

Restoring Teachers to Their Rights: Soviet Education and the 1936 Denunciation of Pedology

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I. Teachers' Practices as "Pedological Distortions"

In early 1937, one-third of sixth graders in a school near Leningrad were not passing their Russian-language course. Their teacher, Tomsinskaia, told the school director that the failures were due to circumstances beyond her control: children had received inadequate preparation in previous grades, textbooks were in short supply, and pupils had "weak reading habits." Other teachers in the Krasnosel'skii district offered similar justifications for pupils' poor performance. Sakhanova claimed that low levels of achievement were due to "bad home conditions." Velichko asserted that her seventeen failing pupils all suffered from inherited conditions such as "mental retardation," "underdevelopment," or "congenital laziness." Semenovskii, who had completed higher education and considerable teaching experience, admitted he had no explanation why one-half of his pupils were failing every year.¹

According to the regional educational journal, however, these poor results were evidence that teachers were "shirking their responsibility for pupils' lack of achievement." While blaming lack of preparation in earlier grades, an article in that journal charged that Tomsinskaia had conveniently "forgotten" that one-half of "failing" pupils had studied with her the previous year and thus she was responsible for promoting them, just as she had "forgotten" to mention that she made little effort to correct mistakes, provide remedial assistance, or encourage independent reading. Yet this article went beyond simply asserting that teachers should be held accountable

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¹"V Krasnosel'skom raione ne vypolniaiut reshenii TsK," *V pomoshch' uchiteliiu* No. 3 (March 1937), 6-7.

for pupil performance. Teachers who claimed that “objective” factors were responsible for poor results were accused of displaying “pedological distortions,” succumbing to “class-hostile elements,” and engaging in “wrecking” activity with “anti-Leninist” objectives.²

The tension between these explanations for unsatisfactory performance illustrates the broader dilemma of assessing teachers’ work. While acknowledging their duty to provide pupils with certain kinds of knowledge and skills, teachers like Tomsinskaia, Sakhanova, and Velichko also believed that classroom performance was shaped by factors seemingly beyond their control. The published account, by contrast, shifted responsibility back to the individual teacher by denying the significance of “outside” factors. These Soviet teachers thus found themselves in the seemingly “universal” predicament of their profession, as their own assessment of classroom performance came into conflict with the ambiguous, unstable, and politically contentious criteria used by outside authorities.³

Yet this evaluation also contained elements unique to Soviet culture of the late 1930s. References to “class-hostile” elements, “wrecking” activity, and “anti-Leninist” objectives, for example, were drawn directly from the repressive politics of the Great Terror. At the very moment this article appeared, Joseph Stalin warned Communist Party members and the Soviet people that “a frantic and unprincipled band of wreckers, diversionists, spies, and murderers, acting under the orders of the intelligence organs of foreign states” had adopted “the most desperate means of struggle” in their effort to betray the world’s first socialist state to its enemies.⁴ Citing this threat posed by “concealed” traitors, Communist Party and secret police organs unleashed the waves of denunciations, arrests, and executions that destroyed hundreds of thousands of “enemies of the people” accused of “anti-Soviet” acts such as spying, sabotage, or conspiracies. The use of this rhetoric to discuss a particular school reveals how the authoritarian politics of Stalinism penetrated daily life in the 1930s and shaped attitudes and practices of teachers within education.⁵

²Ibid., 5-9.

³According to Dan Lortie, evaluating teaching is a process “fraught with complications.” Dan Lortie, *Schoolteachers. A Sociological Study* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1975), 134-136.

⁴I. V. Stalin, “On Deficiencies in Party Work and Measures for Liquidating Trotskyists and Other Double-dealers,” in *Lenin, Stalin, Khrushchev. Voices of Bolshevism* ed. Robert McNeal (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1963), 107-112.

⁵For further discussion of authoritarian politics and Soviet life in the 1930s, see J. Arch Getty, *Origins of the Great Purges. The Soviet Communist Party Reconsidered, 1933-1938* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Robert Conquest, *The Great Terror. A Reassessment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); O. V. Khlevniuk, *1937-i: Stalin, NKVD, i sovetskoe obshchestvo* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo “Respublika,” 1992); Sarah Davies, *Popular Opinion in Stalin's Russia. Terror, Propaganda, and Dissent, 1934-1941* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997). For the specific relationship between Stalinist terror and Soviet teachers,

In this context, the term “pedological distortions” acquired considerable political significance. “Pedology,” the scientific study of children, had become particularly influential in the 1920s among Soviet educators and psychologists. Pedologists believed that studying the influence of environmental conditions and inherited traits on the mental and physical development of children would provide the empirical knowledge necessary to reform educational policies and thus progress toward the goal of creating socialism in the Soviet Union. On July 4, 1936, however, the Central Committee of the Communist Party issued a decree, “On pedological distortions in the system of Narkompros,” which charged that scholars in the field of pedology had disrupted Soviet education by classifying vast numbers of children as “unfit” or “retarded.” Affirming the strong voluntarism of Stalinist ideology, the Central Committee declared that the establishment of socialism meant that inherited traits no longer affected the mental development of Soviet children.⁶ In this context, charges that teachers committed “pedological distortions” directly implicated them in presumptions and practices strongly condemned just a year earlier by the Central Committee.

The denunciation of pedology was one element of the broader effort of Soviet political authorities to establish control over all fields of scholarly inquiry. Soviet leaders never conceded that scholars could be autonomous from social and political concerns. In practice, however, academics in the first decade after the revolution were granted a measure of autonomy, particularly in fields such as child studies, that appeared less ideologically significant. Following the consolidation of Stalin’s power in the late 1920s, however, scholars were subjected to increasing measures of both surveillance and intervention. The 1936 decree thus marked a significant step towards establishing “the Stalinist system of control” in the scholarly world.⁷ The public criticism of scholars, the censorship of publications, and the prohibition of entire fields of research which followed the decree demonstrated how scientific inquiry could be made subordinate to political imperatives.

Yet teachers occupied an ambiguous position in this process of increasing repression. In this article about Krasnosel’skii schools, the recommended responses to “pedological distortions” included such explicitly political acts

see my *The Teachers of Stalinism: Policy, Practice, and Power in Soviet Schools in the 1930s* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., forthcoming).

⁶Narkompros was the Commissariat of Education (*Narodnyi Kommissariat Prosveshcheniia*). For the text of the Central Committee decree, see “O pedologicheskikh izvrashcheniakh v sisteme narkomprosov,” (July 4, 1936) *Narodnoe obrazovanie v SSSR. Obscheobrazovatel’naia shkola. Sbornik dokumentov 1917-1973 gg.* (Moscow: Pedagogika, 1973), 173-175. An English translation is in Joseph Wortis, *Soviet Psychiatry* (Baltimore: Williams and Wilkins, 1950), 242-245.

⁷Loren R. Graham, *Science, Philosophy, and Human Behavior in the Soviet Union* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 167-168.

as “implementing” the Central Committee resolution. But the proposed remedies also included greater attention to the expertise and authority of teachers: “This district has a few teachers who have achieved high levels of success with their pupils. . . . Why have their experiences not been brought to the attention of all teachers for careful study? Why have these experiences not become the basis for mobilizing teachers toward higher levels of achievement? Why have these experiences not been used to expose the absurd and nonsensical claims that it is simply impossible for all pupils to succeed?” In particular, the article concluded, teachers needed practical assistance in preparing lessons, working with pupils on assignments, and acquiring more training.⁸ Given these recommendations, the denunciation of pedology was also part of the effort begun by Soviet leaders in 1931 to reform elementary and secondary schools by placing additional emphasis on the quality of instruction, the accountability of pupils, and the effectiveness of teachers.⁹

The denunciation of pedology thus exerted two seemingly contradictory influences on Soviet teachers. By attaching political meanings to the way children were instructed and evaluated, the campaign against pedology made teachers more vulnerable to accusations of “anti-Leninist” attitudes and actions, at a time when such charges could easily lead to dismissal, arrest, and imprisonment. But the accompanying assertion that teachers themselves should be seen as models for transforming schools raised the possibility of increased professional authority. In particular, eliminating the scholarly field of child study created an opportunity for greater recognition of the skill and authority of the individual teacher. The destructive consequences of this act of repression thus functioned in a dynamic relationship with more constructive elements, and the combination created opportunities for teachers to assert their professional authority within the limits set by an authoritarian regime.¹⁰

⁸“V Krasnosel'skom raione,” 7-8.

⁹In April 1936, for example, the Central Committee offered teachers substantial pay increases made conditional on passing stricter requirements for certification. For further discussion of how these policy changes affected teachers, see my “Stalinism at Work: Teacher Certification (1936-1939) and Soviet Power,” *Russian Review* 57 (Spring 1998), 218-235.

¹⁰This interpretation draws on recent scholarship on the changing nature of authority in the Stalinist context. In his discussion of “Stakhanovism” (that is, “rank-and-file” workers who achieved recognition by Party and state officials after they broke production records), Lewis Siegelbaum argues that the meanings of Stakhanovism were shaped by the interaction between the regime’s objectives of raising production while controlling the labor process, managers’ concerns about authority and efficiency on the shopfloor, and workers’ aspirations and anxieties regarding the distribution of material and symbolic resources. In her study of “everyday Stalinism,” Sheila Fitzpatrick examines the ways that “ordinary” Soviet citizens’ understanding of extent and nature of political power shaped experiences and attitudes during this “extraordinary” time. In his study of Soviet education in the 1930s, Larry Holmes has demonstrated that competing agendas of educational policy-makers in different offices exerted a powerful, if at times contradictory, influence on schools at all levels. Lewis Siegelbaum,

Historians' interpretation of the antipedology campaign have uniformly focused on the policy goals and political interests of decision makers. For almost fifty years, Soviet historians defended the repudiation of pedology as a necessary measure to protect education from "hostile" influences.¹¹ Western scholars, by contrast, criticized the decree for destroying an entire field of scholarship.¹² With the demise of the Soviet Union, the latter argument has been taken up by "reformers" seeking to recover a usable past from their educational history.¹³ While these studies provide important insights into the policy-making process, the present article is the first effort to ask how the repression of pedology affected teachers, on whose behalf the Central Committee claimed to be acting when it issued the July 4 decree.¹⁴ Using articles by and about teachers, unpublished reports in Russian archives, and first-hand accounts by former Soviet citizens this study argues that teachers' involvement in the antipedology campaign, however

Stakhanovism and the Politics of Productivity in the USSR, 1935-1941 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism. Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Larry E. Holmes, *Stalin's School. Moscow's Model School No. 25, 1931-1937* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1999); *idem*, "Power to the Party and the People: Stalinist Control over Educational Administration, 1931-1940," (Unpublished paper, 1996).

¹¹Z. I. Ravkin, "Sovetskaia shkola v period bor'by za zavershenie stroitel'stva sotsialisticheskogo obshchestva i postepenno perekhoda ot sotsializma k kommunizmu (1935-1941 gg.)," *Sovetskaia pedagogika* No. 6 (June 1950), 102; N. P. Kuzin, M. N. Kolmakova, and Z. I. Ravkin, *Ocherki istorii shkoly i pedagogicheskoi mysli narodov SSSR 1917-1941 gg.* (Moscow: Pedagogika, 1980), 363-365; F. N. Gonobolin, *Kniga ob uchitele* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Prosveshcheniia, 1965), 25.

¹²David Joravsky, *Russian Psychology: A Critical History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 345-354; Raymond Bauer, *The New Man in Soviet Psychology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1952), 65, 84-85, 116-129; James Bowen, *Soviet Education: Anton Makarenko and the Years of Experiment* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1962), 143-144.

¹³F. Fradkin and M. Plokhova, "Istoriia raspravy s pedagogiei," *Vospitanie shkol'nikov* No. 6 (June 1991), 21; A. A. Piskoppel and L. P. Shchedrovitskii, "Mificheskoe i real'noe v sud'be Sovetskoi pedagogii," *Psikhologicheskii zhurnal* No. 6 (December 1991), 123; D. Nikolenko, A. Gubko, and P. Ignatenko, "Zlokliucheniia nauki pedagogii. Pora vernut' imia," *Narodnoe obrazovanie* No. 10 (October 1990), 117-124.

¹⁴Several studies make reference to the *intended* effect on teachers, but none actually examine the impact on practices and attitudes. Kuzin, Kolmakova, and Ravkin, *Ocherki istorii shkoly*, 365; Bowen, *Soviet Education*, 145-146; Wortis, *Soviet Psychiatry*, 120; G. F. Karpova, *Obrazovatel'naiia situatsiia v Rossii v pervoi polovine XX veka* (Rostov: Izdatel'stvo Rostovskogo Pedagogicheskogo Universiteta, 1994), 12, 103-110, 116-118; Irina Sirotkina, "The Pedological Decree and Child Studies in the Soviet Union," (Unpublished paper, 1996), 6. Similar priorities have shaped studies of educational psychology in other countries. Adrian Wooldridge, for example, focuses on academic child psychologists, with relatively little attention to their "passive audience" of teachers and parents. Judith Raftery and Kate Rousmaniere, by contrast, examine the responses of American teachers to intelligence testing. Adrian Wooldridge, *Measuring the Mind: Education and Psychology in England, ca. 1860-1990* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Judith K. Raftery, "Missing the Mark: Intelligence Testing in Los Angeles Public Schools, 1922-1932," *History of Education Quarterly* 28 (Spring 1988), 73-74; and Kate Rousmaniere, *City Teachers: Teaching and School Reform in Historical Perspective* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1997), 64.

indirectly and inadvertently, contributed to the increasingly authoritarian nature of Stalinist schools in the 1930s.

II. Russian Pedology and Soviet Education

Russian pedologists, like their counterparts in the child-study movements in Europe and the United States, drew upon the disciplines of psychology, sociology, and pediatric medicine to define a new approach to studying the character and development of children.¹⁵ In Russia, especially following the revolution of 1917, pedologists defined an ambitious agenda for their science. The progressive educator P. P. Blonskii referred to pedology as a “scientific synthesis” of knowledge about children, the eminent psychologist A. B. Zalkind defined pedology as “the discipline which absorbs and synthesizes valuable scientific material on the interconnections between the development of the human personality and the surrounding environment,” and the innovative theorist L. S. Vygotskii defined pedology as “a general science of child development.”¹⁶ By positioning themselves at the intersection of disciplines with a shared interest in child development, Russian pedologists believed that their scientific methods and social concerns would produce both academic legitimacy and public utility.

Russian pedologists with radical sympathies embraced the revolutionary culture of the 1920s, which reaffirmed their belief that a fuller understanding of human character would contribute to the creation of a completely new society. Explicitly invoking the language of Soviet ideology, Vygotskii predicted that pedology would become “the science of the development of the new socialist person,” while other pedologists promised to “create a truly objective, dialectical-materialist system of scientific knowledge which is directed entirely at serving the broadest working masses.”¹⁷ Like many Soviet intellectuals in the 1920s, pedologists believed that their research stood at the point of intersection between practical social problems, materialist theories of historical development, and political aspirations to create a new society.¹⁸ Like their colleagues in the international child-study

¹⁵Ivan Z. Holowinsky, “Vygotsky and the History of Pedology.” (Unpublished paper, E.R.I.C. document 281675, 1987), 2-4; Fradkin and Plokhova, “Istoriia raspravly,” 21; Piskoppel and Shchedrovitskii, “Mificheskoe i real'noe,” 127-128; Sirotkina, “Pedological Decree,” 1-3; Karpova, *Obrazovatel'naia situatsiia*, 48-110.

¹⁶M. Malyshev, “Tak nazyvaemaia pedagogiia,” *Izvestiia* 11 July 1936, 3; A. Fomichev, “O pedagogicheskikh izvrashcheniakh v shkole,” *Nachal'naia shkola* No. 8 (1936), 26; Holowinsky, “Vygotsky,” 10; Bowen, *Soviet Education*, 139; Karpova, *Obrazovatel'naia situatsiia*, 49.

¹⁷“Ruka ob ruku s pedagogikoi,” *Pedologiia* No. 4 (1932), 1-3; Fomichev, “O pedagogicheskikh izvrashcheniakh,” 26.

¹⁸Loren R. Graham, *Science in Russia and the Soviet Union* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 104-108; Michael David-Fox, *Revolution of the Mind. Higher Learning among the Bolsheviks, 1918-1929* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 20-21, 63; Bauer, *New Man*, 116-129; Holowinsky, “Vygotsky,” 4-5, 8-9; Piskoppel and Shchedrovitskii, “Mificheskoe i real'noe,” 129; Sirotkina, “Pedological Decree,” 4.

movement, Soviet pedologists shared a deep faith in the authority of science, an abiding commitment to a rationally constructed order, and a preference for child-centered education.¹⁹

Seeking to make good on their claims of both scientific legitimacy and social significance, Soviet pedologists turned to schools as sites for both empirical research and practical experiments.²⁰ Pedologists studied pupils' reading habits, after school activities, and family characteristics, including size, income, and hygienic practices. The goal was to understand how children's "conditions of life" affected mental development and personal conduct. Educational policy makers often called on pedologists for suggestions to improve schools. Commissar of Education A. Lunacharskii declared: "In the mind of every teacher, there should sit a small, but sufficiently powerful, pedologist." Educational reformer N. Krupskaiia declared: "I cannot imagine a good teacher who does not know pedology." In an article on the teaching profession, V. Belousova identified "a knowledge of pedology" as one of the characteristics of a "real" teacher.²¹ In 1931, the Commissariat of Education called for every district to have at least one person "with pedological training" to work in schools.²² While leading scholars promised that their research on cognitive development would "pedologize" education, so-called "pedologist practitioners" offered advice based on classroom observations.²³

Pedologists devoted particular attention to one of the most pressing problems of Soviet education, the so-called "difficult" children (*trudnovospituemye*, literally "those who are difficult to bring up") who were

¹⁹Paul D. Chapman, *Schools as Sorters: Lewis M. Terman, Applied Psychology and the Intelligence Testing Movement, 1890-1930* (New York: New York University Press, 1988), 22, 174-175; Wooldridge, *Measuring the Mind*, 23-28, 182-183; Raftery, "Missing the Mark," 78-79, 91-92.

²⁰For pedologists' views on reforming Soviet education, see Larry E. Holmes, *The Kremlin and the Schoolhouse. Reforming Education in Soviet Russia, 1917-1931* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991), 71, 75, 135; Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Education and Social Mobility in the Soviet Union, 1921-1934* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 140.

²¹V. Belousova, "O chinovnike, svaem parne i istinnom pedagoge," *Za kommunisticheskoe prosveshchenie* (hereafter ZKP) 4 September 1934, 3; T. K. Chuguev, "O prozhektorskikh atakakh na pedagogiiu," *Pedagogicheskoe obrazovanie* No. 5 (1934), 50; Fradkin and Plokhova, "Istoriia raspravly," 21-22; Piskoppel and Shchedrovitskii, "Mificheskoe i real'noe," 127.

²²"Ob organizatsii pedagogicheskoi raboty po linii organov narodnogo obrazovaniia," *Pedagogiia* No. 3 (1931), 82-83; M. P. Orakhelashvili, "Vvodnoe slovo M.P. Orakhelashvili pri otkrytii soveshchaniia pedtekhnikumov," *Pedagogicheskoe obrazovanie* No. 4 (1934), p. 22; "Na novom etape," *Pedagogiia* No. 1-2 (1932), 3; "Ruka ob ruku," 1.

²³For examples of such advice from pedologists, see Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii [hereafter GARF] fond 2306, opis' 70, delo 1765, list 41; I. Kolosov, "K pedagogicheskomu analizu uroka," *Na putiakh k novoi shkole* No. 1 (1932), 66-72; "Ob uchastii pedagoga v vospitatei'noi rabote shkoly," *Za kommunisticheskoe vospitanie* No. 6 (1935), 34-38. For discussion of the tension between the "scientific" aspirations of pedagogical theory and the "practical" advice offered to teachers, see my "A Terribly Noisy Science: Soviet Child Study and Educational Psychology of the 1920s and 1930s," (Unpublished paper, 2000).

repeating grades, misbehaving, or otherwise acting “abnormally.” In the early 1930s, Soviet children were “tracked” into separate classes and so-called “special schools” based on their ability, achievement, and behavior. In the language used by the Central Committee in 1935, the removal of “defective children” who “systematically disrupt school discipline, disorganize class instruction, and exert negative influences by their anti-social behavior” was the best way to restore order and discipline in education.²⁴

As the point of convergence between scholarly inquiry and government policies, these decisions about pupil assignments allowed pedologists to exert a direct influence on education. Echoing Communist Party directives, some pedologists recommended that “difficult children” be included with “defective” and “mentally retarded” children in special schools, with the stated goal of “neutralizing the harmful influence of these children.”²⁵ In Stalingrad, two special schools enrolled almost one thousand pupils, about 2 percent of citywide enrollment. In Moscow, pedologists identified some four thousand pupils, about 1 percent of citywide enrollment, as “candidates” for special schools. Within many schools, “parallel” classes existed, with “strong” pupils separated from “weak” pupils, most of whom were repeating grades.²⁶ Beyond these enrollment decisions, however, some pedologists made broader statements about the abilities of children. Stalingrad pedologists claimed that as many as three thousand pupils enrolled in “normal classes” should be certified as “mentally retarded.” In one extreme case, one-quarter of pupils in a single class were assigned to this category. Moscow pedologists declared that as many as two-thirds of “failing” pupils were in fact “mentally retarded.” In late May 1936, just one month before the repudiation of pedology, a letter published in the newspaper *Izvestiia* declared that “mentally retarded children” could receive a proper education only in separate schools.²⁷

²⁴“Ob organizatsii uchebnoi raboty i vnutrennem rasporiadke v nachal'noi, nepolnoi srednei i srednei shkole,” (September 3, 1935) *Narodnoe obrazovanie v SSSR*, 170-172. For reports on separate schools for “difficult children,” see GARF f. 2306, op. 70, d. 1765, l. 17; B. M. Volin, “Shkol'noe delo—na uroven zadach sotsialisticheskogo stroitel'stva,” *Nachal'naiia shkola* No. 11 (1935), 12; S. Fridliand, “Boevaia programma deistvii,” *ZKP* 6 September 1935, 1; Piskoppel and Shchedrovitskii, “Mificheskoe i real'noe,” 125; Karpova, *Obrazovatel'naiia situatsiia*, 99. Testing was adopted in England and the United States as a similar strategy for dealing with problems associated with expanding enrollment, ethnic diversification, and social transformation. Chapman, *Schools as Sorters*, 5-6, 32, 43-45, 89-90, 169; Wooldridge, *Measuring the Mind*, 3-4, 11-12, 222-227; Raftery, “Missing the Mark,” 77-78, 91-92; Rousmaniere, *City Teachers*, 64-67.

²⁵These recommendations were later criticized in L. Vladimirov, “Chemu uchili pedologi molodykh uchitelei,” *V pomoshch' uchiteliiu* No. 3 (1936), 19.

²⁶Liuboshits, “Uchitelia Stalingrada osuzhdaui pedologicheskie izvrashcheniia,” *ZKP* 22 July 1936, 2; A. Kalinovskii, “Uchitelia i pedagogiia,” *ZKP* 20 March 1937, 2; Malyshev, “Tak nazyvaemaia pedagogiia,” 3. For higher estimates of enrollment in special schools, see Fradkin and Plokhova, “Istoriia raspravy,” 23; Holmes, *Stalin's School*, 137.

²⁷K. Chizhov, “Vnimanie umstvenno otstalym detiam,” *Izvestiia* 27 May 1936, 2; Liuboshits, “Uchitelia Stalingrada,” 2; Malyshev, “Tak nazyvaemaia pedagogiia,” 3.

During the 1920s and early 1930s, therefore, Soviet pedologists sought to establish their authority in measuring the mental ability and learning potential of children. Yet pedologists were pursuing a politically risky strategy by asking about obstacles to the further development of Soviet youth. In particular, their research suggested that even in a “socialist” system, certain categories of children, especially those in rural areas and among “non-Russian” minorities, remained “backward” in their academic achievement. Soviet pedologists thus found themselves in the dangerous position of calling attention to shortcomings that contradicted the self-proclaimed “achievement” of equality among classes and nations in the Soviet Union.²⁸

Pedologists thus occupied a position analogous to other intellectuals in the early Soviet period. For scholars sympathetic to the transformative goals of the Bolsheviks, the 1920s were a time of unprecedented opportunities to integrate scholarly inquiry with social activism. With the onset of the First Five-Year Plan (1928-1932), however, all “experts” came under considerable pressure from Party authorities to conform to the new imperatives of rapid, massive, and coercive social transformation. Pedologists sought to broaden their agenda to encompass these demands, yet they were undermined by the risks of exploring the more problematic sides of Soviet development, including the evidence of persistent forms of inequality. To understand why pedology was born and then perished under such an “unhappy star,” in the words of educational historians F. Fradkin and M. Plokhova, the next section examines the factors that converged to produce the 1936 decree on pedology.²⁹

III. *The “Historic Resolution” of the Central Committee*

The outlines of a critique of pedology were emerging even before the decisive action taken by the Central Committee in July 1936. Educational policymakers complained that pedologists failed to provide useful knowledge about child development, and a few even called for pedology to be eliminated from teacher training programs.³⁰ Central Committee member A. Zhdanov criticized pedologists who endlessly studied “difficult” children but made no effort to improve behavior or raise achievement of those pupils conveniently kept “out of the way” in separate schools.³¹ These doubts about

²⁸Soviet pedologists devoted little attention to gender differences in mental development or school performance. For inequalities related to class and ethnicity, see Holmes, *Kremlin and Schoolhouse*, 135; Fradkin and Plokhova, “Istoriia raspravy,” 23; Piskoppel and Shchedrovitskii, “Mificheskoe i real'noe,” 124-125.

²⁹Fradkin and Plokhova, “Istoriia raspravy,” 22.

³⁰Orakhelashvili, “Vvodnoe slovo,” 21-22; P. P. Blonskii, “Kak obespechit budushchimi uchiteliam znanie vozrastnykh osobennostei detei,” *Pedagogicheskoe obrazovanie* No. 5 (1934), 42-44.

³¹Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Sotsial'no-Politicheskoi Istorii [formerly the Central Communist Party Archive, hereafter RGASPI] f. 77, op. 1, d. 583, ll. 3-5. See discussion in Holmes, *Stalin's School*, 137-138.

scholarly contributions found practical expression in the praise bestowed on a teacher who corrected pupil behavior through her own ingenuity, "without going to the pedologist."³²

Yet these criticisms pale beside the "violent" language used on July 4, 1936 by the Central Committee. Accusing the Commissariat of Education of yielding control over such functions as assigning pupils, defining regulations, and evaluating achievement, the Central Committee charged that pedologists' "pseudo-scientific experiments" had called excessive attention to "the most negative influences and pathological perversions" in children, their families, and surrounding environment. Such testing meant that "an ever larger and larger number of children" were assigned to special schools after being categorized as "mentally backward," "defective," or "difficult." In fact, the Central Committee declared, many of these children were perfectly capable of attending *normal'naia shkola* (normal schools), but once these labels had been affixed, they were considered "hopeless" cases.³³

The Central Committee went beyond these complaints about school policies, however, by charging that pedological theory itself was based on "falsely-scientific and anti-Marxist foundations." In particular, any suggestion that children's fate was "determined" by "fixed" social or biological factors was condemned as directly contradictory to "socialist development," which had "successfully re-educated people." Such claims about environmental and hereditary influences allegedly revealed an "uncritical" borrowing of "bourgeois" theories intended to maintain the dominant positions of "exploiting classes" and "superior races" by perpetuating the "physical and spiritual doom of the working classes and 'inferior races.'" In the concluding section, the Central Committee instructed the Commissariat of Education to achieve "the full restoration of pedagogy as a science and pedagogues as its bearers and guides" by restoring teachers' responsibility for instruction, returning "the bulk of the children to normal schools," and eliminating the field of pedology by retraining specialists, withdrawing books, and abolishing courses.³⁴

Why did the Central Committee attack pedology at this time and in this manner? The summer of 1936 marked a serious escalation in political repression as Party organizations and the secret police began preparing for "show trials" of prominent Communist leaders driven from power by Stalin. Soviet political discourse at this time was dominated by allegations of "treason" and "wrecking" carried out by "masked" spies and "enemies of

³²S. Kamenev, "O kommunisticheskome vospitanii detei," *Pedagogicheskii zhurnal* No. 3 (1935), 16.

³³"O pedagogicheskikh izvrazhcheniiakh," *Narodnoe obrazovanie v SSSR*, 173-174. The Russian term *normal'naia shkola* should be translated as "normal schools," but should not be confused, especially by American readers, with nineteenth-century teacher training institutions.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 174-175.

the people.”³⁵ That political context influenced not only the Central Committee’s allegations, but also the increasingly virulent tone of subsequent condemnations. Invoking the language of repression, Communist Youth League (Komsomol) secretary E.L. Fainberg offered this ominous warning: “If pedological distortions are not completely destroyed, they will reappear in a different form, so a decisive struggle must be waged against even their smallest manifestations.” Soviet authorities promised that the “unmasking” of “hostile” pedologists would produce “healthier” schools by “rooting out” all “harmful” elements with “counter-revolutionary” intentions.³⁶

The Central Committee also acted in response to pedologists’ open dialogue with scholars outside the Soviet Union. The rise of Nazism in Germany renewed fears of “capitalist encirclement” and deepened concerns about foreign influences within the Soviet Union. In the Central Committee decree and in subsequent attacks, Soviet pedologists were condemned for allowing “fascist” theories about the genetic basis of “racial superiority” to influence their research on children’s class and ethnic backgrounds. Pedologists’ acknowledged use of scholarship produced outside the Soviet Union thus became a liability in this era of “building socialism in one country.”³⁷

The fact that the decree directly attacked Commissariat of Education leaders for allegedly “tolerating” pedological “distortions” suggests that administrative conflicts within the Party/state apparatus also played a role in this decision. Throughout the 1930s, the Central Committee made the Commissariat of Education into a convenient scapegoat for the “failure” of schools to solve persistent social and political problems. Following this same pattern, the 1936 decree cited “pedological distortions” as further evidence that educational policymakers had “hampered the development of the school” by all possible means.³⁸

³⁵For the Soviet political climate in 1936, see Robert C. Tucker, *Stalin in Power: Revolution from Above, 1929–1941* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1990), 313–319, 353–362; Getty, *Origins*, 116–128.

³⁶I. Borukhovich, “Zadachi tekushchego uchebnogo goda,” *Pedagogicheskii zhurnal* No. 9 (1936), 5–6; V. Pronin, “Pedagogicheskaiia oshibka,” *Leningradskaiia pravda* 17 March 1937, 4; “O zadachakh zhurnala,” *Sovetskaia pedagogika* No. 1 (1937), 12; “Moshchnaia kul’turnaia sila,” *Nachal’naia shkola* No. 6 (1937), 7; “Znamenatel’naia godovshchina,” *Sovetskaia pedagogika* No. 7 (July 1938), 4–7; N. K. Goncharov, “Za sovetskuiu pedagogiku,” *Sovetskaia pedagogika* No. 10 (October 1938), 10; “Po-bol’shevistski vypolniai’ direktivy partii,” *Kommunisticheskoe prosveshchenie* No. 5–6 (1936), 91; Malyshev, “Tak nazyvaemaia pedagogiia,” 3; Fradkin and Plokhova, “Istoriia rasprav,” 22–23; Karpova, *Obrazovatel’naia situatsiia*, 118–120.

³⁷Malyshev, “Tak nazyvaemaia pedagogiia,” 3; Vladimirov, “Chemu uchili pedagogi,” 18; Raskin, “Pedologicheskii izvreshcheniia,” 39.

³⁸“Piat’ let raboty posle postanovleniia TsK VKP(b) ‘O pedagogicheskikh izvreshcheniakh v sisteme Narkomprosa,’” *Nachal’naia shkola* No. 6 (June 1941), 17; “Navesti poriadok na pedagogicheskom fronte,” *Sovetskaia pedagogika* No. 1 (January 1938), 14–18; “O zadachakh zhurnala,” 10–11; “Znamenatel’naia godovshchina,” 4–5. Conflicts among educational policy makers are discussed in Holmes, “Power”; *idem*, *Stalin’s School*.

Most importantly, pedologists were undermined by cultural shifts which emphasized practical achievements and political loyalty at the expense of “academic” expertise and “scholarly” findings. Proclaiming the creation of a new type of hero, Soviet leaders rejected any suggestion that heredity or environment presented limits that could not be overcome with the proper combination of enthusiasm and dedication.³⁹ Pedologists were denounced for “pointless debates” and for “talking endlessly in their own pedological language which no one else can understand.” Most pointedly, critics asserted that pedologists had made no practical contribution to Soviet education: “so-called pedologists have done nothing, are doing nothing, and will never do anything to help the school.”⁴⁰ As “observers” rather than “transformers,” pedologists failed to live up to Stalin’s assertion that the people “who make history” are those who not only understand the conditions in which they are living, but also “understand how to change these conditions.”⁴¹

The antipedology decree thus appears as a product of converging factors, including a rising tide of political repression, growing concerns about foreign influences, incipient conflicts between educational and political leaders, and changes in Soviet culture. In the months that followed, an entire field of research and instruction was essentially eliminated as institutions were closed, courses eliminated, and scholars subjected to withering attacks.⁴² By repudiating earlier recommendations on instruction, prohibiting intelligence testing, and banning specialists from classrooms, the Central Committee abruptly transformed the policies which governed the schools. Yet the denunciation was clearly directed at pedologists, as well as their alleged “protectors” in the Commissariat of Education, and it was not clear how

³⁹For the changing images of Soviet heroes in this period, see Katerina Clark, “Utopian Anthropology as a Context for Stalinist Literature,” in *Stalinism. Essays in Historical Interpretation* ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1977), 185-194; Siegelbaum, *Stakhanovism*, 210-246; and my “Becoming a Stalinist Teacher: Ol’ga Leonova and the Politics of Soviet Education” (unpublished paper, 1996).

⁴⁰N. Goncharov, “I Vsesoiuznoe soveshchanie po pedagogicheskim naukam,” *Sovetskaiia pedagogika* No. 1 (1937), 139; “Po-bol’shevistski vpolniat’ direktivy partii,” *Kommunisticheskoe prosveshchenie* No. 5-6 (1936), 90-91; V. Korol’kov, “Bol’she ne budet ‘lishnikh liude’ v shkole,” *ZKP* 10 July 1936, 1; “Navesti poriadok,” 14-18; Fomichev, “O pedagogicheskikh izvrashcheniakh,” 26; Malyshev, “Tak nazvaemaia pedagogiia,” 3; “Znamenatel’naia godovshchina,” 3-4; “Chto delali pedologi v shkolakh,” *Dal’nevostochnyi uchitel’* No. 4 (1936), 27.

⁴¹Stalin’s comment was cited in E. I. Rudneva, “K voprosu o pedagogicheskikh izvrashcheniakh v teorii obucheniia,” *Pedagogicheskoe obrazovanie* No. 1 (1937), 71. For the relationship between Stalinist culture and the denunciation of pedology, see Fitzpatrick, *Education*, p. 229; Graham, *Science, Philosophy, and Human Behavior*, 167; Bauer, *New Man*, 47-48, 110-112, 124-126; Kuzin, Kolmakova, and Ravkin, *Ocherki istorii sbkoly*, 363-364; Joravsky, *Russian Psychology*, 316, 353.

⁴²Even scholars who had passed away, like Vygotskii (in 1934), were denounced for “pedological distortions.” S. I. Grebenkov, “Izgnat’ do kontsa pedagogicheskie izvrashcheniia iz shkoly,” *Uchitel’ i sbkola* No. 10 (1936), 9-10; Borukhovich, “Zadachi,” 6; “Znamenatel’naia godovshchina,” 5; Rudneva, “K voprosu,” 66-70.

the decree would affect those most directly responsible for educating and evaluating Soviet children. Would teachers, like pedologists, endure similar kinds of public criticism with the obvious, if unstated, implications of political unreliability and personal vulnerability? Or did the Central Committee's promise to restore teachers "to their rights" truly create the possibility of claiming a more authoritative position in Soviet education? These questions will be explored in the next two sections, which examine teachers' responses to the campaign against pedology.

IV. "There are No Poor Pupils, Only Poor Teachers"

In the summer and fall of 1936, thousands of Soviet teachers assembled for public "discussions" of the Central Committee decree. Resolutions passed at meetings and published letters from teachers and school directors praised the "great concern, sensitivity, and attention bestowed on the school and the teacher by the Party, the Central Committee, and the great Stalin." While this rhetoric was obviously the product of the Soviet propaganda machine, these sentiments were expressed in ways intended to appeal to those at work in schools. Writing "as an old teacher," G. D. Smagin condemned pedologists for "humiliating" his profession. Moscow school director L. Bogdasarova declared her relief at being able to work without "getting tangled up" with pedologists, whose "ridiculous and often directly harmful work" had absorbed so much energy. According to former preschool teacher Nina Sorochenko, writing in emigration almost twenty years later, Soviet preschool teachers reacted with "enthusiasm" and were "genuinely optimistic" following the "new turn in policy."⁴³

Yet Central Committee intervention obviously had a more complicated impact at the local level than these uniformly positive statements suggest. Inspectors' reports and published articles suggest teachers' responses ranging from resistance through confusion to ignorance. At one Moscow school meeting, teacher S. P. Zavistovskii reportedly spoke out "openly" against the Central Committee decree by declaring that "pedology was, is, and will remain a science."⁴⁴ More commonly, teachers assembled for mandatory "study" of the decree, which often amounted to nothing more than a

⁴³G. D. Smagin, "Konets izdevatel'stvom," *ZKP* 22 July 1936, 2; L. Vasil'ev, "Uchitel' i pedolog," *ZKP* 22 July 1936, 2; L. Bogdasarova, "Vse usloviia sozdany," *Izvestiia* 1 September 1936, 3; E. Vvedenskaia, "Uchit' i uchit'sia," *Izvestiia* 1 September 1936, 3; A. Ponomarev, "Po shkolem g. Khabarovska," *Dal'nevostochnyi uchitel'* No. 2 (1937), 35; "Priv'em detiam liubov' k nashei rodine, vysokuiu kul'turu i gramotnost' dlia dela stroitel'stva kommunizma," *V pomoshch' uchiteliu* No. 3 (1937), 1-2; R. M. Mikel'son, "Shkola v borbe za likvidatsiiu vtorogodnichestva," *Sovetskaiia pedagogika* No. 1 (1937), 80; Nina M. Sorochenko, "Pre-School Education in the U.S.S.R.," in *Soviet Education* ed. George L. Kline (New York: Columbia University Press, 1957), 12.

⁴⁴GARF f. 2306, op. 69, d. 2297, ll. 5-6. For more on teacher Zavistovskii, see chapter six of my *Teachers of Stalinism*.

single public recitation. When questioned, one teacher conceded: "I have read some of the resolution on pedology, but I did not understand it," while another admitted: "I did not read the resolution on pedology myself, but only heard about it, and now I have forgotten everything." In the years that followed, many teachers claimed that they had never even heard of the antipedology decree, while inspectors and school officials complained that "many teachers had only superficial knowledge" of the Central Committee's decision. As an example of such a "misunderstanding," a Party official complained in January 1937 that even "good" teachers had ceased to work with parents to improve the home conditions of children because they did not want to be accused of "pedological activities."⁴⁵

While teachers may have been unsure of the full implications of the Central Committee's decree, they were directly affected by the new policy on pupil assignments. Within days of the decree, the Commissar of Education created a commission to "examine" the "schools for delinquents" with the stated goal of transferring "most children" to normal schools.⁴⁶ Throughout the Soviet Union, Party committees and educational departments acted quickly to conform to the new policy. In late July, the Stalin-grad educational department announced that all but 12 of the more than 150 pupils in a special school should return immediately to normal schools. A district educational department in Leningrad made a preliminary decision to transfer only 15 percent of pupils from a special school, but "intervention" by regional authorities resulted in 95 percent of pupils being reassigned to normal schools. In Luga, a "careful review" led to the transfer of *all* pupils back to normal schools—"to the delight of children and the greater delight of their parents," according to a published report.⁴⁷

These examples testify to the power of the Stalinist state to decree sweeping changes in school policy. As these changes were being implemented, however, it became clear that many teachers and school directors had in fact supported pedologists' decisions regarding "difficult" children. According to Party officials, many "rank and file" teachers had seen spe-

⁴⁵Nauchnyi Arkhiv Rossiiskoi Akademii Obrazovaniia [hereafter NA RAO] f. 17, op. 1, d. 18, ll. 10, 165; Tsentral'nyi Arkhiv Obschestvennykh Dvizhenii Moskvy f. 1934, op. 1, d. 119, l. 130; Tsentral'nyi Munitsipal'nyi Arkhiv Moskvy [hereafter TsMAM] f. 528, op. 1, d. 363, ll. 9-10; GARF f. 2306, op. 70, d. 2425, l. 46; P. S. Arshinov, "Vykorchevat' iz soznaniia uchitelei vrednoe pedologicheskoe nasledstvo," *Uchitel' i shkola* No. 10 (1936), 5; "Na avgustovskikh soveshchaniakh uchitelei," *Pedagogicheskii zhurnal* No. 8 (1936), 51-52; "Za bol'shevistskuiu rabotu v novom uchebnom godu," *V pomoshch' uchiteliiu* [Leningrad] No. 5 (September 1936), 2; "V Krasnosel'skom raione," 5; Kalinovskii, "Uchitelia i pedologiya," 2.

⁴⁶"Prikaz narodnogo komissara prosveshcheniia," *ZKP* 10 July 1936, 1. For analysis of conflicts between educational policy-makers regarding these changes, see Sirotkina, "Pedological Decree," 7; Holmes, "Power," 13.

⁴⁷"O zhivuchesti pedagogii v Luge," *V pomoshch' uchiteliiu* No. 6 (1936), 12-13; Liuboshits, "Uchitelia Stalingrada," 2; "Za bol'shevistskuiu rabotu," 2-3.

cial schools as “a means of deliverance” from “undesirable” pupils. Pedologists were thus “very convenient” for “bad teachers” who no longer had to assume “responsibility for teaching underachieving children.” Pedologists even offered teachers a kind of justification for poor results. When a school pedologist “discovered” that less than 10 percent of second graders in a Moscow school were “capable, well developed children,” teachers had an easy excuse for the poor achievement of the entire class, according to subsequent criticisms.⁴⁸

Yet even as such efforts to evade responsibility were being condemned as “pedological distortions,” some teachers persistently sought to divest themselves of “problem” pupils. Addressing a conference in late 1936, school director P. S. Arshinov described how second grade teacher Serbantova reacted to a pupil with learning difficulties: “For goodness sake, I already have one such ‘incorrigible’ child, and now you have given me another.” On the next day, Serbantova demanded that Arshinov take measures against “this ‘disorganizer,’ this ‘incorrigible one,’ who does not sit still in class, and fidgets all the time.” Noting that the fidgeting resulted from physical illness easily corrected by medical treatment, Arshinov refused this request. Serbantova then incited the parents of other children to make similar demands: “Either remove this boy, or transfer our children to other classes, because he is ruining them.” While Arshinov managed to convince parents that this one child posed no real threat, he finally gave in to Serbantova’s demands to transfer the boy to another class—where he showed immediate improvement. Not surprisingly, Arshinov condemned Serbantova’s behavior as proof of “pedology’s harmful legacy.”⁴⁹

Even after the Central Committee decree, therefore, some teachers sought to avoid, rather than take responsibility for, pupils perceived as “problems.” In many schools, pupils needing “additional attention” were “removed” from “normal classes” and reassigned to “special classes.” In a Saratov school, all failing or misbehaving fifth-grade pupils were placed in the same classroom, while an entire class in one Moscow school was made up of “grade-repeaters” during the 1937/1938 school year, more than a year after the Central Committee decree.⁵⁰ A former pupil in a Leningrad ele-

⁴⁸Liuboshits, “Uchitelia Stalingrada,” 2; Malyshev, “Tak nazyvaemaia pedagogiia,” 3; Fomichev, “O pedagogicheskikh izvrashcheniakh,” 29; Grebenkov, “Izgnat’ do kontsa,” 8-9; Vladimirov, “Chemu uchili pedagogi,” 19-20; “Piat’ let raboty,” 2. In the United States and England, advocates of intelligence testing argued that their methods would “confirm a teacher’s judgement that a child’s failure in school is due to inferior capacity.” Chapman, *Schools as Sorters*, 110-115; Wooldridge, *Measuring the Mind*, 3-4.

⁴⁹Arshinov, “Vykorchevat’ iz soznaniia,” 5-6.

⁵⁰RGASPI f. 1-M, op. 3, d. 177, l. 115; L. Vladimirov, “V Pskove usuglubliaiut pedagogicheskie izvrashcheniia,” *V pomoshch’ uchiteliiu* No. 6 (1936), 9-10; N. Kaz’min, “Za bystreishuiu likvidatsiiu posledstviu vreditel’stva v shkolakh Moskovskoi oblasti,” *Metodicheskii biulleten MOONO* No. 6 (1938), 8; K. Shishkova, “Nekotorye itogi po attestatsii uchitelei Moskovskoi

mentary school recalled that a special class of “hooligans” was abruptly “disbanded” in 1936/1937, but this attempt to conform to centrally mandated policy was shortlived: “In a few weeks, however, the pupils had caused so much trouble in their new classes that the original class was reformed.”⁵¹

In a few cases, as in the example of Serbantova, teachers simply refused to teach certain children. Referring to her “incorrigible” pupils, teacher Ur’eva told the school director: “It is either them, or me.”⁵² Teachers who commented on the “innate abilities” of children were condemned for accepting pedologists’ “reactionary” views on the so-called “fatal” influence of heredity. A 1938 report claimed that some teachers made decisions two months before final exams that certain pupils would be held back and thus made no effort to prevent their “inevitable” failure. When Leningrad teacher Udal’tsova was asked why she had not graded certain notebooks, she replied: “Oh, those belong to the repeating students, and you can’t expect anything from them.” In Moscow, teacher Durova justified her poor results by claiming that her pupils were “less gifted” than those of a more successful teacher. In direct contravention to the Central Committee decree, many teachers continued to label individual pupils as “lacking intelligence,” “hopeless,” “defective” or “retarded.”⁵³

These reports are confirmed by former Soviet teachers, who described widespread efforts to unload “lazy” and “ignorant” pupils. A former school director interviewed by American researchers in emigration recalled expelling several pupils because they “lacked the aptitude for study,” while a former teacher had asked that a “defective” pupil infected with syphilis be transferred to “a school for children such as he.” In both cases, authorities responded forcefully: the school director was threatened with arrest as “a propagator of the anti-Soviet doctrine of pedology,” while the teacher was reprimanded for challenging assertions that the Soviet Union did not have a single “defective child.”⁵⁴

First-hand reports thus suggest that the denunciation of pedology reinforced broader efforts to restrict autonomy, increase obligations, and

oblasti,” *Metodicheskie biulleten MOONO* No. 6 (1938), 15; “Delo chesti sovetskogo uchitel’stva,” *Pravda* 7 January 1938, 1; Ponomarev, “Po shkolam,” 36. In New York schools, many teachers supported tracking because “a more homogenous classroom . . . was easier to teach than a classroom of students with diverse abilities.” Rousmaniere, *City Teachers*, 65, 115.

⁵¹External Research Staff, *The Soviet Union as Reported by Former Citizens* (Washington: U.S. Department of State, 1952-1956), 4.

⁵²Pronin, “Pedagogicheskaja oshibka,” 4. See an identical “ultimatum” in Ponomarev, “Po shkolam,” 36.

⁵³RGASPI f. 1-M, op. 3, d. 177, ll. 92-93; NA RAO f. 17, op. 1, d. 63, l. 203; TsMAM f. 528, op. 1, d. 362, ll. 16-17; A. Kh., “Bezotradnaia kartina,” *V pomoshch’ uchiteliu* No. 5 (1936), 43-44; A. Sharov, “Pedagogi i ucheniki,” *Pravda* 11 January 1938, 3.

⁵⁴Harvard Project on the Soviet Social System, Schedule A, No. 493, 14-15, 19, 28-29; Schedule B4, No. 428, 15-16. See similar recollections by a former teacher in Abraham A. Kreisler, *A Teacher’s Experiences in the Soviet Union* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1965), 23-24.

expose vulnerability among teachers. In a postwar interview, a former teacher offered this interpretation of Soviet policies: "We were confronted with the slogan, 'There are no poor pupils, only poor teachers.' We might have a feeble-minded pupil, but we didn't dare say it out loud. I admire the system [in America] of grading pupils according to ability and putting each pupil in with other children of his same ability. [Soviets] just lump them all together, regardless of ability."⁵⁵ The far-reaching implications, as well as obscure intentions, of the antipedology campaign were described by another former teacher: "Then we had to have a campaign for 100 percent successful teaching; this was Soviet pedagogy, i.e., all students must learn because the idea that only some students should learn was regarded as harmful and bourgeois theory. We were afraid because all pupils could not learn; there was a difference between theory and practice.... If you can't make all students work successfully, you ask yourself if you are capable and if it isn't your fault."⁵⁶ While confirming the uncertainty and anxiety evident in Soviet sources, these accounts also illustrate how the antipedology campaign became an instrument for controlling teachers.

The slogan, "There are no poor pupils, only poor teachers," symbolized this effort to make teachers more directly accountable for pupils' performance. The Stalingrad educational journal offered this unequivocal declaration: "Poor work by the school and poor achievement by the entire class and by individual pupils are the direct result of poor work by the teacher." Whereas pedologists had asserted that "failure occurs outside the school," the new policy line proclaimed that "failure occurs only in the school," at the hands of teachers. Teachers who had been reassured by pedologists that "failure" was the inevitable "fate" of "below average" pupils were now told that "permitting" failure by even one pupil was proof of their adherence to "bourgeois" and "anti-Leninist" theories.⁵⁷

The suppression of pedology thus needs to be seen as part of the broader campaign to use repressive means to change teachers' behavior and attitudes. In the most practical terms, the Central Committee decree and subsequent policy decisions were aimed directly at teachers' efforts to avoid so-called "difficult" or "backward" pupils. More generally, the denunciation of "pedological distortions" was a strategy to make teachers more accountable for classroom performance. Denying that innate character or environmental factors exerted any meaningful influence, Soviet authorities

⁵⁵Harvard Project, Schedule A, No. 1495, 16-17.

⁵⁶Harvard Project, Schedule B5, No. 15, 2.

⁵⁷TsMAM f. 528, op. 1, d. 362, ll. 16-17; Mikel'son, "Preduprezhdenie otstavaniia i likvidatsiia vtorogodnichestva," *Sovetskaia pedagogika* No. 1 (January 1938), 87; O. Kolesnikova, "Za bol'shevitskoe voplnenie reshenii TsK VKP i pravitel'stva o shkole," *Pedagogicheskii zbornal* No. 11-12 (1936), 34; Borukhovich, "Zadachi," 6; Grebenkov, "Izgnat' do kontsa," 9; Kaz'min, "Za bystreishuii likvidatsiiu," 12.

reached the extreme conclusion that all shortcomings were the fault of “poor teachers.” The denunciations, threats, and other forms of intimidation that followed revealed how Stalinist repression became part of everyday Soviet reality in the late 1930s.

V. *The Politics of Responsibility*

Yet this effort to make teachers more accountable had implications beyond these immediate patterns of repression. By repudiating pedology, the Central Committee made it possible for teachers to assume more authoritative roles in schools. Having condemned pedologists for “pulling the ground out from under the teacher” by presuming that “the teacher is nothing more than an automaton,” educational authorities now made teachers completely responsible for evaluating pupils, analyzing the effectiveness of lessons, and fulfilling the required curricula. The “fatal laws” of pedology were contrasted to the active determination of teachers to “develop their pedagogical capabilities to the fullest extent,” “raise our own Soviet school to a higher level,” and “educate children for their future” as “Soviet patriots.”⁵⁸

As symbols of the redistribution of authority, teachers now found themselves in a position to transform image into action. Complaining that pedologists had “crippled” children by categorizing them as “defective,” “difficult to educate,” and “disorganizers,” teacher E. Vvedenskaia urged colleagues to recognize that only an “individual approach” could ensure the success of each pupil. In a similar manner, I. Borukhovich declared that eliminating “pedological distortions” and improving schools were attainable ends only if teachers committed themselves to work “thoroughly, thoughtfully, and lovingly” with each child. Reinforcing this shift in expertise, educational authorities promised to pay more attention to “the voice of our best teachers.”⁵⁹

With increasing frequency, journals and newspapers published celebratory accounts of how teachers transformed children into high achievers, obedient classmates, and loyal citizens. After M. D. Pronina finished the school year without any failing pupils, her achievement was said to have “disproven” pedology. When K. K. Fediukin transformed the son of a neglectful and drunken father into an excellent pupil, he accomplished a task allegedly declared “impossible” by pedologists. Most emphatically,

⁵⁸N. N. Bobrovnikov, “XVIII S”ezd VKP i zadachi sovetskoi pedagogiki,” *Sovetskaia pedagogika* No. 6 (June 1939), 12-14; “Delo chesti,” 1; Malyshev, “Tak nazyvaemaia pedagogiia,” 3; Vasil’ev, “Uchitel’ i pedolog,” 2; “Piat’ let raboty,” 1-2; Fomichev, “O pedagogicheskikh izvrashcheniakh,” 26-29; “Moshchnaia kul’turnaia sila,” 6; Vladimirov, “V Pskove,” 9-10; “O zhivuchesti pedagogii,” 12-13.

⁵⁹NA RAO f. 17, op. 1, d. 63, ll. 12-14; G. Kuprianov, “Pedagogi eshche ne ispol’zuiut svoikh prav,” *ZKP* 2 December 1936, 4; Vvedenskaia, “Uchit’ i uchit’sia,” 3; Borukhovich, “Zadachi,” 7; “Za bol’shevistskuiu rabotu,” 4; “V Krasnosel’skom raione,” 7; “Piat’ let raboty,” 2; Kolesnikova, “Za bol’shevistskoe vypolnenie,” 32-33; “O zadachakh zhurnala,” 10-11.

E. Salienko proclaimed that transforming a class of disruptive pupils into a community of enthusiastic learners was the result of “my will, my culture, and my personality.” In late 1936, a profile of teacher D. A. Litvinchuk declared that his thirty-five years of “pedagogical experience” could be used to “transform” pedagogy along the lines of the Central Committee resolution. Yet the “lessons” of Litvinchuk’s experience consisted of seemingly common-sense approaches. In dealing with “backward” pupils, for example, Litvinchuk called on teachers to provide additional lessons, investigate factors that might impede pupils’ success, and avoid any suggestion that “hopeless” pupils were unable to achieve at “normal” levels.⁶⁰

These examples suggest that the “scientific” authority previously claimed by pedologists had been repudiated in favor of teachers who used their “practical” authority to achieve more than these “experts” believed was possible. In a 1939 account, for example, teacher V. P. Laiko described how she brought about the remarkable transformation of a boy named Valia:

For the first three quarters of the year he remained behind in all subjects. I considered him a “hopeless case,” that is, someone who would be held back a year. At the same time, however, I could clearly see that Valia did not have any kind of defects. I decided to work with him in a serious and systematic fashion. I must say that he was a real trouble-maker, as he interrupted lessons, crawled under desks, used improper language, and stole money from his home. The first thing I did was enlist his parents and keep in constant contact with them. I began to have additional lessons with Valia at the end of the day, invited him to my home, gave him interesting books, included him in socialist competition, and began to draw him a little bit away from the street. In the first half of the quarter, I could already see results as Valia began to read at a “satisfactory” level. By the end of the first grade his grades were not all that great, but I decided to promote him to the second grade in order to continue the work that I had begun with him. At the present time Valia is getting an “excellent” grade in reading, a “satisfactory” grade for spelling, and a “good” grade for arithmetic. I think that Valia might become an excellent pupil. If you work in a very painstaking way with children, it is possible to improve their education and raise their level of achievement.⁶¹

Like many of the teachers cited in the previous section, Laiko began by viewing her pupil in terms of predetermined traits. In this “heroic” narrative, however, this initial perception was overcome by force of will, practical experience, and direct engagement. Valia’s remarkable transformation

⁶⁰“Nashi luchshie uchitelia. Dmitrii Artem’evich Litvinchuk,” *Severo-Kavkazskii uchitel’* No. 7 (1936), 17–19; A. M. Kurtik, “Zamechatel’naia doch’ velikogo naroda,” *Nachal’naia sbkola* No. 4 (1937), 11; “Sel’skii uchitel’ K. K. Fediukin” *Nachal’naia sbkola* No. 4 (1937), 84–85; E. Ia. Salienko, “Iz opyta moei vospitatelnoi raboty” *Nachal’naia sbkola* No. 3 (1941), 54.

⁶¹V. P. Laiko, “Kak ia podtianiula ‘beznadezhnogo’ uchenika,” in *Uchitelia-komsomoltsy o svoei rabote* ed. S. N. Belousov (Moscow: Uchpedgiz, 1939), 68–69.

then became the basis for claims that any child could be an excellent pupil—if only the teacher made the necessary “painstaking” investment of time, creativity, and responsibility.

Stories by and about these teachers and other teachers had potential meaning that extended beyond their immediate value as propaganda for the regime. By claiming the transformative power available within their sphere of practical responsibilities, teachers were able to reconfigure their public images into sources of actual authority. A story told in emigration by a former Soviet teacher illustrates how this tension between perception and performance shaped interpretations of experience. After holding a series of positions, this respondent faced particular challenges in one school: “I obtained my next post at school No. 23 in Kharkov in the fourth grade. This was a school whose children were the toughest I had ever met. Nobody paid attention to the teachers. During class periods the children did everything except listen to what the teacher was saying. The headmaster warned me that this grade was very bad, but he was very surprised when, after one year with me, the children gave up their former habits and became more attentive in their school work.”⁶² In these stories, the parallel transformations from a “hopeless case” to “an excellent pupil” and from “the toughest” class to “more attentive” children were presented as defining elements of what it meant to be a teacher. These stories also reveal the central place in Stalinist culture of the process of personal transformation in conformity with publicly sanctioned models.⁶³ The convergence of these themes suggests that the increasing emphasis on transformative potential shaped the perceptions and experiences of teachers in ways that overlapped with, but were not determined by, the regime’s political objectives.

VI. Teachers’ “Rights” in an Era of Repression

The Central Committee decree of July 1936 unleashed a full-scale campaign against the field of pedology. In addition to losing their positions and facing public criticism, it is likely that some pedologists were arrested, although little is known about the fate of most.⁶⁴ Beyond the impact on indi-

⁶²Harvard Project, Schedule A, No. 1492 (NY), 6. For a similar story of how a single teacher transformed a class of “hooligans,” as told from a former pupil’s perspective, see External Research Staff, *Soviet Union as Reported by Former Citizens*, 4.

⁶³Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, 75–79.

⁶⁴The subsequent fate of Blonskii revealed the complexities of Stalinist repression. Even as he was subjected to vicious public attacks, forced to repudiate his ideas, dismissed from positions, and confronted with the arrest of his own son, Blonskii nevertheless continued to research, write, and even publish papers before his death, apparently from natural causes, in early 1941. Shortly thereafter, an obituary described him as “a brilliant and original” scholar and “a great loss for Soviet pedagogy and psychology.” Making no direct mention of pedology, this obituary referred only to Blonskii’s capacity to overcome certain “mistakes.” “P. P. Blonskii,” *Sovetskaia pedagogika* No. 4 (April 1941), 126–127.

viduals, the Central Committee's intervention strongly affected the study and teaching of children. Ideas "tainted" by their association with pedology were prevented from meaningful circulation in the Soviet Union for almost fifty years. Despite promises that pedological "distortions" would be replaced by a "Marxist science of children," Soviet educational discourse in the ensuing decades was dominated by normative declarations and prescriptive exhortations. Even courses on the "science of child development" placed the greatest emphasis on the knowledge and skills teachers needed to maintain their authority in the classroom.⁶⁵

Given the immediate context, as well as long-term consequences, of the antipedology decree, the Central Committee's reference to "restoring the rights" of teachers appears as a striking anomaly. Yet the rhetoric of rights persisted even as denunciations became increasingly virulent. Teachers' conferences hailed the "confirmation" of teachers' rights, while O. Kolesnikova proclaimed that only in the Soviet Union could the members of her profession "breathe easily and work joyfully," because their "rights" had been "guaranteed." But the promise of rights was made conditional on both demonstrated loyalty and accomplishments. Six months after the decree, a Leningrad Party official complained: "Our teachers have not learned how to take advantage of their rights as they should." Teachers' recognition of the conditional nature of these rights could be seen in Bogdasarova's declaration: "Much has been given to us, but much is also asked of us."⁶⁶

These references to rights were no doubt influenced by publicity surrounding the so-called "Stalin" constitution, which defined citizens' rights in terms of the requirements of communist ideology and institutions. Yet public discussion of teachers' rights was always more than a propaganda facade for an authoritarian regime.⁶⁷ The promise of restoring rights enabled teachers to make sense of the contradictory nature of political repression by selecting an explanation consistent with their personal and professional self-interests.⁶⁸ The process of "imagining" such an explanation was evi-

⁶⁵Fradkin and Plokhova, "Istoriia raspravy," 23-24; Bauer, *New Man*, 128-133; Piskoppel and Shchedrovitskii, "Mificheskoe i real'noe," 134; Karpova, *Obrazovatel'naiia situatsiia*, 121-122; Nikolenko, Gubko, and Ignatenko, "Zlokliucheniia nauki pedologii," 119-120; Joravsky, *Russian Psychology*, 353; Sirotkina, "Pedological Decree," 8-9.

⁶⁶Sharov, "Pedagogi i ucheniki," 3; Kolesnikova, "Za bol'shevistskoe vypolnenie," 32, 39; Ponomarev, "Po shkolam," 36; Bogdasarova, "Vse uslovia sozdany," 3; Kuprianov, "Pedagogi," 4.

⁶⁷For discussion of the Constitution in terms of the tension between regime propaganda and popular perceptions, see J. Arch Getty, "State and Society Under Stalin: Constitutions and Elections in the 1930s," *Slavic Review* 50 (Spring 1991), 18-35; Davies, *Popular Opinion*, 102-108.

⁶⁸This interpretation draws on recent scholarship which examines the ways that the meanings of policies and practices in the 1930s were constructed through an interactive, although unequal, relationship between regime and subjects. Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic*

dent in a postwar interview conducted by American researcher Raymond Bauer. Asked about “pedalogia” (sic), a former teacher offered a confused, yet revealing, explanation:

Pedalogy (sic) was used in general to excuse the fault of the teacher, it was a focus point for denunciation, I believe. I recall that someone in high position in the educational system was taken from his job, and his fault denounced as pedalogy. At this time a woman friend of mine, a member of the Komsomol, was taken from her teaching position. No explanation was given. (Bauer: And how did the teachers regard this method—pedology?) The old teachers thought it had little to benefit the system. In 1936 a law against it was given. I recall the discussion which appeared in the local Armenian newspapers. There was no pedology or exams connected with this science in our 1935 program. Nor did we have any textbooks concerning it. The duty of the teacher was to make known the individual talents of the pupils, the teacher was obligated to teach on an individual basis—this is the concept of that science, I believe.⁶⁹

For all of its uncertainty, this response illustrates certain crucial elements of the relationship between pedology and teachers. Even as she juxtaposed what pedologists said with what they were accused of saying, this teacher clearly recognized the direct connection between the antipedology campaign and the repression of educators. By linking the denunciation of pedology to changing expectations of classroom instruction, however, this teacher also suggested the multiple potential meanings of political repression. To the extent that Central Committee intervention was understood to promote teaching “on an individual basis,” the antipedology campaign redefined authority in ways that reinforced the self-image and the practical activities of teachers.⁷⁰

This study of responses to the antipedology campaign offers new perspectives on the tension between agency and accountability in the Stalinist state. With the 1936 antipedology decree and subsequent measures taken against individuals, institutions, and ideas, the Soviet state imposed a more political orientation on schooling. While teachers were spared the devastation inflicted on pedologists, the Central Committee decree changed the ways that teachers understood their roles in the school. While building upon and reinforcing previous efforts to strengthen the authority of teachers in the classroom, the antipedology decree marked a sharp escalation in the kind of pressure applied to make teachers conform to political require-

Mountain. Stalinism as a Civilization (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 198–237; Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, 67–88.

⁶⁹Harvard Project, Schedule A, No. 493, 22–23.

⁷⁰For a different perspective, which connects the “individualization” of teaching to more subtle forms of self-regulation, see Kate Rousmaniere, “Good Teachers are Born, Not Made: Self-Regulation in the Work of Nineteenth Century American Women Teachers,” in *Discipline, Moral Regulation, and Schooling: A Social History* eds. *idem*, Kari Dehli, and Ning de Coninck-Smith, (New York: Garland, 1997), 117–134.

ments. Teachers who offered different explanations for classroom achievement or reached their own conclusions in evaluating pupils ran the risk of public denunciation at a time of great professional and personal vulnerability. The antipedology campaign thus contributed directly to patterns of conformity, intimidation, and censorship which were increasingly characteristic of Stalinist schools.

By shifting the focus from scholarly inquiry to practical applications, however, political authorities moved closer to the professional aspirations and immediate concerns of teachers. Even as some teachers were punished for “evading” responsibility for pupils, the voluntarist emphasis on individual accountability may have appealed to those teachers seeking practical support and public affirmation for their efforts in classrooms. For teachers willing to assume full responsibility for the performance and behavior of their pupils, the antipedology campaign confirmed classroom practices and professional identities which emphasized accountability, engagement, and authority. The power of the Stalinist state depended on the extent to which Soviet citizens could be persuaded to assume responsibility for making their own behavior conform to the requirements of the regime. Teachers’ responses to the antipedology campaign suggest that a willingness to take on this responsibility transformed many of them, however unintentionally, into effective agents of dictatorship.