

RESEARCH REPORT IREX STG

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1. Topic:

“Little Pieces of the Puzzle: The Party’s District Committees and the Administration of Schools, 1931-1941”

In the summer of 2002, I spent more than eight weeks in the Russian city of Kirov. There I examined the role in school administration of district committees of the Young Communist League and Communist Party in the 1930s. That research is part of a larger project on educational bureaucracy in the Russian Republic from 1931 to 1941.

2. Relevance

Governance of the Russian Republic’s schools was much like grand theater in which institutional and individual actors from Moscow to the rural schoolhouse knew the script and departed from it at their own peril. However, that script changed with changing circumstances and conditions. Thus at one and the same time, an administrator reported one way to one agency and another way to another. The play and its script (the reports) became the “reality” of governance. Existing for its own sake, bureaucracy took on a life independent of the schools it was supposed to serve. As pointed out below, in such an environment personal contacts, alliances, and animosities played an inordinate and capricious role. It is a sobering example for any society that adopts a hypercentralized bureaucratic system.

3. Approach and Methodology

I spent the entire period at the State Archive for the Social and Political History of the Kirov Region (GASPI KO).¹ My main focus was on 225 folders containing the protocols of primary party and Komsomol organizations associated with district departments of education and schools. I also looked at 125 folders with protocols of particular meetings of district party committees that responded to contentious sessions of primary party organizations.

4. Summary of Findings and Preliminary Conclusions

In the grand theater that was the administration of schools, primary party organizations acted out their roles exceptionally well. From place to place and from year to year they dealt with the issues familiar to any student of Soviet history – purges, show trials, celebrations of revolutionary holidays, diplomatic crises, sowing and harvest campaigns, and the latest decrees and speeches emanating from the Kremlin.² These organizations performed equally well the especially powerful act, one I label the “Cult of Criticism,” condemning everyone and everything in the district associated with

¹ The director and staff of GASPI KO made my stay exceptionally productive and enjoyable.

² It is possible to write a history of central policy “from the inside out” by summarizing the direction and content of the sessions of these lowest of party organs.

education. Pupils' performance (even with a 98 percent pass rate) or attendance (even if at 97 percent), teachers' instruction, and extracurricular activities never reached acceptable standards. Not the system, but teachers, pupils, parents, and administrators were at fault for all the real and imagined sins of schools and schooling. Almost invariably, these organizations adopted resolutions offering the same panaceas: study of Marxist-Leninist ideology and party history, implementation of socialist competition, and the exercise of supervision (kontrol').

In order to make such vicious negativity more bearable primary party organizations established a "balance of blame." Their sessions distributed equally the heavy burden of guilt among the many local actors – the head and inspectors of the department of education, the district party and Komsomol committees and their governing secretaries, school directors, communist and non-party teachers, pupils, and parents. Balancing blame offered a measure of protection to all in so far as no one person or administrative organ emerged as exceptionally blameworthy.

Occasionally local actors altered the script by tilting the balance of blame away from themselves. In response, other players launched a frenzied attack on their errant colleagues. Sometimes, however, a tilt provoked a mad scramble of people and agencies forging, destroying, and reforging alliances one against the other to protect themselves, their subordinates, and their friends. Here personal ties and all the noble and ignoble qualities that made Russians (and others) so marvelously human dominated and became, I am inclined to say, the essence of the administering of schools.

In such cases, the alignment of forces was as varied as the many actors and the theory of probability would allow. In one locale, therefore, communist teachers cooperated with the district's party committee against the school's own party organization. In another place a school director joined forces with his school's party organization to oppose the head of the local department of education. Teachers used one primary party organization to condemn an unpopular director or deputy director; they used another to defend their administrators against attack by the department of education or district's party committee. It was all played out at surprisingly contentious sessions of primary party organizations occasionally attended by non-communists.

I do not mean to imply that participants at these meetings acted without regard for the controlled environment in which they lived. The level of give-and-take at these sessions nevertheless belies the existence of a completely regimented society as some historians would have it.³ I do mean to say that grand historical models and theories which help interpret the larger picture of Soviet government come up short in explaining what happened at these sessions and why.

³ These sessions could be far livelier affairs than meetings of pedagogical councils in schools. The school director exercised considerable power at the latter. In primary party organizations, a school director or head of a department of education shared authority more equitably with fellow communists. Precisely because these sessions were often contentious affairs, their protocols raise serious methodological issues. The historian is at the mercy of the recording secretary who in some cases rendered a blow-by-blow account, in other cases hardly managed a decent summary. Moreover, even the most detailed accounts left much unsaid. The participants including the secretary knew well who liked and disliked whom and the reasons involved and thus found it unnecessary, if not inappropriate, to spell it out. It is often impossible to conclude with certainty that allied individuals with the same last name were related in any way. In sum, these protocols verify that the more one knows, the more one doesn't know (and yearns to know). I plan to deliver a paper on this nagging methodological problem.

From 1938 to 1941 outlines of a pattern began to emerge from the mad scramble. More and more school directors and heads of departments of education sought to win a measure of professional autonomy from what they regarded as undue interference in their affairs by primary party organizations. They now found a surprising degree of support from higher party organs determined to provide state officials with more authority in the daily implementation of policy. I am aware that many of my professional colleagues will be as surprised by this conclusion as my Russian acquaintances. I myself was surprised to discover in Stalin's Russia administrators developing a distinct sense of professional identity and struggling so boldly and successfully for the right to administer policy as they saw fit.

5. Suggestions for Future Research

Scholars have studied well developments at Russia's center. Perhaps in Stalin's Russia all roads did indeed lead to Moscow and to the Kremlin, but they also led back to the point of their origin. We need to pay more attention to the relationship between Moscow, on the one hand, and regional and local governments, on the other. Historians should focus on the local day-to-day implementation of policy in order to know how bureaucracy functioned (or malfunctioned) and how Soviet citizens responded to it. The effort requires that scholars prepare themselves for research in the provinces where life can be immensely difficult but immensely rewarding.

6. Any Recommendations for the US Policy Community

An acquaintance with Russia and Russians reveals the importance of personal ties and contacts. These personal loyalties and animosities often dominated the behavior of officials in the 1930s. The "personal" was and remains exceptionally important in private as well as official Russian culture. We would do ourselves a service as tourists, students, analysts, and diplomats to keep this aspect of Russian life uppermost in mind.

My project also indicates, as noted above, the dangers of a hypercentralized administrative system when it is not held accountable by outside independent agencies.