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October 16, 2007

Childbirth Pain Relief and the Soviet Origins of the Lamaze Method

Abstract

On February 13, 1951, the Soviet Minister of Public Health [Minzdrav] E. Smirnov issued Order No. 142, which commanded the constituent republics of the USSR to utilize the psychoprophylactic method (a.k.a. PPM) of pain relief in all Soviet childbirth facilities. Building on decades of work with hypnosis and suggestion, Smirnov touted psychoprophylaxis as an innovative and reliable approach to pain relief in childbirth on a mass scale. In the midst of the campaign for psychoprophylaxis, French obstetrician Fernand Lamaze (1891-1957) traveled to the USSR in September 1951, as part of a delegation of communist and left-leaning French physicians sent to see the latest Soviet innovations in medical technology and administration. More than a half-century after Order No. 142 and Lamaze's trip to Leningrad, psychoprophylaxis continues to enjoy widespread use in North America and, to a lesser extent, elsewhere around the globe. The name Lamaze is a household word in the US, associated with the technique's hallmark panting breaths. Yet despite the way in which it is woven into American birth practices and popular culture, its Soviet roots remain murky, in part because of the deliberate efforts by American advocates during the cold war to obscure those roots. This paper seeks to illuminate the origins and trajectory of psychoprophylaxis prior to its 1951 arrival on the national and international scene, asking, in the words of historian Margaret Jacobs, "a fundamental question: why at certain times and not others does interesting science (and technology) occur in the first place?"