

Russia: A Reward for Nobody

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The return of the awarded title of “Mother Heroine” is another attempt by Russia to dress up the invasion of Ukraine in the uniform of the Great Patriotic War. What principles underlay the Soviet version of the order? What does its recovery say today? Gender studies researcher Sasha Talaver analyzes the history and relevance of the award

On August 15, 2022, Vladimir Putin signed a [decree](#) on the return of the once famous Mother Heroine order to the list of state awards. In accordance with the presidential decree, this title is awarded to women who have given birth and raised ten or more children, and also provides for a lump sum payment of one million rubles. Considering that the average spending per person in a family with three children per month in 2020 was 10 148 rubles per month, according to [a study by Rosstat](#) [note: *the Russian acronym for The Federal State Statistics Service*], the amount of remuneration for heroine-mothers seems outrageous. But even more outrageous is the fact that in today's circumstances this order is literally a reward for nobody. Its return is devoid of any practical meaning except for the obvious: to establish a symbolic link between the current imperialist war and the Great Patriotic War. Even though the order encourages a certain type of reproductive behavior, in this case it is not a population policy, but with a purely historical policy. This kind of stretching of specific Soviet symbols onto post-Soviet Russia only emphasizes the gulf that separates socialist principles from modern neoliberal capitalism, which informs much of Putin's social policy regime.

To each according to her due

The order to establish the award does not take into account the realities of modern Russia. On average, [there are 3.3 children per “large family”](#) [note: *“multiple-children” family or многодетная семья in Russian*], and there are only 100,000 families with five or more children in Russia in a population of 144 million people. However, [as researchers themselves have noted](#), these state records are poorly maintained. At the same time, the State Order of Parental Glory has existed in Russia since 2008 and is awarded to families raising five or more children. Russia, one might say, has followed the example of other post-Soviet states that returned Soviet-era awards for mothers who give birth to many children. Thus, in Belarus since 1995 there has been an “ордэн Маці” [*Order of the Mother*], (it is also issued for five or more children), in Kazakhstan, since 1996, mothers of seven and six children receive pendants “Алтын алқа” [*Golden Pendant*] and “Күміс алқа” [*Silver Pendant*], respectively. In Ukraine, орден “Мати-героїня” [the Mother Heroine order], which is awarded to parents of five or more children, was returned in 2004. In addition, in many regions of Russia, parents are given various [awards](#) at the regional level.

However, even with a small number of families raising five children, only a few of these parents received the Order of Parental Glory from 2009 to 2021 (494 families, or approximately 0.5% of the total number of such families). In comparison, in the USSR from 1944 to 1991, more than 18.5 million women received various awards for five or more children: the order of the “Mother Heroine” — [more than 400,000 women](#), the order of “Mother's Glory” (of varying degrees for 7-9 children) — more than 5,500,000, “Medal of Motherhood” (of varying degrees for 5-6 children) — [more than 13,000,000 women](#). At the same time, according to the 1989 census in the USSR, there were

approximately [8,000,000 women](#) of “numerous” nationalities with five or more children. It turns out that if in Russia the order of “Parental Glory” is received on average by 38 people a year, then in the USSR for the entire existence of awards for raising five or more children, an average of 383,333 women received them (in the first months of the introduction of the orders “Mother Heroine” and “Mother’s Glory”, 88 women received the respective awards).

One can assume that these figures are not only indicative of the difference between barely comparable reproductive strategies and social protection programs (which will be discussed below) of contemporary Russia and the Soviet Union. First, they demonstrate clearly how in post-Soviet Russia the share of the award recipients in the total number of people who can apply for it, based on the number of children raised, has decreased. Second, the figures also illustrate how the selective, divisive logic of the market, which involves the selection of the “best of the best,” structures maternity support programs in neoliberal Russia. Having and raising five children, which in itself requires exceptional reproductive effort, is no longer enough. Today, order applicants must meet [additional criteria](#) to receive it: they must “form a socially responsible family, lead a healthy lifestyle, provide an appropriate level of care for the health, education, physical, spiritual and moral development of children, the full and harmonious development of their personality, set an example in strengthening the institution of the family and raising children”.

No support, only heroism

So, if in contemporary Russia there are about 100,000 families raising five or more children, then in the RSFSR there were 3,620,555 such families among the “numerous” nationalities. These figures indicate not only [a revolution in contraceptives](#), but also signal changes in reproductive behavior due to economic insecurity of potential parents.

Multiple children in the family in contemporary Russia is one of the indicators of family’s poverty. According to Rosstat, in 2013-2019, the share of the poor (that is, those families in which the income per family member is below the subsistence level) among families with three or more children was almost half, 46.7% of the total. It can also be noted that families with many children made up one of the largest groups among the poor, while over 2013-2019 period its share among other poor groups [steadily increased](#).

Against this background, the return of the “Mother Heroine” order by Putin actually contradicts his demonstrative concern for children. This current award forces us to recall the historical purposes of the adoption of the Soviet decree. Its full description unequivocally indicates its subject: “On increasing state assistance to pregnant women and single mothers, strengthening the protection of motherhood and childhood, establishing the highest degree of distinction — the title of ‘Mother Heroine’ and establishing the order ‘Maternal Glory’ and ‘Medal of Motherhood’.” The decree, corresponding to the heroic order, was primarily aimed at “increasing state aid” — this meaning of the historical award that carried the same name is shamefully omitted by the current Russian regime.

And yet it would be dishonest to speak of the 1944 decree as the embodiment of a fair remuneration for maternal work. This decree (remarkably, originally written by Khrushchev himself) was intended to increase the birth rate, including by releasing men from financial responsibility for children born outside of a registered marriage. If previous legislation in the spirit of socialist feminism recognized equal rights for children born in and out of wedlock, then the new decree of 1944 prevented women from attributing paternity to unofficial partners (they were tacitly assigned the bourgeois label of “lovers”), which would require them to pay alimony and complicate the divorce process. This is how the status of “single mother” appeared in Soviet social policy — a status that became especially widespread in the post-war USSR and completely shifted the responsibility for children and family

management onto women. It is this reactionary tradition — the idea of the family as a woman's responsibility — that the modern Russian state also supports, defending the so-called "traditional values".

In the context of the emergence of a single mother as a new social category, the "state support" provided for by the decree of 1944 could be read as a mockery. Nevertheless, this decree assumed several innovations designed to support mothers of many children, pregnant women and, of course, the "single mothers" themselves. A comparison of the 1944 decree with modern Russian legislation regulating the protection of single mothers reveals nothing but an exceptional farce, this time at the level of social policy. Thus, in accordance with the Soviet decree, benefits for single mothers did not depend either on marital status, or on place of residence, or on income and were paid until the moment when the child reaches the age of twelve: 100 rubles per month per child; [150 rubles — for two children and 200 rubles — for three or more children, while the average salary in 1945 was 442 rubles](#). Modern Russian legislation uses a system of socio-economic differences: for example, if a mother's salary is twice the minimum wage, then she [does not have the right to the benefits](#) even for children under the age of seven. The benefit amount is also puzzling, despite its recent increase: since 2021, the payment for a single parent with a child from 8 to 16 years old is [5,650 rubles](#), with an average salary in Russia of [56,545 rubles](#) per month in 2021.

Despite Putin's paternalistic sentiments, we are witnessing only the degradation of the rudiments of the Soviet system of support for reproductive labor — both at the level of laws, benefits, and infrastructure. Although the USSR regularly failed to achieve its declared goals in terms of creating the necessary conditions for the implementation of the post-war reproductive policy (for example, the norms for the construction of nurseries and kindergartens, canteens, laundries, etc.) were not met, the question of socialization of everyday life did not leave the pages of women's magazines at least until perestroika. The Russian government, on the other hand, hiding behind the argument about "traditional values" and supporting home schooling, is stubbornly trying to put the responsibility for the reproduction of the population on the shoulders of women, hoping to get off the hook with symbolic awards instead of real economic redistribution.

The Militarization of Motherhood

So, the new order "Mother Heroine" means absolutely nothing in terms of real support for motherhood. It serves as an instrument of symbolic politics, pointing to the continuity sought by the Russian regime with Stalinist government and the Great Patriotic War. In addition, it marks a step towards the militarization of motherhood.

As Cynthia Enloe once wrote, ["anything can be militarized,"](#) and motherhood is no exception. For several years now, we have been observing how on the occasion of May 9 [Victory Day], children are dressed up in military uniforms and children's bicycles and strollers are decorated with military-patriotic paraphernalia. However, after the Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, the promotion of motherhood as a service for upbringing future soldiers has gained a different scale and is only increasing momentum. For example, the sensational advertising campaign ["Protect me today. And I can protect you tomorrow"](#) clearly assigns women the role of reproducer of cannon fodder, and at the same time promotes the restriction of reproductive rights in the name of Russia's security. The return of this order from the times of the Great Patriotic War is part-and-parcel of this paternalist PR-strategy. By encouraging in the extreme, especially in modern conditions, the reproductive behavior of women seen as their exclusive vocation, the Mother Heroine award reproduces the logic of anti-abortion campaigns, because the birth of a large number of future soldiers brings women closer to the order of ["Heroes of Russia"](#). Moreover, the Stalin years, from which this order itself was resurrected, were marked by the return of the ban on and criminalization of abortion. The current Russian regime, despite its declarative statements about the importance of

“saving the people”, has consistently created conditions for population decline. The current war in Ukraine — with its heavy losses, negative economic consequences and social upheaval — will only create a further demographic decline, which, apparently, the regime intends to patch up with ridiculous orders and attempts to [regulate the reproductive behavior of women](#). Against this background, a potential future [attempt to remove abortions from compulsory medical insurance](#) looks more and more realistic — and more and more frightening. In this sense, the return of the Mother Heroine order does not portend anything other than a threat to women’s reproductive rights.

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