

Educating the New Soviet Man

The Commissariat of Enlightenment: Soviet Organization of Education and the Arts under Lunacharsky, by Sheila Fitzpatrick. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970. 380 and xxii pp. \$13.50

The Soviet Union (World Education Series), by J. J. Tomiak. Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1972. 144 pp. \$6.50

Modernization and Diversity in Soviet Education, with Special Reference to Nationality Groups, by Jean Pennar, Ivan I. Bakalo, & George Z. F. Bereday. New York: Praeger Publishers, 1971. 397 + xix pp. \$20.00

Few new states have set out with such great hopes in the reforming capacity of education as the Soviet regime in 1917. The Bolshevik leaders brought to their revolutionary task the conviction that they possessed the science of human progress to guide them in all their fields of activity, of which education was only one. They brought with them as well the deep faith, born of the highly intellectual atmosphere of the Tsarist educational system, that reason and learning provided key tools in laying the foundations for a new humanity. The obstacles which they confronted were great. The society which they governed remained deeply imbued with the emotional-dogmatic forms of the Orthodox religion, and had just begun its rise out of pre-literate to literate culture. But they were men of commitment. Somehow, they felt, they would achieve that new man in a new communist society of which Karl Marx and other European socialists had dreamed. Education had a crucial role to play in this holy cause.

A half-century later, the dreams are still discussed. Education remains a major force in Soviet life greater certainly than ever before. But the dreams have not come true, at least not in the form they were supposed to, and education has altered radically its form and function from the early pattern of the Bolshevik system. It is now possible to compare the dreams with reality, to measure the distance covered since 1917, to look at the impact of education on the outlook and behavior of new generations of Soviet youth, and to evaluate the degree to which education in that country was actually able to remake humanity.

Interest in this general field has been great in the West since the late 1950's. Provoked first by vivid evidence of the capacity of Soviet schools to prepare highly competent scientists and technicians capable of complex space technology, these studies have since then expanded somewhat their scope and widened the field of investigation into formal education in the USSR. They have looked at the character-building capacity of the upbringing provided in the schools. They have examined the relationship between

new developments in the social sciences and the role of Marxism-Leninism as a guide to social reform. They have begun to examine the complex problem of education and the relations of nationalities in the past and present. Taken altogether, they provide valuable insights into the fascinating story of the adjustments and disruptions which have accompanied the evolution of Soviet education into a mammoth operation servicing an industrially advanced, urban society. Among these works are three, all published within the past three years, which will be reviewed in this article. Sheila Fitzpatrick's monograph on the early years of the Commissariat of Enlightenment—i.e., Education—furnishes abundant material on the dreams which inspired the first leaders of Soviet education. J. J. Tomiak's brief study of schooling in the Soviet Union, published in the World Education Series, helps evaluate achievements and shortcomings of educational developments since the revolution. It is seriously handicapped, however, by its very brevity, and by the obvious effort of the author to write a simple introduction to a complex subject. The third book, *Modernization and Diversity in Soviet Education*, offers a far richer harvest of factual data on both the history of Soviet education, covered in part I, and the impact of education on the non-Russian nationalities. Strong in the breadth of its coverage and the abundance of tables, the work still leaves the reader groping for some comprehensive theme around which to group the material in the book. Statistics on enrollment by nationalities in secondary and higher education cannot by themselves provide this insight. The dominant pattern in Soviet educational development has to be found elsewhere.

For the Bolshevik leaders in the new Soviet state, the significance of education lay above all in its capacity to reshape men's minds. Lenin himself emphasized the high ethical task of the schools to teach "modern youth" the essence of "Communist morality," which he saw as the key to destroying attitudes created by "the old exploitative society" and strengthening support for the proletariat, "which is creating a new society of Communists." (1) In practice, this elevated ideal took the form of radical reforms in the schools. In the new Commissariat of Enlightenment, Anatoly Lunacharsky headed a group of ambitious amateur educators who saw new worlds of schooling before them. They started by scrapping the Tsarist system of primary and secondary education in favor of a unified school to form the whole man. Embodied in the Declaration on the United Labor School, their goals promised general, polytechnical education to all children. Specialization would come only later, in line with the Communist ideal of training the new people for a multitude of activities, rather than just for one special task. Liberation would come through the widening of intellectual horizons within a society where the abolition of exploitation would open up tremendous possibilities for human development and enrichment. The enormous reservoir of talents locked up in every individual would at last be released for the enrichment of all mankind.

This great vision was reflected in the United Labor Schools. They embodied the principle of labor as a prime factor in schooling. This meant that the pupils would acquire an "active, mobile, and creative acquaintance with the world" and "the direct familiarization . . . with what will be most nec-

essary to them in life, . . .with agricultural and industrial labor in all its variety." (2) The educational leaders found inspiration for their dreams of poly-technical schooling from their ideological mentor Karl Marx. They also took ideas from that bourgeois educator, John Dewey, whose ideas for activity schools reappeared in their plans. Combined with this eclectic pedagogy went a vision of highly democratic organization of the classroom. From primary to higher education, pupils and teachers were to organize themselves according to the "brigade-laboratory method." Work would proceed through projects which the pupils formulated and on which they worked together, with the advice and aid of the teacher. Gone would be the old authoritarian teacher and rigid, dogmatic curriculum. Innovation was the byword, though in reality much remained as dreams and plans only for want of qualified teachers and equipment.

The realities of Soviet life dictated from the first years a more practical approach to education than the revolutionary goals of these visionaries in the Commissariat. In the first place, the country had to overcome the hurdle of simple illiteracy, the situation for 60 percent of the population. In the second place, the imperatives of economic development required that scarce resources for education go toward the training of semi-skilled and skilled workers. As one party leader reminded the educators, "enlightenment exists on the basis of a definite surplus product of society." The Soviet Union could not therefore spend vast amounts on educating the "whole man," since it lacked the wealth. In fact, he argued that "higher education must be hugely diminished in favor of lower, and in lower education, the general branch must be enormously diminished in favor of what is urgently important for industry and agriculture." (3) The educators branded this proposal a "peasant-artisan policy" and defended the "people's thirst for education." But specialization was too important a need to be sacrificed on the altar of ideology.

Instead, the Marxist-Leninist vision was codified and concentrated in a special branch of the educational system. It became the foundation of the "social sciences," taught at every level of schooling, and endowed with its own teacher-training programs. The entire operation was controlled by the party itself, which steadfastly refused to allow the Commissariat of Education to take over the role of defender of the faith. "Political education" was too important a task to be left under the exclusive supervision of a non-party institution, despite the fears of educators, such as Lenin's wife Krupskaja, that it would degenerate into "agitational chatter." (4) Fitzpatrick's book discusses the beginning of the process by which ideology became educational dogma. None of the other books take the story any further. Yet this problem is crucial in understanding the character of Soviet education. After a few years of experimentation, the Communist ideology ceased to provide the inspiration for a revolutionary new education. Its place in the schools served to inculcate the proper standards of political loyalty and civic duty expected of teachers and students alike. Its tenets were not open to intellectual debate and questioning. It fitted best a system, not of experimentation, but educational conservatism.

By the early 1930's, the schools had moved back into a traditional mold of

education. Gone were the forays into progressive education. The teacher re-emerged as the final authority in the classroom, where discipline and order reigned supreme. The pupils dressed in school uniforms, and received their learning from a strictly defined body of knowledge whose limits were set by textbooks and teachers. The educational leaders were no longer willing to accept the "reduction of the student's individual responsibility for his own work" and the lowering of classroom work to "the level of the poor and backward students." (5) Mastery of assigned lessons replaced innovation as the hallmark of excellence. At the level of higher education, this meant increased emphasis on the training of highly qualified specialists. Instead of educating the "whole man," the Soviet schools were now servicing the needs of a rapidly expanding industrial system.

Taken on these terms, they performed very well. The Soviet Union waged a major campaign against illiteracy throughout the first decades of rule. By the mid-1930's, it had eliminated illiteracy among its Russian population, in the non-Russian lands, it achieved this goal a decade later. By this time, primary education was universal for the youth of the entire country. At the secondary level, the state developed an extensive network of technical schools. The numbers of universities and professional institutions of higher education increased rapidly as well. This school system, set up according to uniform central standards, provided the young generations of Soviet citizens with the opportunity to penetrate the new occupations of a rapidly growing economy regardless of social or national origin. The offspring of workers and peasants in the educational institutions represented by the late 1930's over half the total students in higher education, and over 80 percent of the students in the secondary technical schools. Upon graduating, these young people could expect to rise into the ranks of the skilled workers and professionals. No Western country could match this degree of social equality in educational opportunity.

For the non-Russian nationalities, the natural outcome of this tremendous expansion of schooling was the strengthening of the Russian language as the vehicle for transmission of knowledge and exchange of ideas. This problem of the impact of Soviet education on the nationalities of the USSR provides one of the main subjects for the work by Pennar, Bakalo, and Bereday. They have compiled a considerable amount of data on the participation of the populations of the 15 republics in the primary, secondary, and higher institutions of education. The conclusions, as one might expect for so diverse a country, are ambiguous. Schooling in the eastern, Asian regions of the Soviet Union has had very different repercussions than in the western areas, especially among the Baltic populations. The first area felt Soviet schools primarily as Westernization; the second experienced it as a move toward Russification. In this sense, the book combines two separate stories under one cover.

The nationality policy of the Soviet regime has generally adhered to the principle that class solidarity of Soviet peoples is more important than national differences, but that national cultures reflect part of the unique nationalities of the people of the Soviet Union. As the hackneyed slogan has it, Soviet society is "national in form, socialist in content." For education, this

policy has meant that schools should provide learning in the native languages, but that the Russian language must be made available to the largest possible proportion of pupils. It has been, after all, the language of the “most progressive” part of the population spearheading the drive to socialism. Russian, in the words of a minister of education of the Russian Republic, is the “mighty instrument of trans-national relations” between Soviet nationalities. (6) In other terms, it has become—indeed, has always been—the *lingua franca* of the USSR. This position represents in fact something of an ideological compromise. Originally, Marxists expected that nations would ultimately merge under socialism. National distinctions would remain only during the period of transition. But the transitional has a way frequently of becoming permanent.

Despite Stalin’s open favoritism for Russian and the Russian people in the last part of his rule, he did not fundamentally alter the nationalities policy embodied in the institutional structure of the Soviet Union. Since his death, and particularly since Khrushchev’s fall, the non-Russian nationalities seem to be reasserting their rights to separate schooling. As Pennar *et al* report, educational leaders of the various non-Russian republics have been very careful to preserve first place in their schools for their own language, and keep a watchful eye on any trends which seem to jeopardize this situation. The whole subject was openly debated in the late 1960’s. In veiled terms, party leaders and intellectuals from areas like the Ukraine and Latvia defended their own culture and, by extension, education in their own cultural idiom. With their own state apparatus and educational system, their position is strong, even if they are occasionally warned against “bourgeois nationalism.” Only the Jews are at a great disadvantage, since they have no national area. Despite the obvious interest of some Soviet Jews in their own Yiddish culture and Hebrew language, they have no native schools to which to send their children. They are the one group on whom educational assimilation has been forced, and this fact by itself explains part of the current conflict between Jews and the Soviet authorities. On balance, one would have to conclude that the spread of literacy and education among the Soviet nationalities has strengthened, not weakened, the cultural loyalties of the various national groups of the USSR.

Yet there are economic and intellectual forces working quietly but effectively to strengthen the position of Russian. The Russian language offers considerable advantages to Soviet youth as a source of technological and scientific knowledge. For the Asian peoples, it is the Western language providing access to modern economic and scientific information. It is no wonder that in the Uzbek Republic, for example, schools using Russian as the language of instruction attracted in 1961-62 24 percent of the pupils, while the Russian population represented only 12 percent of the Republic’s peoples. (7) Professionals and trained teachers are in such demand in the Central Asian republics that Russians are imported to supplement the inadequate supply of native graduates from advanced educational institutions. This trend further strengthens the influence of the Russian language. Yet the 1970 census has revealed a curious trend caused by the spread of Russian as technical and professional language of communication. In a sizeable number of cases,

people from non-Russian nationalities who declared that Russian was their principal language still proclaimed their national identity to be their original national group. (8) If even technological and economic pressures cannot overcome national loyalties, it would seem that the Soviet dream of the merging of nationalities will be a long time coming.

The hopes for developing a "new Soviet man" through general education appear even more remote. The dilemma of a poor country trying to cultivate the full capacities of its population through polytechnical education was resolved by favoring practical educational skills and specialization. The direction given education in the 1930's has continued on to the present, despite platitudinous pronouncements from Communist ideologists and one vain effort to turn the tide. Tomiak, in his history of Soviet education, presents the reader with the educational goals as presented by the party in commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution. But he fails to point out the great gap which had developed between ideals and reality. The 1967 Theses stressed the need for education to mold individuals with both the specialized knowledge required by the national economy and the general moral qualities compatible with the new Soviet man. (9) The authors of the theses did not, however, indicate just how the demands for specialization were to be reconciled with that full realization of human mental and physical capacities dreamed of by Karl Marx.

Ten years before Khrushchev had begun a concerted campaign to reverse the seemingly irresistible trend of education toward training for specialized skills. He was particularly disturbed by the social consequences of this movement. The rigors of education were operating a natural selection among Soviet youth, among whom the less talented (usually the offspring of workers and peasants) received only secondary education at best, and the more capable consisting of a high percentage of sons and daughters of white-collar workers and professionals) went on to the more rigorous institutions of higher education. These latter, destined to join the "intelligentsia," had no experience thus with factory or farm labor, while the former were relegated by their restricted education to positions of manual labor. The demands of a complex, industrial economy were pushing education in the direction of a system of social stratification. Khrushchev complained that

it can't be fitting that Vania, for example, may not go into industry while for Kolya there cannot be another road but directly into production. When some think that industry is for people of a second rank as it were, [then] that is even wrong in principle [and] contrary to the spirit of a socialist society.

He invoked "generally accepted principles" to urge that all youth, "regardless of the position their parents occupy," have equal access to educational opportunities. (10) The spirit of Karl Marx still moved him as he sought to reform Soviet education. His 1958 reforms introduced throughout the secondary school system compulsory vocational training and participation in socially useful work. An entire year was tacked onto the ten-year schools which prepared for higher education to allow adequate time for these fu-

ture white-collar workers to get a good taste of manual labor. But it was to no avail. His hopes were undermined by the realities of Soviet industrial life, in which unwilling teenage part-time recruits had no real place. Following Khrushchev's removal from power in 1964, the program was abandoned. Technology was triumphant over ideology.

Still, the educational system has been partially successful in molding the character of Soviet youth. Educators could point to the results of public-opinion surveys among young men and women which indicated that social obligations and service did count for the new generations. A survey in 1966 among 15,000 young people found that 85 percent valued their future careers primarily for their "social usefulness," while only 3 percent felt that "any job is fine as long as it pays well." (11) Though the questionnaire might have been somewhat biased in favor of the former answer, there is still good reason to believe that Soviet youth are much less interested in the financial side of careers than American youth. Even more profoundly, Soviet schools have apparently been able to inculcate in their pupils a high degree of social responsibility. A recent study by an American scholar concluded that the "collective upbringing" of the Soviet primary schools did succeed in making the children "obedient" and "self-disciplined, at least at the level of the collective." Soviet children in their peer groups acted "to support behavior consistent with the values of the adult society" and encouraged each member "to take personal initiative and responsibility for developing and maintaining such behavior in others." (12) The characteristics of self-discipline and collective responsibility have come as a direct consequence of a conscious educational policy, itself guided by the ideological vision of the communist society of the future.

But beyond these basic social virtues, the Marxist-Leninist ideology has contributed little to the education of Soviet youth. It has acted as a brake on innovation in the social sciences, and has even disrupted at times the teaching of the natural sciences. Only recently have academic disciplines in the social sciences freed from the stifling atmosphere of ideological dogmatism opened up in higher education. Both sociology and economics have emerged in the 1960's as respectable and intellectually demanding subjects in universities and the Academy of Science. Their rise is in fact one measure of the growing obsolescence of the Communist ideology, unable to meet the needs of the complex urban, industrial society which has appeared over the past forty years in the Soviet Union. These disciplines provide empirical data needed to solve acute problems of human behavior provoked by the new social and economic life into which the Soviet population has so rapidly been propelled. The increasing demand for their services by Soviet government and party leaders provides a measure of how little Marxism-Leninism can contribute now as a practical guide to policy formation and implementation. The rise of sociology and economics represent, in the words of an English economist, the "End of Ideology" in the Soviet Union. (13)

The educational system has done its job well. It has helped to raise the Soviet Union into the ranks of the most highly developed countries of the world. By this very fact, it has contributed mightily in the construction of a new Soviet society. But the new Soviet man who has emerged bears only a

faint resemblance to the dreams of the early Soviet educators. He continues to feel the attraction of national loyalty, and looks suspiciously like that specialized blue- or white-collar worker of the capitalist West whom the Bolsheviks hoped to ban from their midst. The three books under review here touch only slightly on this hidden dilemma of Soviet educational history. They remain mostly within the conservative limits of verifiable facts and figures, telling a story only half as dramatic as it might be.

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Notes

1. Jean Pennar, Ivan I. Bakalo & George Z. F. Bereday, *Modernization and Diversity in Soviet Education, with Special Reference to Nationality Groups* (New York, 1971), p. 113.
2. Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Commissariat of Enlightenment: Soviet Organization of Education and the Arts under Lunacharsky* (Cambridge, 1970), p. 32.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 215.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 254.
5. Pennar, *Modernization*, p. 60.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 176.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 177.
8. Roman Szporluk, "The Nations of the USSR in the 1970's," *Survey* (Autumn, 1971): 71.
9. J. J. Tomiak, *The Soviet Union (World Education Series)* (Hamden, Conn., 1972), p. 27.
10. Pennar, *Modernization*, p. 43.
11. Fedor Korolev, "The October Revolution and the Education of the New Man," *Sovetskaia pedagogika* (November, 1967 [reprinted in translation in *Soviet Education*, October, 1968]): 45.
12. Urie Bronfenbrenner, *Two Worlds of Childhood: USA and USSR* (New York, 1970), p. 80.
13. Peter Wiles, "Convergence: Possibility and Probability," in Alexander Balinsky et al, *Planning and the Market in the USSR: The 1960's* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1967), p. 98.