

## A Warning from History: The Pendulum of Change to and from Institutional Out-of-Home Childcare

Olga Ulybina

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# A Warning from History: The Pendulum of Change to and from Institutional Out-of-Home Childcare

Olga Ulybina

Sociology, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland

## ABSTRACT

This article examines the historic and current developments in out-of-home childcare – as a chain of repeated attempts to prioritize family-based and family-like care, followed – due to various circumstances – by returns of institutional care. We focus on Russia – as a country with a particularly significant history of institutional care – and place the Russian case within a broader international context. Comprising a critical review of published academic analysis and primary documents, the article explores the circumstances of the pendulum-like, repeated recourse to both family-based and institutional residential childcare, as well as the implications of these dynamics for policy-makers and childcare practitioners today.

## KEYWORDS

Out-of-home; residential; deinstitutionalization; foster care; orphan

## PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS

- The future of residential childcare is uncertain, and U-turns in care provision towards institutional facilities are likely, particularly given the recent trends of care for-profitization and corporatization, standardization and professionalization of the care sector.
- In order to avoid the pendulum of care towards and away from family- and community-based care, policy makers, scholars and practitioners need to do two things – (a) move away from the institutional vs family-based dichotomy discussions; and (b) ask why, when, and under what conditions harmful care institutions spread in the past.
- Promoting deinstitutionalization and raising awareness about the benefits of family- and community-based childcare is not enough to guarantee that children grow up in a family environment.
- In order to ensure that there is no rolling-back to institutional care systems, it is important to focus on economic and technological systems that need to be put in place to maintain care in the family as the number one option.

## Introduction

Over the last decade, a growing number of studies have addressed the advance of family- and community-based out-of-home childcare, which is usually

**CONTACT** Olga Ulybina  [o.a.ulybina.04@cantab.net](mailto:o.a.ulybina.04@cantab.net)  Sociology, University of Helsinki, Unioninkatu 40, Helsinki 00014, Finland

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contrasted with institutional residential childcare (e.g. P. S. Goldman et al., 2020; Henderson, 2023; van Ijzendoorn et al., 2020). Community-based care includes family-based and family-like care, and refers to “*the spectrum of services that enable individuals to live in the community and, in the case of children, to grow up in a family environment as opposed to an institution*” (Common European Guidelines on the Transition from Institutional to Community-based Care, 2012, p. 27). Family-based care usually includes kinship care, foster care, adoption, and guardianship (Cantwell et al., 2014, p. 33; Common European Guidelines on the Transition from Institutional to Community-based Care, 2012). Family-like care refers to residential care “*provided in largely autonomous small-groups under conditions that resemble a family environment as much as possible,*” or “*a small family-style living unit*” in residential facilities (Cantwell et al., 2014, p. 33). Such arrangements are contrasted with institutional childcare, meaning large children’s homes, often with institutional culture and rigid routines, where children are isolated from the community, lack control over their lives, and care is not personalized to take account of children’s individual needs (Cantwell et al., 2014, p. 34; Common European Guidelines on the Transition from Institutional to Community-based Care, 2012, p. 25). In many countries, including Russia, the balance between these types of provision has changed over time.

At the end of the 20th century, after a massive expansion of institutional residential childcare, Russia was one of many countries to join the international deinstitutionalization movement and carry out reforms aiming to move children from institutions to families or family-like environments (Kulmala et al., 2020; Ulybina, 2023). These reforms tended to include transition from large to small care facilities, more family-like care arrangements, as well as preventive activities, such as support of mothers in the community, aimed at reducing child abandonment.

The global spread of childcare deinstitutionalization (DI) in the late 20th–early 21st century tends to be attributed to three predominantly post-World War II ideational factors, i.e. factors pertaining to ideas: (a) the rise of new individualistic, human rights-focused thinking; (b) the scientization of social policy-making and the spread of scientific evidence-supported thinking that institutional care is harmful for children; and (c) the spread of neoliberal ideas, whereby cost-cutting becomes a legitimate objective in the social sector (Kulmala et al., 2020; Ulybina, 2023; UNICEF, 2003).

We discuss the conditions under which the rise of institutional care occurred historically in Russia, as well as conditions that made the current influence of pro-family ideas and the spread of DI policy possible. We apply a historical lens to highlight the uncertainty around the future of children in care. We point out that the power of certain ideas is critically dependent on non-ideational conditions – economic, socio-demographic, and technological. Given the volatility of these material conditions, childcare may take radically different paths in the future.

Using the history of child (de-)institutionalization in Russia, we argue that: (1) the history of child care transformations is not unidirectional or irreversible; (2) the history of childcare ideas is not “progressive,” as the family-care ideal has been around for a long time; (3) changes in the dominant forms of childcare appear to be associated with changes in material conditions.

In this paper, we do not aim to advocate for a particular form of childcare. Nor is our aim to review the long and complex history of out-of-home childcare in Russia (for overviews, e.g. Firsov, 2005; Rockhill, 2022; T. M. Smirnova, 2015). Rather, by using examples from Russian history, we wish to draw the attention of childcare researchers and professionals to the implications of the repeated rise of both institutional and family-based forms of care over the past few centuries.

This article is based on a critical review of existing scholarship and historical documents (policy documents, reports, and official publications) concerning the development of out-of-home childcare in Russia, specifically the prevalence of institutional versus family- and community-based care. For simplification, Russia refers to either the Russian Empire, the Russian Republic of the USSR (RSFSR) or the Russian Federation, depending on the period in question.

Literature was identified by a hybrid strategy of reviewing key index literature which was known to the authors; backward and forward citation searching from this literature; a search of Google Scholar, and two libraries (the National Library of Russia <https://nlr.ru/eng> and the Electronic Library of Historic Documents <https://docs.historyrussia.org/ru/nodes/1-glavnaya>), using the keyword search (foster care, orphanage, orphan, orphanhood, without parental care; patronat, detskie doma, besprizornost, deti-siroty, sirotstvo, bez popecheniya roditeley). Inclusion was based on relevance to two central questions: (a) What has been the historical trajectory of change in terms of the dichotomy *family- and community-based vs institutional*? (b) Under what conditions do we observe shifts toward or away from institutional childcare? The sources considered were in Russian or English only and no date restrictions were applied.

Obtaining meaningful and comparable sets of statistical data for pre- and post-Revolution periods in Russia, and interpreting these figures accurately, is a challenge that would require a separate study. We, therefore, include just a few figures below to give an idea of scale.

The article is structured as follows. We explore the alternate rise of family-based and family-like vs institutional residential childcare in Russia, and discuss factors that repeatedly shifted the policy focus between these two broad childcare models at different moments of history. We then point out that benefits of family-based and family-like childcare were widely understood long before the most recent DI movement. After that, we place the Russian case within a wider international context, point out that the Russian story is

not unique and similar developments can be found in other countries. To conclude, we discuss the implications of our findings for the future of out-of-home childcare in Russia and beyond.

## **The History of Out-of-Home Childcare in Russia: Between Family-Based and Institutional Childcare**

### ***Russian Out-Of-Home Childcare: On an Intricate Path to and from Residential Childcare Institutions***

*Family-based and institutional childcare before 1917.* Various forms of alternative childcare co-existed throughout Russian history – both family- and institution-based. The history of family-based foster care in Russia goes back to at least the 16th century (Avdeev et al., 2020), and since then, Russia saw multiple efforts to place children without parental care into families. Prior to the 19th century, peasant communities, which constituted the majority of the Russian population, arranged care for abandoned children and orphans in the community – by child’s relatives or other families in the village, appointed by the village gathering (skhod). The community elders were expected to oversee the actions of foster parents.

The 18th – 19th centuries saw a rise of foundling homes and orphanages. From the late 18th century, care for foundlings and orphans was provided by foundling homes in Moscow and St. Petersburg, as well as departments of public care (prikazy obshchestvennogo prizreniya) in other regions, and from 1864 by bodies of local self-government (provincial zemstvos). The Moscow and St. Petersburg foundling homes were established due to the efforts of Ivan Betsky, who petitioned Catherine II to set up large institutions (Betsky, 1789; Sklyar, 2008). The care homes were designed to be closed institutions, in order to bring up children in morally appropriate ways (Betsky, 1789). Care included games, sports, various sciences and crafts, and children were taught hard work, cleanliness, manners, etc. The number of children brought to these homes grew over time. For example, for St. Petersburg Children’s Home: “*between 1771 and 1787, the number of arrived children was fluctuating between 457 and 976, and from 1788 onwards it was more than 1052 children*” (Sokolovsky, 2001). In the second half of the 18th century, local self-government bodies became involved in the provision of care in the Russian provinces. The intention was to set up local shelters, which would admit illegitimate children and then send them to the Moscow Foundling Home at the age of two to 5 years.

The rise and spread of childcare institutions in the 18th century are associated with the influence of European ideas about charity, child care and education (Betsky, 1789; Frumenkova, 2007). However, there were other

reasons for this, too. Traditional systems of community care were not effective when it concerned babies born out of wedlock. Mothers of illegitimate children, who did not wish to disclose their secret, had two options – to anonymously bring the child to a foundling home, or to murder the child. Orphanages were partly set up in response to a high baby murder rate, in order to save children's lives (Betsky, 1789; Imperial Philanthropic Society, 1886).

The policy of supporting closed childcare institutions did not mean abandonment of family-based care. According to a 1775 Manifesto by Catherine II, *«if arranging orphanages will be inconvenient or will require spending that would prevent care provision to larger numbers of orphans, then the Department places poor orphans for moderate payment to reliable virtuous and well-behaved people for maintenance and upbringing, with the obligation to send them back anytime to the Department»* (Catherine II, 1775, p. 159).

Institutional care provision brought disappointing results. First, the system was widely abused, as secret admission allowed legitimate children to be abandoned as illegitimate (Zaytseva, 2008). Second, the mortality of children in the two foundling homes was very high: the ratio of annually admitted children to those who died at the children's home that year often stood at about 1:1, similar to child mortality rates inside orphanages in other Western European countries of that time (Ransel, 1988; Sklyar, 2008; Sokolovsky, 2001). The high mortality was due to the lack of wet nurses, overcrowded housing, poor nutrition, and lack of good health care (Ransel, 1988; Sklyar, 2008; Zaytseva, 2008). In order to prevent such high child mortality, in the second half of the 18th century, "open childcare" was introduced, i.e. family-based care, whereby children from foundling homes were sent to peasant families in the villages for upbringing (e.g. Sklyar, 2008; Sokolovsky, 2001). Orphans were placed with relatives or other families in return for remuneration. In other words, the state moved to develop foster care in the families once institutional care showed unacceptable outcomes, which in the 18th century meant a nearly 100% mortality rate.

Starting from 1821, officials were instructed to prevent the admission of children to institutions, with a view to eventually close those shelters. In 1837, an Imperial decree ordered that all children in children's homes were to be sent to villages for upbringing by peasant foster families, and access for children from provincial institutions to the Foundling Homes in St. Petersburg and Moscow was prohibited (Materialy dlya istorii Imperatorskogo Moskovskogo Vospitatelnogo doma [Materials for the history of the Imperial Moscow Foundling Home], 1914, pp. 116–117). Payments to foster parents varied and could depend on the age, gender and disability of the child. Foster children remained in foster families up to the age of 13–15 years, after which they returned to the orphanage, were sent to the workshops, etc. In the 19th century, the state took steps to make foster care more attractive. It

offered higher remuneration to foster parents, as well as bonus payments to foster parents whose children lived until above the age of one. Child fostering – the so-called fosterage industry (*pitomnicheskiy promysel*) – was an important source of income for many peasants, and thousands of villages were involved in different parts of Russia (Ransel, 1988; Yegorysheva, 2012).

However, the mortality of fostered children was high. This was partly due to the high child mortality generally in the population (Ransel, 1988, p. 266). As noted at the International Congress on the protection of babies in 1909, Russia had the highest rate of child mortality among developed countries (Novikova, 2012, p. 863). While 5.5 million children were born in 1908, 3.5 million died the same year, and 1.5 million of these were under the age of one. This high child mortality can partly be explained by poverty (Imperial Philanthropic Society, 1886) and “peasant child-care culture” (Ransel, 1988, p. 266) and limited knowledge in the population about the needs and development of babies, hygiene and the importance of breastmilk (Frumenkova, 2017; Yegorysheva, 2012). Yet, child mortality in the regions where village fostering was common was significantly higher than the Russian average (e.g. Kurkin, 1902, p. XXVIII, 270, 275; Yegorysheva, 2012). Foster care was often associated with neglect and exploitation since children were commonly fostered as a source of income and free child labor (e.g. Ransel, 1988). The predominantly economic nature of fosterage is illustrated by the late 19th century statistics, which show that the rate of child fostering in rural areas reduced when population could engage in more profitable economic activities (Kurkin, 1902: XXXVI). The authorities took various measures to improve care outcomes in foster families, e.g. not placing infants with families during the first few weeks after birth in order to guarantee breastfeeding for at least some time; raising remuneration; and issuing detailed guidance for more frequent and thorough inspections of children in foster care (e.g. Materials, 1914). However, outcomes of foster care remained poor.

Given that neither the institutional nor foster care provided satisfactory results, from the second half of the 19th century, there was a shift toward a mixed family-like and family-based system of residential care. In the new system of open admission to foundling homes, mothers were required to present identity documents. Various kinds of support were offered to mothers with babies in order to promote and improve the outcomes of family-based care. Financial support was provided to mothers who brought their babies to the shelter and then decided to take their baby back home, or agreed to breastfeed their baby for a certain number of months (e.g. *Imperatorskiy Vospitatelny Dom* [Imperial Foundling Home], 1871, p. 8). In some areas, mothers were required to stay with their babies at the local shelter for a period of a couple of months, after which they were sent home with their babies, or babies were placed with foster families (Zaytseva, 2008). Measures were taken to encourage biological mothers to maintain the bonds with their children for



as long as possible. The All-Russian Guardianship for the Protection of Motherhood and Childhood promoted “milk kitchens,” i.e. special stations where formula milk and supplementary dairy products were distributed for free to mothers of babies and small children. At the same time, the key principle was to support breastfeeding. Mothers were offered consultations where they could learn about correct baby feeding, bathing and other aspects of childcare (Novikova, 2012; Semenova, 2019). So, in the 19th–early 20th century, efforts were made to turn orphanages into mother and baby homes and to provide material incentives and other support for biological mothers to keep their babies, in order to deal with overcrowded, disease-ridden and costly baby homes, while rural foster care was associated with high child mortality. Yet, such “schools for mothers” (Semenova, 2019, p. 78) existed mainly on private charitable donations and could not secure support for all those who needed it (Novikova, 2012).

*Family-based and institutional childcare during the Soviet period.* Events of the first half of the 20th century, including World War I, the 1917 Revolution and the following Civil War in Russia resulted in large numbers of children without parental care, with child homelessness and child crime rising dramatically. After 1917, the Soviet state took responsibility for children without parental care and mobilized massive resources to address these problems.

As demonstrated by historians of early Soviet childcare, the radical ideas about the demise of the family and the “nationalization” of children, which were widely spread after the 1917 Revolution, never became part of the state policy in the USSR. The early Soviet government took various measures to prevent child abandonment and promoted a combination of public and family upbringing (T. Smirnova, 2023, p. 155).

The attitude of the Soviet state toward family-based and family-like forms of orphan care was “contradictory” and dynamic. On the one hand, the new authorities set the goal to replace the orphanages of the Czarist time with “palaces for orphans” (T. M. Smirnova, 2015, p. 238). In 1918, the department for children’s homes of the People’s Commissariat of social provision laid out the rules for organizing children’s homes – to be followed by all provincial departments of social provision (Narkomat sotsialnogo obespecheniya [People’s Commissariat of Social Security], 1918). According to these rules, “the overcrowded orphanages of pre-reform type are undesirable as they have barrack-like character” (People’s, 1918, pp. 13–14). Older children were to be involved in caring for younger children, “which helps develop altruistic feelings in them and adds a family character to the small commune” (People’s, 1918, pp. 13–14). Either way, “children’s homes must be open, i.e. children must go to general schools, kindergartens, clubs. Only if there are none in the vicinity, children’s homes should have their own schools” (People’s, 1918, pp. 13–14).



On the other hand, the Soviet state allowed four forms of family-based alternative care: foster care (*patronat*), two forms of guardianship (*opeka* and *popechitelstvo*), and adoption. Authorities initially moved away from family-based foster care. Village fostering was not mentioned in the Family Code of 1918 – because of its association with high child mortality, poor care outcomes, concerns that children would be brought up by families in ideologically inappropriate ways, as well as concerns about child exploitation by foster parents (Bernstein, 2001; T. M. Smirnova, 2015). However, child fostering was not banned, and the state started to promote foster care as a way to reduce child homelessness and cut expenses.

In the early 1920s, following poor harvests and famine, the number of street children without parental care grew massively, and children's homes became overcrowded (T. M. Smirnova, 2015, pp. 144, 149, 204). In 1923, the number of children in various institutions (children's homes for preschool and school-aged children, reception centers, homes for disabled children) in the RSFSR was over 800,000 (T. M. Smirnova, 2015, p. 359). The state could not support children's homes any longer and transferred them under local budgets in 1923, which reduced the number of children's homes and institutionalized children, either by placing children with families or leaving them in the streets (Karaseva, 2015, p. 141).

The problem of child homelessness persisted, and in order to vacate places at reception centers and orphanages for new children from the streets, the state ran a foster care campaign in 1926–1928. In the 1920s – 1930s, a system of generous material stimuli for foster parents was developed – one-off and monthly payments, land plots, apartments, etc. (VTsIK I SNK [All-Russian Central Executive Committee and Council of People's Commissars] [SNK], 1928; VTsIK I SNK RSFSR [All-Russian Central Executive Committee and Council of People's Commissars of the Russian SFSR] [SNK], 1936).

Soviet authorities took measures to regulate foster care and improve the practice of child fostering. They demanded a written contract, with a minimum term of 3 years, giving preference to long-term contracts (All, 1928). Additional material incentives were offered for providing good care – for those foster parents “who fulfil their obligations in relation to foster children with due care and completeness” (All, 1928, Article 13).

By the late 1930s, approximately 250,000 children lived in institutional care (Karaseva, 2015, pp. 194, 222). Children's homes had “colossally high child mortality”: in the RSFSR, child mortality in orphanages for healthy children was 7–9 times higher than average child mortality, and for pre-school children it was more than 8–10 times higher than normal (Iz dokladnoy zapiski o sostoyanii detskih domov RSFSR [From a report on the state of orphanages in the Russian SFSR] [RSFSR], 1934, p. 343). At the same time, 144,000 children lived in foster families in the RSFSR (Karaseva, 2015, p. 135).

A significant share of these children (up to 50%) were fostered by their close relatives, who, according to law, should have been guardians of these children, but departments of public education and councils let them foster children as without state support the majority of these relatives would not be able to maintain the children (Karaseva, 2015, p. 135). In addition, many children were living in families under guardianship – a number “significantly larger than that of fostered children” (Tyurkin, 1938).

Audit reports from Russian regions in the 1930s discuss the frequent failures to provide appropriate foster care – children lacking food, clothes, bedding, not going to school, abuse, and exploitation; absence of child records; failures to conclude foster care contracts and make payments; lack of inspectors to visit families (e.g., *Informatsiya o rezultatah obsledovaniya usloviy zhizni detey-sirot v opekunskih sem'yah* [Information on the results of the survey of living conditions of orphans in foster families], 1936; Potehina, 1936; Tyurkin, 1938; also; Bernstein, 2001). Family placements often led to the rise of street children, who either escaped the harsh conditions of their foster homes, went begging, or were abandoned by foster parents (T. M. Smirnova, 2015, pp. 307–308; Tyurkin, 1938).

During the World War II, which left more children without parental care, the Soviet state again turned to both family-based and institutional care. Street children were to be temporarily placed into reception centers (for no longer than 2 weeks), after which children under the age of 14 were to be reunified with their parents or, if this was impossible, placed in children's homes or foster care (Sovet Narodnyh Komissarov SSSR [Council of People's Commissars of the USSR] [SSSR], 1942). In other words, the 1942 resolution prioritized the birth family and did not stipulate that institutional care was more preferable than foster care. Citizens in urban and rural areas continued to be allowed to foster children, under the supervision of special inspectors and based on a contract, which foresaw a salary for foster parents and benefit payments and clothes for foster children (Council, 1942, p. 158).

Soviet policy changed in the 1950s and 1960s, when many children's homes were transformed into large boarding schools, with each school housing 300–600 children (Madison, 1972, p. 841; also Ivanova, 2018). Boarding schools, promoted by Khrushchev in the 1950s, were inspired by the Czarist closed schools that would raise the future elite and, at the same time, provide care for orphans and help single mothers who needed state support (Gospolitizdat [Political Literature Publishing House], 1956, p. 82). The transition to boarding schools is explained by economic factors: “*the pupils' standard maintenance allotments were somewhat higher at the boarding schools, the staff salaries were higher there, and the boarding-school buildings were better equipped with up-to-date amenities*” (Madison, 1972, p. 841). The popularity of boarding schools among the population was also due to economic difficulties at the household level – single mothers and large families often saw

boarding schools as a way to alleviate their material problems (Ivanova, 2018). In the academic year 1965–1966, there were 1178 boarding schools in the RSFSR, which housed 425,000 children (Ivanova, 2018, p. 372).

In reality, boarding schools did not live up to the ideal described by Khrushchev – they suffered from the lack of necessary space, equipment and qualified staff, and were often associated with high child morbidity, child abuse, poor feeding and care practices. Students showed poor educational achievements and behavioral issues. In response, fearing the “deviant behavior of pupils,” staff of boarding schools imposed multiple restrictions on the everyday lives of children, which led to the strict regimentation of daily routines (Ivanova, 2018, p. 370).

We do not find evidence of state efforts to make childcare institutions family-like in the 1950s and 1960s. Children in care were isolated from local communities and had highly structured daily routines in accordance with state-of-the-art medical and pedagogical science – a result of increased professionalization and scientization of care provision (Galley, 2020, p. 61; Schmidt, 2014, p. 28; Sovet Ministrov RSFSR [Council of Ministers of the Russian SFSR] [RSFSR], 1954, 1963). Children’s homes could only be opened if they “*strictly met sanitary rules for children’s homes and fire safety rules for children’s organizations*,” and all homes for school-aged children were required to have rooms for studies, workshops, a sports ground, their own farming plot, etc. (Council, 1954, p. 19). Meeting these requirements would naturally be easier for larger homes. The state moved to consolidate smaller children’s homes into large units and established a minimum number of children per home – at least 60 for school-age children and at least 50 for pre-school children (Council, 1954). The 1963 Resolution of the Council of Ministers of the RSFSR explicitly stated that regional governments and local authorities were “*obliged to ensure economical spending of public funds on the maintenance of boarding schools < . . . > to increase the number of students in each of them to at least 280 people . . .*” (Council, 1963, p. 157). The policy of expenditure optimization, consolidation, and transition to larger organizational forms was part of a broader trend toward rationalization and increased efficiency – pursued in other sectors, such as mergers of schools and farms in the 1950s and 1960s, as part of modernization of different economic sectors (e.g., schools – Sovet Ministrov USSR [Council of Ministers of the USSR] [USSR], 1971; farms – TsK VKP(b) [Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (VKP(V))] [VKP], 1950).

Another manifestation of rationalization and optimization was the tendency toward typization and separation of children into groups “according to certain prejudged characteristics” (Madison, 1972, p. 852) – a process that started in the 1930s (Karaseva, 2015, p. 148). Children were strictly segregated by age groups, their physical and mental abilities. The institutionalization of childcare occurred to a great extent in the process of scientization,

rationalization and economic optimization of care provision, which was part of the broad-based modernization. The Soviet practices of childcare “*reflect the exigencies and pressures of rapid industrialization – more than they do the demands of a given ideology*” (Madison, 1972, p. 852).

The state, however, continued to support family-based care and view institutional care as an option to be used when family-based care failed. In official documents, family-based and institutional care were listed as equal care options, and authorities of different levels were obliged to take measures to support families that raised children left without parental care (Ministr Vnutrennih Del SSSR [Minister of Internal Affairs of the USSR] [SSSR], 1952; Sovet Ministrov RSFSR [Council of Ministers of the Russian SFSR] [RSFSR], 1957). Children could leave childcare institutions in order to return to parents or close relatives, as well as for adoption, foster care or guardianship by other families (Council, 1954).

In the 1960s–1970s, child homelessness was under control, and state efforts focused on preventing child abandonment, supporting families in need, and child protection. Yet, the numbers of children in care remained high, at an estimated 1% of the underage Soviet population (Galley, 2020, p. 21). In 1965, between 60,000 and 70,000 new cases of children without parental care were registered in Russia (Rockhill, 2022, p. 2). Foster care, however, declined – by the 1960s, the country was no longer in the extreme socio-economic conditions of the pre-war period, and the need to accommodate large numbers of children without parental care was no longer so acute (Bernstein, 2001). Other reasons included concerns about the traumatic psychological effects of short-term foster care for children (Bernstein, 2001), bureaucratic challenges, and poorly regulated controls over foster parents (Avdeev et al., 2020). In 1968, foster care was not included in the new law on marriage and family; however, other family-based care options – guardianship and adoption – remained (Verhovny Sovet SSSR [Supreme Council of the USSR] [SSSR], 1968). Unlike foster care, guardianship and adoption did not imply remuneration and therefore were less likely to lead to risky placements motivated by material benefits. The 1969 Code on Marriage and Family of the RSFSR allowed adoption by foreign citizens in cases where the child could not be placed under guardianship or adopted by Soviet citizens (Verhovny Sovet RSFSR [Supreme Council of the Russian SFSR] [RSFSR], 1969). In other words, there was no abolition of family-based forms of care but rather a move away from what had proved to be a particularly risky form of care, while more “traditional” and possibly less prone to abuse forms of care – guardianship and adoption – were kept.

*Family-based and institutional childcare during the late Soviet and post-Soviet period.* During the late Soviet period, policy shifted back to promoting family-based and family-like childcare. A couple of decades after foster care was abolished, in the late 1980s, different models of professional family-based

care, as well as family-type children's homes, started to appear (Rossiyskiy Detskiy Fond [Russian Children's Fund], 1988; Sovet Ministrov RSFSR [Council of Ministers of the Russian SFSR] [RSFSR], 1988).

The economic decline after the fall of the USSR negatively affected the development of family-like forms of care and weakened families. In the 1990s, the number of children without parental care was growing, with over 100,000 new cases of children in Russia without parental care being registered annually between 1994 and 2006 (Rockhill, 2022, p. 2). It is estimated that "over one-third of these children were placed in residential care institutions, over a half were placed in family substitutes and only about 6% were returned to their birth families" (Rockhill, 2022, p. 2). As of 2003, there were 776,000 children without parental care in Russia, of whom 250,000 were raised in institutions (Rockhill, 2022, p. 2).

Once the economic situation improved, the post-Soviet Russia properly joined the global movement of childcare deinstitutionalization. The federal program "Russia without orphans" (Rossiya bez sirot) for 2013–2020 aimed to close the existing network of children's homes by redirecting funding toward family forms of childcare. The de-institutionalization program saw problems that were similar to the foster care campaigns of the late 1920–1930s – the gap between declared intentions and practice; the campaign-like nature of reforms, without due consideration for quality control; negligence and non-compliance with the rules for placing children in foster care, in the race to achieve pre-defined goals. Also, similar to the 1920s, the post-Soviet authorities used economic motivations for fostering, and foster care became a survival strategy for poor families in rural areas, with negative effects for children (e.g. Galindabaeva & Karbainov, 2022; Kulmala et al., 2020).

### ***Imagining Ideal Out-of-Home Childcare: The Progressive History of Childcare Ideas?***

*How new is the ideal of family- and community-based out-of-home childcare in Russia?* As seen in Russia in 1886, "the future task consists in returning the mother to the child" (Imperial Philanthropic Society, 1886, p. 32). In the 21st century, this task was proclaimed by the United Nations as a global goal: "to support efforts to keep children in, or return them to, the care of their family" (UNGA, 2010, p. 2). Both historically and today, we find the argument that children's homes should be used only for temporary placement: "prior to their [children's] placement into families for upbringing" (Volkova, 1894, p. 26); "removal of a child from the care of the family should be seen as a measure of last resort and should, whenever possible, be temporary and for the shortest possible duration" (UNGA, 2010, p. 4).

The now commonly recognized advantages of family- and community-based care – respect for the rights of the child, emotional and developmental

benefits for the child, as well as the lower cost – were also recognized by care professionals more than a century ago. Available official publications from the late 19th–early 20th century make nearly identical points to modern-day advocates of family- and community-based childcare. These are: the moral/human rights argument, the health and development argument, as well as the cost argument (e.g. Imperial Philanthropic Society, 1886; Yablokov, 1901).

What about the Soviet period – did the ideal of family- and community-based childcare perish in the Soviet Russia? Given the particularly heavy use of institutional residential childcare in the USSR, one might assume that the pro-family ideas were abandoned after 1917. However, the Department for the Protection of Motherhood and Infancy of the Russian Ministry of Healthcare (Narkomzdrav RSFSR) actively fought against child abandonment and advocated for the development of state support of families. The Department recommended opening baby shelters and foundling homes only as measures “of last resort” (e.g. T. M. Smirnova, 2015).

By the first half of the 20th century, the issue of child hospitalism – the failure of infants deprived of maternal care in childcare institutions to thrive and develop normally, both physically and psychologically – was well-known in Russia. Soviet researchers and practitioners worked to develop an evidence-based system of upbringing in childcare institutions that emphasized the relationships between children and carers, which would help to overcome the problem of hospitalism (for references see Lisina, 2012).

Various official documents from the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s present an image of family-like institutional childcare, which is focused not only on the physical well-being and educational attainment of children but also provides an emotionally comfortable environment, where children are surrounded “*with attention, love and affection*” (Narkompros RSFSR [People’s Commissariat of Education of the Russian SFSR] [RSFSR], 1940c, p. 10): «*The approach of the carer to children in a children’s home has a lot of that which reminds us of the relationships of parents with their children in a family*» (Narkompros RSFSR [People’s Commissariat of Education of the Russian SFSR] [RSFSR], 1940b, p. 24). It was argued that children’s homes should not resemble military barracks but should rather be as small as possible and be organized on the model of a family (Narkompros RSFSR [People’s Commissariat of Education of the Russian SFSR] [RSFSR], 1940a, pp. 10–11). Suggestions were made how to make institution-based care more family-like: “*In order to make the conditions in the children’s home even closer to family conditions, we celebrate children’s birthdays . . . at the shared, festively decorated table*” (Akademiya pedagogicheskikh nauk [Academy of Pedagogical Sciences], 1956, p. 54).

Advocacy of close, family-like relationships between children in institutional care and their carers can also be found during the later Soviet period,



1970s–1980s. Soviet psychology since the second half of 1970s (for references see Schmidt, 2014) supported theoretical concepts of attachment, which strengthened the idea that mother cannot be replaced during the early childhood.

*Are ideational changes responsible for the repeated rise and decline of family- and community-based childcare in Russia?* Ideas about the benefits of family environment were common in Russia long before the arrival of ideas about children's rights and the right to grow up in a family. The now mainstream idea that the best option for the child is to grow up with a family or in a family-like environment was also widely expressed in the 19th century, before World War II, and even at the time of widespread proliferation of orphanages in the USSR. However, pro-family ideas did not prevent the rise of orphanages and retreats from these ideas in practice. Under what conditions did this happen?

Witnesses from the late 19th, 20th and 21st centuries stress material and economic – rather than ideational – factors as the main hindrances to family-based care. At the turn of the 19/20th centuries, the poor outcomes of family-based care, which prompted recourse to institutional care, were explained as follows: “*material insecurity is accompanied by underdevelopment, uncleanness, prejudices and other unfavorable conditions for the proper development of the child's body*” (Yablokov, 1901, p. 158).

Although the number of orphanages and institutionalized children grew, this was not a result of intentional policy. The expansion of institutional residential care was perceived in the 1930s as a necessity (e.g., From, 1934, p. 341).

Arguably, problematic family- and community-based care is explained not only by household poverty and macro-economic downturns. Another material factor preventing the effective realization of family- and community-based care was the lack of technologies allowing safe feeding of infants in care. As discussed above, historically Russia experienced a significant deficit of locally available wet nurses, and the lack of clean, safe, and age-appropriate feeding. The absence of safe formula milk at that time contributed to severe child mortality in foster families and led to frustration with this form of family-based infant care, potentially encouraging U-turns toward the alternative.

There is extensive literature on the history of infant feeding and the impact of feeding-related technological innovations on reducing child mortality in the 19th–20th centuries around the world (e.g. Currier & Widness, 2018). Pasteurization of cow's milk, equipment for the heat treatment of bottled milk, as well as improvements in milking machines greatly improved milk hygiene and safety, and consequently infant survival (Currier & Widness, 2018). This was complemented by the invention of formula milk, i.e. cow's milk modified to be similar to human milk (Currier & Widness, 2018), as well as human donor milk banks (Moro, 2018) – essentially an industrial version of wet nursing.



Between 1918–1926, the Soviet state imposed a ban on adoptions. However, this temporary move away from family-based care is explained not so much by the ideological preference for institution-based care but rather by the concern that peasants would adopt children in order to exploit them as free labor (W. Goldman, 1993, p. 52; T. M. Smirnova, 2015, p. 299). If so, the logic was similar to that of deinstitutionalization reforms of the late 20th–early 21st centuries: the discovery of the unacceptably poor outcomes of care in one type of setting (family- or institution-based) triggered its rejection and attempts to shift to the alternative type of care. The difference between the 19th/20th and 21st centuries lies in what was considered unacceptably poor outcomes: in the early 20th century, the central criteria were child morbidity and mortality, as well as child exploitation, while in the late 20th century, these basic criteria were complemented by the psychological well-being of the child, as well as their chances for harmonious development. In addition, the relative cost of care provision continued to be an important consideration.

The Russian case highlights the importance of placing current care developments within the longer historic context. It reveals the need for a discussion about the future of out-of-home childcare that would be aware of the sector's past, and specifically the role of material – economic and technological – factors that enable certain ideas to dominate the policy and practice of childcare.

### ***International Parallels and Lessons from Russian History for Our Time***

The Russian case – the pendulum of childcare to and from child institutionalization – is hardly a unique story. Policy pendulums, i.e. sequences of reforms and counter-reforms, are common to many countries and have been widely discussed in the Russian context (e.g. Akhiezer, 1997; Ledeneva, 2026). Furthermore, a quick glance at other countries finds similar childcare developments elsewhere. According to a report from the XXII International Pedagogical Congress in Switzerland (1892), two approaches to out-of-home childcare – institutional and family-based – co-existed in Europe since the 18th century (Volkova, 1894, p. 9). In the late 18th century Europe, a high-profile debate about the preferred forms of orphan care took place, known as *Waisenhausstreit* (e.g. Scheutz, 2014). Benefits of family-based care were widely realized and advocated for by the European public and professional communities in the past centuries, e.g. in Germany, Holland, Austria, Sweden (Engberg, 2004; Volkova, 1894). A similar pendulum of care practices from orphanages toward family-based foster care, and then back to closed institutions, can be found in the history of Austria (Scheutz, 2014). Until recently, residential care in North America was deemed harmful and efforts went toward developing family-based care; however, after family-based care brought disappointing outcomes and failed to accommodate various groups of children in care, there have been calls to revive residential care services (e.g. Whittaker, 2000).

The dichotomy view of effective care being either residential or family-based remains common today – as reflected in the deinstitutionalization concept itself, and the increasingly voiced critique of the deinstitutionalization movement (e.g. Ainsworth & Huefner, 2025; Henderson, 2023; Holmes et al., 2018).

The similarities of childcare ideas and policies in the 19th and 21st centuries are striking. Today, the UN Guidelines stipulate that “*financial and material poverty ... should never be the only justification for the removal of a child from parental care*” and that appropriate support should be provided to birth parents in order to prevent child abandonment (UNGA, 2010, p. 4). In the 19th century, a common custom in Austria was «*to bring children closer to their parents*» by providing financial support to biological mothers as maintenance money for their children (Volkova, 1894, p. 27). Both historically and today, we find a relatively broad understanding of prevention of child abandonment, including not only financial support but also various social supportive services such as day care centers for children living with their parents (UNGA, 2010, p. 8; Volkova, 1894, pp. 41–42). The similarities are not only striking but also concerning. Given that pro-family care ideas and practices failed to prevent mass institutionalization of children in the past, there is no guarantee that the world will not go back to child institutionalization in the future. Our observations agree with findings of scholars of adjacent policy areas concerning the history of childhood and child-related policies, e.g.: “*While neglect, maltreatment, and an emotionless educational approach probably occurred more frequently in the past than today, this was not because of a basically different educational mindset. It was because of stronger limits and less favorable conditions for the educational space.*” (Dekker, 2023, p. 6).

Shifts toward and away from family- and community-based care appear to be not so much products of ideational change but rather certain material conditions that (do not) allow the deeply rooted pro-family preferences to be realized. If this is indeed the case, the future of residential childcare is uncertain, and U-turns in future care provision are likely. Recent trends of care for-profitization and corporatization, associated potentially with standardization and professionalization of the care sector (Sen et al., 2024; Ulybina, 2026), highlight the persistent uncertainty and imminent fragility of DI achievements. The first step to avoid the described pendulum of care may be to move away from the residential vs family-based dichotomy discussions toward a more nuanced approach that allows space for different care models and focuses on the placement purpose rather than placement type (Holmes et al., 2018), and seeks “the right care, in the right setting, at the right time” (Ainsworth & Huefner, 2025). However, childcare scholars also need to be asking: why, when, and under what conditions did institutions come back in

the past? How do we ensure that there is no rolling-back to the systems that one thinks harm children? What systems need to be in place to maintain care in the family as the number one option?

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