

Why Russia's Population Is Plummeting

news

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The well-being of any state and the correctness of its development path are judged by the quality of life and standard of living of its citizens. Although abstract in nature, these indicators can be effectively measured through criteria such as birth and death rates. These factors have a direct impact on a country's demographic situation: not only is it desirable for many children to be born, but also for people to live long lives, thereby reducing mortality rates. This makes fertility and mortality rates the “vital signs” of a nation's health.

In August, Rosstat reported a decline in Russia's population [1]. According to the agency, the natural population decline in the first half of 2024 amounted to 321,000 people. By comparison, the decline was 272,000 last year, which means this negative trend is worsening. The number of deaths in the first half of this year reached nearly 1 million, with 921,000 deaths reported. Meanwhile, births decreased by 17,000 compared to last year, totaling 599,600.

Thus, the natural population decline in Russia increased by 18% in the first half of 2024 [2]. Put simply, Russia is dying as fewer children are being born while more people are dying. Why is this happening?

It is therefore obviously necessary to increase the birth rate and reduce the mortality rate for positive population growth dynamics. While government policies can play a role, are Russian authorities really addressing the underlying issues that contribute to the low birth rate? The legislators did propose various initiatives to encourage women to have more children. These include proposals to ban childfree ideology, extra payments to female students who give birth, and sermons by Orthodox priests extolling the value of marriage and childbirth (as discussed in our previous news material “The Collapse of Traditional Values: Russia’s Demographic Crisis”). But the statistics remain relentless - the birth rate is falling. In 2023, a survey by VCIOM (Russian Public Opinion Research Center) revealed that the majority of women (39%) are not planning pregnancies due to inadequate housing conditions and financial difficulties [3]. Another 37% of Russian women said they were afraid to have children because of the lack of stability in their lives [3].

As we can see, these problems have more to do with the material reality of capitalism, which places a priority on profit above the reproduction of labor force, rather than with the lack of “family values”, contrary to what the authorities tend to claim. But it is much easier for politicians to accuse women of lacking morality rather than acknowledge that capitalism's inherent contradictions, which aggravate the housing crisis and underfund social services related to childrearing and motherhood, are the root of the problem. These issues are not only the oversights of policy; rather, they are the inevitable outcomes of a market economy.

Under such a system, the interests of the capitalist class take priority over those of workers, particularly working moms, who are gradually deprived of the resources necessary to raise their children. That being said, a woman with children just does not fit into this Social Darwinist paradigm of survival-of-the-fittest because she does need adequate help and support from the government, but this is something capitalism is simply not willing to provide. The resources needed for child-rearing — time, money, healthcare, and housing — are increasingly hoarded by an exploiting minority, leaving the majority of workers to struggle with ever-decreasing crumbs.

This was not the case in the Soviet Union though, where protecting motherhood and childhood was a state priority. Since 1917, the People's Commissariat for Social Security (analogous to today's Ministry) maintained a Department for the Protection of Maternity and Infancy [4]. This commitment reflected a socialist understanding that the fruits of collective labor might be used to improve society, especially for the most vulnerable ones in it if it were not expropriated by a handful of capitalists.

Efforts to improve sanitary conditions for working women, educate mothers, and support those in need continued even during the difficult years of the Civil War. Financial allowances, milk kitchens, nurseries, and kindergartens were available to women more than 100 years ago in a fledgling socialist state that had not even been electrified. The Bolsheviks understood that reducing child mortality and giving families decent living conditions were essential to the happiness and prosperity of society. Even though modern entrepreneurs may recognize the significance of these problems, their actions are often limited by capitalism's fundamental constraints itself, this is why most of their efforts are focused primarily on the quick, surface-level fixes.

State policy in the USSR, on the other hand, continued to develop and finally brought forth the longest maternity leave in the world, supportive labor regulations for women, the building of large summer camps for kids, free extracurricular activities, free school lunches, and free education. The socialist state provided all this because all the means of production — factories, plants, and land — were socially owned, and so they could be used to the benefit of children and their families. As a result, women felt safe and supported by the state - having a child was not a ticket to poverty for most, and so they could give birth more freely. Why can't a wealthy capitalist country, the fourth-largest economy in the world, provide at least the same benefits as the "beggar USSR," as modern market enthusiasts would have us believe?

The second major reason for the low birth rate, according to the women surveyed, is the inaccessibility of housing.

Today, only a few people can afford to buy an apartment with their savings. For the majority, the only option is a mortgage. But even in this case, the situation is dire: on July 26, the Central Bank raised the key interest rate to 18% [5], which means higher interest rates for mortgages. Currently, they average 19–20% for apartments in cities. Here's an example of the cost of buying a home: in August 2024, a one-bedroom apartment in a Siberian city of over one million people will cost 3 million rubles on the re-sale market. With a down payment of 500,000 rubles, the bank could offer a 30-year mortgage with a monthly payment of 41,000 rubles. The total overpayment to the bank would be 12,333,000 rubles. Each month, you would have to pay an amount slightly below the average salary in the region, and 30 years later, you would be the proud owner of a one-bedroom apartment in a building built during the Brezhnev era — the very same apartment that people in the USSR got for free from the enterprises they worked for. We discussed mortgage conditions in more detail in our article "[Mortgage: Profit for the Rich, Bondage for Workers](#)".

Only a socialist state, with a planned economy under workers' ownership of the means of production, can provide decent housing. In a market economy, the interests of developers and banks, driven by insatiable profit motives, will always take precedence. It's no wonder that these conditions do not encourage family creation or higher birth rates.

Another critical demographic issue is mortality.

In the spring of 2024, Rosstat reported a sudden rise in mortality rates across Russia [7], with some regions seeing an increase of up to 34%. The most common causes of death are diseases of the circulatory system and neoplasms [6]. In 2015, scientists

found that a long working week and repeated overexertion significantly increase the risk of cardiovascular disease [8].

The most common case is coronary heart disease, which mainly affects men between the ages of 40 and 70. The need to work excessively literally shortens one's life, but the economic situation leaves no alternative, especially when even a "one-bedroom apartment on the re-sale market" takes 30 years to pay off (for those who can even afford the installments). It is not surprising that the first demand of the socialists in the late 19th century was the reduction of working hours. In the USSR, the 8-hour workday — and later the 7-hour workday — was strictly enforced.

Why, now, with all the advances in technology and automation, do people often work 12-hour shifts for several days in a row? After all, some of the work could be automated, giving people more time for rest, recuperation, and proper nutrition. This is exactly what would happen in a socialist state, where exploitation does not exist.

In a market economy, the interests of the worker and the employer are fundamentally opposed. The worker seeks a decent wage and sufficient rest, while the employer seeks to maximize profit, often by exploiting the workers. If the workers resist, the companies will simply import so-called guest workers (migrants) who will work under worse conditions for lower wages. No technological progress in a market economy will significantly improve the situation of workers because it is not profitable for corporations. Only a few will accumulate wealth, occasionally throwing crumbs to the masses, but even those crumbs will be taken away in the next economic crisis when "the market does its thing."

The market economy is unable to overcome the main cause of mortality — work-related heart attacks. On the contrary, the oligarchic powers benefit by reducing the burden on the pension fund. Capitalism creates a brutal jungle of competition in which the weak perish, and no scientific discovery will fundamentally change this situation. Any new technology will be used to enrich the few who control most of the planet's resources. Each labor-saving and productivity-boosting innovation, allows the capitalist to enrich himself by appropriating the results of labour, while workers face unemployment and impoverishment.

Only the Soviet socialist state used scientific progress to improve people's quality of life, and the numbers speak for themselves: according to statistics, Russia's demographic losses after the collapse of the USSR amounted to 25 million people [9]. The Soviet Goskomstat (State Statistics Agency) predicted that Russia's population would reach 169 million by 2021, based on fertility, mortality, and natural population growth rates. The Soviet state, with its truly social policies — universal health care, regular disease prevention, rest and recuperation for workers in sanatoriums, and strict protection of workers' rights — created confidence in the future, which led to population growth. However, the transition to a market economy cost Russia 25 million lives. These victims of social murder are dismissed as those who "did not adapt to the market".

No matter how much the defenders of capitalism talk about freedom and democracy for the individual, the numbers tell a different story. In a market economy, private owners exploit wage labor and drain the life out of workers, contributing not to their longevity but to their extinction. Only a transition to a socialist economy can ensure a decent life for the majority of citizens and fundamentally improve the situation for everyone. A transition to an economy where private property and exploitation are abolished and the wealth of the country rests in the hands of the workers. However, this is not something that will be realised spontaneously - the task of forming a communist party to lead the broad masses of workers along this route remains.

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