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‘Natural Childbirth's Cold War History’

Abstract:

This talk sheds light on the previously untold Cold War history of the natural childbirth movement. In 1933 British physician Grantly Dick-Read coined the term Natural Childbirth to connote his approach to unanesthetized birth, achieved through prenatal education to alleviate women's fears and through constant support during labour. Nearly two decades later, French obstetrician Fernand Lamaze travelled to the Soviet Union and witnessed the psychoprophylactic method, which similarly promised the relief or even elimination of labour pain without resort to pharmaceuticals. Popularised in the West as the Lamaze method, psychoprophylaxis used conditioning in patterned breathing and conscious relaxation. Threatened by the rising popularity of the Lamaze method, Dick-Read mocked the breathing technique as “merely frills” and condemned Lamaze as an instrument of Soviet propaganda and plagiarism. Dick-Read's accusations against Lamaze were not wholly unfounded. Though psychologists in the USSR had come up with psychoprophylaxis independently, the Soviet state did, indeed, seek to use this method to spread word of Stalin's benevolence toward working class women. When, in the 1960s, the Lamaze method arrived in North America, its politically suspect pedigree would first be the subject of scrutiny and, ultimately, erasure.