

Essay Review

Learning To Be Soviet: Stalinist Schools and Celebrations in the 1930s

Larry E. Holmes. *Stalin's School: Moscow's Model School No. 25, 1931-1937*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1999. 228pp. Cloth \$45.00.

Karen Petrone. *Life Has Become More Joyous, Comrades: Celebrations in the Time of Stalin*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000. 266pp. Cloth \$39.95.

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The two books under review focus on the processes, meanings, and outcomes of education in the Soviet Union of the 1930s as a means of illuminating the nature not only of Stalinist schools but of Stalinism as a whole. Both take seriously the state's own claims about the centrality of education in the grand Stalinist project of creating a new society and new men and women.¹ Moreover, both align themselves with revisionist studies that have emphasized the coexistence of "omnipresent coercion" alongside citizens' "sincere belief" in the promise of Soviet socialism.² What both authors find at the heart of Stalinist education—albeit in differing proportions—are inequities, dysfunctional bureaucracies, and citizens who sometimes subverted or evaded and sometimes enthusiastically embraced the identities proffered by the Soviet state. Petrone and Holmes stake out very different educational territory. Taken together, the two works underline the importance, perhaps especially in the Soviet case, of understanding education as both the work of schools and as a broad cultural process. The Soviet state expanded elementary and secondary education, but its educational program went well beyond its schools, as state-sponsored mass culture aimed to inculcate "Soviet" values, norms, behaviors, and language. Holmes focuses on the traditional subjects of histories of education—teachers, students, admin-

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¹On the conception of the Soviet Union as a "school of the strict type," and education as "one of the regime's core values" see Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 226-227.

²Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 225.

istrators, curricula, institutions. He proposes his richly documented study of a single extraordinary school as a study of Stalinist society in microcosm. Finding the privileged School No. 25 to be a place that often differed from the “typical ‘Stalinist’ school” of “iron discipline, unforgiving order, heavily politicized instruction, numbing drill, and blind devotion to the socialist motherland and its leader” (p. 5), Holmes emphasizes that the Stalinist educational program could be genuinely appealing for both pupils and teachers. Petrone takes a wider view of “education,” examining the public celebrations devised by the Stalinist state (primarily in the years between 1935 and 1937) as a means of turning the entire nation into a schoolhouse. While Holmes emphasizes that students, teachers, and administrators supported “Stalinist” discipline and rigor, Petrone argues that public spectacles organized to promote state-sanctioned values and identities “could also be employed to express alternative, unofficial, and subversive viewpoints” (Petrone 2-3). Examining a broad range of educational programs, the books under review illustrate that the state, its massive “coercive power” notwithstanding, attempted to and sometimes succeeded in getting citizens, especially young people, to “identify voluntarily” with Stalinism (Petrone 20).

Privilege under Socialism

Both Holmes and Petrone place an examination of the production and perpetuation of privilege at the center of their analyses of Stalinist education. However, their approaches to the problem of privilege under socialism differ markedly. Holmes examines the pinnacle of the Soviet school system, where administrators fought bureaucratic battles to promote the “fame and fortune” of their school and privilege shaped the experiences of youngsters lucky enough to attend a rich and famous school. By contrast, Petrone emphasizes the ways in which public events designed to celebrate the collective also constructed and reinforced hierarchies of “age, appearance, gender, nationality, Party membership, place of residence, social status, and occupation” (p. 23). If for Holmes “privilege” helps to explain loyalty to the Stalinist regime, for Petrone it is the key to understanding the fractures and contradictions in Stalinist society.

Holmes examines an exceptionally rarefied corner of Stalinist society and vividly illustrates the experience of privilege in the Soviet Union. Moscow’s Model School No. 25 was, Holmes demonstrates in his first two chapters, the most famous and probably the richest, best supplied school in the nation from its founding in 1931 until its demise in 1937—a victim of the campaign against overt privilege associated with the great purges. Joseph Stalin’s own children attended the school, as did the children of such communist luminaries as Stalin’s right-hand man Viacheslav Molotov, Arctic explorer Otto Schmidt, and Paul Robeson (p. 22). While average Soviet schools spent 50 to 80 rubles per pupil each year, the well-connected

School No. 25 spent 350 to 400 (pp. 34, 39). The school's teachers were better educated, more experienced, and far better paid than their peers in common schools. Totally unrepresentative of Soviet schools as a whole, School No. 25 became a must-see attraction for both Soviet and foreign educators, drawing 5,500 visitors in the course of the 1934–35 school year (p. 25).

Petrone begins where Holmes leaves off, asking, in essence, how the visibility of privilege undermined or challenged the intended meanings of celebrations of Soviet accomplishments. What sorts of conclusions, she might ask, would a provincial or non-Russian teacher draw from a visit to the flagship School No. 25? To take just one example of her approach, Petrone argues that while organizers hoped that the celebration of the centennial of Russian poet Alexander Pushkin would demonstrate “the cultural advancement wrought by socialist transformation” (p. 116) the actual celebrations reproduced and reinforced geographical and national hierarchies that belied the achievement of general cultural advancement. Rural schools received few if any of the newly-published editions of Pushkin, while local organizers neglected efforts to teach basic literacy. Meanwhile, “the very top levels of Soviet society marked their elite status by participating in lavish, by-invitation-only state-sponsored events” (p. 121). Here the reader sees the underbelly of privilege that the portrait of the elite and alluring School No. 25 tends to obscure.

While Petrone emphasizes the multiplicity of hierarchies—gender, age, occupation, nationality—that structured Stalinist society, Holmes has little to say about the existence and importance of hierarchy within the privileged walls of School No. 25. The relative lack of attention to the functioning of privilege within the school is particularly surprising given Holmes's commitment to providing a sensitive picture of the life of the school. Much of *Stalin's School* is devoted to a painstaking effort to bring School No. 25 “back to life,” to allow the reader to “walk the school's halls, enter its classrooms, sit at its cafeteria tables, meet its people, participate in its extracurricular activities” (p. 16). He in fact does an excellent job of detailing, on the basis of archival and published sources as well as interviews, the school's everyday routines, the creativity of teachers' lessons, their personality quirks, the wide variety of opportunities available to pupils, their devotion to their school, and their pranks. He also briefly notes the tensions that existed between the children of the elite and the relatively small number of proletarian children at the school.

While Holmes interviewed both male and female former students, he does not investigate whether the school reproduced the “hierarchies of gender” that Petrone (p. 47) views as an essential component of Stalinist discourse and society. At School No. 25—as at less privileged institutions—women constituted 75 percent of the teaching staff (p. 42). It would be interesting to know what, if any, impact that statistic had on the life of the school.

Holmes does not highlight or systematically analyze gender differences, but his account includes evidence suggestive of the differing experiences of boys and girls. Very few of his examples of tolerated misbehavior document it among the girls. Should one conclude that girls stepped out of line—or were allowed to step out of line—less frequently than the boys? Moreover, what should be made of the seemingly distinct varieties of mischief engaged in by boys and girls? The boys smoked in the basement, organized “wild” soccer games after school, and played chess during class by whispering moves to one another. The tenth-grade girls were less overtly disruptive. Upset when the boys did not give them gifts on International Women’s Day, the girls offered them bonbons laced with laxatives (p. 59). Holmes argues that his analysis of School No. 25 is at once “a fragment of Stalinism and an opportunity for an evaluation of the whole” (p. 20). It thus seems worth investigating whether the hierarchies that structured life outside also structured the life of this most privileged of schools.

Dysfunctional Bureaucracies

Holmes emphasizes that School No. 25’s privileged position stemmed in large part from its administrators’ ability to work the Stalinist system that Holmes, following the lead of other revisionist historians, pictures not as a totalitarian monolith but as an inefficient, squabbling, sometimes chaotic bureaucracy.³ Like Holmes, Petrone emphasizes the degree to which educational outcomes were influenced by the disorganized, unruly nature of Soviet bureaucracy. But whereas Holmes examines how school administrators took advantage of infighting and splits within the bureaucracy to further the fame and fortune of their school, Petrone explores how bureaucratic failings inadvertently opened a space for citizens to behave and talk in ways that undermined, challenged, or shifted the meanings of the celebrations in which they participated.

Holmes attributes much of School No. 25’s success to its administrators’ skill in bureaucratic politics. During School No. 25’s heyday, Director Nina Groza unabashedly and effectively used her connections to ensure that the school received funding and donations in kind from the local administration as well as a long list of sponsors, such as the newspaper *Izvestiia*. Similarly, Groza and her deputy director Aleksandr Tolstov used their political clout to make sure that School No. 25 won various national competitions to find the best school in the nation—even when the official juries decided otherwise. The school maintained its privileged

³J. Arch Getty, *Origins of the Great Purges: The Soviet Communist Party Reconsidered, 1933-1938* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985). Moshe Lewin, “Russia/USSR in Historical Motion: An Essay in Interpretation,” *Russian Review* 50 (1991): 249-66.

status until political changes beyond the grasp of its usually adept administrators led to its very public condemnation in 1937. The anti-elitist rhetoric associated with the political purges of that year doomed the most famous and elite school in the nation, in part by making it possible for the school's opponents—notably educators who had voted against the school in national competitions—to use the change in official policy to their own advantage.

Picturing a similarly fractured bureaucracy, much of *Life Has Become More Joyous, Comrades* revolves around illustrating the claim that “Soviet ideologues . . . could not control the way that the official discourses they created”—including the catchphrase that provides the title—“were used by others or entirely eliminate other worldviews” (p. 2). Staged by over-burdened party cadres who had to constantly shift their attention from one frenzied campaign to the next, Soviet celebrations often produced unintended and potentially subversive outcomes. Documenting a wide variety of ways in which celebrations could escape their creators' control, Petrone concludes that “Celebrations thus contributed to the formation of both official Soviet identities and unofficial and individual points of view” (p. 203). While Holmes details how rifts in the bureaucracy could facilitate the production of privilege, Petrone is interested in the sort of lapse in bureaucratic control that made it possible for girls to turn International Women's Day into the excuse for a practical joke. Indeed, she tends to load a great deal of analytical weight onto unruly behaviors, categorizing them as a species of resistance, an effort to produce alternative identities.

Pedagogical Practice: Both Rigorous and Rousing?

The common denominator of the celebrations considered by Petrone is their organizers' efforts to combine political education with newly-sanctioned apolitical fun. By contrast, the schools of the 1930s combined political education with newly-sanctioned rigor and discipline. Petrone distinguishes the celebrations that emphasized “popular culture and mass mobilization” (physical culture parades, the feting of Soviet aviators and Arctic explorers, New Year's celebrations featuring decorated fir trees) from those that attempted to enlist the intelligentsia in a state-sponsored program of “enlightenment” (the Pushkin Centennial, the twentieth anniversary of the October Revolution, the ratification of the new “Stalin Constitution”). The division is somewhat artificial, since as Petrone makes clear, all the celebrations of the mid 1930s included efforts to enlighten the masses via “emotional appeals” and “apolitical gaiety” (Petrone 6). At the same time, a series of decrees on school policy enshrined a very different sort of pedagogy. Aiming to restore order in the wake of the disruptions of the collectivization campaign in the countryside and the rapid industrialization of the First Five-Year Plan, the highest party authorities, in directives issued between

1931 and 1935, turned against child-centered experiments in education and restored traditional textbooks, grading, and subjects.⁴

The joyous celebration and the orderly school offered distinct, perhaps complementary, solutions to the problem of inculcating Soviet values, behaviors, and language. Petrone argues that the “main vehicles for teaching the population what it meant to be ‘Soviet’ in the 1930s were the political activities surrounding the celebration” (p. 6). As Holmes documents, however, the school also aimed to teach pupils “what it meant to be ‘Soviet.’” Moreover, schools provided one of the most important venues for celebrations, and youngsters one of the most important audiences. Reading Holmes and Petrone together thus raises questions about the conflicts, complications, and compromises faced by teachers who had to make education at once rigorous, politically correct, and joyous.

School No. 25 embodied and publicized the state’s rejection in 1931 of the child-centered, progressive pedagogy that had dominated official thinking about education since the October revolution of 1917. Holmes argues that teachers’ “own preferences and professional ethos largely matched Moscow’s demands for discipline and instruction in cognitive skills” (p. 156). Drawing on his work on Soviet education in the 1920s, he concludes that “Most teachers, parents, and pupils despised the progressive curriculum introduced during the 1920s and refused to implement it.” By contrast, “. . . most pupils, their parents, and the school’s teachers favored what [Deputy Director] Tolstov called the ‘most severe conscious discipline.’”⁵ The school pioneered the use of daybooks for assignments, identification cards, and quarterly report cards with one of four grades in each subject, a practice introduced in all Soviet schools only in 1935.⁶

Teachers and pupils seemed to have had less enthusiasm for the overtly political content of the curriculum than for academic rigor, but Holmes largely avoids the question of whether teachers saw any conflict between political education and their “preferences and professional ethos.” He attributes the success of political education to a “combination of politicized instruction, flexible methods, professional dedication by administrators and teachers, and a rousing presentation of material [that] brought pupils to welcome their role as warriors in the construction of socialism” (p. 97). Holmes provides numerous, well-described examples of lessons that support his balanced conclusion.

⁴Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Education and Social Mobility in the Soviet Union, 1921-1934*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 209-223.

⁵Holmes, *Stalin’s School*, 53-54. On resistance to progressive programs in the 1920s see Larry Holmes, *The Kremlin and the Schoolhouse: Reforming Education in Soviet Russia, 1917-1931* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 36-55.

⁶William W. Brickman and John T. Zepper. *Russian and Soviet Education, 1731-1989: A Multilingual Annotated Bibliography* (New York: Garland, 1992), 34.

However, by focusing on the lively and engaging “learning environment” created by teachers at School No. 25, Holmes obscures the degree to which “politicized instruction” might have come into conflict with professional standards and “rousing” methods. Unable to locate any living teachers from the school when he began his interviews in the 1990s, Holmes cautiously reserves judgement on their attitudes and experiences. Nonetheless, the evidence he presents seems to warrant stronger recognition of the complications for teachers of meeting professional standards while implementing the official curriculum, all the while denying the existence of any such complications.⁷ Holmes documents that teachers occasionally dared to set aside the official syllabus when it encroached on valuable academic content: a second grade teacher ignored “lessons on ‘our factories’ and ‘our collective farms’ to spend more time on reading” (p. 89). Teachers’ willingness sometimes to disregard the curriculum suggests, at minimum, some discomfort or disagreement with state-mandated political education.

Greater attention to the myriad pressures on teachers would allow Holmes to paint a more nuanced portrait of the progressive opponents of “his” school. Progressives imagined that politically correct conclusions would naturally flow only from child-centered pedagogy that encouraged “originality and critical thinking” (p. 78). They thus may have rejected the “authoritarian” methods they found at School No. 25, while sincerely, if paradoxically, expecting greater political understanding than did more traditional educators. The progressive commitment to creativity as the best route to political correctness helps to explain Nadezhda Krupskaja’s otherwise puzzling (or, in Holmes’s account, rather crudely self-serving) willingness to criticize “the school for a lack of creativity while demanding of it political uniformity” (p. 153). Holmes explains the conflict between progressives like Krupskaja (Vladimir Lenin’s widow) and the directors of School No. 25 as a political showdown. It can also be understood as part of teachers’ varied and ongoing efforts to reconcile professional imperatives, revolutionary dreams, and the demands of the state.

By 1936 grades, discipline, and academic rigor had been decisively enshrined in educational policy and, Holmes argues, embraced by most school teachers. However, Petrone’s examination of 1936 New Year’s celebrations geared toward youngsters suggests that some educators viewed political indoctrination as educationally suspect. Petrone notes that “celebrations appealed particularly to Soviet youth” (p. 85), but an analysis of how teachers integrated celebrations into the curriculum lies beyond the

⁷E. Thomas Ewing, “Restoring Teachers to Their Rights: Soviet Education and the 1936 Denunciation of Pedology” *History of Education Quarterly* 41 (Winter 2001): 471-493 provides a nuanced account of the relationships between teachers’ “professional aspirations” and the “requirements of the regime” (493).

scope of her study. Nonetheless, her descriptions of fir tree celebrations for children and young adults suggest that some teachers disagreed with efforts to make education more political, largely because they objected to efforts to impose outside discipline on children and favored the development of creativity. In a curriculum guide for teachers organizing New Year's celebrations, the editor emphasized the importance of making children feel "happy, celebratory . . . free, joyful, and easy" and warned against a "dry, *kazennogo* (bureaucratic)" holiday in which "strict order" stifled children (p. 90). The guide "argued against the politicization of fir tree ornaments" (p. 92). In other contexts—for example, a report to the Moscow Trade Union Council that funded one particularly lavish indoor winter wonderland—organizers emphasized the presence of a clear political agenda (p. 95). In Petrone's account, the advocates of apolitical celebrations seem to have come primarily from primary schools and preschools, where the most radical sorts of child-centered education had long enjoyed their greatest support.⁸ That such teachers stuck to their principles, at least when writing for other teachers, suggests that the emphasis on discipline and rigor may have not always have coincided with teachers' understandings of their professional responsibilities.⁹

True Believers

The most difficult question faced by both Holmes and Petrone is the question of the reception of the political messages embedded in celebrations and the school curriculum. What, finally, did students learn? Relying on interviews with adults who attended School No. 25 between 1931 and 1937, Holmes concludes that many became true believers in the system. Petrone concludes that mixed, subversive messages abounded, based on her textual analysis of the "discourse of celebration." Where Holmes finds that the possibility of bending the school's rules reinforced pupils' respect for and commitment to its values, Petrone argues that the "double-edged discourse" (p. 113) of celebrations indicates that Soviet messages often failed to hit their intended marks.

Holmes recognizes that the school's privileged status and the opportunities afforded pupils help to explain the devotion to and identification

⁸Luiza Shleger, one of the important progressive opponents of School No. 25, was deeply involved in preschool education. See my *Small Comrades: Revolutionizing Childhood in Soviet Russia, 1917-1932* (New York: RoutledgeFalmer, 2001).

⁹Petrone concludes, somewhat speculatively, that celebrations that "emphasized politics" (95) did so in order to provide "special privileges and special indoctrination" (97) to the children of the elite. She explains the different descriptions of the same event as evidence that officials from the Commissariat of Education and organizers from the trade union "each highlighted the aspects of the celebration that would be most helpful in promoting their ideals or careers" (98). The "or" here is quite critical—by 1936 an unwillingness to rank political indoctrination above creativity was unlikely to aid a teacher's career.

with the school expressed by alumni interviewed in the 1990s. However, he sees more than crass self-interest at work. Pupils, he argues, responded with enthusiasm to the “Stalinist values” represented by the school: “Precisely because School No. 25 embodied in miniature the Party state’s vision of a vigorous but obedient society, it inspired genuine affection for the system” (p. 18). Here he may understate the degree to which a sense of being part of the future elite of “the system” contributed to pupils’ affection for both the school and the state. Still, Holmes presents a convincing case for understanding adults’ fond memories as a marker of the degree to which they internalized the school’s ideals and ideology. An alumnus interviewed by Holmes in the 1990s remembered that “Propaganda gave meaning to our lives” (p. 101). Even those who became dissidents as adults remembered their childhood belief in the system as “sincere.” “We believed in communism. We wanted to become warriors for the world revolution,” recalled one. Another declared, “We were pure, unspoiled. No wonder we won the war” (p. 102).

Holmes attributes the pupils’ internalization of Soviet values, behavior, and language to the attractiveness of a school environment that blended discipline, idealism, intellectual challenges, and a measure of spontaneity. The return of traditional subjects, grades, and structure was, Holmes emphasizes, both genuinely popular and never as draconian as the school’s progressive opponents—notably Nadezhda Krupskaja—alleged. Holmes documents numerous cases in which teachers and administrators tolerated “a degree of spontaneity” (p. 46). Under this rubric, he includes pupils who got away with poor penmanship, playing chess in the “quiet room” of the library, and smoking cigarettes—often supplied by Stalin’s son Vasilii—in the boys’ bathroom. Still, Holmes concludes that “Students internalized their school’s order and discipline, perhaps thereby exemplifying the ultimate in totalitarianism, when the fact of submission to authority becomes the fiction of one’s own free acceptance of it—but I think not” (p. 62). The evidence he presents suggests instead that pupils genuinely enjoyed their school, appreciated the opportunities it gave them, and never understood themselves as pawns of an authoritarian system.

Primarily interested in documenting the “subversive” side of Soviet celebrations—everything from peasants celebrating the October Revolution by getting drunk to students celebrating the Stalin Constitution by designing what “educational officials” deemed an “extremely subversive” (p. 200) constitution for their class—Petronne has relatively little to say about sincere belief. Where she does see voluntary identification is largely among young people, particularly privileged young people. “Celebrations,” Petronne concludes, “were more successful with youth than the elderly, more compelling to rising elites than to workers and collective farmers. They were more likely to promote male participation than female” (p. 204). Historian

Sheila Fitzpatrick similarly notes that communist “[a]ctivism . . . was strongly correlated with youth.”¹⁰

How do we account for the fact that young people often became true believers? Holmes suggests that for children, or at least for pupils at School No. 25, “past present, and future did not exist, they were all one and the same” (p. 211, n. 4). Without any first-hand knowledge of the pre-Revolutionary past, children were more ready than adults to feel that they were part of “the glorious revolution” (p. 150) and to accept the socialist realist conflation of the present and the future. An instructional pamphlet that advised teachers to take pupils “to new schools that were under construction so that the children could envision their futures” seemed to count on youngsters’ readiness to blur the line between present and future achievements (Petroni 156). Holmes also suggests, as noted above, that young people enthusiastically embraced the idealism of the Soviet project. Finally, at least in the case of School No. 25, privilege probably played some role in children’s readiness to internalize Soviet values.

Young peoples’ readiness to embrace the Soviet cause may also stem from the privileged position accorded happy children and youthful revolutionaries in Stalinist images of the present and the future. The slogan “Thank you, Comrade Stalin, for our happy childhood” that could be found in every Soviet school underlined the status of smiling children as icons of revolutionary transformation. Young people also functioned in Stalinist propaganda as the chief constructors of the future. As Victoria Bonnell has noted in her study of representations of workers in Soviet political art, “youth and a general appearance of vigor, freshness, and enthusiasm” constituted the “first and perhaps most important” features of the heroic citizen.¹¹ If young people learned their political lessons well, as Holmes contends, then they likely learned that their efforts and their happiness constituted the regime’s self-proclaimed core values.

Ending his story with the purges of 1937, Holmes provides a moving picture of the depths of adults’ continuing commitment to the happiness of their childhoods. While both Holmes and Petroni eschew visions of Stalinism that emphasize coercion, both recognize that the state ultimately and always had the upper hand. When the new “populist” line associated with the purges of 1937 turned the nation’s most famous school into a target too big to be ignored, no amount of political savvy on the part of administrators could save it. Here Holmes finds the limits of maneuver, but not the limits of belief in “revolutionary truth.”¹² The oral and written tes-

¹⁰Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, 37.

¹¹Victoria Bonnell, “The Iconography of the Worker in Soviet Political Art” in *Making Workers Soviet: Power, Class, and Identity*, ed. Lewis Siegelbaum and Ronald Grigor Suny (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), 366.

¹²Holmes borrows the phrase from Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain*, 229.

timonies of the adults who were pupils in 1937 demonstrate a near universal ability to separate their love for their school and their childhood devotion to the grand vision of Stalinism from the arrests of their friends' parents and, apparently, even the arrests of their own parents.¹³ Holmes's final images of alumni in their sixties and seventies whose faces light up with youthful vigor when reminiscing about their school underscores the power of Stalinist myths, particularly when those myths were alloyed with nostalgia for childhood.

¹³For a discussion of reactions to arrests see Holmes, *Stalin's School*, 98-99. In *Everyday Stalinism* Fitzpatrick notes that "the arrest of a family member changed everything overnight" (212), but Holmes's interviewees do not seem to confirm this generalization.