

Education in the Soviet Union

Presentation made to the Stalin Society by Ella Rule

The Soviet Union during the time that Stalin was General Secretary of the CPSU was a country at the lower stage of communism building itself up towards the higher stage. As is well known, at the lower stage of communism productive forces are not yet sufficiently developed to meet all the physical and cultural needs of the people, but the whole aim and purpose of this lower stage is to develop the productive forces so that these needs can be met at the earliest. It is precisely for these reasons that at the lower stage of communism workers are rewarded according to their labour. There is insufficient productivity to satisfy all needs so the higher stage of communism has to be delayed until this changes. The system of rewarding people according to the amount of work they do is quite good at encouraging hard work among people whose attitude to work has been scarred by years of working under capitalism and who regard work as nothing but drudgery rather than life's prime want.

Article 121 of Soviet Constitution

Citizens of the USSR have the right to education. This right is ensured by universal and compulsory elementary education; by free education up to and including the 7th grade, by a system of state stipends for students of HE educational establishment who excel in their studies; by instruction in schools being conducted in the native language, and by the organisation in factories, state farms, MTSs, and collective farms of free vocational, technical and agronomic training for the working people.

But how exactly is a high level of productivity to be achieved, and when achieved, how is it to be maintained? Clearly a highly productive society must be equipped with all the latest technology. But in order to acquire that technology and then use it effectively, an educated population is necessary. Illiteracy must be eliminated. Hundreds upon thousands of Soviet experts must be trained.

At the start of this enterprise, the task is enormous, and the forces to tackle it are extremely meagre. Education was a key factor, as is well explained by a petty-bourgeois English writer on education who studied the Soviet education system:

“The task of building from the ruins of the Russian Empire a modern, industrial, and socialist society has pushed on with a ruthlessness – and at a human cost – that is well known. But no measure of ruthless determination could in itself be enough; for the success of such projects as the FYPs [Five-year plans], the authorities depended on educational development no less than on the mustering of manpower and economic resources. There had to be a new force of engineers, scientists, technicians of all kinds ... no possible source of talent could be left untapped, and the only way of meeting these needs was by the rapid development of a planned system of mass education.” (Grant, p.20 – see bibliography for detail).

In Tsarist Russia the education of the masses had been neither necessary or desirable as capitalism was little developed and did not need a literate working class, and education gives people expectations of a better life that Tsarist Russia could never satisfy. The result was that 73% of the population of Tsarist Russia (excluding children under 9) were illiterate. Only a quarter of all children ever went to school.

In Soviet Russia, by contrast, besides educating people for higher productivity Soviet education had also to prepare them to be good citizens in a communist society, encouraging them to let go of attitudes, towards work and possessions for instance, which capitalism had fostered and which many in the older generations still cling to. Grant writes that Soviet education is “designed not merely as a machine for the production of scientists, engineers, and technicians, but as an instrument of mass education from which the younger generation gain not only their formal learning, but their social, moral and political ideas as well.” (p.15).

Last, but not least, political understanding must be developed so that there is an enormous pool of workers with a high level of class consciousness to form the vanguard of the continuing class struggle. Grant writes: "... Soviet society ... requires 'political awareness' in the mass of the population. This is more than mere conformity, which usually comes more easily through ignorance. Dumb acquiescence will not do; what is wanted is conformity versed in knowledge and study of political theory, conformity in the positive sense." (p.23-24).

The question of education, then, is critical to the survival of communism and its development towards its higher stage. As Lenin said; "Without teaching there is no knowledge and without knowledge there is no communism."

That is why during the period of the first two 5-year plans, when the Soviet people were straining to ensure their industrial productive capacity caught up with that of the most advanced imperialist countries, as they knew working-class state power in the USSR would be wiped out by imperialist military intervention if they did not succeed, huge resources were nevertheless poured into education – education of adults and of children. Between 1917 and 1937, 40 million adults were taught to read! The number of children and students in full-time education increased from 8 million in 1914 to 47 million in 1938-9. Secondary school attendance increased from under a million in 1914 to over 12 million in 1938-9. Numbers of university students increased from 112,000 in 1914 to 601,000 in 1938-9, and more schools were built in the USSR in 20 years than the Tsarist autocracy built in 200 years.

But besides providing education in schools, the Soviet Union also organised education for those in work. S. Sobolev (a member of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR and of the Supreme Soviet of RSFSR) wrote in *Soviet Youth at Work and Play* (in *USSR Speaks for Itself* pp.229-230)

"An extensive system of courses and study circles provides a wide range of educational facilities enabling them to become proficient in their particular trade or profession."

"A system of vocational training schools attached directly to the factories has been functioning in the Soviet Union for more than 15 years. In these schools highly skilled workers from all branches of industry and the transport services are trained free of charge. The pupils in these schools acquire a general education equal to that provided in secondary schools, and under the supervision of qualified instructors, learn to become proficient in the trade they've selected..."

"Since their foundation the vocational training schools have supplied the country with about 2 million skilled workers in various trades. Many of their graduates have since developed into master craftsmen, setting outstanding records of labour productivity."

Besides secondary level education, there was also immense provision for workers to study for university degrees on a part-time (mostly correspondence course) basis but closely linked with the universities where students would be called to attend frequently special seminars or activities, much like the Open University in the UK today. This system was observed in operation by Grant in 1959. Part-time students accounted for 45% of total in 1959, (38% correspondence).

Nevertheless, providing education is one thing, but what about the quality of that education? Is it 3-R type education limited to enabling a worker to read the instructions for operating a machine and to have enough arithmetic to be able to measure materials adequately? Or is it education aimed at enabling workers to acquire a real understanding of nature and society? Is it the oppressive rote learning of a vast amount of apparently irrelevant facts, or is it the acquisition of genuine competence in the face of the complex situations that the world presents to humanity? Is it the inculcation of propaganda designed to enslave, or is it the passport to freedom via appreciation of necessity?

One book which enables us to glimpse the reality of Soviet education during Stalin's days is Deana Levin's book *Children in Soviet Russia* (Faber & Faber Ltd., 1942). Deana Levin worked as a teacher in a Moscow school from 1938-42 having first acquired 7 years experience as a Maths teacher in the UK. The school was a typical Soviet school in every respect except one, namely, that teaching was in English. The reason for having an English-medium school was that the Soviet Constitution guaranteed to children an education in their mother tongue and there were many children in Moscow

whose mother tongue was English, be they the children of American or English experts working in Russia or children of Russian workers who had gone abroad to an English-speaking country with their families, whose children on their return found it easier being educated in English than in Russian. However, the school followed exactly the same syllabus as Russian-medium schools. They used exactly the same textbooks, only translated into English. They also used exactly the same teaching and discipline methods. It is clear that Deana Levin's was a very good school among very many other very good schools though, as is to be expected, not every school had reached the same very high standards at the time Deana Levin was in Moscow.

On the surface, much of what Deana Levin says about the methods used to ensure high standards of learning and discipline would sound to a person brought up in bourgeois society as if it might be close to the rhetoric of Mrs Thatcher, but on closer inspection it is apparent that there is a difference between rhetoric about the need for high educational standards (this rhetoric being designed to dump the blame for the ills of society on teachers while doing nothing at all to improve standards – after all what is the point of disseminating high educational standards to a working-class the majority of whom are going to be unemployed or confined to unskilled jobs?) and the experience of the Soviet Union where the actual achievement of high educational standards was a pressing necessity.

Deana Levin wrote in the preface to her book:

“The only acknowledgement that I wish to make here is to the freedom with which I lived and worked in the Soviet Union. Although I was controlled in my work like any other Soviet teacher and had to teach according to the fixed syllabus in my subject, I was encouraged to experiment in methods of teaching and to use my initiative in the organisation of my time. I felt throughout my experience in Moscow that I was being judged for what I was worth, as was every other teacher. Good work was appreciated and encouraged; poor work was always criticised and disapproved of in such a way as to ensure its speedy elimination. The names of good teachers were known and honoured in the teaching world.” (p.6).

The key difference in attitude in Soviet Russia as opposed to Thatcherite Britain lies in the words “poor work was always criticised and disapproved of IN SUCH A WAY AS TO ENSURE ITS SPEEDY ELIMINATION”. The elimination of poor work came through supporting, training and encouraging the teacher concerned so that he or she could improve – to the relief of both his pupils and himself, rather than humiliating him and depriving him of his livelihood. Let us see some examples of how the Soviet system set about identifying good and bad teaching and how it set about remedying bad teaching.

Deana Levin writes: “Our natural science teacher, Comrade Edmunds, was far too lenient. At the same time I noticed that she had poor discipline and that the quality of the children's answers was not good.” (The way this would have been noticed is by virtue of the fact that any teacher could sit in on any other teacher's class, as could any parent).

“After visiting a botany lesson in the 6th class, where the children were obviously unprepared for their lesson, I kept the class after school and asked Comrade Edmunds and the class adviser to be present. I went straight to the point. ‘Your discipline was not good during the botany lesson, and many of you had not done your homework ... will you please explain this to me. Tanya, you are the president of the class, let us hear what you have to say first’.

“Tanya ... thought for a moment ... ‘Comrade Edmunds is not strict enough. She should not mark so easily ... many of the class do not bother to prepare their homework carefully. They think they will get good enough marks anyway’ ...

“Well, Joseph, what do you think?”

“Our discipline is bad because we have not always enough to do ... Today's lesson was too easy, everybody knows it, so no-one felt inclined to work seriously.’

“I think that the unit leaders are getting slack’, said Edward. ‘They should take up the question in unit meetings. If we know that Comrade Edmunds is a good teacher we should listen to her lessons, even if she is too kind’.

“When the children had gone, after having decided to improve their discipline and study harder, Comrade Edmunds and I remained to discuss the matter. I could see that she was impressed by the children’s opinions. We planned the next three or four lessons carefully together, remembering to keep the children ‘busy’. I arranged to attend her lessons regularly for the next week or two, and to mark all questions simultaneously with her, comparing notes with her afterwards. She also agreed to visit my lessons to see how I conducted them and how I marked oral answers.

“Discipline and work improved steadily after that ... she kept the children well occupied during her lessons, and that was one of the main reasons for improved discipline.” (p.56).

We can see from this example the spirit of mutual respect, cooperation and support with which teaching and learning problems were dealt with – quite different from the blame-dumping exercises that Thatcherism (eagerly emulated by Jack Straw) demands.

We can also see the children having a quite different attitude to discipline than one would expect to find in a British school. Discipline in a Soviet school was not perceived by students as something imposed on them so that teachers could have a quiet life. It was in no way equivalent to oppression or submission to arbitrary authority. Consider for example Deana Levin’s description of an exchange which took place between herself and her pupils in her early days in Moscow:

“I found the children very intelligent, rather noisy and uncontrolled, but very easily interested. The first lesson I had with them was arithmetic, and as I kept them very busy, they worked fairly quietly. But when it came to geography, I found it more difficult to control them. They were seemingly very much interested in this subject, but all began to ask questions at once, without any idea of order. I stopped the lesson to explain that unless we had some sort of discipline we should not be able to get on fast enough. One girl raised her hand. ‘The trouble with our class is that although everyone knows the rules, we forget to keep them’.

“‘What are the rules?’ I asked anxiously.

“‘Well,’ she answered, ‘we know that while the teacher is talking and explaining a lesson, we should listen. Then we know that we should raise our hands if we wish to ask questions, because if we all speak at once, it is impossible to hear anything. I think we should have a socialist competition with the 4th class, as we did last term’.

“‘Yes, yes’, everyone agreed.

“At the end of the last lesson a girl and a boy came into the room. The girl, a ... child of about 12, asked my permission to make an announcement to the class. On my giving permission, she turned to the class. ‘The fourth class challenges you to socialist competition for this term on the following points: excellent discipline during class, always ready for lessons, towel and soap always in order. Sidney and I have been chosen by our class to check up. If you agree, you must also choose two representatives to help us to check. Do you agree?’” (pp.18/19)

Class 3 agreed unanimously.

In order to facilitate checking the competition the children themselves prepared charts and books for the class teacher to sign as evidence of performance, with the class president elected from among the students also keeping records.

Deana Levin goes on to say “In practice I found socialist competition a wonderful lever. The children crowded round the board in the hall every day to see who was ahead ... The rivalry and bad feelings that I feared ... seemed entirely lacking. Although for some days our class and the fourth were level and feeling ran high, Julia said to me, ‘wouldn’t it be nice if both classes won?’

“Vova, who overheard, said ‘I wish the whole school could be a red banner school, then we might get the district red banner.’

“This remark gave a new aspect to the whole competition. If all classes became red banner classes, then our school would have a choice in the district competitions. If our district became a red-banner district, it would have a chance in the city competition – the possibilities became endless.” (pp 21-

22).

So, besides the infrastructure to encourage an interest in excellence, it is noteworthy the extent to which these 11-year-old children were allowed to take the initiative and to control the proceedings. It was not the teacher who told them to enter into competition – it was the children who told the teacher they wished to do so and who expected her to cooperate in keeping the necessary records.

A. Makarenko in an article entitled ‘Children in the Land of Socialism’ in *USSR Speaks for Itself* (p.223) is fully justified in saying:-

“[C]hildren in the Soviet Union are [not] brought up to be idle and irresponsible. On the contrary, we expect rather a lot from our children: we expect them to be good pupils at school, we expect them to develop themselves physically, to prepare themselves to be good citizens of the USSR when they grow up, to know what is going on inside the country, what our society is striving for, where it is making progress and where it is still behind. We promote the general and political development of children, help them to be active and intelligently disciplined. But we have not the slightest occasion to use force against them or cause them the slightest suffering. Our children cannot but be conscious of the affection, solicitude and care which attend them at every step without being morally convinced of their duties, so that they fulfil their obligations willingly, without their becoming irksome.

“Our children can see that all they do is necessary not for the pleasure of their elders but for themselves, and for the whole future of our state. Soviet children are strangers to fawning and servility. They do not have to demean themselves to a taskmaster as to one who can make or break them.”

In Britain it is still the case all too often that as the urge for independence strikes young people as they enter their adolescence, they have to confront authority to be allowed to take charge of their own lives and make their own decisions – leading to disastrous breakdown in discipline. In the Soviet Union, the children’s desire to be respected and responsible adults was fostered and built upon in a way that is impossible in capitalist countries because schools (at least in the public sector) are not so much concerned with preparing the young to take over responsibility in society but to submit meekly to their masters, their employers, and to accept bad conditions, unemployment, bullying by the authorities, etc., as a necessary fact of life. Many teachers suffer from an irresistible urge to extinguish every spark of rebellion. In the Soviet Union such teachers would have to be criticised and helped to understand that rebellion can and should be channelled in a constructive direction, as well as being shown how to ensure this actually happens in practice, supported by other teachers until the teacher’s new learning is secure.

Teaching methods

Teaching methods appear at first glance somewhat conservative. One saw students sitting at desks, wearing uniforms, obeying the teacher’s instructions, listening to what he or she had to say. Nigel Grant is misled by this outward appearance into failing to understand the differences with traditional teaching. He describes lessons as “a one-way process, the job of the teacher is to tell the pupils, theirs to accept and absorb ... the role of the children is mainly passive.”

He then effectively contradicts himself by saying that 20% of class time is taken up by examining the students’ homework: “This”, he says, “consists largely of the retention of memorized material, problems solved, sentences translated etc., or the answering of the teacher’s questions by selected pupils, who stand out at the blackboard to say their piece or perform the task required” (p.104)

It appears that after all for 20% of the time at least it is pupils who are working actively, not the teacher performing. The children are given marks for their answers, and their success or failure as students depends on the marks they get in this way. In this way, the way the class is organised is supporting the students in completing learning tasks outside school. Backsliding is not left to accumulate as everybody can see if the work has been done or not at an early enough stage to intervene effectively if the child is having problems. This all leads to a high degree of involvement on the part of the students with what the teacher is saying. They are able mentally to interact with the teacher. In

any event, after the teacher has said his piece, the teacher then questions various members of the class to see if they have understood. So again, we see even more time devoted to student activity, not just teacher activity. And it should be noted that if students have not understood, then the teacher takes this not as a sign of the stupidity of the student but as a sign of the inadequacy of his teaching which he is going to need to put right. He is going to have to find ways of putting things right.

He would be able to discuss the problem with the class, with the head teacher, with his trade-union committee, all of whom would help in every way they could. The head teacher might come and observe classes to help identify the problem, or another teacher might come at the instance of the trade-union committee. As we saw above, Comrade Edmunds had problems with her class not only because she was not strict enough but because she was not giving them enough to do. We saw how Deana Levin, acting as head mistress, helped her plan her next few classes in order to correct this and how she supervised her in her first trials with this new type of teaching plan, ready to offer more support if the new plan required adjustment.

The relatively formal appearance of the classroom is dictated by class size, and class size is determined by the number of teachers available in relation to the number of students. As a matter of fact, of necessity, class sizes were large. Deana Levin says “the numbers are limited to 42 children in the lower classes and 30 in the 8th – 10th classes. In some cases, due to shortage of school buildings or teachers, there are as many as 46 or 47 in a class, but the teacher is then paid extra for every child over the maximum in the class.” (pp153-154). These class sizes are too large to allow for much interaction between children in the class itself. English primary school teachers find they cannot, using interactive methods, readily manage classes much larger than 30.

Since large classes are unavoidable if all children are to have access to education, the problem to be solved is: how to make best use of the resources available. We can see, then, how the Soviet system of attention to problems, freedom of criticism, focusing on finding solutions rather than on hankering after unattainable ideals, produced a very effective educational system, which even Grant has to admire, albeit somewhat grudgingly:-

“Nevertheless, [he writes] the schools do seem to bring a surprisingly high proportion of the population to a standard that we tend to think of as within reach of the most able 30% at best” (p.44).

Unlike Deana Levin who actually spent 4 years teaching in Russia, Grant was not able to observe a great deal of what went on outside the class, where in fact a great deal of interaction between students was planned and occurred in practice, teachers among others having responsibility for ensuring that it did. One of the principal vehicles for organising children’s out-of-class activity was the Pioneer Movement to which nearly all children belonged. The Pioneers organised not only social events, like trips to the theatre, or museums, etc., but also class newspapers. The Pioneers were allotted a generous budget to conduct these serious cultural activities and were involved in regional and national networks which ensured the quality and quantity of activities was maintained.

Besides the Pioneers, there were also special interest circles meeting in the school buildings after school was finished to develop subjects outside the prescribed curriculum in response to interest expressed by pupils. Circles at Deana Levin’s school included drama, literature, physics, chemistry, art, young naturalists, orchestra, choir, technical and instructional circles of aspiring engineers. “Each circle has a leader paid by the school or Pioneer organisation but one of the children is elected secretary and keeps records of attendance and helps running the work of the circle.” (p.76). Again, nearly all children were involved in these activities. An example of what it meant not to confine school to the classroom is given by Deana Levin. She describes a child named George who had study problems.

“George rarely did his homework properly, came late to school, and teased all his comrades on all occasions. Several members of the class asked to have a class meeting to discuss him and we arranged to have one after school... (p.31)

“Elga took the chair, having been elected class president for the term ...

““George is spoiling our chance for the red banner...he does not do his homework...He is rude to his

comrades'... 'I think the class can help George by taking no notice of him in class', said a very quiet boy called Alec. 'Some people laugh at him when he says something silly, and that only makes him worse. I shall help him by checking his homework every morning before school, to see he is doing it. I shall sit next to him too'...

George was good at art and was keen to join the after-school art circle but had previously been excluded for bad behaviour. A deal was struck that he would be allowed to join if his behaviour improved.

"George improved from that day. Of course, he had his ups and downs, but Alec proved a very good friend to him and I often talked to him about his difficulties and coached him in his weak subjects so that his marks improved all round. The whole class behaved in a very comradely way towards him, and at the following meeting Elga reported with satisfaction that George had kept his word. He joined the drawing class at the art school and attended 3 times a week after school. He became one of their best pupils..."

In addition older pupils often opted as part of the social work required of them as Pioneers to help younger students with their study problems.

It should be noted that all schools were co-educational and comprehensive. There was no streaming and no setting. All students followed the same syllabus, no matter how "bright" or how "dull". As Grant says (p.43) "In the USSR, all children are given the extensive course in the sciences mentioned before, all learn one foreign language, all go through the same course in history, geography, Russian, and so on. The inevitable difficulties rising from this are got round to some extent by encouraging the abler pupils to help those who are slower with their work. Students who fail a year simply repeat. This seems to have been 5% of all students. Even in the special schools for the handicapped the mainstream syllabus is followed as far as humanly possible".

Grant points out (p.46) "This rejection of streaming stems, fundamentally, from the Marxist insistence on the importance of environment in shaping a child's personality and abilities, rather than his hereditary equipment... The Soviet educator ... is likely to attribute failures not to his theories, but to misapplication of them or to practical difficulties like lack of space, inadequate pre-school training. [etc]. The bright child may lose by not being able to forge ahead at his own pace; but the social training he receives in learning to help others instead of concentrating exclusively on his own advancement is felt to be one of the important foundations of communist morality."

The role of parents

We have seen that parents were free to enter the school, and indeed were expected to do so, to talk to teachers and even observe classes. Deana Levin explains (p.68):

"Every school has its parents' committee, which is elected yearly by a general parents' meeting and which plays an important part in the life of the school. This committee helps in the organisation of celebrations and parties for the children, appoints parents to take duty in the school at recreation time and in the dining-room, and serves as a check on the work of the school in general. The principal gives a full report on the work of the school at a termly parents meeting and there is always a display of keen interest and lively discussion.

"In addition to general meetings, there are monthly class meetings at which the specific problems of that class are discussed ..."

Like in an English school today (but not seen in the UK till fairly recently) children kept homework diaries which had to be countersigned by parents who could add comments. If the diary were not signed the teacher would immediately contact the parents.

In addition teachers were expected to visit children at their homes on a regular basis, to understand what their problems might be and to try to find helpful ways of overcoming them.

Parents who failed to take a proper interest in their children's welfare would find themselves surrounded by people taking an interest in their difficulties and trying to help them overcome them.

A really recalcitrant parent might find his union branch at work asking what the problem is and whether he needed time off – as Grant describes (pp.61-2) “A recent case in Kiev can serve as an example; in the Krasny factory, a notice was pinned up (by another parent) to the effect that Anatoly Orlenko, Class 1V pupil, was behaving badly at school. Orlenko Senior speedily found himself before the factory committee and was told that he ought to do something about this, since it reflected on the factory as well as the child, the parent, and the school. They pointed out that if Orlenko was unable to do anything because he lacked knowledge, his best course would be to consult the appropriate organ of the Parents’ Committee, or the teacher, who would certainly be able to help him with advice.” The father would have complied because otherwise the matter would have been brought up for discussion at a full branch meeting with all his workmates. “Techniques of this kind are effective, but rarely used, they are regarded as a drastic step to be used only when gentler methods have failed.”

Revisionism and Soviet Education

I do not propose to say a great deal about this, but Grant’s book is already in 1959 noticing some of the trends attacking the principles we have seen at work above.

First of all, there was chaos in history lessons because all the history books were re-written to suit the interests of revisionism, and the old ones were withdrawn before the new ones were available to replace them.

Secondly progress towards compulsory 10-year school education was turned instead into compulsory 8-year education followed by 2 years of education combined with work. This was done apparently more in the interests of relieving pressure for university places than in the educational interests of the students. It seemed a good idea from a Marxist point of view insofar as it combated elitism (a tendency of some young people to imagine they were more important than people who did manual labour) and theoretically it enabled learning and work to be combined. In practice it was badly organised and the errors were not corrected. The net effect was to turn people away from practical education back to wanting a more academic approach, a well-organised academic course being better than a practically-based shambles. It would, however, be necessary to consult far more widely than just Grant’s book to get an accurate picture of what was really going on.

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