia* (Mum's Dresses) by Galina Demykina (1923 – 1990) appeared. In it, a young girl described her mother's numerous dresses as her enemies: she could not stand them. She only liked the shabby old robe, thrown casually onto the bed. When her mother wore that, it meant they got to spend all evening together and the young girl liked nothing better.[33] This poem, with its portrayal of a romanticised mother-daughter relationship, again depicted an idealised feminine Soviet woman, with a collection of colourful dresses, one for every occasion. A far cry from the "drab…mud-coloured clothes and sensible boots" Australian historian Sheila Fitzpatrick donned in order to assimilate in 1960s Moscow and a far cry from the lived reality of most Soviet women, who usually possessed only one outfit.[34]

The idea of Soviet women as dowdy and drab persisted in the West into the 1950s. Soviet commentators at the time called upon Soviet women to embrace their femininity and engage with fashion, cosmetics and hairstyles.[35] To that end, Soviet women's magazines began to publish more fashion content.[36] In its 8th March 1959 issue, the weekly magazine *Ogonek* stated that "a beautiful, new dress is always a joy for women."[37] Even Khrushchev remarked publicly on the topic, stating in a report to the Supreme Council of the USSR in 1964 that "Working people want to purchase clothes and shoes that have an up-to-date style and beautiful colour and that correspond to the season and to fashion. This is a good thing."[38]

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[33] *Murzilka*, March 1959, 22.
[34] Sheila Fitzpatrick, *A Spy in the Archives: A Memoir of Cold War Russia*, (Melbourne University Press, 2013), 61. For more on Soviet women's fashion see Ilič, *Soviet Women – Everyday Lives*, 127–148; Jukka Gronow & Sergei Zhuravlev, *Fashion Meets Socialism: Fashion industry in the Soviet Union after the Second World War* (Finnish Literature Society, 2015).
[35] Susan E. Reid, 'Gender and the Destalinisation of Consumer Taste in the Soviet Union Under Khrushchev,' in *Gender and Consumption: Domestic Cultures and the Commercialisation of Everyday Life*, eds. Emma Casey and Lydia Martens (Ashgate, 2007), 58–59.
[36] Olga Gurova, 'The Art of Dressing: Body, Gender and Discourse on fashion in Soviet Russia in the 1950s and 1960s,' in *The Fabric of Cultures. Fashion, Identity, Globalization*, eds. Eugenia Paulicelli & Hazel Clark (Routledge, 2009), 73–91.
[37] *Ogonek*, 11 (March 1959), 7.
[38] Nikita S. Khrushchev, 'Iz doklada N. S. Khrushcheva na Chetvertoi sessii Verkhovnogo Soveta SSSR 'O merakh po vypolneniu programmy KPSS v oblasti povysheniia blagosostoianiia naroda,'' *Dekorativnoe iskusstvo SSSR*, 9 (1964), 1.

In printing this poem, *Murzilka* further strengthened official matriculture by circulating idealised images of the Soviet woman as both mother and worker who was at the same time feminine, attractive, and well-dressed. This was presented as an exemplary portrait of a Soviet woman and an aspirational role model for young female readers. This depiction, however, reveals a tension between maternal femininity and availability, suggesting that for the child, what mattered most was not the mother's appearance but her presence. By framing the old robe as the preferred outfit over fashionable dresses, the poem suggests that material culture or appearance was secondary to maternal care and affection, a significant distinction given the context of Soviet consumer shortages.[39]

An illustration by Elena Korotkova (1927 – 2000), published accompanying the poem, depicts the young girl sitting alongside her mother who is wearing an old robe. The daughter is holding a book and gazing at her mother who gazes back. The illustration reinforces the daughter's association between her mother's availability and the old robe: its appearance signals her continued presence. The robe also serves as a marker of the mother's private self in contrast to her public persona and makes visible the daughter's awareness of the competing demands on her mother's time. Korotkova positions the pair in a roughly triangular composition, creating a sense of intimacy and togetherness. The pair may be physically touching although it is unclear. Physical touch between mother and child acted as an indicator of maternal tenderness and attachment and more broadly draws upon cultural associations of emotional security.[40]

Within *Murzilka* in the period 1956 – 1964, there were sixty-four instances of physical contact between mothers and children depicted visually, compared with just twelve between fathers and their children. This predominance of female touch links maternal identity with intimacy, enabling touch to function as visual shorthand for maternal tenderness. In contrast, the relative lack of paternal touch constructs a contradictory model of fatherhood, less entwined with physical proximity and bodily contact.[41] The gender differentiation of care extends beyond adult representations in *Murzilka*. Girls are much more frequently positioned as caregivers, pictured in nurturing roles with other children, animals, and toys while boys are less commonly depicted in equivalent caring

[39] For information on clothing supply shortages in the USSR at this time see Larissa Zakharova, 'How and What to Consume: Patterns of Soviet Clothing Consumption in the 1950s and 1960s,' in *Communism and Consumerism: The Soviet Alternative to the Affluent Society*, eds. Timo Vihavainen & Elena Bogdanova (2016, Brill), 85–112.
[40] Geoffrey Batchen, for example, suggests that "All portraits of a mother holding her offspring recall, sometimes consciously, the Christian iconography of Madonna and child, the ideal emblem of maternal performance." Geoffrey Batchen, *Negative/Positive: A History of Photography* (Routledge, 2020), 219.
[41] This difference in frequency between maternal and paternal touch has been studied recently by Flavia Izzo *et al.*, 'Happy Moments between Children and Their Parents: A Multi-method and Multi-informant Perspective." *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 25 no. 3 (2024): 1–28.

positions. In the period 1956 – 1964, there were eighty-two images of girls in *Murzilka* in a nurturing role compared to twenty-eight images depicting boys in comparable roles. *Murzilka* therefore presented caregiving not only as a characteristic of motherhood but as a form of feminine-coded behavior.[42]

Mothers At Work

Prior to the 1917 revolution, Russian women made up a significant proportion of the workforce, but the First Five-Year Plan, initiated in 1928 at Stalin's behest, prompted a mass influx of women into the Soviet labour market.[43] While enshrined in Soviet ideology, however, equality in the workplace was not fully realised in practice. Prejudice against women workers was endemic at all levels.[44] Soviet women workers were generally limited to two kinds of job: high-intensity, low-pay factory-line production, especially within the textile and food industries; and heavy, unskilled manual labour.[45] Furthermore, women, shouldering the double burden of work and home, were limited in how much time they could devote to upskilling or retraining and were therefore less likely to be promoted.[46] According to a study of Leningrad workers published in 1965 and cited by Filtzer, the prevailing factor for women in choosing employment was the absence of any alternative: they simply needed a wage, regardless of the job itself. Men, on the other hand, were more likely to enter a trade because they were interested in it.[47] For many Soviet women then, work did not define them; it was a means to an end and secondary to their role as mother.

In *Murzilka*, the jobs and work of mothers were not given the same prominence as that of fathers, nor were working mothers celebrated or revered in the same way as many fathers who appeared in the magazine. In *Murzilka*, the work of fathers was narratively interesting, contributing explicitly to the building of socialism. Mothers' work was undoubtedly essential labour, but it was uninteresting, irrelevant, and unheroic. In the

[42] Larissa Rudova, 'Transformative Vision and Abiding Traditionalism: Gender in the Canon of Soviet Children's Literature,' in *The Moving Canon(s) of Slavic Children's Literature*, eds. Mateusz Świetlicki, Dorota Michułka, and Zofia Zasacka (John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2026), 139–156.
[43] For information regarding women worker's status pre-revolution, see Rose L. Glickman, *Russian Factory Women: Workplace and Society 1880 – 1914* (University of California Press, 1984), and for an excellent analysis of Soviet women in work in the early Soviet Union, Goldman, *Women at the Gates.*
[44] This inequality was not exclusively Soviet; women workers in Europe, the USA, and China also encountered prejudice and hostility; see Goldman, *Women at the Gates*, 207–208.
[45] David Filtzer, 'Women Workers in the Khrushchev Era,' in *Women in the Khrushchev Era*, eds. Melanie Ilič, Susan E. Reid, and Lynne Attwood (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 30–34.
[46] Filtzer, *Women Workers*, 30–34.
[47] Filtzer, *Women Workers,* 34 and 38.

story *Zhuk* (Bug) by Gennadii Snegirev (1933 – 2004) in the June 1956 issue of *Murzilka*, for example, no information about the mother of Galia and her brother was given, other than the fact that she was "at work."[48] Likewise, in July 1956, the poem *Detskii avtobus* (Children's bus) by Zinaida Aleksandrova (1907 – 1983) gave no further details beyond "Mothers came from work, and are waiting for their children."[49] Similarly, a poem by Iurii Korinets (1923 – 1989) called *333 zhil'tsa* (333 residents) appeared in the March 1957 issue of *Murzilka* in which the comings and goings of the 333 residents of a block of flats were documented. Among them are a number of mothers and fathers: "82 fathers went to work. 98 mums went out and about on business."[50] While the fathers in this poem purposefully went out to work, the mothers only attended to vague, undefined business.

In the June 1959 issue of *Murzilka*, an article was published entitled *Nashi Papy i Mamy vypolniaiut semiletku* (Our Dads and Mums are fulfilling the seven-year plan) which explicitly highlighted the value of all work, although the only examples mentioned were those that were materially productive:

> All of our mums and dads work. Some in construction, some behind a lathe, some catch fish, some sow grain for bread, and some build the atomic icebreaker 'Lenin.' It doesn't matter where you work. What's important is that you work well. To work well means to fulfil the directives of the XXI party congress, to fulfil the Seven-Year Plan.[51]

The article featured drawings and information sent into the magazine by readers. One boy drew two fishermen. Another boy drew a new mine, a mine in which he might work when he is older, the editors suggested. Another boy sent in a picture of the icebreaker *Lenin*, another the changing Moscow skyline, and another a rocket on its way to the moon, all worthy communist projects. Svetlana Evdokimova, aged eight from Leningrad, drew her father, a turner in a Leningrad factory, but there was no suggestion that she would follow in his footsteps; that was the preserve of sons only.[52] The only mention of a female worker came from Tania Karandeeva, from the village of Luzhki in Belarus. She wrote of her ambition to become a collective farmer and how she already helped her mother look after chickens. In total, Tania had already raised more than forty chicks.[53]

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[48] *Murzilka*, June 1956, 19.
[49] *Murzilka*, July 1956, 10.
[50] *Murzilka*, March 1957, 6–7.
[51] *Murzilka*, June 1959, 4–5.
[52] A number of stories and readers' letters were printed in *Murzilka* in this period which depicted boys who aspired to be just like their fathers. See for example: 'Slavka' by Evgenii Permiak, *Murzilka*, May 1957, 21; Mikhail Lapygin's poem 'Kuznetsy,' *Murzilka*, September 1957, 19.
[53] *Murzilka*, June 1959, 5.

The only mention of a woman at work, then, came from a romanticised rural setting and featured a woman in a caregiving role. This article contributes to a gendered hierarchy of labour which privileges those forms of (male) productive labour considered heroic and socially significant over those viewed as (female) routine and non-transformative. *Murzilka* fathers' work was important on a national scale, furthering the construction of socialism, while the only example of a mother's job mentioned here was limited to the local domestic sphere. By incorporating children's own contributions, the article encourages the wider readership to assign value to these representations and positions readers themselves as active participants in the ideological process.

This was not the only instance in which readers' contributions constructed a gendered hierarchy of labour. A number of readers' letters appeared in *Murzilka* in the period 1956 – 1964 concerning the rearing of rabbits and the association of girls with this type of labour. In the September 1959 issue for example, Galia Bespertseva, a grade five student from Krasnodar Krai, wrote of how her school kept rabbits and how they helped the older students look after them. Galia also wrote of how her class had recently taken on cleaning duties of their classroom, commenting how nice it was to study in a space for which they themselves were responsible.[54] In the May 1960 issue of *Murzilka*, a letter from the pupils of Tarasovka village in Kyiv oblast was published. They explained how they too took care of rabbits at their school and sent in a story detailing how one second-grader, Lilia Zhuk, the smallest in her class, cared for her rabbit, even when he got sick.[55] Another letter appeared in the October 1960 issue of *Murzilka* from Lena and Iasha Zhurbin, a sister and brother from Ukraine. They detailed how they fed and cared for their ten baby rabbits, bringing them milk and vegetables and fresh grass.[56] These letters demonstrate how *Murzilka* readers were not merely passive recipients of matriculture but active participants in its reproduction and circulation. By detailing the routine work of caring for baby rabbits, these readers, most of whom were girls, performed behaviours associated with idealised motherhood, linking femininity to the nurture of others.

Another example of a working mother appeared in the July 1959 issue of *Murzilka*. In the opening paragraphs of Boris Emel'ianov's (1903 – 1965) *Rasskazy o Mame* (Tales about Mum) we find out that Masha and Misha's father worked on an icebreaker far away at sea: worthy, transformative work on a grand, national scale. On the contrary, very little information was given regarding their mother's work.[57] Instead, her role as a loving mother and as a feminine woman who cared about her appearance was foregrounded in the early

[54] *Murzilka*, September 1959, 22.
[55] *Murzilka*, May 1960, 20.
[56] *Murzilka*, October 1960, 19.
[57] *Murzilka*, July 1959, 4.

part of the story. Later in the story, Masha was rude about her mother's hands, describing them as rough. Her mother said her hands were perfectly ordinary *rabochie ruki* (worker's hands).[58] Masha's disdain for her mother's hands, hardened through physical work, echoed some contemporary critics' concerns about the toll manual labour was taking on Soviet women's physical and emotional states.[59] Later in the story, when Masha and Misha's grandmother reprimanded Masha for being rude, more information was finally given about their mother's work:

> Your mother's hands have done good, ten times as much as you could do, you could cover half the planet with the linen that your mother has woven […] Your mother is no white-handed idler, she is a worker, and there is nothing wrong with that, only a lot of good. You stand in her place and God help you to be like her, offensive girl! [60]

Although clear from the above description that the mother was a textile factory worker, it was never explicitly stated. Unlike the father who was defined by his job early in the story, the mother was never given a job title; that part of her identity was not defined beyond the generic title of 'worker,' which was secondary to her romanticised role as mother. The grandmother's admonition reveals the mother's otherwise unseen labour through the motif of her hands. There is both a rejection of a traditional, delicate femininity associated with 'white-handedness' and a celebration of manual labour.[61] Despite the competing demands of labour and motherhood, the mother is explicitly positioned as a model not just for her daughter, but for the wider *Murzilka* readership.

A Mother's Burden

Soviet mothers were expected to not only birth and raise children appropriately, but also to work. This double burden has been examined in both the global and the Soviet-specific context and boasts a rich and varied historiography.[62] The dual toll of work and

[58] *Murzilka*, July 1959, 6.
[59] See Attwood, *The New Soviet Man and Woman, passim*.
[60] *Murzilka*, July 1959, 6.
[61] Hands as a visual metaphor for labour and the working class had a long history in Soviet visual culture and Soviet children would have been familiar with this established visual vocabulary. For recent scholarship on this, see for example Emma Simmons, 'Tools for Liberation: Labor, Gender, and the Factory Workbench in Early Soviet Culture.' *Arts*, 15, no. 5 (2026), 100 and 103.
[62] For discussion of the double burden generally, see for example Michelle Budig, 'Feminism and the Family' in *The Blackwell Companion to the Sociology of Families*, eds. Jacqueline Scott, Judith Treas, and Martin Richards (Blackwell, 2004), 416–434*;* Arlie Hochschild & Anne Machung, *The Second Shift: Working Parents and the Revolution at Home* (Viking, 1989). For a Soviet slant see Filtzer, *Women*

motherhood on Soviet women threw the regime's notion of equality into sharp relief. Soviet women workers who fulfilled their duty to become mothers were expected to maintain their worker status. State-run kindergartens were established in order to facilitate this, yet women were expected to shoulder responsibility for all other aspects of the child's welfare and upbringing as well as other domestic chores, such as shopping, cooking, and cleaning.[63] One contemporary observer noted that at the end of each work day, married women hurried off to queue for groceries, picked up their children from nursery and then went home to cook, clean, and do other chores until late in the evening.[64] Even the basic task of procuring groceries was far from straightforward with frequent widespread shortages and long queues for even everyday supplies. Some women gave up their lunch break in order to shop: "We only had one break of 45 minutes during the day. The men would go to lunch, but I usually went shopping to buy food during that time."[65] When it came to preparing meals, women often had to be inventive due to the lack of available ingredients.[66] These multiple burdens shouldered by Soviet women were famously portrayed in Nataliya Baranskaia's novella *Nedelia kak nedelia* (A week like any other), published in the Soviet literary journal *Novyi Mir* in 1968. Detailing a week in the life of an ordinary Soviet woman Olga Voronskova, a scientist and mother, as she struggled to cope with the demands of Soviet life, the novella was so accurate in its portrayal that it was misidentified in some quarters as non-fiction.[67]

A tongue-in-cheek story by A. Parkhomenko (dates unknown) entitled *Vot tak pomog!* (How helpful!) from the April 1957 issue of *Murzilka* depicted a typical burdened mother

Workers; Lapidus, *Women in Soviet* Society; Lapidus ed, *Women, Work and* Family; Jeni Harden, 'Beyond the Dual Burden: Theorising Gender Inequality in Soviet Russia,' *Critique: Journal of Socialist Theory*, 30, no. 1 (2002), 43–68. Some scholarship refers to the triple burden of Soviet women: work, domestic duties including childcare, and political engagement; however, the focus in *Murzilka* is on mothers as caregivers and workers.

[63] State childcare facilities were established in the Soviet Union but supply never matched demand and lack of childcare provision was a perennial problem, widely discussed even into the Khrushchev era. Catriona Kelly, *Children's World: Growing Up in Russia 1890 – 1991* (Yale University Press, 2007), 409–411. For contemporaneous discussion in Soviet women's magazines, see for example *Rabotnitsa*, 1956, 6, 29; *Rabotnitsa*, 1963, 1, 25.

[64] Mary Leder, *My Life in Stalinist Russia: An American Woman Looks Back* (Indiana University Press, 2001), 44 and 168.

[65] I. F. Vainstein, cited in M. Ilič, *Life Stories of Soviet Women: The Interwar Generation* (Routledge, 2013), 97.

[66] Svetlana Yampolskaya, 'Russian Families Past and Present,' in *Unresolved Dilemmas: Women, Work and the Family in the United States, Europe and the Former Soviet Union*, eds. Kaisa Kauppinen and Tuula Gordon (Ashgate, 1997).

[67] Kelly, *A History of Russian Women's Writing 1820 – 1992*, 399. For a detailed discussion of Baranskaia's novella, see Thomas Lahusen, ''Leaving Paradise' and Perestroika: 'A Week Like Any Other' and 'Memorial Day' by Natal'ia Baranskaya.' in *Fruits of Her Plume: Essays on Contemporary Russian Women's Culture*, ed. Helena Goscilo (Routledge, 2015), 205-224.

returning home from work; she "as always, carried milk, bread and sugar."[68] Kolia, her young son, upon seeing her, ran to meet her, demanded sweets, and then offered to carry the bread. When his legs began to hurt, his mother picked him up and carried both him and the bread home. The father met them on the front porch and both he and the mother smiled when the son said he was helping carry the bread. This short, light-hearted story demonstrated the multiple burdens of a Soviet woman in both a metaphorical and literal sense. The fact that both the father and mother smiled, highlighted just how normalised it was. The accompanying illustration by A. Reshetova (dates unknown) draws upon established visual codes in its representation of the working mother in a headscarf.[69] The headscarf, traditionally tied under the chin for peasant women and behind the head for workers, became shorthand for the Soviet working woman.[70] In the *Murzilka* image, the headscarf visually marks the mother as a worker, while the physical act of holding the child close to her body and gazing at his face, reminiscent of the Madonna and child, evokes a longstanding convention in which maternal holding signifies intimacy and care.[71] Reshetova's illustration brings together the two identities of worker and mother, highlighting for readers the compatibility of labour and motherhood within the idealised image of Soviet womanhood.

In the March 1958 issue of *Murzilka*, a light-hearted illustration by V. Andrievich (1908 – 1985) was published, detailing some children's gifts for their mothers on the occasion of 8th March (International Women's Day).[72] One girl promised to clean the floor at home while another girl promised to do the ironing. Another girl was going to launder her mother's jacket for her. One boy was going to do the shopping for his mum and another, who wanted to be a sailor, was going to mend his own socks. The implication being of course that ordinarily, the mothers would be responsible for these tasks. Another gift was the promise of a top grade at school but this again highlighted an additional burden on mothers: on top of everything else, she also had to worry about the children's grades. Such discussions centring on a mother's mental load continue to this day in a number of countries and became particularly prominent amid the privations of the pandemic where the responsibility for home-schooling fell overwhelmingly to mothers.[73] In *Murzilka*, however, Andrievich presents the Soviet woman's lot not as a matter for criticism but as an accepted social reality.

[68] *Murzilka*, April 1957, 18.
[69] Nadezhda Plungian, *Rozhdenie sovetskoi zhenshchiny: Rabotnitsa, krest'ianka, letchitsa, "byvshaia" i drugie v iskusstve 1917–1939 godov* (Garazh, 2020), 55.
[70] Victoria E. Bonnell, *Iconography of Power: Soviet Political Posters Under Lenin and Stalin* (University of California Press, 1999), 102.
[71] See note 40 above.
[72] *Murzilka*, March 1958, 12–13.
[73] Caitriona Delaney, Alicja Bobek & Sara Clavero, ''It was too much for me': mental load, mothers, and working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic,' *Frontiers in Psychology*, 14 (2023), 1–12.

The March 1960 issue of *Murzilka* featured a domestic scene by artist Tatiana Eryomina (1912 – 1995) on the cover: a young boy holding a celebration sign whispers something to his father who is holding a bunch of flowers and a large gift box. In the background, the mother, wearing an apron, is in the kitchen preparing some food. The irony here is that 8th March, a day purportedly devoted to the celebration of women, actually involved more work for them. Beginning in the 1950s and 1960s, satire grew around the 8th March holiday and the involvement of men in the domestic space.[74] McCallum argues that such satirical depictions were the only visual representations of men within the domestic space, as though the very idea of their presence was laughable.[75] Certainly in *Murzilka* in the period 1956 – 1964, there are no examples of fathers or men in the kitchen; this was the exclusive domain of women and framed as such for the readership.

These examples highlight the various demands placed upon Soviet women, demands not equally distributed amongst men and women but disproportionately the burden of women. *Murzilka*, in transmitting this officially endorsed matriculture and modelling for girls (and boys) society's expectations of them, both reflected and perpetuated the status quo. At the same time, the magazine's inclusion of demonstrations of appreciation modelled ideal behaviour for its readers, offering a tentative recognition of the demands placed upon women and encouraging readers to acknowledge the double burden they bore.

The gendered nature of domestic labour is mentioned explicitly in a story by A. Sidorov (dates unknown) published in the October 1959 issue of *Murzilka*. In the story, entitled *Kak Boriu shchetka podvela* (How a brush let Boria down), a Pioneer leader (a leader within the Soviet communist youth organisation) asked which children cleaned their own rooms at home. Boria initially thought it was a question for the girls and was surprised to see lots of boys raise their hands. Embarrassed, he raised his own and lied about cleaning his room. Boria was eventually caught out in his lie and suffered great discomfort and embarrassment.[76] This story appears to suggest that a gendered attitude towards housework was a source of shame: a good pioneer helped around the home, regardless of gender. The *Murzilka* story promoted an ideal where boys do their fair share of housework but in reality, housework remained the domain of women and girls.

[74] Claire E. McCallum, 'Man about the House: Depicting Fatherhood and Male Domesticity in Soviet Visual Satire after Stalin,' in *Palgrave Handbook of Women and Gender in Twentieth-Century Russia and the Soviet Union*, ed. Melanie Ilič (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 336–337.
[75] McCallum, *Man About the House*, 338.
[76] *Murzilka*, October 1959, 20.

In the February 1961 issue of *Murzilka*, a letter written by a reader's mother was published. This is the only such example in the period 1956 – 1964. The mother wrote to praise her son Gennadii Kut' (Gena), a second-grader at the Zerendinskaia school in Kazakhstan. Gena's mother wrote how he studied well, helped out at home, looked after his little brother and took him to nursery. She said that by the time her and her husband returned home, Gena had already prepared wood for the stove and peeled the potatoes. She finished by saying that she was glad that her son was growing up to be so attentive and hardworking.[77] That there is no equivalent letter celebrating a daughter in *Murzilka* suggests that girls' domestic labour was treated as expected rather than exceptional. This underlines the contradictory nature of Soviet gender ideology: *Murzilka* attempted to cultivate amongst boys non-traditional, masculine behaviour while at the same time perpetuating the normalisation of women's and girls' domestic labour.

In the 1960s, the newspaper *Komsomolskaia Pravda*, a major Soviet youth publication, ran a series of sociological surveys, one of which, published in December 1961, elicited 3000 responses on attitudes towards love, marriage, and the family.[78] One of the questions related to "women's position of inferiority in daily life" and one of the proffered solutions was "participation of the husband [...] in handling household chores."[79] That this was being articulated in the mainstream press suggests that this issue was of some concern although respondents disagreed sharply with its implications. Some rejected the notion that men should be more active around the house: 27-year-old engineer Velakhin for example, complained that it was time to stop "crying about helping the women" while 29-year-old engineering architect Tat'iana Vlasova disparaged men who cared for children as insufficiently masculine.[80] Others, however, recognised the ongoing inequality between men and women: 24-year-old electrician V. Abakov criticised families in which the man considered himself "the head" while 27-year-old editor Tamara Vinogradova, lamented that women too often shouldered "a burden beyond our strength."[81]

These competing attitudes are corroborated by Lynne Attwood's research into the Soviet women's magazines *Rabotnitsa* and *Krestianka*, which reveals women's complaints at being treated as "household slaves" and the ridicule aimed at men who engaged in "women's work."[82] Even where male participation was accepted, it was often confined to

[77] *Murzilka*, February 1961, 21.
[78] M. Motzenok, 'Youth Has Its Say on Love and Marriage,' *Soviet Review*, 3, no. 8 (1962), 21–40.
[79] Motzenok, *Youth Has Its Say*, 21.
[80] Motzenok, *Youth Has Its Say*, 22–23 and 30.
[81] Motzenok, *Youth Has Its Say*, 35.
[82] Lynne Attwood, 'Celebrating the 'frail-figured welder:' Gender Confusion in Women's Magazines of the Khrushchev Era,' *Slavonica*, 8, no.2 (2002), 165 and 166–167.

certain 'masculinised' forms of activity.[83] Consequently the *Rabotnitsa* and *Krestianka* editors proposed "upbringing work" to educate those men who treated their wives as subordinate and those women who did not problematise sexist attitudes and behaviours.[84] Certainly *Murzilka* was positioned as an instrument of socialist upbringing intended to shape idealised gendered behaviour. In this way, the character of Boria acts as a negative role model which readers were expected to shun. At the same time, the letter from Gena's mother promoted and celebrated male participation in household tasks. Together these sources highlight the contested nature of gendered domestic roles: inequalities were beginning to be acknowledged yet household labour continued to be framed as a fundamentally female responsibility.

In the March 1960 issue of *Murzilka*, the story *Devushka v voennom kostume* (The girl in the military suit), written by Vladimir Zheleznikov (1925 – 2015), appeared. This is the only story in *Murzilka* in the period 1956 – 1964 which explicitly discusses a woman's active military service. In the story, Iurii receives poor grades and lies to his mother, Nina, who becomes angry when she finds out. Later, while his mother is out, a former front-line comrade, Sukhov, arrives and reveals that he owes his life to Nina. He shows Iurii a photograph of a girl in military attire who Iurii eventually recognises as his mother. When Iurii's father returns home, his immediate concern is that Nina is not there to prepare his dinner. Sukhov remarks that it is Nina's absence that matters, prompting Iurii's father to reflect on how little he and his son appreciate her. He subsequently realises that Nina left because they had forgotten her birthday and they go to find her and wish her well.

In this story, Zheleznikov, a frequent contributor to the magazine, juxtaposes Nina's extraordinary wartime contribution with her mundane domestic duties and depicts both Iurii and his father in an unfavourable light. There was a lack of interest in and respect for Nina on the part of her son and husband and this contrasted sharply with the common *Murzilka* trope of sons idolising their fathers. Elena Kononenko, writing in *Rabotnitsa* in 1956, discussed the gender imbalance within the domestic space.[85] Based upon readers' letters sent into the magazine, Kononenko cited one example of a couple who had met as students and following their marriage, the man expected the wife to devote herself to looking after him in much the same way as in the *Murzilka* story. Another letter was from a woman who despaired that her husband wanted to spend his free time only with his friends and not her.[86] Zheleznikov's story is critical of the father and son's treatment of the

[83] Attwood, 'Celebrating the Frail-Figured Welder,' 169. This was also seen in *Murzilka* in the March 1958 article discussed above where a boy who wanted to be a sailor darned his own socks: an appropriately masculine version of a traditionally feminine occupation.
[84] Attwood, 'Celebrating the Frail-Figured Welder,' 165–166.
[85] E. Kononenko, 'Otkrovennyi razgovor (Obzor pisem v redaktsiiu),' *Rabotnitsa,* 3 (1956), 30.
[86] Kononenko, 'Otkrovennyi razgovor,' 30.

mother and tellingly coincided with the major holiday celebrating women and mothers. The story ends with Iurii and his father donning their best clothes and apologising and Nina returning home. This depiction of Iurii and his father's ingratitude and inattentiveness acted as a disciplinary narrative encouraging readers to recognise and appreciate maternal labour and sacrifice. Such negative role models not only functioned as cautionary examples for readers in the present, but also reinforced the idea that such attitudes and behaviours were incompatible with the values of the bright Soviet future. At the same time however, this kind of conduct was commonplace and *Murzilka* perpetuated the idea of the Soviet woman's lot.

Despite the title, the illustrations accompanying the story never show Nina in her military uniform. Instead, artist Iuvenalii Korovin (1914 – 1991) depicts her in a white, ruffled blouse, fitted, navy jacket with puff sleeves, white gloves, handbag and a stylish, feminine hat, tipped at a jaunty angle. Djurdja Bartlett suggests that an image of a Soviet woman such as Nina in an elegant ensemble, complete with hat, was a "visual testament to the official reconceptualization of gender."[87] Korovin's choice of outfit was deliberately removed from Nina's wartime heroics and decidedly feminine. According to Anne Greisse, women's war heroics were forgotten but for a "once-a-year-splash" on 8th March.[88] Certainly in this story, while Nina's heroics are mentioned, the primary image the reader is presented with is an elegant, traditionally-feminine mother and wife.

Problem Mothers

Not all *Murzilka* mothers adhered to accepted ideological codes of motherhood. Mothers that were too loving and caring were seen as the root of certain adolescent problems. One such mother appeared in the February 1957 issue of *Murzilka* in a poem by Iurii Yakovlev (1922 – 1995) entitled *Mamin khvostik* (Mummy's little shadow):

There lived in the world
A boy Kostik
The boy Kostik is
Mummy's little shadow

He's behind his mummy
The whole day long

[87] Djurdja Bartlett, *Ideology and Clothes: The Rise and Decline of Socialist Official Fashion*. PhD Thesis, (University of the Arts, London, 2006), 251–252.
[88] Anne Elliot Griesse, *Soviet Women and World War Two: Mobilization and Combat Policies* (MA thesis, Georgetown University, 1980), 81.

Following behind her
Like a tail.

Mummy to the shops
Little shadow to the shops
Make your way to the counter

Mummy to the kitchen
To get the lunch
Kostik-the-little-shadow
Follows silently

Mummy goes visiting
Kostik goes with mummy.

Mummy is needed at a meeting
Her son is ready in advance
I won't stay behind, not for anything
I've already put on my coat!

And whenever
And wherever
The mother might be throughout the day
Kostya's weak voice can be heard
I'm going with you, take me

He is growing up
The boy Kostik
Mummy's little shadow
Is growing too

Kostia starts school
He goes gloomily, miserable
Because in the early hours
Mummy isn't allowed in class.

Kostia was called to the blackboard
Kostia twirls the chalk in his hand
I can't read without mummy

I can't count without mummy
Tears run down his cheek

Kostia wears a red tie
And plaintively asks the others
To please enrol
Mummy into the squad too

That's how he is
This Kostik
This Kostik
Mummy's little shadow. [89]

While following after your father metaphorically as well as literally was something to be celebrated and encouraged, Kostia's relationship with his mother made him a laughing stock. He was described as weak and miserable and could not perform even the most basic tasks without his mother. In the Soviet Union, any inadequacies within children were usually blamed on the mother, although instances of fathers as responsible for their poorly turned-out children appeared in the latter half of the 1950s.[90] Kostia's inability to enter into the Soviet collective contract marked him as an unworthy member of society and he and his mother served as negative role models for *Murzilka* readers. By including such a poem for publication, *Murzilka* not only appealed to the readers' inherent whimsy but cautioned them against behaving in a similar manner, whether as mothers or as children.

Conclusion

In the period 1956 – 1964, *Murzilka* framed its mothers primarily as loving and nurturing while simultaneously maintaining their femininity and taking care over their appearance. Although they participated in paid employment, work rarely defined them and did not displace motherhood as their primary role. *Murzilka* mothers were presented as capable and able to shoulder multiple burdens with apparent ease. *Murzilka* did not present the demands of employment and domestic duties as competing obligations but as ordinary responsibilities which an ideal mother could fulfil without any problem. The official Soviet matriculture was not merely one of maternal affection but of capable and available femininity where work and motherhood were complementary facets of a mother's identity.

[89] *Murzilka*, February 1957, 5–6.
[90] See Ilič, *Soviet Women – Everyday Lives*, 110; McCallum, *Man About the House*, 338.

The magazine's representations of motherhood did much more than reflect societal expectations of Soviet women. Through their repetition across stories, poems, illustrations, and reader contributions, particular understandings of the maternal ideal were made recognisable and desirable to children. Through the construction of this matriculture, the *Murzilka* mother was a mechanism through which the Soviet state sought to embed maternal norms, encouraging their internalisation and reproduction across generations. Portraying these ideals to the children reading the magazine would, it was hoped, help shape how they viewed motherhood and themselves and, ideally, lead to a new generation of devoted, feminine, working mothers and helpful, hardworking, appreciative fathers. Such a reading reveals how *Murzilka* participated in and perpetuated gendered ideological norms and sought to shape gender identities in accordance with state interests.

Biography

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Pravda

Rabotnitsa

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