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Russia Rethinks Abortion: What About America?

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For most of the last half-century, Russia [or the Soviet Union] has encouraged abortion as a means of birth control. Soviet medicine was notoriously unconstrained by ideals of medical ethics, and abortion was just a means of solving a social problem. Committed to a militant form of atheism, the Soviets did not consider abortion a moral issue—just a medical procedure.

In the 1988, as the Soviet Union's days were running out, over 4.6 million abortions were performed. Last year, that number had dropped to 1.7 million, but 60 percent of first pregnancies in Russia still end in abortion. The official state policy has made abortion easily accessible and virtually free.

The procedure is just a technology to end a pregnancy, the communist regime insisted. Many Russian women bought the argument. Quoted in the Christian Science Monitor, "Natasha," a student at Moscow Linguistic University said: "I would like to do everything to avoid an abortion, but it has never occurred to me or my friends that [abortion] is immoral."

That is changing. Russian lawmakers have just passed the first restrictions on abortion since Joseph Stalin's ban on the procedure was lifted in 1955. Abortion in all three trimesters has been readily available. But now, women seeking late term abortions must cite one of four "special circumstances" or the procedure will be denied. This hardly amounts to a reversal on abortion policy, but it does represent a first step toward the recovery of a human life ethic.

Especially encouraging is the fact that moral considerations forced this change in policy. "It's a first step," said Aleksander C. Chuyev, a member of the Russian Parliament's lower house, who introduced a bill outlawing all abortions after the 12th week of pregnancy. He helped to negotiate the compromise plan adopted by the government, and plans to sponsor a bill this fall granting the fetus the same rights as a child.

This "first step" represents a very significant shift in Russian politics and public opinion. Some credit this change to the growing influence of the Russian Orthodox Church after seven decades of official Soviet atheism and repression. The Church has clearly influenced some key political figures and may play an even larger role in the future. A pro-life movement is now emerging in Russia, and these restrictions are a sign of its success.

These new restrictions have also caught the attention of the liberal Western press. The New York Times lamented that, "The way may become increasingly dangerous for women if the government arbitrarily curtails medically safe abortions." Note the language carefully. The Times accuses the Russian government of acting arbitrarily in placing these very limited restrictions on abortions. The Oxford American College Dictionary provides two definitions of 'arbitrary': [1] "based on random choice or personal whim, rather than any reason or system," or [2] "unrestrained and autocratic in the use of authority." Of course, neither of these meanings applies in this case.

The Russian government acted in its lawful authority through its legislative process, and the new policy was negotiated with the official health authorities. There was nothing even remotely arbitrary about the Russian Parliament's action. This case reveals clearly the absolute determination by the editors of The New York Times to oppose any restrictions on abortion as arbitrary. That's their story, and they're sticking with it. Who cares about the facts?

America's liberal media are resolutely determined to defend abortion on demand against any threat—no matter how remote. The New York Times simply leads the pack in this respect. The Times pushes its pro-abortion agenda through slanted news coverage and outright editorial bias. Pro-life leaders are presented as fanatical zealots out to oppress women. Workers in the pro-life movement are portrayed as mindless victims of prejudice and ignorance. The fetus, of course, seldom appears at all.

It was not always so. In *Abortion Rites: A Social History of Abortion in America*, Marvin Olasky demonstrates that The New York Times was once a stalwart defender of human dignity and opposed abortion as "The Great Evil of the Age." In 1870, editor Louis Jennings published an editorial claiming that the "perpetration of infant murder ... is rank and smells to heaven. Why is there no hint of its punishment?" The paper ran a series of investigative reports that led to a police crackdown on abortionists. The current leadership of the Times must see this history as a great embarrassment.

The liberal Western media pose as the defenders of human rights and human dignity, but what they actually defend is abortion under virtually all circumstances, without any limitation. Abortion has become a cherished symbol of sexual liberation and freedom from moral limitations for the liberal elite. The fetus simply does not count and does not matter.

The good news is that Russia is showing signs of a moral recovery on the issue of life. These very limited restrictions on abortion hardly threaten the massive Russian abortion industry, but when put in an historical frame, these are the first restrictions on abortion to come in fifty years. This is only a small victory—but a very important victory. Those who defend the sanctity of human life—born and unborn—must welcome this development and pray for more.

The bad news is that the elite American media are resolutely committed to the culture of death. Across a range of vital issues, the media elite stands ready to defend abortion, embryo research, euthanasia, and other threats to human life and human dignity.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Russia's great prophet of our times, once stated: "The strength or weakness of a society depends more on the level of its spiritual life than on its level of industrialization. Neither a market economy nor even general abundance constitutes the crowning achievement of human life. If a nation's spiritual energies have been exhausted, it will not be saved from collapse by the most perfect government structure or by any industrial development."

That is a warning Russia must hear—and so must we. A nation committed to the Culture of Death has forfeited its spiritual life and is headed for history's long list of civilizations in decline. Russians—and Americans—must pray for recovery in our times.

