

The Russian Method

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Abstract *The paper explores the Russian concept of “vospitanie” and the history and methodology of the Communards’ movement. The author argues that educational communities based on positive peer cultures, common activity, and collective reflection represent a viable direction for education. Moreover, educational institutions with elements of civic engagement remain not only guarantors of democracy in democratic countries, but also an important agent of social change in authoritarian countries.*

Keywords Russian education, vospitanie, Communards movement

Introduction

In the ruins of the Soviet Union, there were hidden treasures. Even now, more than 20 years after the collapse of the country, the Russian economy survives on these treasures: the natural resources, the space, arms, and nuclear energy industries. More recently, the country began to dig deeper and discover smaller treasures that are not as significant in economic terms, but help with international prestige and are valuable on the large domestic and regional markets: culture, sports, agriculture, the auto and aviation industries and a few others. Certain parts of Russian education can be viewed as one of those smaller treasures. With the right kind of governmental support, one tradition within Russian education can be both repackaged for internal consumption and marketed globally.

Some of the Russian psychology and philosophy has been successfully translated (Vygotsky and Bakhtin are the two most prominent examples). The country’s educational thought remains almost completely unknown in the rest of the world. Rooted in the Euro-American Progressive education ideas of the early 20th century, the Russian educational tradition later developed largely independent of the West. Isolation is generally not a good thing; among many side effects is the idiosyncratic

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language and frame of conceptual references. However, the relative isolation had its silver lining. Some Russian educators were able to develop a fairly unique approach to education by blending the Western educational ideas with their own national tradition and adapting both to the peculiarities of the Soviet political regime. I will refer to the loosely connected set of traditions as the Russian Method. It is more of a rhetorical convenience than a representation of an actual coherent method. However, there is definitely a set of common assumptions about the nature of education that justifies the use of the term.

The key idea is the transformation of peer culture into an educationally valuable community. Such a community has all the characteristics of a peer group, with its norms, identity rituals, markings, linguistic codes, and an informal relational structure. At the same time, it is open to a negotiated form of adult influence. Positioned in the space between the peer culture and the world of education, these communities can be very powerful. I will borrow Brendtro and Vorrath's (1985) notion of the *Positive Peer Culture* (Russians just say *kollektiv*, the collective). This is not a new idea; it occurred for centuries to Jesuits and other religious educators, and to the Progressives; it is used by Scouts, by kibbutzim educators, and by many others. The difference is that the Russians figured out a way of creating cohesive peer communities without religious undertones, and keep them secular, inclusive and diverse. The positive peer culture is fairly easy to create in groups with volunteer attendance, but at least several Russian educators created and maintained them in compulsory institutions (schools, and juvenal remedial colonies; see Makarenko, 1973). They also created simple and reproducible techniques so the communities do not depend on one charismatic leader. This type of a youth community, in theory, can be very attractive to pluralistic, diverse societies because of its independence from a particular ethnic or religious identity, and its applicability to compulsory institutions.

An educational community needs a project, a goal larger than itself, and an activity that requires cooperation; relationships alone do not hold it together. Friendship is by definition selective and preferential, so young people need a common project to justify the need for the non-exclusive community. Let us call this the *keystone activity* (Dewey would have called this an *occupation*), a project that "locks" a community's structure in place. Just like a real keystone, it may not be large, but it holds everything together.

A number of Russian educators stumbled upon the same idea: they used techniques borrowed from the Russian theater actor training schools (Stanislavsky, Meyerhold, Mihail Chekhov), and from literary and musical traditions of the Russian intelligentsia. They invented the so-called *collective creative action* – something between improvisational theater, and an invented celebration. It is not easy to explain, and has not been well explained in the Russian literature, but this

strange activity provides enough social glue to hold the communities together even where there is no previously established common interest. In a certain sense, the practice turns an involuntary association into a voluntary one. The emphasis on creativity becomes more and more important for the creative knowledge economies, and the idea can therefore be credibly replicated elsewhere. As Gazman and Matveyev put it: “Everything is creation, otherwise why bother?” (1988). It is important to mention that the creative collective action is the most common, but not the only kind of keystone activity.

The Russians independently re-invented the group therapy methods and used them to develop youth communities. If you consistently discuss with children their own collective experiences including the group dynamics, it helps to accelerate the community development. It is also very helpful in building social and leadership skills among typically developing children and adolescents. Over the years, these techniques were standardized to a point where almost any competent adult could do it with some training. In the American cultural context, two similar approaches exist: the Just Communities approach (Power, Higgins, & Kohlber, 1991) and the middle school advisories (Galassi, Gullede, & Cox, 1997).

Vospitanie

English does not have an exact equivalent for the Russian *vospitanie*. It is a term for the part of educational practice that is not about traditional academic learning, but is more about attitudes, dispositions, and character. *Vospitanie* literally means “nurturing up,” or “raising,” which implies the upward direction. It is sometimes defined as helping a person to grow, and in this sense is wider than education. The word is translated as social, value, moral, sometimes character education, or up-bringing, none of which is quite accurate. *Vospitanie* is closer to what an American psychologist would call an intervention in its broadest sense. Traditionally it has been more associated with afterschool and extracurricular activities; although most educators believe a classroom is also a site of *vospitanie*. It is normally used in contrast with *obuchenie* which describes the teaching-learning (instruction) process. In this sense, *vospitanie* is the non-instructional part of education. In my definition, it is a long-term and multi-purposeful intervention into child’s development with emphasis on the formation of character, values, and non-academic skills such as communication, leadership, and creativity. Anatoly V. Mudrik (2008) defined *vospitanie* as the social institute for the relatively controlled part of socialization.

While Western parents may find the notion to be intrusive, their Russian counterparts expect public school and afterschool systems to perform the *vospitanie* as one of their primary duties. It has been the case in pre-Revolutionary Russia, in the Soviet period, and remains a widely held assumption in the post-Soviet times. The Communists’ use of public education for ideological control made people more

ambivalent about schools intervening into students' values. Yet it did not diminish the assumption that schools should not only teach, but also carry out *vospitanie*. Perhaps most parents, most of the time, disagree with the *kind* of *vospitanie* their children receive, but only very rarely do they object to the *idea* of *vospitanie*.

Mass compulsory schools all over the world face similar problems. They just cannot keep their students engaged and attending. Attempts to make classroom learning fascinating enough to keep all the children interested abound. While some progress is evident, achieving the ultimate goal is problematic. The best Russian schools I know are much, much more than just academic institutions. They provide a sense of belonging and a rich array of activities to students. In exchange, students agree to comply with the school's rules and apply some academic effort. The bargain seems to work much better than simply requiring children to learn. It is often thought that in order to improve learning, we need to improve teaching; this is a logic that is much too linear. Those two processes are connected rather indirectly, through a complex medium, a nutritious relational broth that is as elusive as it is vital to education. *Vospitanie* is an art of creating such a medium, and Russians might have discovered something there.

What follows is a brief overview of one particular strand of the Russian Method with which I am most familiar. It has been known as the *Communards' movement*. Perhaps the largest, it is still just one school of thought. The Russian method is as diverse as Indian philosophy; the adherents of different schools disagree with each other to the point of being oblivious to their fundamental similarities. Makarenko (1973) and Sukhomlinsky (1981) are two most notable earlier examples, but dozens of names and places could be added to the list. Some of these experiments had little in common with Communards, while others seem to invent very similar approaches independently.

The Communards

In the late 50s and early 60s, Khrushchev's "Thaw" began to melt some of the iciest Stalinist institutions. In many walks of life, creative forces seemed to be released all at once. In one of Leningrad's neighborhoods, Igor P. Ivanov had organized the "Frunzenskaya Kommuna," the first Communards group. A gifted writer and a life-long supporter of the movement, Simon L. Soloveichik later helped to compile a book which told the story of the group (1969). Formally, the group was a District Young Pioneers Headquarters. It engaged in social activism and volunteerism; the children helped where they felt their help was needed. This altruistic sentiment became a necessary part of all subsequent communards' groups. Much time was spent on what I earlier described as the creative collective action: the kids and adults put together elaborate games, skits, and theater shows. Regular retreats (*sbor*) and preparation for them made up the third activity component.

The adult leaders of the group, Igor P. Ivanov and Faina Ya. Shapiro played the major role in the group's success with their seemingly limitless creativity and enthusiasm. But as consequent history of the movement has shown, it does not take a charismatic leader for a Communards' group to start and function. Interestingly enough, *Frunzenskaya Kommuna* in a sense, outgrew its leader. The book describes a peculiar conflict between Ivanov and the children. He apparently claimed more authority in making decisions than kids were ready to grant him. The group existed for several years after he left.

The Communards' movement is undeniably the single most interesting phenomenon in the area of *vospitanie* for the last fifty years. Soloveichik once estimated that about 300,000 kids at some point of their lives went through a communards' group. The estimation was made around 1984, in a newspaper article (reference unknown), and since then numbers could have easily tripled. A significant number of children's groups did not call themselves Communards, and probably did not fully realize where the principles of their organization came from. They were, in fact, various offspring of the movement. In my adolescent years, I belonged to one of these groups in Novosibirsk.

In the early sixties, the Communards came into *Orlyonok*, then a brand new all-Russian children's camp on the Black Sea Coast. The camp has been designed to bring in Pioneer and Komsomol (Central Committee of Youth Communist Organization) youth leaders from all Russian regions for enrichment, development, and recreation. *Orlyonok* quickly adopted the Communards' ideas, and became a sort of national center for dissemination of the Communards' movement. In the early 70s, the Komsomol, which ran *Orlyonok*, conducted a political cleansing campaign, removing most of its top administrators and creative leaders. It simply became too liberal in the increasingly conservative political atmosphere of Brezhnev's Soviet Union. However, the educational method that is working is notoriously hard to kill. When I came to *Orlyonok* in 1984 as a counselor, the Communards method was alive and well, even if its liberal spirit has been weakened.

By the early 80s, there were dozens of groups all over the country. They had formed a distinctive subculture, at times overlapping with other informal subcultures (the hiker clubs, the song-writers clubs, the artists and actors, etc.), that together made up the cultural space of Russian *intelligentsia*. The latter can be defined as the segment of college-educated population not directly involved in the political system. The Communards movement provided a vehicle for what Americans call "upward social mobility." It did not, however, involve moving from lower to a higher-income class since all incomes except those of high-ranking officials were fairly equal. Instead, it amounted to the *intelligentsia* recruiting other people's children into their ranks.

The Method

The Communards' method is difficult to describe even to the Russian audience without first-hand knowledge. After any presentation, an audience member usually asks: "Now, tell us what do you actually *do* with kids there?" The Communards' method is transferred through direct participatory experience; almost never through a written word. I am not aware of a single group that would start from reading a book. Not many books exist; two of the most notable are Gazman and Matveyev's (1988) book on the Communards' method in the summer camp, and Vladimir A. Karakovskii's works (1977, 1982) in which he manages to apply the method first in Chelyabinsk and then in a school in Moscow. Still the Communards' system is replicable, which is not the case with many other educational success stories. Under the right circumstances, average educators could get a good idea of how to do it. What is really needed is a *team* of founders. To start a new Communards' group alone has proven to be very difficult. The transmission involves a demonstration of a certain style of relationships and interaction; it is not easy to demonstrate a relationship alone.

The Russian culture, like most others, contains an enduring, if vague, notion of community, a pseudo-nostalgic dream of an ideal state of human affairs. At different times, the Orthodox Church or the Communist ideology shaped specific details, but a search for utopia seems to be one of the most powerful spiritual vehicles of Russian culture. Educational movements in general tend to tap into the depths of the cultural imagination of a particular kind. This is why they tend to stay within the cultural borders. The "Russian method" hence cannot be directly replicated outside the Russian cultural sphere; only the more abstract ideas can be recreated within different cultural contexts.

What made the Communards' utopia especially powerful was the Soviet political regime. I do not think there were many people in the late USSR who did not feel at least some disgust over the stifling political regime, including many of the people who *were* the regime. The Communards provided young people with a striking alternative, a utopian island in the fairly lifeless social ocean. Some probably associated it with the true Communism, while others with the Kingdom of Heaven, or something even more abstract. To differ from the dominant social reality was fairly easy.

A utopian commune can exist only under these conditions: (1) its members are alienated from the dominant social order; (2) the commune is free of basic economic worries, such as how to pay for food and rent; and (3) the utopia must be strictly limited in space and time. The Communards used to preach active involvement in social activism, and were in fact open and inclusive. At the same time they clearly distanced themselves from the rest of the society. It was an internal emigration of a kind, not an uncommon way of life in the Soviet Union.

The utopia has to be short in duration. We humans cannot love each other for long periods of time. The problem was easily solved in *Orlyonok* and other summer camps: the kids lived together for a month, and almost never saw each other again. The whole setting encourages the utopian tendencies. More permanent groups used one of the fundamental Ivanov inventions, the *sbor*. The word means just a gathering, but in a Communards' lingo it means something between a retreat and a communion. Up to two hundred children and adults go out of town, or isolate themselves some other way. They spend together three or four very intense and sleep-deprived days. The time is planned and highly structured; it is filled with the creative collective actions, humorous competitions, improvisational theater, singing, community service work, sometimes also sport and games.

Sbor is an exercise in spiritual renewal even though no religion is mentioned. The Russian society has always been multiethnic and multi-confessional. Being a part of some greater whole, a communion is the end-goal; the collective creative action, the arts, the work, and even the volunteering for the needy are the means of achieving that goal. *Sbor* is a unique non-utilitarian cultural phenomenon that defies an easy categorization. The Communards used to say "to *make a sbor*," which meant to achieve a certain degree of spiritual excitement that leaves a lasting impression. The relational echoes of the *sbor* sustain the community for the entire year.

The cultural genealogy of *sbor* can be best explored with the help of Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of carnival. Bakhtin traces the European carnival tradition back to Antiquity, with its peak described by François Rabelais. At its core is a universal, all-engulfing laughter. It is the laughter of the masses, opposing the official church-dominated culture of Medieval Europe. The carnival laughter defies the fear by ridiculing the divine and the authority, and in such a way makes the world closer and more familiar. It is ambivalent laughter, embracing the new and the old, the death and the birth, the beginning and the end. The carnival gives one an experience of freedom from limitations of one's social rank, makes everybody equal and united in the utopian ideas of equality and abundance (Bakhtin, 1990). As D. S. Likhachev et al. further explored:

Laughter breaks down the established connections and meanings. Laughter shows the senselessness and absurdity of relationships existing in the social world. But laughter has also some contemplative constituent, though in the imaginary world only. The laughter breaks down but also builds up something: it is a world of mixed up and illogical relationships, a world of absurdity, a world of freedom from conventions and therefore a desirable and careless one. . . . Laughter in its sphere restores the destroyed in other spheres contact between human beings, because laughing people are a group

of “conspirators” that see and understand something invisible or incomprehensible for others or for themselves before. (Likhachev et al. 1984)

The primary target of laughter in Communards’ *sbors* is the everyday life of school, of peer culture, mass media and other social contexts of children’s lives. One of the aims is to break down stereotypes of school life and a peer-culture. *Vospitanie* in general, and Communards’ version of it in particular, is, in fact, an attempt to break down the barriers between school and peer culture. The carnival is the method for achieving just that. Since Makarenko, who published in the 30s, most of the people in the field agree that the positive peer culture (a collective, *kollektiv*) is the main method of *vospitanie*. Russian educators are very suspicious of the efficacy of individual teacher-student relationship. They have little patience for young people proclaiming their individual moral autonomy. A managed ethical confrontation between an individual and a positive peer culture is believed to be at the heart of *vospitanie*. An individual is forced to define himself/herself with and vis-à-vis the group, rather than simply conform to or reject the group.

Sbors used to have a powerful liberating influence on both children and adults. However in the Soviet Union, the sense of freedom was not a particularly helpful asset. That was one of the most controversial issues within Communards’ community. We did not really prepare children for the real life; the utopian nature of the method all but assured conflict and disappointment. A young person would return from a *sbors* engaged, creative and thinking independently, and promptly get in trouble with his or her school authorities. The Communards were accused of mounting “rose-colored glasses” on students’ eyes. And it was true: every single *Orlyonok* counselor has received letters from children, filled with bitter disappointment and despair. The message we gave children was: “Go and change your school, organize a communards’ club, do something,” and yet we knew full well that unless an adult would be willing to help, and ultimately to head such a group, our kids had no chance of succeeding.

In the long run, however, children with communards experience gained some real advantages. Even within the Communist system those who had a somewhat innovative set of mind, who could organize, plan and implement, those people succeeded. There is no real data about former Communards’ success in the post-Communist Russia, but anecdotally most did very well. According to Sergey I. Panchenko (personal correspondence, 2012), 45% of Duma (Russian Parliament) members are former *Orlyonok* children or counselors. If the numbers are accurate, they indicate a statistical anomaly that would be difficult to ignore, for only a tiny minority of Russian children attended *Orlyonok*.

One of Ivanov's original inventions was *ogonyok*, an important component of the system. *Ogonyok* is a form of group self-reflection. It resembles T-groups and encounter groups, although I am quite sure that Ivanov was not familiar with them. The principal difference is that in *ogonyok* people discuss their shared experience as a group, while group psychotherapy involves discussion of previous individual experience, or modeling some artificial group experience right on the spot. *Ogonyok* is basically a group discussion about a past day or a longer period of time. Eventually, an elaborated tradition of *ogonyok* has developed; it included ways to achieve certain emotional atmospheres of safety and trust. Singing was an important part of it. About two hundred or so songs are easily recognizable in all Communards groups across the huge territory of the Soviet Union.

Russians are suspicious of procedures and formalities; no Roberts Rules of Order of any kind were allowed. One could not expect a formal decision at the end of the *ogonyok*, although it is in fact the highest decision-making body of a Communards group. If it reached a certain emotional peak, a group assumes that everybody has understood what to do the next day. It is as much a motivational exercise as a decision-making process. Pragmatically, *Ogonyok* allowed for faster shaping of a common culture in a group. Just like in the encounter groups, *ogonyok* gives a person an accurate picture of how she and her actions are perceived by others.

Communards' groups, especially during the *sbors* were run mostly by kids. Adults would come to a *sbor* as one of the teams, with no special power, and with one vote per person. They would have to be asked for help by the kids, if needed. Otherwise, adults would do the same things as children, which is to work for the *sbor*, and enjoy themselves. One of the lessons of the Communards' experiment is that an educator does not have to function as an organizer and authority figure in order to achieve educational goals. In the domain of *vospitanie*, indirect influences are more effective than direct ones. Ivanov borrowed from Makarenko and transformed the idea of the ad-hoc committees. They create a flexible student government structure, which shifts children between the roles of a leader and the follower.

Ideologically, Communards represented something I would call a Communist's Protestantism. It was a specific form of resistance to the Communist system. But we all simply had no common vocabulary outside Communism, so the protest took the form of searching for the true and forgotten real Communism. Understandably, the Soviet authorities were somewhat ambivalent about the Communards. Despite their highly effective social engagement of children, the Communards never received much support. An unknown number of Communards' groups were disbanded or harassed by local authorities. Very few of the Communards group settled within the public schools system. But there was little authorities could hold against the

movement. Communard groups did exactly what Communists' rhetoric asked educators to do, and you cannot prosecute someone simply for being too good. Some people within the Party establishment surely realized the great potential the Communards' movement had, but it was neither supported, nor officially condemned.

Communards had friends everywhere, including within power structures. In the 1970s, for example, Lybov K. Balyasnaya, a former Deputy Minister of Education of the Russian Federation, took interest in *Orlyonok*, and supported the spreading of Young Pioneers Headquarters – structures formally associated with the Young Pioneer Organization, but working outside of the school system in every big city. Many of these groups were run by former *Orlyonok* counselors. Some educational researchers, for example, Lyudmila I. Novikova's group from Moscow, for many years supported the movement, and researched its methods. The dawn of *Perestroika*, with its hopes to reform Communism, was, perhaps, the highest point in the Communards' history. Dozens of new groups sprung up. *Uchitelskaya Gazeta*, the main educational daily newspaper, supported the movement; many schools tried to incorporate the method into regular academic process.

It was a Communist heresy. One might argue that Communism itself is a Christian heresy, and Christianity is in turn a Judaic heresy. Whatever the case, the collapse of Communist ideology impacted the Communards. Many of the Communards' groups (but not all of them) used to carry red banners, they sang about the Red Army heroes, etc. When all of it suddenly went out of fashion, Communards didn't have time to adjust. Some adult Communards felt uncomfortable denouncing the Communist ideology, even though they were life-long critics of the Soviet regime.

The movement splintered, and both disintegrated and was integrated into a myriad of youth groups and movements. Its echoes are still very strong in summer camps, in after-school clubs and organizations; they can also be found in faith-based groups, schools and the institutions of supplementary education. *Vospitanie* is clearly returning to Russia, even though the Communards' version of it may be on its way out.

The Woman Who Brought Down the Berlin Wall

As it should be clear from the previous sections, political realities significantly shape education, though not in a simple and direct way. The next section explores a possibility of a reverse impact. Does education influence the political system of an authoritarian society?

Here is a perfectly plausible theory: once upon a time there were two military and ideological blocks: the Western democracies and the Communist totalitarianism. They fought the Cold war, which the Western block has won, and the Communist

block has lost. Two main strategies greatly contributed to the fall of Communism: an arms race that exhausted the Soviet economic capacity, and an ideological struggle that weakened the Soviet regime from inside. If this is true, American governments may rightfully claim credit for the victory (which they did and still do). Moreover, if this is true, the United States should use similar approaches to dismantling other Communist and authoritarian regimes throughout the world. However, this theory has a problem – it is inaccurate. This is why the approach works so poorly with China, North Korea or Cuba.

In fact, the arms race may have strengthened the Communist Party rule by providing an excuse for the suppression of freedoms, and for keeping the living standards low. John Dewey wrote as far back as in 1929: “The withdrawal of recognition by Great Britain has done more than any other one thing to stimulate the extremists and fanatics of the Bolshevik faith, and to encourage militarism and hatred of bourgeois nations (p. 132).” Fifty years later it was still true for the role of United States in its relations with USSR.

The majority of Russians probably supported its Communist government because it stood up to the West, even if they were never asked for an opinion. In fact it was almost the only issue where Communists enjoyed popular support. Moreover, the explicitly non-Communist government of Vladimir Putin again has to use the nationalist card to govern. The economic failures did not jeopardize the Party’s grip to power. At any rate, the Soviet Union was very far from the kind of economic hardship experienced now by both Cuban and North Korean regimes. The living standards of the Soviet people in the 30s, 40s and 50s were much lower than at the end of 1980s, which never seemed to affect the stability of the regime. The Soviet economy was an inefficient one, and the arms race took its heavy toll. However, the attempts to explain the collapse of Communism by its economic failures seem to lack any basis. It is, in fact, easier to rule poor people than those whose expectations are raised.

As for the ideas of “softening” Communism from the inside, I have my doubts, too. Although there was a tiny group of dissidents, their influence was insignificant, especially outside Moscow and Leningrad. The KGB was very successful in planting a deep resentment towards Western style political dissidents like Sakharov among the Russians.

The Communist Party propaganda never succeeded in containing a deep suspicion among all Russians that the Communist project went terribly wrong. It was the lack of freedom and civility that most of the Soviet population resented. Bosses were inaccessible and arrogant, clerks were rude, and official doctrines sounded dull and incredulous. Those were the feelings that drove people first to support Gorbachev’s reforms, and then to stand up to the tanks during the 1991 coup. One has to experience the incredible rise of hopes after Gorbachev’s first hints

of coming change to understand the depth of popular dissatisfaction with the state of affairs.

The reason for the fall of Communism was that Russians got sick and tired of it. It was a spiritual and ideological crisis in the first place, much less an economical or even a political one. The collapse of Communism was the result of gradual changes in the Russian psyche over several decades. It was mainly an internal affair; it would have happened even if the Soviet Union existed in complete isolation. It could have happened sooner or later, but by the mid-eighties the need for change was very much in the air. Yet, if not from abroad, from where else could people take their ideals? One should have an ideal to compare against the reality. Again, I do not really believe those were ideas taken from foreign radio broadcasts.

The answer to this question I propose is this: the KGB overlooked one subversive institution – education. Instead of harassing Sakharov, they should also have taken a closer look at Dr. Novikova’s laboratory at the Institute of General Issues of Character Education in the Academy of Pedagogical Sciences. The KGB failed to read Dewey, too.

John Dewey visited Russia in 1928, and discovered that the Russian revolution was much larger than political and economic changes. He complained that in what he read about the revolutionary Russia, there was too much about Bolsheviks and Communism, and too little about “the more basic fact of revolution.” (Dewey, 1929). He suggested that the best picture of what society is at a certain point of time might be best understood through its education. The image of the country formed by a reflection on its educational development is “fundamentally truer” than that based on the analysis of its economic and political conditions, Dewey thought. This is an interesting proposition, to which I will return.

What Dewey found in Russian schools was a faithful, if not further advanced, implementation of progressive education ideas. Two of them seem to me to be of particular importance. The first idea concerns the dovetailing of school activities into out-of-school social activities (Dewey, 1929, p. 85). Anyone familiar with Soviet education would agree with the observation. Russian schools are much more than just schools; traditionally they carry out the complex multitude of extracurricular and social activities under an umbrella of *vospitanie*:

In view of the prevailing idea of other countries as to the total lack of freedom and total disregard of democratic methods in Bolshevik Russia, it is disconcerting, to say the least, to anyone who has shared in that belief, to find Russian school children much more democratically organized than are our own. (Dewey, 1929, p. 106)

These two characteristics of Russian education should be kept in mind, when we come to Dewey's prediction:

There is, of course, an immense amount of indoctrination and propaganda in the schools. But if the existing tendency develops, it seems fairly safe to predict that in the end this indoctrination will be subordinate to the awakening of initiative and power of independent judgment, while cooperative mentality will be evolved. It seems impossible that an education intellectually free will not militate against a servile acceptance of dogma as dogma. (Dewey, 1929, p. 129)

Dewey did not know that the way to what he predicted was going to be long and twisted. Even while he was writing the paper quoted above, some radical changes on the Soviet political landscape were under way. The period of temporary liberalization was over, and new waves of political repression began. The next decade left Russia with a lot of Communism, and very little or no revolutionary creative impulses. The educational system practically returned to its pre-Revolutionary state, with progressive experiments uprooted. Here is where Liudmila Novikova, the woman who brought down the Berlin Wall, comes into a play.

The tradition of democratic, civic-minded education was severely suppressed in the late 1930s, but never died out completely. For instance, in 1942 F. Briukhovetsky founded an amazingly free-spirited school in the southern city of Krasnodar. Briukhovetsky, like many others, was inspired by the writings of one of the most important early Soviet educators, Anton Makarenko. The close reading of Makarenko, who wrote in early thirties, will reveal the same ideas of multiple activities, social engagement and democracy in an educational institution. Those ideas in turn may be traced to the progressivism of Dewey and others, although Makarenko was critical of the "bourgeois" experiments with self-government, industrial education, etc. Vasily Sukhomlinsky is another famous example of democratic education tradition thanks to his literary talents. Sukhomlinsky, who was a rural school principal in Ukraine, became one of the most influential educational writers in the 60s.

Soviet education was slowly returning to its progressive roots in the late 50s and early 60s. Novikova was one of the first scholars who analyzed, and in many ways helped to promote, democratic education. She worked in the theoretical framework of the *collective upbringing*. Urie Bronfenbrenner caught a part of a long-standing debate in his famous book *Two Worlds of Childhood* (1970). After extensive quotations of Novikova's influential paper, he summarizes: "Soviet upbringing is showing signs of flexibility. In particular, both within and outside of family, there is

a shift away from features which foster dependency and conformity, toward new configurations more conducive to the emergence of individuality and independence” (1970, p. 89). I do not believe, though, that the changes in Soviet education Bronfenbrenner refers to were simply a shift to greater individuality and independence. This was not a move towards greater individuality, but an attempt to rediscover an alternative form of collectivism.

By the end of the 60s there were two rival schools of thought in the theory of collective education. One, led by Boris T. Likhachev (not to be confused with a prominent literary scholar Sergey Likhachev) treated the children’s collective as an organizational device of behavioral control. He came up with the idea of “the unity of expectations,” meaning that if everyone around, from teachers to parents, demands the same things from children, they have no other choice but to comply. His theory reminds me of the idea of consistency of expectation that some American educators are so eager to restore (for example, Damon, 1995). This was a theory of social control in its purest sense. Schools were supposed to produce obedient individuals, and the collective was supposed to be an effective tool for that purpose.

Novikova’s group was trying to understand the nature of the collectives found in the best Soviet schools. The group members never defined an effective school from the academic achievement standpoint, but they quite consciously selected schools where both children and adults felt at home and led interesting lives. Among other things, they claimed that the effective educational collective might be described both as an organization and as a community. Neither of the two descriptions can be reduced to the other. In reality, each collective leads two intermingled and intimately interdependent, but still distinctive, lives. A school functions as a school, with its policies, schedules, rules and roles; at the same time a subtle network of interpersonal relations constitutes an elusive, but real relational phenomenon.

Another discovery was that successful collectives were not monoliths, but rather loose conglomerates of differentiated smaller groups with intersecting memberships. These “best schools” invariably provided the students with a broad variety of organized and spontaneous activities, which constantly shifted and reshaped the organizational and communal structures. It seemed the very variety of personal involvement guarded the collective from becoming too rigid and authoritarian. It is interesting to mention that Robert Putnam, in his influential book on civil society, reports that “strong” personal ties (like kinship and intimate friendship) are less important than “weak ties” (like acquaintanceship and shared membership in secondary associations) in sustaining community cohesion and collective action (1993, p. 175).

Soviet schools and other educational institutions of the 60s and 70s were incredibly ambivalent institutions. On the one hand, the “enormous amount of propaganda,” mentioned by Dewey (1929), never went away, and eventually

became more and more subtle and sophisticated. To call a typical Soviet school a democratic institution would be an insult to common sense. Nevertheless, they also included elements of democratic decision making and social activism. For instance, Young Pioneer groups were run according to democratic procedures, with elected and regularly changed officials, one-person-one-vote principle, etc. In addition, children were constantly challenged to organize themselves, to go out into the larger world and make a difference. In some cases, all of this was a pretense, but it surely contained an implicit idea about how democracy should work. In most schools, democracy and authoritarianism coexisted, despite the widely held belief that it is impossible.

On the final account, the permeation of democracy and civic life was more significant in education than in the rest of the society. The political democracy in the Soviet Union was a complete fraud, which even party officials did not bother to deny. This was not the case with educational institutions, as well as some other rudimentary civil society organizations like gardening and homebuilders' cooperatives. If an average Soviet person had had an experience electing an official, participating in a discussion, sitting on a committee, voting, electing and being elected, writing in a newspaper, speaking in public, etc., such an experience would most likely have happened in his or her school. Most of the ideas about democracy, social engagement, and civic norms people had came from schools, summer camps and Pioneer Palaces.

What Novikova's group did was find the seeds of civility in the best schools and spread them around through various channels, including those of official educational policies. The best Soviet schools were advanced democratic communities. More important, however, is that the mainstream Soviet school was exposed to the weakened virus of democratic civility over the last thirty years of the regime. The Communist officials perhaps thought of it as an inoculation. But it turned out to be strong enough to trigger the fever.

With the beginning of Gorbachev's reforms, education became one of the most politically dynamic spheres of social life. A group of reformers, centered around V. Matveyev, E. Dneprov, and S. Soloveichik through the popular *Uchitelskaya Gazeta*, attacked the Soviet educational system for the lack of respect for the individual, for its rigidity, and lack of creativity. This is a separate story, told in English by S. Kerr (1990), Chapman, Froumin, and Aspin (1995) and other authors. This initial criticism, while in many respects justified at the moment, nonetheless went way over board. If the old Communist education was such a total disaster, how come the most valuable resource of modern Russia is agreed to be its highly educated population? All of the reformers grew up in the Soviet Union, went to a Soviet school, became independent thinkers, and somehow acquired the right ideas about democracy and freedom. Would it not be reasonable to suggest that many of

their classmates were capable of the same mental process? It is ironic how we sometimes attribute our best qualities to our own work and talent and our worst to the faults of education.

The school reforms of the 1990s used the early Soviet educational language: self-government, variety of choices for students, critical thinking, respectful treatment of students, learning by doing, etc. – all of these are certainly within the limits of the Progressive paradigm.

Here is an alternative theory on the end of the Cold War: Soviet education was a major tool of Communist Party rule, and at the same time it led to the demise of the political regime. The schools gradually taught Soviet people to oppose authoritarianism, which was a cause of Communism breakdown. One can speculate that similar processes may have contributed to recent democratization of Latin America and of the Arab world.

When I speculate that it was Novikova's efforts that brought down the Berlin Wall, I exaggerate. Many more researchers, educators and officials worked to create the spaces of civility within the educational system. Factors other than education contributed to the process of power erosion. Communism shot itself in the foot when it incorporated progressive educational ideas in its ideological arsenal in the 20s. It neglected to prevent schools from toying with Novikova's and other ideas about collective education. A historical curiosity: one of the founders of the Soviet educational system, influenced by progressivism, was another woman, Nadezhda Krupskaya, Lenin's wife and party comrade, and a student of American progressivism. In the long run, she managed to undo the damage done by her husband.

What does this story tell us? Education is capable of changing a society. Perhaps, not in a sense envisioned by Dewey; progressive education does not become a vehicle of progressive social change. But an education with even rudimentary elements of civility may actually be the only reliable agent to free a society from totalitarian nightmare. The nature of modern education has irreversibly changed. Unlike the education of the past, it now includes practically all children for long periods of time. Even small portions of freedom, civility, and critical thinking, if made available to all people, are better for democracy than full knowledge of democratic values, available to the elite. American founders of a common school in the 18th and 19th centuries understood this very well. The American common school concept was established specifically to promote democratic values, not to boost the nation's achievement in math and sciences. Unfortunately, this became less and less obvious as American schools shy away from character and value education.

Now, let us return to Dewey's suggestion that one understanding of a society is "truer" if based on analysis of its educational system rather than on political and economic analysis. From this perspective, American society does not look

democratic and as civil; it presents itself as more authoritarian than the “adult” world. American schools today do teach democratic ideals, but do not live by them. Children in this country do not learn democracy and civic engagement in school. They learn it on the streets, from their parents, in neighborhood organizations, baseball camps and community centers. American schools set themselves further and further apart from the civic culture when they limit student activities and interactions in the name of safety.

Soviet schools were powerful enough to ruin Communism, but not to create a civic society. I suspect that in general, the “negative power” of an educational system over the whole of a society is much greater than its “positive” power. An educational system that does not fit the society, cannot really improve, but can destroy the latter. In some cases, it has a welcome outcome, like the destruction of Communism.

Conclusion

The massification of public schooling brings with it particular challenges. It is impossible to keep all children interested in all learning all the time. Academic learning is not a naturally bonding activity, and it cannot be counted on for sustaining youth interest in the world of education. Therefore, any historical precedents of linking youth to the educational world are valuable. The “Russian method” cannot be directly adopted, but its lessons surely can be used in other cultural contexts. The first lesson is that positive peer cultures can be created within compulsory institutions. The second lesson is that the collective, creative expression can be tweaked to provide the communal bond. The carnival-like events and collective reflections on the group dynamic can speed up community development. Perhaps the most important lesson of all is that education broadly construed will put schooling in its proper place – something that is only a part of a larger whole which cannot be sustained alone.

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