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'The School Waltz': The Everyday Life of the Post-Stalinist Soviet Classroom¹

Actually, a bad school is a good school.

Viktor Shklovsky,
The Third Factory

When I was in my first year at school, we had to use those number 86 pens: you pressed down on the nib to get them to write. The thickness of the letters was all over the place, some of them went skinny, some fat. I'd shake the pen around in the ink-well and the ink'd go — wham! And then I'd cry on top of the blot — wham! again. So as for writing classes... well, the best mark I'd ever get would be 'satisfactory'. Because the pen was always catching on something and I'd mess round with it, and then, oh I don't know, another blot. I'd write and I'd write, and everything would be fine, and then another blot. Three lines of writing deep — you had to write everything in big letters,

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that was the rule. And you were supposed to write pressing down in some places and not in others, it was really hard. And you'd work and work away and my hand would be shaking, and I'd be trying so hard to write well I'd end up writing really badly. There now [Oxf/Lev SPb—O2, PF 7A: 42].¹

Thus a woman born into a Leningrad working-class family in 1931 remembered her first days at school in 1939 and her struggle to absorb the unfamiliar technique of writing. As she vividly conveys, tuition in the three Rs was, for those exposed to it, an experience that went far beyond the mechanical acquisition of skills. It was also an initiation into a new kind of performance, spurred on by anxiety about the prospect of being graded for one's efforts on the official scale of one to five, where, essentially, any mark less than four ('good') represented failure. And it was a child's first intensive exposure to the official ethos of *kulturnost*, where orderliness and efficiency counted for everything and self-expression for very little [Fitzpatrick 1992; Maier 1994; Buckley 1996; Hessler 2000; Volkov 2000; Kelly 2001: 230–321].

Not all Soviet classrooms had always been like this. During the first half of the 1920s in particular, supporters of the liberal 'free education' movement, such as S. T. Shatsky, had exercised a powerful influence on educational policy, with the First Experimental Station of Narkompros, through its village primary schools and kindergartens in the Moscow region, acting as a testing house for new ideas. Though teaching practice in many institutions remained more conventional than educationalists such as Shatsky would have wished,² the 'methodological notes' sent out by Narkompros attempted to disseminate modes of teaching that were sympathetic to children's sense of alienation when they first reached the classroom, and which placed at least some emphasis on the importance of maintaining interest through variety, and on the efficiency in this respect of 'learning through play' [*Programmy* 1932]. With the abandonment of 'brigade work' and the restoration to primacy of academic targets by ministerial decree in 1932, however, the state educational system began to distance itself from 'free education' (significantly, the First Experimental Station was reorganised into a more conventional 'pedagogical laboratory' in May 1932) [Fitzpatrick 1976; Holmes 1991; *Spravochnik* 1990]. The decree [*postanovlenie TsK VKP*] of

¹ In later generations, the recommended pens were nos. 11 and 13 for children of all ages, and nos. 24 and 110 for older schoolchildren [Sovetov 1967: 108].

² In fact, the work of the First Station itself, on the ground, represented an uneasy compromise between pedagogical ambition and the practicalities of teaching in rural areas where parents often had very traditional ideas about what education should be achieving. [See Partlett 2003]. On the wide variety of teaching methodologies in the 1920s generally, [see Holmes 1991; Boguslavskii 1994; Balashov 2003].

4 July 1936 condemning ‘pedological perversions’ placed a full stop on the further development of educational psychology: from now on, the Soviet schoolroom would be ruled by ‘pedagogy’, a discipline that self-consciously harked back to the nineteenth-century Russian educational heritage and which replaced Piaget, Montessori, Froebel and Lev Tolstoy by Makarenko and Ushinsky (and, of course, Stalin, though in this case as an authority on the universe in which teaching took place, rather than on teaching practices) [Shimbirev 1940: 30–1, 34]. The classroom envisaged was one that was teacher-directed, and subordinated to a precisely-defined teleology: in the words of a pedagogical manual published in 1940, ‘*By education we mean a process, directed by the teachers, of equipping the developing generation with the general experience of mankind, in order to prepare it (i.e. the developing generation) for the social activity that lies before it*’ [Shimbirev 1940: 3].

During the Khrushchev Thaw, there was a small resurgence of interest in ‘free education’. A de-Stalinising editorial published in *Sovetskaya pedagogika* during 1956 (No. 9. Pp. 3–18) not only criticised the dead leader’s evil influence on pedagogical writings, but also the dry academicism of the genre itself after 1932: it was time to concentrate less on ‘how to teach’ and more on ‘how children learn’. In its turn, the interest in the learning process brought educational psychology to the centre of intellectual life for the first time since the assault on ‘pedological perversions’ in 1936. Educational discussions in the West started to be reported without the note of sarcasm that had been obligatory during the late 1930s, 1940s, and early 1950s, and a muted, but perceptible, process of rehabilitating long unmentionable home-bred authorities such as Lev Vygotsky and other ‘pedologues’ began. Characteristic too was the revival, in a restricted and timid way, of educational sociology, which brought with it the redeployment of an instrument that had been left to rot since the early 1930s [Glowka 1970: 135–44]. As in the 1920s, empirical methods were often used to underline conceptual innovation: it was common for surveys to be cited in support of the argument that children learned more effectively if their interest was kept alive.¹

Yet all of this discussion was somewhat constrained: professional pedagogues did not, for instance, cite Lev Tolstoy with warm approval, as the editor of a Thaw anthology of children’s poetry did [Glotsner 1964]. In most significant respects, the methodological

¹ See e.g. ‘Ukreplenie distsipliny i poryadka v shkole — nasushchnaya zadacha’ // *Sovetskaya pedagogika* 1955. No. 11. Pp. 9–17, which despite its harsh title, actually spoke out against excessively harsh control, and pointed out that dull teaching was often a contributory factor to poor discipline. On the use of surveys at this period, [see O’Dell 1978: 216]. Note also the increasing interest in aesthetic education [see e.g. Apraksina, Vetlugina 1956].

guidance given to Soviet teachers remained stable.¹ It was not until the end of the Soviet era when there was a serious reassessment of the sort of teacher-led, regimented, goal-directed pedagogy that our first informant experienced in 1939. The recollections of an informant born more than forty years later than the first informant cited, and whose first days at school fell at the beginning of the 1980s, reflect a strikingly similar atmosphere of intimidation:

I think my most striking early memory, what struck me more than anything else was, yes, without a doubt, was school. I hadn't expected such a big contrast... because the teacher was very strict, and after the kindergarten, after home, after mama and granny it was such a big contrast! It wasn't that... I'm not saying it was bad, no, it was interesting, but it was tough switching over to such a strict regime right away, school life, lessons... [CKQ-Ox-03 PF 10A: 1–2].

Even though this informant recalled her teacher as 'kind' as well as 'strict', a sense of dislocation was an unavoidable part of the first contact with schooling. And, asked to reflect generally on the character of their school experiences, historical subjects who went through their school years during the last three decades of the Soviet Union's existence were likely to describe these — at the most positive — as 'boring but useful'. 'There was nothing creative about school,' commented one man who attended a typical school in a socially mixed (but predominantly working-class) area of Leningrad between 1975 and 1985, while also recognising as valuable the tuition to which he had been exposed in most subjects other than foreign languages [CKQ-SPb-03 PF 2B: 14; PF 3A: 20]. The views of a woman born in 1949 about her schooling were rather less positive:

It horrifies me to think how little I got out of school, how awful it all was. I liked botany for a while, I really liked history, I sometimes found astronomy and chemistry quite interesting, because we were doing interesting experiments... yes. But really nothing much. [...] Languages were just dreadful. They really didn't know any English, even though we supposedly had the three best teachers in [our town], but it was all really badly set up, no-one ever gave us any tapes to listen to with recordings of English or real English people [CKQ-Ox-03 PF 8B: 17].

Or in the still more openly hostile words of a Leningrad woman who began attending school in 1965: 'School was just awful, a real nightmare. I could cry over wasting ten years of my life there' [CKQ-Ox-03 PF 13A: 9].

¹ Cf. the fact that several pedagogical manuals of the Stalin years stayed in print during the post-Stalin era as well. Cf. e.g. the republication of [Shimbirev 1940] as [Shimbirev 1954], and [Esipov 1946] as [Esipov 1967]. Bearing in mind also the scarcity of methodological literature in provincial towns — a circumstance to which the Academy of Pedagogical Sciences' delegations of inspectors often drew attention — it is fair to assume that Stalinist manuals continued in circulation long after 1953 as well.

And these constitute the reactions of four educational successes, who ended up in prestigious forms of higher education, and eventually in the higher professions. Inevitably, informants from working-class homes who went on to careers in manual labour were still less positive:

You know, no-one really wants to go to school, to be honest. It's like a lead weight round your neck. There's no fun in it at all. If anyone tells you they were happy there, it's just a pack of lies, they're putting it on [...] It's a double life, school is. On the one hand, you get pressure from the bottom. The badly behaved kids, like. You're up against them the whole time, fights and that. Right. And on top you've got the prize pupils sitting way out of reach. They've got that whole hierarchy to protect them... that hierarchy of them, what d'you call them, teachers, like. So right, and the kid in the middle, what's he do? He gets pressure from below, from them badly brought up ones. They try to nick his money, to make him work for them, and that... [Oxf/Lev SPb-03 PF 24B: 13, 26].

Historical subjects of this kind took refuge in the non-academic side of school — sports, friendships, and — in some cases — disruption of the regimentation to which they were subjected as part of the school programme. According to the unpublished school memoirs of a woman born in Leningrad in 1967, the working-class children at her school stood out not only because they were poorly dressed and shod, but also because of their bad behaviour: *'A lot of them behaved extremely badly. Three or four pupils in every class were quite unmanageable'* [‘Vospominaniya’ 2003: 4].

Recollections of this kind point to the trauma caused in many children by the transition from family life to institutional life. Even if children had attended a nursery school before they reached ‘real’ school (and attendance at pre-school institutions was never 100 per cent, even in the late Soviet period, and even in major cities),¹ the tenor of instruction at these was quite different from the tenor of instruction at schools. The methodological notes for nursery teachers preserved elements of ‘free education’ right through the Soviet

¹ Official Soviet sources concealed participation in nursery schools, but it is clear from a comparison of the figures is [Zhenshchina 1960: 85], and [Gelfland 1992: table 18]; and [Deti 1979: 19], and [Gelfland 1992: tables 20, 26, and 31], that participation was about 12 per cent in 1958, rising to roughly 20 per cent in 1960, and just under 50 per cent in 1970. These figures obviously covered a wide variety of different rates, highest in large, rich enterprises in big cities, which had nearly full participation in some places [see Jacoby 1974: 53]. The school authorities were aware that nursery-school coverage was never 100 per cent, and in the late Soviet era, children who had not attended a *detsad* often went into the school system via a ‘preparatory’ or reception class, where they learned basic reading, writing, and arithmetic — whether they needed to or not. *'But we could do all this already. I think that "home" children were put through the preparatory class mainly to get them used to collective existence. There were about ten of us in the class'* [Vospominaniya 2003: 2].

era.¹ And though nannies and supervisors in the real-life institutions did not always measure up to the ideals set out in normative guides, their deviance tended to be at the level of bad temper or managerial incompetence rather than at the level of educational authoritarianism.² In any case, the central background experience for children remained home life, and however strictly regulated this was, it was unlikely to be characterised by the strict regime of alternating lessons to be found in the school. Parents might be indulgent, severe, or irascible, or a mixture of all three, but they were seldom, if ever, exacting in the way that teachers — even in the primary school — were traditionally meant to be in the Soviet system. And in the late Soviet era, a clash of styles was particularly likely to be remarked, given that — in middle-class households and indeed in some working-class ones — an ethos of ‘children first’ (literally, ‘everything for the children’) was making itself strongly felt in terms of what children were given to eat, what they were bought, and to some extent of how they were allowed to spend their time [CKQ Ox-03 PF 7A: 6: ‘*The child was always given the best of everything*’; CKQ Ox-03 PF 2B: 6].

At the same time, one should perhaps not place too much emphasis on the regimental or exploitative nature of the late Soviet school. To begin with, there were pupils who loved their experience at school [see e.g. Oxf/Lev SPb-03 PF 26–27: *passim*]. And in any case, generalisations about school experience made by adults reflect, as much as anything else, the disgust inspired by envisaging an earlier self locked in a power asymmetry that with hindsight seems degrading. For many children at the time of experiencing it, on the other hand, schooling is simply an inescapable cultural given, made tolerable, as much as anything else, by the fact that there is no alternative.³ As in other countries (e.g. Britain) [Thomas 1976; Willis 1980], rebellion in the schoolroom was strongly ritualised and took ‘carnival’ forms, and was rapidly succeeded by resignation to the status quo. The relationship between children and school authorities was, as we shall see, generally characterised less by open enmity and embittered confrontation than by a degree of understanding and indeed collusion, with both sides recognising that their relationship might be in some respects uncongenial, but had to be endured and survived.

¹ See e.g. [Levshina, Sorokina, Usova 1946], which cites Montessori and Pestalozzi without adverse comment on p. 201, though criticising Froebel on p. 256, and emphasises the importance of poetry (p. 228) and games (p. 110) in socialising the child.

² See e.g. [Oxf/Lev SPb-03 PF 24A: 1–2], where the informant recalls his nannies as ‘*old women [...] old ladies what was already collecting their pensions. But they was nice to us, more or less,*’ and the supervisors as rather helpless young women: ‘*Well, so. The supervisors was just some young girls. What d’you expect them to do?*’ See also [Jacoby 1974: 58].

³ This observation does not, of course, apply to persistent truants, let alone drop-outs from the school system, but such individuals seem to have constituted a minority in the late Soviet era, judging by the relative absence of remark in published sources (though there was certainly a ‘below the water’ community of occasional truants: see p. 115 note 1 for details).

As is well known, the Soviet school placed as much emphasis on *vospitanie* (moral or character education) as it did on *obrazovanie* and *obuchenie* (intellectual education and skills training). Extant writing on the history of late Soviet education has, however, concentrated primarily on the second and third of the school's objectives [e.g. Dunstan 1978]. Equally, when engaging with the educational process at the first level, the historiography has generally confined itself to the content of the syllabus and the nature of the ideologies perpetuated, rather than the on-the-ground practices by which moral education took place [O'Dell 1983; Kelli 2003; Balashov 2003; Leontyeva 2003].¹ A second line of research goes in the opposite direction, concentrating on what one might describe as the 'underground' of the educational process — the 'everyday life' of the institution in terms of school folklore and pupil traditions [Belousov 1990; Belousov 1998; Cherednikova 1995; Vail, Genis 1996]. Between them, these two traditions produce a distinctive and somewhat simplistic model of the school as a place characterised by adult ambition, on the one hand, and child resistance, on the other — which up to a point is accurate, but which gives insufficient space to the cases where adults (particularly teachers) and pupils had to work together and make compromises, or might be jointly involved in adapting the regulations sent down from above.

A fuller study of the educational process, including some material on negotiation between pupils and teachers, is to be found in Larry Holmes's excellent case study of School No. 25 in Moscow [Holmes 1999], but this deals both with a different period (the 1930s) from the one on which I focus here, and with a quite exceptional institution (a flagship 'model school', with a high intake of children from the pinnacle of the Soviet elite). The analysis in the present study is broader-based, including 'average' schools as well as one or two more privileged establishments; it is, however, held together by a concentration on day schools in urban centres (from *poselki* or settlements and small towns up to major cities: the *internat*, a fashionable innovation of the 1960s, but always a marginal phenomenon, is not considered).² The purpose is — so far as is possible — to put together a

¹ The embryonic discipline of 'pedagogical anthropology' is starting to fill this gap, not only for the contemporary period, but also for historical eras: [see e.g. Bim-Bad, Kornetov, Myasnikov 2002]. But little of substance appears to have been produced so far on the Soviet era. The material on Third Reich schools is comparably ideology-obsessed: [see e.g. Leschinsky, Kluchert 1997; Trapp 1994; Michael 1994].

² In Russian cities, the milieu I am discussing here, the *internaty* were a short-lived phenomenon (though they continued throughout the Soviet period, and after, to be of importance in remote rural areas: [see e.g. Lyarskaya 2003]). However, while they existed, the city schools did (to judge by the archive of one of them in the Moscow region, School no. 72) fulfil at least some of their role as a placement centre for children from single-parent families. See RAO NA [Rossiiskaya Akademiya Obrazovaniya: Nauchnyi arkhiv] f. 81 op. 3 ed. khr. 9. 'Lichnye dela uchashchikhsya': *passim*.

‘historical ethnography’ of the late Soviet school, a catalogue of the rituals and everyday practices that held schools together and shaped them as institutions. Ideology has a peripheral place — as indeed it did in the day-to-day practices of the school at this period. What concerns me here is three other themes: first, what might be called the corporate identity of the Soviet school, the way in which it achieved coherence through forms of behaviour that emphasised its separateness from other forms of everyday life; second, the way in which pupils and teachers negotiated the working relationship that had been imposed upon them, and adjusted its prescribed asymmetries (where the teacher was supposed to have boundless control); third, the manner in which pupils were able to express — in however limited a way — a degree of personal autonomy in this apparently forbidding social setting, by making modifications to the built environment, school uniform, and so on. Rather than the polarised model of educational establishments that emerges from the concentration, in extant historiography, upon top-down educational policy, on the one hand, and school folklore, on the other, what we see is a rather more fluid pattern of give-and-take, with the school authorities, for instance, ignoring certain misdemeanours so that they could go on *appearing* to exercise control, and in order that the unrealistically ambitious school programme could seem to be functioning normally.

A word on sources would be in order here. When one is dealing with a vanished era, there is, it goes without saying, no possibility of participant observation or of interviewing informants as they experience the educational process. Yet surviving contemporary materials — including archival documents — are strongly coloured by censorship issues, and tend to underestimate the extent of low-level everyday tension (as opposed to major problems requiring top-level attention). By the post-Stalin era, pupil-teacher confrontations tended to be dealt with ‘in house’, because the members of the school administration were well aware that resorting to higher authority would have called the efficacy of their own ideological control into question. It is reasonable to assume that many, if not most, minor kerfuffles were never documented in written form.¹ Also — as always

¹ See e.g. the following account relating to the early 1980s: ‘*Inf. Then, still according to the same genre conventions, they called us in to the director’s office, some kind of school committee had been set up there, and they took us through contemporary politics. That’s to say, they basically wanted us to assess things, assess them in the right way. And I remember — this would have been in 1983 — they started talking about Afghanistan, you had to say all the right things about Afghanistan, and I called it an occupation. There was the most terrible row, really awful, which could have ended in disaster for me. I mean, they could have given me a dreadful reference, and then I’d not have got into university, probably. But I don’t remember anything like that happening, because actually no-one wanted a row, because rows like that were always... Int. Hushed up? Inf. Yes, hushed up*’ [CKQ-SPb-03 PF 2B: 13]. It is worth noting also that at least some parents obediently wrote sick notes for children who did not want to attend boring lessons, tests etc. [see CKQ-0x-03 PF 13B, p. 11], which means that such absences would not come up in the truancy statistics.

with Russian materials — written sources often do not condescend to particulars with regard to everyday details: the intricacies of *byt* were lost in abstractions about the ‘radiant future’ of the educational process or in didactic moralising.¹ Therefore — as with other areas of the history of everyday life — sources such as memoirs help retrieve domains of experience that would otherwise be lost. Given the paucity of written memoirs relating to the late Soviet era — as in most cultures, historical subjects of fifty and under are seldom given to musing on their past, unless they belong to the socially unrepresentative group of professional writers² — oral history work fills a crucial lacuna in the sources.

Accordingly, much of the material here is drawn from intensive, questionnaire-based interviews with three different focus groups: individuals from working-class origins who grew up in Leningrad during the 1960s and 1970s; individuals from service and intelligentsia families brought up in a variety of different geographical locations at the same era; and school teachers in Leningrad and Moscow. In the case of the first two groups, the material on schooling was collected as part of a study employing a wide-ranging questionnaire (sixty-eight questions covering home life, relations with family, neighbours and friends, material culture such as toys and clothes and games, imaginative life, early experiences of romantic love, and so on).³ Questions on the school dealt by no means exclusively with ‘daily life’, but this proved to be the aspect of schooling about which informants spoke most readily. While usually unable to remember school folklore, for instance, in detail, many of them appeared to slip back into the language and perceptions of their schooldays when discussing this section of their lives, displaying astonishing recall of teacher names and personalities, the fabric of school buildings, and of the details of personal relationships (often reported with a significant emotional coloration years *après la lettre*).

No representations about the exclusive authority of this material can of course be made. Educational history is about more than pupils’ impressions of what is being taught to them, and about more than the processes by which teaching happens. There are also the considera-

¹ This is true, for instance, of children’s literature set in the schoolroom, which to a still greater extent than its counterpart in, say, Britain, dwells on the non-material culture of the school — psychological conflict and relationship building in particular. See e.g. [Oseeva 1978; Vorontsova 1988].

² For example, the wide-ranging selection in a recently-published anthology [Bim-Bad, Kosheleva 1998] contains only two memoir extracts by individuals born after 1945.

³ Interviews with the focus group of teachers also employed a questionnaire, this time of 46 questions, covering the personal biography of the informant (how they entered teaching etc.), the physical fabric of the school, daily life, festivals, traditions, and celebrations, the place of teaching methodology, moral education and discipline, work with parents, extra-curricular activities, and general conclusions. See Appendix 1 for further information about the questionnaires and about the interviewing procedures.

tions of social destiny in the long term — what happens to pupils when they leave school [as documented in e.g. Fitzpatrick 1979, Ruffely 2003] — and of the school's cultural location (relations between the school and the family, between the school and the local educational authorities, and the role of the school in the community more broadly).¹ And there are also the intricacies of power relations within the school. For pupils, the director was a distant figure, but official manuals and recollections from teachers alike make clear that he or she had leverage in every area of school life, and that his or her personality was quite fundamental to the character of the school. As one teacher whose career began in 1953 and spanned more than fifty years recalled, a school with the authoritarian kind of director was likely to have a 'totalitarian regime', and have trouble retaining the more independent-minded members of staff; where trust was placed in the teachers and they were allowed to use initiative, the working atmosphere was much better. A competent director would also look after his or her staff, suggesting, for instance, ways that the regime could be altered so that their salaries improved, and coping with the eccentricities of funding supply from the local educational authorities, which might, for instance, withhold cash till the end of the year and then lash it out all in one go. While the nature of regulations might change, this personalisation of educational power did not; *vydvizhenets* directors in the Stalin years (those who had 'come up from below' under the new educational system) were just as likely to 'lead from the front' as were the directors of classical high schools before 1917.²

¹ Parents were — officially speaking — to a large extent disempowered in the Soviet school. Parent-teacher meetings, *roditelskie sobraniya*, were essentially fora at which parents were informed about pupils' progress, and in some cases rebuked, usually publicly, for their deficiencies as parents. See [Oxf/Lev Spb-03 PF20B: 47] (interview with a teacher who began work in 1953) for a description of this. The active minority who joined the *roditelskii komitet*, however, had more leverage. And parents of all kinds might be called upon to help with practical things, such as repairs during the school holidays, and with extra-curricular activities [CKQ Ox-03 PF 11A: 9]. Parents also had recourse to the lobbying methods open to Soviet citizens generally, so if very dissatisfied with the school, could make formal complaints to the educational authorities, their local deputy, write to the local newspaper, etc. (educational scandals in the press sometimes took such letters as a starting point. And education, just like every other section of Soviet society, came within the network of relations named as *blat* (pull or influence) [Ledeneva 1998]. Officially, recruitment to schools was strictly by catchment area (*mikroraion*), but parents who wished to place their children in a school with a good reputation (e.g. a language special school) might pull strings to get their children admitted [see e.g. CKQ Ox-03 PF 12B: 6]. Parents might also present individual teachers with gifts in the hope of buying favour for their child [Oxf/Lev SPb-03 PF 20B: 56: the informant asserts that she never did this, but acknowledges that such things went on]. On relations with the local education authority (regarded as a trivial nuisance at this era), [see Oxf/Lev SPb-03 PF30B: 19, PF32A: 7]. This particular teacher recalls the officials as mostly failed teachers who didn't know what they were doing, and the inspections as perfunctory affairs consisting of checks on paperwork.

² All these remarks are based on [Oxf/Lev SPb-03 PF 19]. See [PF 19 A: 6] on the school with a 'totalitarian regime', PF 19 A: 12 on the director who placed trust in her pupils (who was a *vydvizhenka*). A third school, on the other hand, had a stupid director and was simply dull [PF 19 A: 13]. On staff turnover see [PF 19 A: 14], and on budgeting [PF 19 B: 17]. For very interesting reminiscences by a former school director, see [Shturman 1990].

Teachers also had some administrative control that is not visible in the discussion that follows. For example, they had some leverage in deciding which shift they wanted to work, if the school operated a shift system. And teacher morale was dependent not only on relations with pupils, but also on material conditions. Basic salary levels were (in the eyes of teachers themselves) poor, but some schools offered opportunities of profitable work on the side as a private tutor. Furthermore, once they had completed their compulsory state *raspredelenie*, teachers had some flexibility in terms of place of work — they could leave an institution that did not suit them and move to one that did [Oxf/Lev SPb-03 PF 30 A: 10; PF 30B: 18]. While pupils would not have been conscious of factors of this kind, their impact on the levels of teachers' job satisfaction would have made itself felt indirectly.

However, if seeing the school through pupils' eyes is a method with limitations, it has at least the virtue of complementing the top-down character of studies of Soviet educational history so far, with their emphasis on government policy and on institutionalisation in an abstract sense (which has led, for instance, to considerably more abundant documentation of the elite *spetsshkoly* than of conditions in bog-standard Soviet schools of the post-Stalin era) [see e.g. Dunstan 1978; Glowka 1970]. What pupils saw — the rituals and day-to-day practices that bracketed the school off from the rest of ordinary life, emphasising its peculiar nature as a social institution, while also providing an exposure to a characteristically Soviet community — constituted a very important part of the life of the classroom. Hence, intensive study of the school as experienced from below has much to tell us about how that peculiar but typical Soviet institution in fact functioned.

I should, finally, address a question that I suspect will occur to readers both at the start and throughout: why a foreigner, without detailed knowledge of the post-Stalinist schoolroom from personal experience, should be attempting an analysis of this kind in the first place. There is, evidently, a risk of producing an extended statement of the obvious, a kind of fragmented and faulty version of what would be remembered by one of the historical subjects here. This risk, indeed, besets anyone attempting to write the history of childhood in another culture more generally. The point is, though, that childhood is a quintessential example of what has been described as a 'common place', a space of social existence that as a result of the intellectual heritage of the Enlightenment and Romanticism, has been 'devalued and literalized', which is lived and imagined, rather than scrutinised and interpreted [Boym 1994:15]. There is value, therefore, in the defamiliarisation (*ostranenie*) of common experience through the (inevitably) naïve outside view of a foreigner who tries to find explanations for phenomena that are taken as cultural

givers by those who live through them. The post-Romantic view of childhood as the unalienable site of *individual* experience also means that educated observers from a particular culture are likely to find it hard to generalise about the *typical* experience of childhood in their own culture. Also, since Soviet culture no longer exists, and memories of ordinary experience vanish fast, there is much to be said for creating a written record — if only to provoke those who actually did experience all this into creating written records of their own.

Throughout the discussion, a comparative dimension emerges, at least implicitly. What I identify as the central features of the Soviet school at this period are, in many cases, features that were absent from the typical British school of my own childhood, a childhood which happened to fall neatly into the post-Stalin era (I was born in 1959, and my school years stretched from 1964 until 1977). British schools did not generally celebrate the beginning and end of the school year, though sometimes there were institutional festivals (in my school, we celebrated the school's 'birthday', which, as I recall, fell on 4 May).¹ School traditions were also emphasised by the name of the institution (in this case, 'Godolphin and Latymer' — the commemoration of school founders was a routine practice), and by the school uniform. Uniform colours were consistently drab across the whole of Britain, but whether one suffered in dark green, navy blue, brown, grey (as in our case), or (in the case of the most unfortunate schoolchildren of all) dark purple, was a matter of the individual institution's caprice. Both these colours, and the school crest, emblazoned on hats or caps (if worn), coats, and blazers, allowed instant identification of the child's institutional affinity, facilitating attacks by members of rival schools and letters of denunciation by members of the public who had witnessed pupils unwisely smoking, using drugs, thieving, having illicit sexual relations, etc., in public.

Not only these superficial details, but the classroom rituals themselves were of a different order. Repetition of homework was less formal, with the pupils usually sitting at their desks and volunteering information (though disciplinary practices such as hand-raising before one answered and standing up when the teacher came in were still required). A standard method of organising discussion was the formal debate, parliamentary-style, in which a motion was proposed and seconded and there were then contributions from the floor. Ideological input was different: even outside church schools, the British equivalent of the *lineika* was likely to include some religious content (this was in fact a legal requirement, and indeed still is, but while in recent

¹ In fact, of course, the date of its founding, or rather re-founding as a girls' school (the school had originally been founded as a boys' boarding establishment in the seventeenth century — its most famous alumnus was probably the poet W. B. Yeats — but in 1905 it was reopened as a day school for girls).

times many schools have chosen to ignore it, in the 1960s and 1970s most did not). There was also a weekly class (again, legally compulsory), known as ‘scripture’ or ‘religious education’, which in my secondary school consisted of deeply tedious maunderings about ethical choices (what to do with money found on the pavement, etc.), and during which I worked my way surreptitiously through a good deal of the Bible and a handbook on comparative religion. That said, reading under the desk was not generally tolerated, and there was insistent emphasis on self-policing in this and other respects. Copying work was regarded as a disgraceful activity, the prompting (*podskazka*) of pupils being questioned was unknown, and the use of crib-sheets (*shpargalki*) in tests was branded as ‘cheating’ and — if discovered — subject to very severe punishment, right up to the level of expulsion. And given that my secondary school was (typically for a British institution of the day) single-sex, the flirtation typical of the Russian classroom was impossible. The main form of ritualised contact with boys was the school disco, at which (in the younger classes) boys and girls lined up along opposite walls, like shy peasants at a village dance, while one or two brave souls (towards the end of the evening, and after a few shandies — a mixture of lemonade and beer considered acceptable alcoholic intake for the younger teens) ‘snogged’ (teen-age slang for kissing and cuddling) in a corner, or if especially brave, right in the middle of the room for all to see. And any account of a British education would be incomplete without acknowledging the role of sport — which even in academically selective schools such as mine was the source of interest, excitement, and status. High marks carried some value (though there was no formalised rank order as with the Russian ‘first pupil’, ‘outstanding pupil’, etc.), but sporting talent was regarded with more enthusiasm and was a good basis for popularity. At my school, the pupils elected the head girl and her two deputies, and all three, while far from stupid, were distinguished above all by being good at sport.

This foregrounding of difference should not be regarded, though, as an attempt to suggest that the British educational system was somehow superior. I would agree with one of the Russian historical subjects cited earlier, ‘I could cry over the ten years of life I wasted’, except that in my case it was ‘thirteen years’. School was often desperately boring, and much of the knowledge accumulated frankly irrelevant to later life. Teachers in the British school, like those in the Soviet school, were capable of making one’s life a misery if they so chose. Of course, one should not overstate the level of oppression in the British schools. There were no mass organisations that one was to all intents and purposes forced to join, along the lines of the Pioneers or the Komsomol, and teachers — while individually they might be unpleasant — enjoyed personal and professional authority alone, rather than being instruments of state power. But even the

Soviet schools under discussion were — unlike orphanages or even boarding schools — not ‘total institutions’: access to the world beyond was an important mitigating feature, and modification of regulations and improvised informality was always possible. In most of them, contact with the outside world, as well as a flourishing folklore of slang, comic poems, urban rumours, gossip, and genres such as the *strashilka* blurred the hard edges of regimentation.

In any case, what emerges in the end is less the peculiarity of the Soviet school experience than its typicality, vis-a-vis the standard post-industrial, ‘Western’ (in the broadest sense) school model. Many features of the Soviet school were common to the typical school experience in modern cultures throughout Europe and America: the rigid division of the timetable into lessons of regular length marked off by bells; the alternation of lesson time and free time; the attempt to combine intellectual education, skills training, and moral or civic education. Other features, which are not educational universals, have parallels in other countries — for instance, the very high degree of central control over syllabus content can be matched in France, though not in Britain or America, where local educational authorities have traditionally had a large amount of autonomy over what is taught in the classroom. Schools are in any culture institutions of collective socialisation, where by and large academic excellence is of secondary importance to qualities such as tidiness, organization and conformity to group values.

Yet at the same time, the absence of any schools not run by the state was (comparatively speaking) an idiosyncratic feature of the Soviet system (not matched even in other so-called ‘totalitarian’ societies, such as the Third Reich, Fascist Italy, or Franco’s Spain). This feature, and its association with state propaganda that repeatedly asserted the Soviet Union’s unique care for children, gave the Soviet school a peculiar status, making it a focus of the regime’s hopes to engineer new generations of loyal citizens. The irony was, as we shall see, that — like exposure to other types of collective practice (e.g. the wall newspaper, on which see [Kelly 2002]) — exposure to education tended to produce an imperfect form of accommodation to the state, one based on reluctant and unavoidable compromise, rather than on willed, rational assent.

The First of September: The Threshold Ritual of the Soviet School

Arrival in the classroom itself, and subordination to the strict rules of behaviour there, was a secondary phase of entry into school life. Children were first welcomed in the school in a pompous, celebratory manner. The first of September, or ‘the day of knowledge’ (*den znaniya*), was not a public holiday in the sense that workplaces were

closed, but it was definitely a festive day. Children, and most particularly those entering class one, arrived at their *alma mater* wearing party clothes and clutching bunches of flowers (gladioli were particularly popular), accompanied by their parents, who often took commemorative photographs. The entire school would be lined up in some place suitable for ceremonial rallies: possibly the schoolyard or *aktovyi zal* (assembly hall), or, if room here were insufficient, some convenient local venue such as a cinema. Here a ‘festive assembly’ (*prazdnichnaya lineika*) would be held, at which the school director was likely to ‘say something about our duty to study well, and about the Party and the government’ [CKQ SPb-03 PF 2A: 10].

Historically, the First of September (capitals were often used in writing about the occasion, such as the newspaper reports that were published annually to honour it) was a quintessentially Stalinist festival. During the first seventeen years of Soviet power, children simply turned up at their local school and signed on (though individual schools might set some sort of assessment test); there was no ceremony to greet them. According to newspaper reports of the time (see e.g. *Leninskie iskry*, 28 August 1929: 7), and to oral history,¹ arrangements were often ad hoc and chaotic. The foundations for the holiday were laid in 1935, when legislation harmonised the dates of school vacations right across the Soviet Union (Decree of the Council of People’s Commissars and the Central Committee of the Communist Party on the Internal Organisation of Primary, Incomplete Secondary, and Secondary Schools’, 3 September 1935, [*Spravochnik* 1937: 789]). Thereafter, children were allowed to begin studying at a new school on another dates only in the most exceptional circumstances (such as when parents were forced to move to a new city for work reasons) [*Nachalnaya shkola* 1950: 819]. And the First of September was from the first not a bureaucratic boundary, but a ritual occasion. Registration as such took place in the weeks before the official start of the school year, requiring parents to turn up with the usual pile of documents, from birth certificate onwards, and get the child signed on. The First of September, by contrast, consisted of a *symbolic* welcome to the new pupils.

Even before the harmonising law had time to take effect, an illustrated report appeared in *Pravda* [2 September 1935: 5], showing ‘The First Lesson’ at Karl Liebknecht School, Kropotkinskaya Street, Moscow. The following year, considerably more extensive coverage appeared in *Pravda* [2 September 1936: 3], with space given to several different ‘human interest’ stories from both Moscow and Lenin-grad. Thereafter — with the obvious exception of the war years —

¹ See e.g. [CKQ-M-04 PF5A: 3]: ‘I started attending school in 1927, and the beginning of the year wasn’t marked in any way. We just arrived, they took down our names, and lessons started right away. There were no festivals of any kind.’ Cf. [CKQ-M-04 PF7A: 11] (this informant entered school in 1935).

stories about the start of the new year, with pictures of clean, well-dressed, beaming infants, were a fixture in the Soviet press around the start of September.¹ As a festival, the First of September combined several different strands. The Stalin years saw an explosion of festivals of different kinds, and above all of calendar festivals (*kalendarnye prazdniki*). Professions with a place in the Stalinist hierarchy (border guards, police, pilots) acquired their own 'days', which were in turn listed in the opulent annual calendars that were a boom genre of the time [Petronne 2000; Dobrenko 2002]. The mid-1930s also saw a significant alteration in the prominence given to Soviet children. In 1935–1936, 'child interest' stories flooded the Soviet press, and the welfare of children came to be seen as ensured by the Leader himself on a personal basis (it was at this point that the 'ruler and child' icon of Stalin with a small child, usually a girl, and the slogan 'Thank You Stalin for a Happy Childhood' began to be disseminated) [Kelly 2005]. Children came to stand for the nation (*narod*) in two senses: they acted as a metonym for the Soviet Union in its subordination to Stalin's affectionate and paternal care, and more concretely, they represented the nation's ethnic diversity and at the same time its fraternal harmony. Samuil Marshak's poem, 'The First of September' (1935), a staple in anthologies intended for 'younger schoolchildren', rammed home the pan-Soviet resonance of the new festival:

The First of September!
The First of September!
The First of September –
Is a date
To remember –
Because on that day
All the little girls
And all the little boys
In cities and towns
And of villages all around,
Took their bags and their books
And their lunches under their arms,
And rushed off as fast as they could
For the first time to school!

This happened in Barnaul,
In Leningrad, in Torzhok,
In Blagoveshchensk, and in Tula,
On the Don, and on the Oka,
In Cossack stanitsas, in Caucasian auls,
And in Central Asian kishlaks.

[Marshak 1952: 3–4]

¹ For example, *Pravda* on 1 September 1947 included a report that preparations for the start of the school year were in full swing (p. 1), and on 2 September 1947, the newspaper reported on how things had gone: schools no. 131 and no. 135 in Moscow had been beautifully decorated, and the girls there had brought bouquets of flowers for their teachers (p. 2).

Geographical range was held together by temporal homogeneity: the school calendar (and in a smaller sense, the school programme) exemplified communal purpose through simultaneity. The perception was that schoolchildren all over the Soviet empire could be found doing the same thing at the same time (time zones were not taken into consideration, nor was the operation of a shift system in many schools, according to which some children studied in the afternoon or indeed in the evening).¹ Children's schooldays were reliably always the same, and in the safe monotony of their activities children provided an exemplum for adults in their more dangerously diverse places of work. In time, the 'First of September' accordingly became encrusted with a whole representational tradition of its own, including songs such as 'The First Former' or 'Our First Teacher', or A. Roitman's 1949 narrative film *The Girl in Class One*.

The understanding of 'First of September' as a joyful day of integration into the collective and unity with the whole motherland remained in force during the post-Stalin era as well. On the whole, though, children themselves tended to find the First of September exciting and uplifting in a more personal way. In the words of an informant born in 1975:

I really looked forward to my first day at school, I... I had a beautiful dress and a back-pack with all the textbooks and exercise books and that, and I turned up wearing a huge bow on my head, a white bow, which looked really lovely, and with this huge bouquet you could hardly see me behind! And the first thing that struck me was how many people there were, I found that quite scary, but then I had my mother with me [CKQ Ox-03 PF 10A: 2].

Even this part of the proceedings, though, could be fraught with anxiety, since, as this informant also recalls, the child also found out at this point which group he or she had been allocated to. Registration in the school as such took place on a day before the first of September, but now the child would meet his or her new class-teacher. As at many other points in a system that was posited upon equal opportunity, but was in fact shaped by considerations of socio-economic status (and particularly in the post-Stalin era, as wage

¹ A two-shift system was common throughout the first decades of Soviet power (during and after the Second World War, some schools even operated a three-shift system). In the post-Stalin era, numbers of schools on a shift system diminished as the building programme took hold, but there were still numerous schools which did operate at least a second shift. Second-shift children found it hard to discipline themselves to work in the mornings, and when they returned at night at seven p.m., were generally too tired to do much in the way of homework. In the words of someone who experienced the system: 'You can't keep up with anything. In the mornings, you just want to sleep. By the time you've rushed here and there, and you need to take a walk, see round your territory, get this and that done... go for an ice-cream and whatever... We got nothing done more or less. Except the ones with parents at home, they sat there boring the pants off themselves, now...' [Oxf/Lev SPb-03 PF 24B: 20].

stratification became more sharply defined), parents would act as decisively as they could to make sure that their child's interests were safeguarded:

My mother took a long time to work out what class they'd put me in and then it turned out it was class E. [...] I remember that she was really worried. She was talking to someone and I picked up that something was wrong from her intonation, she was saying something along the lines that class E looked bad, they'd probably put everyone who was any good in class A, but then it turned out that things didn't work that way and we'd ended up with a really good teacher, she was an Honoured Teacher of the Russian Federation [CKQ OX-03 PF 10A: 2].

Thus did a Soviet festival (*prazdnik*) get transformed almost immediately into a Soviet ordinary day (*budnii den*), preparing children for the transition to the classroom itself, where they would get treated from the beginning with insistent, though not necessarily unbending, authority on the part of their teacher:

We sat quiet as mice at the first lesson, listening obediently, and the lesson... well, the first piece of homework we ever got, I can remember it as clearly as if it were yesterday, was learning the words of the Soviet national anthem by heart. And I found it very hard, because I had had to learn things in the nursery school, but never anything so long. And I remember that I found learning it rather a grind, but I did manage... my mother helped me, and I did manage to learn it. [...] That was our very first homework, even before we could read or write properly, our first homework was learning the national anthem.... Mind you, I remember that we were all really disappointed afterwards, because no-one ever checked we actually had learned it [CKQ OX-03 PF 10A: 2].

The festive side of the First of September acted as a boundary between school life and the world of home, family, and nursery school; the first lesson introduced children to the daily life of the school itself, which had, as we shall see, its own characteristic rituals, primarily involving the public reiteration of rote-learned material. But before describing those, something needs to be said about the material fabric of the school, and about the non-academic content of the curriculum.

Brown, Green, Grey and White: The Fabric of the Post-Stalinist School

By the post-Stalin era, Soviet school children were supposed to use buildings that conformed to a standard pattern in terms of the decoration. The 1962 'Rules for the Sanitary Administration of Schools with a Programme of General Education and Boarding Schools' provided detailed guidance on every detail of the building, from the colour of walls (the top two-thirds of which were to be

whitewashed or treated with distemper in a pale shade, while the bottom third was painted in a darker shade of washable emulsion), to ceilings (white), to floors (concealed by a pale floor-covering), to woodwork (painted white) to desks (painted pale green or grey) [*Spravochnik* 1971: 335]. Earlier sets of instructions had been far less detailed in terms of practical guidance. While a ‘sanitary passport’ scheme had been introduced in 1936 in Leningrad, this was in the first instance a system of collecting information to facilitate inspections of the fabric of the building and of basic equipment [*‘O sanitarno-tekhnicheskom pasporte’* 1936: 58–9]. And, though Moscow University had opened its first department of school hygiene as early as 1925, which published text-books and brochures at regular intervals, while A. Ya. Gutkin in Leningrad was at the centre of an equally active group, there was as yet no central, regular health inspection scheme to make sure that the advice so tirelessly offered was acted upon [Ivanovsky 1947; Molkov 1940].

Putting this into practice of course depended on resources, but as there were significant increases in educational budgets from the late 1950s onwards,¹ there was some chance of modernisation at the surface level. And teachers and pupils recollect that material conditions did improve at this era. A woman who began work in Leningrad at the end of 1953 remembered that conditions at first were decidedly tough — the only desks were old, pre-war ones, visual aids (*naglyadnye posobiya*) were short. By the 1970s, though, things had got better: *‘In the Brezhnev era schools were better off in a material sense’* [Oxf/Lev SPb-03 PF 19B: 15]. A former pupil of another Leningrad school also recollected that it was at this stage when the old wooden flip-top school desks (*party*) got replaced by more modern table-style desks with a shelf for books at the top [CKQ SPb-03 PF 2B: 12].

That said, the standardisation at a cosmetic level was offset by a good deal of variety in terms of building types and ages. City schools were unlikely to include any of the wooden peasant huts in which some village establishments went on being housed until the twenty-first century,² but though ‘brick’ (loosely used — including also systems-built and concrete) buildings were standard, these might range from a former *gimnaziya* or state primary school erected in the late nineteenth century or earlier to a modern purpose-built structure, with different layers of Soviet building in between. The vast majority

¹ Per capita educational spending increased from 91.6 roubles p.a. in 1960 to 141.3 in 1970 and 208.5 in 1980 (in general education), and from 250 to 278 to 439.7 (in secondary specialised education) over the same period. See D. Glowka, ‘The Unfinished Soviet Educational System’ [Dunstan 1987: 15].

² For instance, the evening news programme ‘Vesti’ on NTV, 31 August 2002, reported on the opening of the first-ever brick-built school in a remote village in Yakutia.

of Soviet schools were, from the mid-1930s, *tipovye proekty*, or pattern-book designs whose main virtue was supposed to be maximum capacity at low cost. One-off projects were occasionally found: for instance, the 1940s saw a handful of more ambitious buildings in Leningrad (mostly adapting the neo-classical principles of the Tsarist era) [Smirnov 2003: 109, 119]. During the post-Stalin era, an interest began to be taken in individual designs of quite a different variety. Albums of urban planning included ambitious modernist proposals, sometimes with reference to new work in the West [Gradov 1968: 96–104]. While even ‘best practice’ of this kind did not allow for specialist premises such as playrooms or sick bays (as could be found in, say, Danish schools), it placed considerable emphasis on recreation space: a typical design included a large entrance lobby, off which stood a hall used to mark formal occasions (*aktovyi zal*) and a gymnasium, with, at the rear, wide corridors that were also used as recreation rooms in bad weather, and a range of classrooms leading off these. But inevitably, the crash building programme of schools that took place at this stage very largely consisted of *tipovye proekty*. Around 120 schools in Leningrad during the late 1960s and 1970s, for instance, were constructed to just two designs, both of an unimaginatively boxy kind; alternative projects with a more experimental character ended up shelved for economic reasons [Smirnov 2003: 126–7]. Such designs were carried out by anonymous *kollektivny* under the nominal leadership of an experienced architect, and were considered essentially architectural hackwork, to be carried out by the mediocre, while the able worked away on special one-off commissions or entries for competitions.¹ Inevitably, the general standard of architecture and furnishing was somewhat Spartan and uninspiring.

In principle, then, the gamut of schools might run from a newly-built show project for a ‘model school’, designed by a named architect, down to a crumbling inner-city building, perhaps even with war damage. A team from the Academy of Pedagogical Sciences’ Scientific Research Institute of Forms and Methods of Education (NII form i metodov obucheniya APN SSSR) which visited Sverdlovsk in 1957 to check on the trial run for the new curriculum introduced nationwide in 1958, saw a range of 10 ‘typical’ schools that included, among others, a pre-revolutionary former classical high school (spacious and well laid out), a brand new building, a six-year-old building, two *tipovoi* buildings of some age, but one of which was specified to be ‘in good condition’, and a building of unspecified age that was ‘in need of repairs and modernisation’. The buildings ranged in height from one to four storeys, and in size from 11 to 35 rooms, and the levels of equipment were very variable, with many schools short of essential workshop and laboratory materials and one school soldiering on with a

¹ C. Kelly, interview with former architect and studio director at Lenstroï, 31 August 2002.

solid fuel stove system rather than central heating.¹ Matters were further complicated by the fact that children housed in a new building might treat it badly, while pupils at an apparently more modest school adopted a more protective or neutral attitude. According to the recollections of a woman who attended a Leningrad school in the 1970s:

My school [...] had also just been built (in 1970) to some special design, it wasn't a tipovoi proekt. Apparently it had been planned to be an elite institution from the beginning. [...] The teachers often got on at us in the lower forms: we had a school like this! and we didn't value it. No-one ever bothered to specify exactly what the school was 'like', it all functioned purely at the exclamatory level.

It was actually true to say that we didn't really value it. The boys used bent pins on threads to try and hook the fish in the aquariums, and everyone flung all sorts of trash in there — apple cores, sweet papers, and so on. And then [later on] they took the aquariums away altogether — I think it was about a year [after I started school], but it could have been earlier, because all the fish died off straight away ['Vospominaniya' 2003: 1].

This, however, seems to be an extreme example: informants from more modest schools do not recall vandalism of this kind. No doubt there was a sense that damaged items were unlikely to be replaced, and thus indispensable. In principle, too, the compulsory rotas of *dezhurstvo*, or responsibility for keeping the classroom tidy, chalk supplied, etc., meant that even the least diligent had to make some contribution to the upkeep of the school fabric).

An aspect of standardisation in material culture that was strongly resented by pupils was the requirement to wear a school uniform. Up to the early 1960s, this was the original outfit as first stipulated in 1943 — and as modelled then on pre-revolutionary patterns. Boys had a military-style uniform jacket and leather belt, girls were forced into a quaint and anachronistic combination of brown dress and frilly apron (black for every day, white for festival days). From 1962, boys had to wear hairy grey jackets and trousers, while the outfit for girls remained the same. In the mid-1980s, a different kind of uniform again was introduced, consisting of more banal, but not necessarily more elegant, dark-blue jackets and skirts. None of these uniforms, whatever the appeal to adults of tidiness and homogeneity, was much liked by those who actually had to wear it. Discomfort was one problem: a survey in the late 1950s established that the stand-up collars worn by 82 per cent of older children were felt by half of those forced into

¹ 'Nauchnyi otchet o komandirovke v g. Sverdlovsk i Sverdlovskoi oblasti [sic.] po voprosu izucheniya opyta shkol, rabotayushchikh po novomu uchebnomu planu', RAO NA f. 32 op. 1 ed. khr. 655, ll. 15–67. On war damage see [CKQ 0x-03 PF 3B: 9] (part of an Odessa school closed in the early 1970s because of subsidence from this cause).

them to be itchy and uncomfortable [Lapshina 1959: 30].¹ Fashion was another, particularly among older pupils, for whom the ultimate status symbol was now a pair of jeans. But modifying the regulation wear was difficult, since the rules were strictly enforced — for example, teachers might tear down the hems of a skirt that they felt had been shortened too much, and physically scrub the makeup from the face of an errant schoolgirl, rather than simply ordering her to remove it [see interviewer's note to Oxf/Lev SPb-03 PF 20A: 34]. A former pupil at a particularly sophisticated Leningrad school recalled that small-scale modifications were attempted, which were at one and the same time tiny gestures of rebellion, and parades of 'cultural capital' in terms of access to scarce, or indeed Western, goods. Girls used to liven up the monotony with coloured tights (an item that came into the category of *defitsit*, almost impossible to buy), and she herself got into a good deal of trouble for covering up her Komsomol badge with a Western badge bearing the name of Jesus Christ Superstar [CKQ Ox-03 PF 13A: 9, 11].

Another area of material life that inspired detestation was school food — described as like the contents of a latrine (*parasha*) by one unwilling victim [Oxf/Lev Spb-03 PF 24B: 19]. Protests of this kind were themselves, of course, a sign of social change — at less prosperous stages of Soviet history, such as the early 1920s, not to speak of during the Second War, the quality of school meals had not attracted comment: their mere existence made all the difference between survival and starvation.² Once an element of choice had come in, pupils now sometimes made efforts to avoid the offerings of the school canteen: for example, in the 1970s one Leningrader and her friend used to spend the 32 kopecks doled out by their parents for school lunch on portions of ice cream with syrup [CKQ Ox-03 PF 13 B: 12]. Though pupils had little direct control over the material culture of the school, they were able in such small ways to adjust institutional homogeneity.

'What Does and Doesn't Go in Your Leaving Certificate': Political Indoctrination and the Non-Academic Curriculum

The account of a first school day in 1981, where the first assignment given was to learn the Soviet national anthem by heart, gives the impression that post-Stalinist education was still strongly ideological in character. In some respects, this impression was accurate. Days

¹ Lapshina urged for a change to the uniform not only on this basis, but on the basis of hygiene: younger pupils were bundled into several layers under their uniforms, which impeded movement, while older ones wore nothing but a singlet and underpants under theirs, which did not aid cleanliness, since the woollen over-garments were cleaned once or twice a year at best [Lapshina: 31].

² See e.g. [CKQ Ox-03 PF 6B: 14] (Leningrad schools operating essentially as soup kitchens during the blockade).

still started with a *lineika*, formal assembly, at which Pioneer symbolism (the bugle and the drum, red banners) was prominent, and which included speechifying by the director, and sometimes also members of staff and even pupils. As a woman born in 1949 recalled:

Everyone lined up, the whole school, and the director made a speech, and the deputy director made a speech, and one of the teachers would make a speech, or maybe one of the pupils would, would say something anyway [CKQ Ox-03 PF 8B: 16].

As this woman also remembered, it could be very unnerving to be picked out to give an oration, as she herself was on the occasion of Yury Gagarin's safe return on 12 April 1961 from his first flight into space:

They made me express my delight, so to speak, in front of the whole school, my pride in the achievements of Soviet science and technology, because... because, so to speak, we, the Soviet Union had been the first to send a person into space and because that person had been a Soviet person [CKQ Ox-03 PF 8B: 16].

While pupil involvement of this kind was not universal — other informants remember nothing like it¹ — the organisation of a *lineika* of some kind was. It provided a formal opening to the school day, just as ideological initiatives of other kinds — Pioneer meetings, class meetings, the *klassnyi chas*, or pep-talk on some moral subject by the class teacher (*klassnyi rukovoditel*) framed it at the other end. And pupils' surroundings everywhere were also punctuated by political symbolism, which was not confined to the *pionerskaya komnata*, Pioneer centre, with its banners, magazines and newspapers, and probably also shrine dedicated to whichever Soviet saint was the dedicatee of the *druzhina* (the largest unit of Pioneer organisation at school level), but manifested itself in official portraits on the walls of classrooms and corridors, and also in the *stengazeta*, wall newspaper, with its laborious articles on political topics of the day, not to speak of portraits and poster displays in the classroom, and so on.

At the same time, all of this was superficial, for several reasons. To begin with, the very pervasiveness of political propaganda made it in some respects invisible, particularly once stability was the governing medium of political life. Individuals who grew up knowing no leader but Brezhnev, who seemed by the 1980s to be enjoying eternal life, if not eternal youth, found official culture paralytically uninteresting. Engagement in politics, whether this came in the form of *politinformatsiya* sessions at which pupils were supposed to regurgitate articles from the Soviet press, Pioneer meetings, or the so-called 'Leninskie zachety' at which those in their last years at school read

¹ See e.g. [CKQ SPb-03 PF 2B: 15].

some representative works of Lenin and discoursed about them to a panel of visiting inspectors, was stultified by the painfully routine nature of the activities. Often pupils simply did not understand the language in which they were being tutored, and spouted about ‘American hegemonism’ and ‘Zionist aggression’ without having the faintest idea of what, in real terms, this meant [CKQ SPb-03 PF 2A: 11]. Privately, most pupils, and a fair number of teachers, were politically apathetic, if not actually cynical, and this mood occasionally came out in public — as, for example, in the following reminiscence about a history lesson:

My friend got up and said, ‘Well, you’ve all heard how the soldiers would go into battle shouting ‘For the Motherland, for Stalin!’ But just imagine if a war started now. Would people really shout, ‘For the Motherland, for Brezhnev!’ And the class cracked up laughing, as you can imagine [CKQ SPb-03 PF 2A: 11].

Inevitably, political discussions were beset by an air of lack of conviction, of going through the motions. A child whose parents were listening to ‘Voice of America’, ‘Radio Free Europe’, the BBC Russian Service or some other Western radio station, as increasing numbers of Soviet citizens started to do from the early 1960s, was certain to write off school discussion as ‘rubbish’ (*erunda*).¹ On the other hand, a child who did not come from an intellectually ambitious social background was likely to find political discussion absurd and irrelevant.² It would seem that the occasional post-Stalinist schoolchildren who were not political cynics had a rather specific family profile: they were the children of active, ideologically committed Soviet citizens who might well themselves be professionally involved in education.³

The civil defence classes offered in schools (*grazhdanskaya oborona*) were generally the subject of even greater disdain. Pupils knew that they could not risk expressing their contempt too openly at sessions of *politinformatsiya* or Pioneer and Komsomol meetings, since this would have been to risk disciplinary action both through the organisation and through the school (culminating possibly in a bad conduct mark and a *kharakteristika*, character reference, of a kind that would debar them from further study). On the other hand, civil

¹ See e.g. [CKQ SPb-03 PF 2A: 11].

² See e.g. the comments of a working-class male Leningrader born in 1960 about the Pioneer heroes who featured in his school education: **Int.** *Do you remember any Pioneer heroes?* **Inf.** *Think I could forget that crap? Valya Kotik. Lyonya Golikov...* **Int.** *Do you remember what they did?* **Inf.** *(sighing heavily) They blew themselves up, didn’t they? [...] Fought fascism, didn’t they? The idiots!’* [Oxf/Lev SPb-03 PF 18A: 46].

³ For a case in point, see [Oxf/Lev SPb-03 PF 26A-B: *passim*] (this informant, b. 1960, is the son of a schoolteacher and political activist who himself participated in the Pioneer and Komsomol leadership at his school and spent a good deal of time organising sporting and GTO (Get Fit for Work and Defence) activities.

education did not fall within the grading system (school leaving certificates simply recorded that a pupil had undergone a course in it), and hence it might safely be treated with levity. It was also always taught by retired low-ranking officers from the Soviet army, who usually had zero pedagogical ability and were the subject of merciless teasing from their tutees. ‘They lasted exactly a year,’ one woman born in 1975 recorded.¹ Even in the 1940s, pupils had often skived off civil defence with impunity: in one case, an entire class spent their time either annoying the teacher at the front or cooking pancakes on a Bunsen burner at the back. When examination time came round, the pupils deserted the school en masse. This, to be sure, got them into trouble with the school authorities (parents were called in and the law laid down), but in the end the authorities gave way, and credit was given for the course on record cards even though no test was ever imposed [Oxf/Lev SPb-O2 PF 7A: 47]. In the post-Stalin era, the standing of ‘civil defence’ was even lower, and disruption still more likely.

With other non-academic subjects, which occupied an equally peripheral place in the curriculum, reactions depended to a greater extent on individual factors. Sport, a deadly bore for many academically-inclined pupils, was the one subject in which some who struggled with intellectual subjects felt any interest.² Equally, while some pupils thought the training in handicraft that was offered (from the mid-1960s, ‘housekeeping’ for girls and ‘labour training’ for boys) a ‘complete waste of time’, but others found the lessons reasonably interesting and useful.³ No doubt the same was true of music and art for others.⁴ Alongside a child’s personal interest, the enthusiasm and competence of the teacher (as with any subject) were crucial, the problem here being that as the ‘special school’ system opened up, the best qualified were likely to opt for a position outside ‘general education’. In some cases, pupils did not receive the tuition

¹ [CKQ OX-03 PF 11A: 9. Cf. CKQ SPb-03 PF 3A: 17] (class torments the colonel taking the class by saying ‘*Zdraviya zhelayu, tovarishch podokonnik*’ (approximately, ‘Good day to you, Comrade Kernel’), or [CKQ OX-03 PF 3B: 9] (class can’t stop laughing during civil defence).

² See e.g. [Oxf/Lev SPb-03 PF 18A: 32].

³ The brief revival of the ‘comprehensive school of labour’ (*edinaya trudovaya shkola*) in the Khrushchev era meant that girls, as well as boys, underwent ‘training for labour’ (*trudovoe vospitanie*). From the late 1960s onwards, groups were divided along gender lines, so that girls learned to cook, sew, clean, etc., while boys learned to do woodwork and had other kinds of skill training. On the whole, boys seem to have had a more positive experience than girls, both because ‘work experience’ placements from class 8 (age 14–15) onwards allowed them to earn a little money, and because the skills taught were a little more practical. The official school programme in the 1970s, for instance, demanded that girls be taught to sew an apron in year 1, a pair of underpants in year 2, and a skirt in year 3, and because of lack of culinary facilities, cooking in some schools consisted of taking down recipes from dictation. (Compare [CKQ SPb-03 PF 2B: 12; CKQ OX-03 PF 11A: 9; CKQ OX-03 PF 13B: 12]. For a female informant who did find the classes moderately useful, though, see [CKQ OX-03 PF 3B: 10]).

⁴ On this, see e.g. the memoirs of an art teacher [Oxf/Lev M-03 PF 12A: 6–8; PF 12B: 14].

that was envisaged in central timetabling because it was simply not possible to find the staff.¹

Much more significant in terms of the enthusiasm that they inspired were non-academic activities outside the main school timetable. The late 1950s and early 1960s saw a two-sided expansion of these. On the one side, the Pioneer movement graduated further towards the function of a leisure organisation, a function in which it had become active in the mid-1930s, as ‘Pioneer palaces’ were set up as the centres of hobby ‘circles’ (*kruzhki*), often of a handicraft or amateur art variety (radio building, ‘young naturalists’, model-making, ballet, music, and literature were all commonly represented). With the rise of the ‘Timurite’ movement after 1940, as well, Pioneers became increasingly involved in volunteer work rather like that done by Scouts in the West, in particular visiting old people and collecting scrap to foster the national good.² On the other side, anxieties about the dangers of ‘parallelism’, or the existence of youth organisations beyond the Komsomol and Pioneer organisation, went into abeyance: the main concern was now to expand the network of ‘rational leisure’ organisations.³

A striking feature of the era is the sheer amount of ‘voluntarist’ work with children that was going on in and around schools, usually driven by the enthusiasm and self-sacrifice of individual teachers. It was common for such dedicated people, especially class teachers, to take pupils on school trips, sometimes long distance — to other parts of Russia or even different republics. Alternatively, if the local landscape permitted, children might be escorted on hiking expeditions that involved making a campfire and cooking improvised meals, and sometimes also camping out.⁴ In some schools this activity was formalised through the foundation of entire separate clubs, run, once more, by individual teachers, and sometimes providing sports training as preparation for hiking trips.⁵ While official guides for ‘class teachers’ continued to stress their function as conduits for official values, and as

¹ See e.g. [CKQ SPb-03 PF 2B: 14] (this particular school had no singing classes for several years). [Oxf/Lev M-03 PF 1A: 9] records that the 1970s sports programme required separate activities for girls and for boys, but that resources made this problematic because a single teacher had to take the sessions.

² The ‘Timurite’ movement, inspired by Arkady Gaidar’s popular novel *Timur i ego komanda* (1940), was extremely prominent during the Second World War, but lost official favour thereafter. During the 1960s, however, it underwent a significant revival, with, for instance, *Pionerskaya pravda* running repeated Timur items in 1963–4 (see e.g. 22 February 1963, 7 January 1964). For recollections of this kind of voluntary work in post-Stalinist Soviet schools, see e.g. [CKQ OX-03 PF 8B: 16–17; CKQ OX-03 PF 11B: 16].

³ See e.g. ‘O rabote s pionerami i shkolnikami v vnechebnoe vremya’ (1965), RGASPI-KhDMO, f. 2, op. 1, ed. khr. 423, ll. 9–16.

⁴ For long-distance trips, see e.g. [CKQ OX-03 PF 13B: 11] (this Leningrad school went to Kiev, Riga, and Brest, Minsk, and the Khotyn war memorial); for short-distance hikes, [CKQ OX-03 PF 11A: 9].

⁵ See especially the account of the ‘Tropinka’ club functioning at School no. 2 in Leningrad during the 1980s: [Oxf/Lev Spb-03 PF 22–3: *passim*].

regulators of discipline, in at least some cases contact was warmer and more personal than methodological prescription envisaged.¹

This kind of informal, extra-curricular, contact was all the more valued in that teacher-pupil relations in the classroom itself were usually extremely formal and distinctly anonymous; indeed sometimes — depending on the personal dynamics — they verged on antagonism.

**‘Testing Knowledge’ (*Proverka znaniï*):
The Classroom as Instrument of Social Control**

Classroom politics in the post-Stalin era do not seem to have been beset by the serious disciplinary problems that are reported, both in official sources and in the memoir literature, for the 1930s and 1940s. There are records at this period of a range of disruptive incidents, from truancy and insolence right up to assault upon teachers and fellow pupils with weapons. It is, of course, possible that intensive research in archives would produce a similar catalogue of serious incidents, but given the rise in average standards of living that the 1960s and 1970s witnessed, it is perhaps equally likely that the classroom really did become calmer during a period when social stress was lower than it was during forced industrialisation and during and after the war. Certainly, oral history suggests that determinedly disruptive pupils constituted a marginal group, sometimes with an easily glossable social profile: for example, in one Black Sea resort town near Novorossiisk, the worst classroom *khuligany* were traditionally the children of merchant seamen billeted with other relatives while their parents spent months away at sea [CKQ-Ox-03 PF 11A: 10].

This is not to say, however, that teacher and pupil interests invariably overlapped, or that the classroom was necessarily the home of the sort of harmonious *kollektiv* envisaged in Soviet propaganda. Pupils were quick to spot teachers who were no good at keeping order, whether because they were very young, very old, or simply had no pedagogical gifts. Teachers of this kind might well be subjected to as much bullying as the class could get away with.² A favourite method of tormenting the unwary was *mychanye*, where a large group of pupils or indeed the entire class set up a low-pitched hum, with individual members of the group falling silent as they were approached, so that the infuriated pedagogue was unable to find out

¹ See [Boldyrev 1955]. The duties dwelled on here included (alongside all the political consciousness-raising) fixing up work trips to collective farms, organising sports sessions and excursions to the theatre, and checking up that pupils were doing their extra-curricular reading.

² ‘Every [new] teacher gets put through an ordeal’ [Oxf/Lev M-03 PF12A: 4].

where the noise was coming from [Oxf/Lev SPb-03 PF 18A: 37]. If they got the chance, pupils would declare bluntly that they ‘couldn’t give a fig’ (*nam eto vse po barabanu*) [CKQ SPb-03 PF 3A: 17]. The ultimate aim was to disrupt the lesson completely (*sryvat urok*), a technique that might well have severe consequences for the hapless teacher, since failure to keep control could lead to dismissal from one’s position.¹

Inevitably, given the demands of keeping order in large, mixed-ability classes that included a lunatic fringe of pupils bent on disruption, teachers were often battle-scarred and ruthless. In the words of one Leningrad man, ‘*The teachers who’d been through the 1950s and 1960s behaved like the teachers in a nineteenth-century English novel, they’d grab a ruler and bash you over the knuckles [...] I can’t say that they abused the practice, but I myself often saw teachers restoring discipline in the Soviet way*’ [CKQ SPb-03 PF 3A: 17]. Other pedagogical weapons — alongside recourse to the official arsenal of assigning bad marks, or more seriously, a bad conduct mark (i.e. anything less than a perfect 5) included sarcasm, reordering the classroom so that friends and accomplices were separated, and making the class stand up until the hubbub quietened down.² But on the whole, teachers preferred not to let things get to this stage. They aimed, rather, to create a sense of repressive awe by making pupils stand up when a member of staff entered the room, insisting that hands were raised before a contribution was made to class discussion, and — in some cases — refusing to allow pupils to leave the room during class, even to visit the lavatory.³ Two of these methods — standing up and raising of hands — were written into the official school rules, which imposed upon pupils courtesy to staff at all times [*Spravochnik* 1971: 106–7]. The lavatory directive, however, was a case where personal initiative had been imposed. It was one of several cases where the defensive need to maintain order spilled over into sadism, another being the manipulation of pupils’ psychology by the imposition of a hierarchy of favourites and scapegoats. Pupils’ resentment at teachers who openly selected favourites was offset by the considerable power that teachers had in assigning marks. A teacher who openly showed preferences for some pupils over others might well be privately disliked, but would probably not be openly challenged, since anyone who did so risked falling into the category of ‘scapegoats’, with a corresponding loss of educational security and institutional prestige [see CKQ Ox-03 PF 8A: 9 and CKQ Ox-03 PF 3A: 8].

¹ As happened to the literature teacher subjected to the practice by the informant and his classmates in [Oxf/Lev SPb-03 PF 18A: 37].

² Sarcasm: cf. the warnings against this in professional journals, e.g. [Trofimov 1952]. Splitting up friends: see [CKQ-Ox-03 PF8A: 9]. Making the class stand up: [Oxf/Lev SPb-03 PF16A: 73].

³ Standing up: [Oxf/Lev SPb-03 PF20A: 42]; prohibition on the lavatory: [Oxf/Lev SPb-03 PF24B: 26].

This regimentation, whatever its merits in terms of crowd control, did not enhance children's enjoyment of school life. As we have seen, it was one of the causes of alienation when children first arrived. In theory, nursery schools were supposed to acclimatise children in advance by organising excursions to a local primary. A manual published in 1961 paid tribute to a teacher from Babushkino who had done this, so that pupils now knew some essential things about the institution they were about to visit: *'Mother lets me have my hair down, but I'll have plaits when I go to school,'* or *'We mustn't be noisy with the desks, or we won't hear what teacher is saying. We must put our hands up and say what we want'* [Sorokina 1961: 308]. But if induction of this kind was regularly offered (which one may doubt), it did little to soften the bewilderment, and in some cases annoyance, of children once they actually reached the schoolroom, and were confronted, for instance, with the need to stand up when the teacher entered, or to raise your hand to answer a question: *'When the teacher came in, everyone stood to attention by their desks. And you had to sit with your arms folded, with your left elbow on your right hand'* [Oxf/Lev SPb-03 PF 24B: 26 (interviewer's comments)]. The rigidity of classroom etiquette, judging by oral history work, seems to have been particularly strongly resented by male working-class informants:

You'll be watching [TV], and they'll have something on about an American school, they'll all be sitting there so relaxed, talking to the teacher like he was a mate. Right? You just can't get your head round it, eh? [...] [But in the Soviet school] *say it's a hot day, there's sweat running down your back, you try to ease up a bit, right? And they'd start in on you: 'Nosov' (that's my surname), 'what are you lolling round there for?' And then later, you'd be sitting there again, and it would all start over another time. You'd just sit there and get it time after time, and it was just dreadful* [Oxf/Lev SPb-03 PF 24B: 13, 26].

But relations in the classroom should not be seen purely in terms of confrontation. Almost all memoirists and interviewees recall with gratitude one or two teachers who genuinely did manage to inspire their classes, as well as some fearful monsters.¹ And by far the most characteristic working relationship was based on co-operation, indeed collusion. Pupils had, of course, a vested interest in achieving the best possible mark for their work, and teachers also were keen to foster high grades, since the standing of the school, and their own standing as teachers, depended upon the proportion of pupils who achieved top marks. And it was particularly during the formal assessment of progress by assignment of marks — potentially a flashpoint — that collusion became evident.

Like every other kind of Soviet institution, the school was subject to

¹ See e.g. [CKQ-SPb-03 PF 2B: 14]; [CKQ-0x-03 PF 3A: 9], etc.

centralised planning both at the macro level (setting of budgets, regulation of the curriculum) and at the micro level (both administrators and individual teachers were supposed to organise their work according to pre-set schedules). In practice, from the mid 1930s and the reintroduction of ‘uniform textbooks’ (*stabilnye uchebniki*: i.e., textbooks that were mandatory throughout the educational system), planning at the level of the individual classroom usually meant conformity to a strongly ritualised formula whereby the lesson began with review of work already covered, and in particular with a session where pupils were quizzed about the material from the textbooks that they had been allocated for homework. It then continued with formal discussion of new material, before finishing with the setting of work to be done before the next lesson.¹

All of these separate sections of the lesson were themselves supposed to happen in a planned and orderly fashion. Teachers were instructed, for instance, to present new material in the form of a ‘lecture’ (*shkolnaya lektsiya*), or a ‘demonstration’ (*demonstratsiya*), which might involve, say, presenting each pair of pupils with a fish-head to look at in a biology lesson so that they could see the movement of the gills, or a ‘discussion’ (*beseda*), i.e. series of leading questions (‘Can steam be turned into water?’, etc.) [Shimbirev 1940: 276–87]. The setting of homework was a compulsory part of the lesson, and the normal loads were laid down in ministerial regulations. In the 1960s and 1970s, they ranged from 1 hour per day in class 1 (for seven year olds) up to 4 hours per day in class 8 (for fifteen year olds). This was on top of a school day that ran from 24 hours per week for the lowest forms up to 30 hours a week for classes 5–9 (and 32 hours per week for the top class).²

The most elaborate prescriptions, though, related to the first section of the lesson, review of work already covered, what pedagogical manuals termed *ustnaya proverka znanii* (‘the oral testing of knowledge’). This was officially supposed to be a perfect manifestation of ‘socialist competition’ and collective harmony, with the class listening attentively as one of its members went through his or her paces. The atmosphere in which this ritual was conducted was supposed to be imbued

¹ Already in the 1930s, the dependence of Soviet teachers on textbooks was found striking by pupils who had been exposed to other European cultures (see e.g. Leongard 1984: 15). There were some individualists who deliberately eschewed the standard material (see e.g. [CKQ 0x-03 PF 6A: 12], on a maths teacher in late 1940s Leningrad). However, this was a risky action: cf. the use of ‘Knorin’s textbook after this had been banned for use in schools’ as grounds for the arrest in 1938 of a history teacher in Staro-Kuznetsk, Stalinskaya Province: [Kemerovo i Stalinsk 1999: 478].

² ‘Ustav srednei obshcheobrazovatelnoi shkoly’ [*Spravochnik direktora shkoly* 1971: 15 (home-work)]. These norms are similar to those established in 1951 [Boldyrev 1955: 101]. Contrast Beatrice King’s recollection that in 1937 the Kiev school that she visited was setting 40 minutes to the lower years, and three hours for the top forms. [King 1937: 12].

with *strakh*, terror, which — in the Stalinist system — had been a virtuous emotion, something equivalent to the biblical ‘fear of the Lord’.¹

The model pupils whose essays about *ustnaya proverka* were cited in a pedagogical textbook on the process depicted themselves progressing, through terror, to the achievement of enlightenment. The following piece by a boy in class 10 at Moscow School no. 636 was a case in point:

The bell announcing the lesson has rung. The teacher comes in: the pupils rise to their feet and then sit down in their places again. The experienced teacher runs a quick look from under his glasses at the pupils, the desks, the floor, the walls, the ceiling of the classroom. Only then, after this long procedure, does he begin the lesson. The question session begins... A deathly hush falls on the class. The teacher looks through the list of pupils and slowly, as though in a deliberate drawl, utters my surname. Something turns over inside me, and although the homework was quite easy and I have a good knowledge of it, a slight shiver runs down my body. I get up and go to the blackboard. The shiver calms down, the excitement fades away as though I had never felt it, and a sense of my own power fills my soul with warm light and spreads over my entire body. I begin to answer. My thoughts boil up like a whirlpool in my head, organising themselves into an elegant system of knowledge. Words trip lightly and involuntarily off my tongue, like over-ripe fruits from a gently shaken tree. Hurriedly, fearful I'll be interrupted before I've managed to say everything that I'm thinking, I give the answers. The teacher smiles warmly and says gently, 'Good! That'll do! Just one more question!' And now I'm not nervous any more. The question seems really easy, and I answer it in a playful way. I've finished giving my answers, and the teacher enters my mark in the register in a beautifully neat hand. I'm certain that I've got a five, but in order to work myself up a bit, I start going meticulously through everything that was wrong with my answer to myself. But now the pupils sitting in the front row, the first heralds of our schoolroom joys and disasters, are showing five fingers behind their backs, and a whisper runs round the classroom, 'Five!' [Perovsky 1955: 25–6].

While the teacher, in this scenario, retains complete control, the objectives he has in mind are shared by everyone in the classroom. The individual pupil makes every effort to answer well, and the *kollektiv* approves his efforts, joyfully greeting the top grade he has been given. The success of the *otlichnik* (star pupil) is not resented; instead, he is seen as an example to all.

A cynic might remark also that the tiny sketch of *proverka znanii* set

¹ See especially Aleksandr Afinogenov's play *Strakh* (Fear, 1931). In Western sources, such as [Kasack 1992: 15], Afinogenov is credited with a critical attitude towards terror and the political purging process, but in fact *Strakh* presents terror exultantly, as a positive force in the renewal of society. On this side of Soviet culture see also [Kharkhordin 1999].

out here laid bare the system's emphasis on the sheer amount of information regurgitated, rather than its integration into a logical argument. A mark of 'excellent' was supposed to be given if the pupil 'knew the whole volume of the material in the programme that has been covered and cited many diverse examples', 'brought out what was central and significant', 'made no mistakes of fact and formulated accurately', and 'expounded (whether orally or in writing) all the material required in a systematic and independent-minded manner'. Independence of mind and complete accuracy was not required for a mark of 'satisfactory', but otherwise the guidelines were much the same [Shimbirev 1940: 306–7]. 'Independence of mind', then, was a bonus in the most gifted, but otherwise not required (and in fact, one notes, the prize pupil in the passage just quoted is most remarkable for his fluent command of Soviet cliché — as in the phrase 'like over-ripe fruits from a gently shaken tree').

Methodological textbooks naturally made no criticisms of this kind, but reluctantly conceded some limitations (or, as the preferred euphemism had it, 'complications') of the 'oral testing' method. It was possible only to sample the efforts of a small number of pupils; the replies were ephemeral, and thus had to be graded instantly, with no revision being possible; having to speak in public might provoke attacks of nerves and self-consciousness in pupils. But the advantages of the method were deemed to be as follows: it allowed a pupil's individual abilities to be spotlighted more effectively than any other assessment method did; it trained pupils in public responsibility (*obshchestvennaya otchetnost*); and it was flexible, allowing any subject to be tested at will. Plainly, these strengths outweighed the drawbacks [Perovsky 1955: 19–23].

The reference to 'public responsibility' is especially revealing. More than simply an efficient method of pedagogical reinforcement, *ustnaya proverka* was supposed to be an instrument of social control, or in the words of one pedagogue, a 'school of criticism and self-criticism' (*shkola kritiki*) [Perovsky 1955: 20]. It was a process in which the individual pupil, guided by the teacher and sometimes also by the other pupils (the model dialogues had the teacher turning to the floor if the answer given by the official interrogee was unsatisfactory), arrived eventually at the right answer, whether this meant a command of factual detail in itself or an interpretation of the facts:

Teacher: What kind of climate is there in Korea?

Pupil 1: A monsoon climate.

Teacher: Left that out first time, didn't you? And what else didn't you say that you should have done? [Pupil is silent]. Come on girls, what have you got to say to that? [Several other pupils raise their hands]. Well, S?

Pupil 2. She should have said that although Korea is only a small country, it has lots of useful minerals. In Korea they mine gold, silver, iron ore, coloured metals, and coal [...]

Teacher. Well done, S! Good girl, sit down. So, who else can add something? [Perovsky 1955: 151]

While later manuals were less explicit about the link between oral testing and social control, they still emphasised the role of the process in enforcing a sense of the need for self-improvement: 'A properly conducted oral test will make schoolchildren themselves want to find out how much they know' [Boldyrev et al. 1968: 196]. Textbooks on school hygiene still, in the post-Stalin era, recommended a classroom layout that would allow universal surveillance: in the words of a manual published in 1967, the teacher's desk should be placed 'in front of the first desk of the middle row' (*pered pervoi partoi srednego ryada*, i.e. the middle of three rows running from front to back of the classroom). It added, 'So that the teacher can observe the pupils more effectively, it is convenient to place the teacher's desk on a special platform, or to introduce a raised chair, especially where teaching in the higher classes is concerned' [Sovetov 1967: 100].

In reality, *ustnaya proverka znanii* seldom lived up to the decorous ideal imagined in such pedagogical manuals. To begin with, in mixed-ability groups, teachers often concentrated their efforts on mediocre or struggling pupils, so that, rather than having the chance to shine, *otlichniki* might sit whiling away the time in boredom and frustration. Brighter pupils preferred activities of a more challenging, and indeed competitive kind — for instance, a system introduced by one Leningrad maths teacher where pupils were allocated as many problems as they could manage during a lesson, so that getting into the top group who were allocated most became a point of pride [CKQ-Ox-03 PF 13A: 9]. But less able pupils disliked *ustnaya proverka* too: they were daunted by the likelihood that their mistakes would be shown up in public, and resentful that their best efforts tended to be rewarded by mediocre marks [Oxf/Lev SPb-03 PF 25B: 40]. Whichever way, as school inspectors were wont to complain, recitations from the textbook predominated over insightful expositions of properly understood information.¹

Ustnaya proverka, then, rarely engaged the entire class in the sort of rapt communality and creative improvisation envisaged in pedagogical textbooks. Sometimes those not undergoing questioning simply tuned out. At least one book was an essential part of the equipment

¹ See e.g. (in the particular case of chemistry), 'Materialy o vyborochnoi proverke znanii, umenii i navykov 7–11 klassov shkol-internatov No. 12, 61, 72 i shkoly No. 204 g. Moskvy' (1963), RAO NA f. 32 op. 1 d. 834, l. 52: 'Some of the [pupils] gave answers that were very close to the textbook, without the required understanding of chemical formulae and technical terms.'

for surviving a day at school; when not reading, bored pupils might well be passing notes, conversing, or, if they were particularly diligent, doing the homework for another lesson.¹ Where group solidarity did manifest itself, this was in a subversive sense, through the ‘prompting’ (*podskazka*) of those under interrogation. Pupils mouthed the answers to questions, gesticulated, and sometimes — if the teacher’s attention seemed to have wandered elsewhere — even held up notices with the right answer [CKQ Ox-03 PF 8B: 12]. Comparable subversive activities included *spisyvanie* — copying of work from another pupil, the use of *shpargalki* (crib sheets) during examinations or tests (*kontrolnye*), and surreptitious reference to text-books during *ustnaya proverka* — which was a possibility if the review session took place, as it sometimes did, with pupils sitting at their desks, rather than ‘called to the blackboard’ at the front of the class.

All these practices were regularly denounced in the Pioneer press, which emphasised their dishonourability (*nechestnost*). In 1962, for example, the Leningrad Pioneer newspaper *Leninskie iskry* ran a discussion session across several issues prompted by an incident when a boy who would not let classmates copy his work was set upon and ended up with a broken nose. In a parallel, at the junior level, to the discussions that were currently going on in the Komsomol press about civic duty, readers were invited to comment. A show trial duly followed, finishing in a verdict of ‘guilty’ and a condemnation of copying.² But even in this propaganda-led discussion, a few alternative voices came through. In the words of one defiant character from School no. 388, ‘Only mean, nasty and spiteful people won’t let you copy!’ Oral history confirms that this attitude was indeed dominant in the schoolroom at this period (as at other periods of Russian history). If pupils did not use *shpargalki*, the reason for this was normally that they could not be bothered.³ *Otlichniki* might not necessarily have recourse to these practices on their own account, but refusing to help others out was regarded as dishonourable (*nechestno*): an *otlichnik* who remained aloof was in danger of exciting very direct retribution outside the school classroom.⁴

On the face of it, the prevalence of such practice might be considered evidence of a pupil subculture existing alongside, and impervious to,

¹ See e.g. [CKQ Ox-03 PF 13A: 9; PF 13B: 12].

² See ‘Podlost nado sudit!’, *Leninskie iskry* 6 October 1962: 6, and the sequels in the issue for 17 October: 3; 31 October: 3; and 21 November: 3.

³ As, for instance, in [CKQ SPb-03 PF 3A: 18]. For a case where an informant made *shpargalki*, but (according to her own insistence) never actually consulted them during tests, regarding them as a ‘life line’ (*spasatel'naya verevka*), see [CKQ Ox-03 PF 11A: 10].

⁴ On the best pupils not having recourse to copying etc., see [CKQ Ox-03 PF 4A: 11]. On social pressure to participate in such activities, see [CKQ Ox-03 PF 11A: 10. Oxf/Lev SPb-03 PF 15B: 56], notes that conversely, *otlichniki* who had already been bullied might retaliate by refusing to let others copy their work.

official values. But in fact, the situation was less simple. All these different ways of evading straightforward assessment relied on a degree of collusion from the teacher if they were to function in the first place. The activity that was most likely to be silently indulged was the use of *shpargalki* — in stark contrast to the British school system at the same era, where the use of crib sheets would have been termed ‘cheating’ and severely punished. Teachers who did not tolerate the use of cribs existed, but they were unusual enough to be specially remembered.¹ There were even teachers who consciously defended the use of *shpargalki* as an indication that the material had been ingested at some level: ‘[The pupil’s] *worked through the material for himself*.’² *Podskazka*, on the other hand, was a little more problematic: it was, for instance, difficult to get away with it in a small classroom, because of the likelihood that the teacher would see [CKQ SPb-03 PF 3A: 18]. However, the reason teachers took action in cases like this may have been as much because they felt awkward about permitting an illicit activity that everyone knew they could not avoid observing, rather than because they were resolutely opposed to *podskazka* as such. Indeed, in one official report on a nursery school filed in 1961 the inspectors commented on the fact that children prompted each other during question and answer sessions as a positive feature, indicating willingness to help.³ While attitudes to the practice in ‘real’ school were rather different, an unspoken association of *podskazka* and mutual aid seems to have persisted.

Podskazka and other unofficial classroom practices, therefore, constituted an important area where teachers had to compromise with pupils. The root of collusion was the nature of the school programme, which was immensely demanding in terms of the standards required over a huge range of subjects. In the words of one former pupil of high academic ability, ‘We just had to cover so much material, so much, you know: they stuffed so much into us you couldn’t cope any other way.’ This person was himself forced to resort to copying mathematics homework in the higher classes because ‘at some point I just stopped understanding at all’ [CKQ SPb-03 PF 3A: 17, 18]. Teachers themselves, with no control over the school programme, and a duty to fulfil quotas of pupils with ‘passing’ grades, had a vested interest in tolerating behaviour that kept the system ticking over, and in making it seem as though even the weak pupils could follow the material that was being covered.

¹ [Oxf/Lev SPb-03 PF 16A: 74].

² [Oxf/Lev SPb-03 PF 20B: 43]. This informant also records the astonishment of her nephew, a student in the Netherlands, when he discovered that Dutch pupils do not have recourse to cribs, copying, etc. (ibid.)

³ ‘At lessons, the children try to help each other (they prompt)’. ‘Yasli-detsad No. 36 Leningradskogo raiona, Moskva’ (1961), RAO NA f. 126 op. 1 d. 35, l. 111.

And if classroom life saw teachers compromising to a greater degree with pupils than the strict regulation propounded in manuals would have assumed, conversely, outside the classroom, the influence of teachers was more pervasive than studies of ‘school folklore’ in the absolute have sometimes assumed.

Outside the Classroom: The Culture of the Playground and Corridor

The Cultural Revolution of 1928–1932 had seen a short-lived campaign to introduce ‘rational leisure’ to the playground through the provision of ‘organised games’ and other such decorous activities. Given the many other demands on teaching staff, however, the expectation that they make a contribution in this area was not realistic. In practice, the main way, during the 1930s and 1940s, that ‘rational leisure’ was ensured was by simply not allowing schoolchildren to use the playground, or to leave the school buildings, between the start of lessons in the morning and the end of lessons in the afternoon.¹

By the post-Stalin era, repression at this kind of level had become less prevalent, but — despite the revival of a drive to civilise children’s leisure — teachers took little interest in break time, limiting their activities to barking occasional commands at children whom they happened to catch misbehaving as they went from place to place.² Responsibility for maintaining order was left to older pupils, who might, when provoked, take drastic measures to subdue their juniors: in one Leningrad school, recreation monitors would suspend smaller children who had pushed them too far by the collar from the large hooks that remained behind after the aquariums in this luxuriously appointed model school had been removed. *‘And he’d dangle there like a marionette, to the delight of all the onlookers, until his friends managed to knock him off [the hook] from below and release him’* [‘Vospominaniya’ 2003: 2]. The description of such rough-and-ready supervision brings out an essential paradox of the social situation during recess: on the one hand, the official school hierarchy was in abeyance and summary justice (*samosud*) prevailed, but on the other hand, pupils themselves in at least a distant way replicated the authoritarian structures that prevailed in the school more widely (explosive behaviour of this kind characterised some teachers when provoked as well).³

¹ On not allowing children to leave the buildings, see [CKQ 0x-03 PF 6B: 12]: *‘They kept the door locked all the time so we wouldn’t be able to get out, because then we might have run off for good and all, to the movies or whatever.’* On lack of access to the playground (in an elite Moscow city-centre girls’ school during the late 1940s), see [CKQ 0x-03 PF 2B: 8].

² Email communication from interviewee in [CKQ 0x-03 PF 12-PF 13], 17 July 2003.

³ See above, and also [0xf/Lev SPb-03 PF 24B: 14–15] (a *zavuch*, director of studies, who was given to burning pupils on the cheek with a cigarette end when enraged, and a geography teacher who lammed about herself with the blackboard pointer).

The essential feature of school leisure was this link, albeit tenuous, with school authority. To be sure, some pupil activities during the breaks were not specific to the school and bore few traces of their immediate context. Once outside in the schoolyard, children played much the same games that they would have done in any street or courtyard: chase, catch, *slon* (a piggy-back battle between two children sitting on the shoulders of others), hopscotch, skipping. As in courtyards and streets generally, they ran round, smoked, talked desultorily, and worked their way through food and drink.¹ At the same time, though, there was a school-specific set of activities and especially of folklore transmission. Some of the school-specific activities were of an enforced kind: visiting the lavatory (because during classes this was usually not possible), catching up with missed homework.² But there was also a flourishing school folklore that bore a strong relation, by inversion, to the material presented in lessons. For example, special genres of anecdote popular with children undercut the constant schoolroom reminders about the need to behave in a sensible, practical way. One of the most popular heroes was Vovochka, a dimwit boy who, for instance, when instructed to paint the windows in the classroom during a stint as class monitor (*dezhurstnyy*) returned in puzzlement to say that the glass was all freshly painted, but he wasn't sure what to do with the frames. [CKQ Ox-03 PF 11A: 10]. Other joke figures of this kind included Poruchik Rzhevsky, the Soviet agent in disguise Shtirlitz, and Cheburashka, the protagonist of stories and cartoon scenarios written by the children's writer Eduard Uspensky.³ Equally popular were scabrous parodies of texts set for compulsory reading and learning by heart in literature classes: the opening lines of Pushkin's *Ruslan and Lyudmila*, or the stanzas on winter from *Evgeny Onegin* ('Winter: the peasant, sensing triumph...') or a rewritten stanza from Mayakovsky's 'Verses on My Soviet Passport', in which the poet extracted from his 'wide trousers' something quite different from the document attesting Soviet nationality of which he had boasted in the original poem [Belousov 1998].

If influences from the official parts of school life reached into these areas of pupils' imaginative lives, there were also sections of their emotional existence which showed the traces of school socialisation: the culture of friendship, for instance. On the one hand, friendship, as was abundantly documented in propaganda for chil-

¹ [CKQ SPb-03 PF 3A: 18]; [CKQ Ox-03 PF 4A: 11]; [CKQ Ox-03 PF 8B: 12].

² Visiting the lavatory: [CKQ Ox-03 PF4A: 11]; homework: [CKQ Ox-03 PF12B: 12].

³ For examples of jokes of this kind, see V. F. Lurye, 'Materialy po sovremennomu lenigradskomu folkloru', in [Belousov 1989: 118-43]; [Belousov 1990]; [Belousov 1998]. For further such material, and a good discussion, see [Utekhin 2001].

dren, was understood in official discourse to be a phenomenon fraught with danger. Friendship in the sense of absence of hostility was one thing: children were constantly reminded of the importance of maintaining a *druzhnyi klass*. In some discussions, this type of friendship was named as *tovarishchestvo* in order to distinguish it from emotional relations on a more individual basis, such as might lead children to become involved in subversive activities, or lead to an undue dominance, in the class collective, of individual groups (*kompanii*) of a kind threatening atomisation.¹ But it was of course this second kind of friendship that predominated in the actual schoolroom, rather than a disinterested collective spirit. The existence of such a spirit was in most respects a fiction by this era in any case: divisions by ethnicity and more particularly social status were extremely evident in Soviet schools, especially in the major cities. Children's sense of differentiation at the second level was sharpened by the broadening possibilities for acquisition of consumer goods, including ones produced outside the Soviet Union: the compulsory uniform concealed some of this, but as the strict neighbourhood catchment system meant that schools recruited pupils who generally lived alongside each other, pupils would see each other in ordinary clothes as well and acquire a very good idea of who owned what.²

In any case, as in other circumstances and cultures, the essential basis for friendship tended to be shared interest. A class group was unlikely to consist entirely of people who had an interest exclusively in sport, or in the ballet, or in music, or in particular kinds of books, yet it was precisely on the basis of such exclusive interests that friendships were cemented.³ For its part, juvenile enmity was not usually based on issues of principle, as it supposedly should have

¹ For the contrast *friendship/comradeliness*, or 'true/false friendship', see [Balan 1938a, 1938b]; ['Razve v etom druzhba?' 1938]; [Brodskaia 1938]; [Aleksandrova 1950]. The most important source for the period under study is probably Valentina Oseeva's classic story *Vasyok Trubachov and his Comrades* (1948), filmed in 1955, and regularly reprinted in the post-Stalin era. The plot hinges upon what the boys' stern but humane new teacher, Sergei Nikolaevich, describes as 'false comradeliness': '*There is open, honest, Pioneer comradeliness and there is petty, cowardly, dishonest saving a person's skin [vyruchatelstvo]*' [Oseeva 1978: 200]. The most obviously culpable boys in the story, Mazin and Rusakov, have a relationship that is founded on *vyruchatelstvo* from the beginning: Mazin saves Rusakov from a thrashing by his strict father by taking the blame for a broken window on himself. Thereafter, the usual collaborative classroom sin of *podskazka* is regularly committed, and eventually a more serious violation of propriety occurs: Mazin removes a piece of chalk from the classroom to create a diversion during a test, hoping to save his buddy from a public humiliation and poor marks.

² See especially [CKQ SPb-03 PF 2B: 16]: '*I can't say the school exactly gave us a sense of unity, it was really shared social background that mattered.*' In particular, the children of successful engineers working abroad stood out because their clothes were smarter than everyone else's. (Ibid.) On the other hand, an informant from a small town asserted that social distinctions were not that obvious in her school: [CKQ 0x-03 PF 11B: 12].

³ See e.g. [CKQ-SPb-03 PF 2B: 16] on friendship as a result of shared school trips.

been, but on arbitrary and extra-rational factors. Children who were too fat, for instance, were likely to be called insulting names, or a child might be singled out on some more mysterious basis, unclear even to those who were doing the bullying [CKQ Ox-03 PF 13B: 12; PF 13A: 12–13]. And, because the status ladder in the playground, like much else about the out-of-classroom culture, inverted the status ladder in the classroom, *otlichniki*, especially if they wore glasses, were likely to find themselves the butt of not necessarily good-natured taunts [Oxf/Lev SPb-03 PF 15B: 55].

At the same time, there were elements in children's relationships as lived that bore some relation to the behaviour patterns in books and articles. It was, for example, quite common for children to do homework together, less for frivolous reasons (cutting down effort by copying from each other) than for pedagogical ones — the child who was stronger in a particular subject might help the one who was weaker get to grips with the material [Oxf/Lev SPb-03 PF 15 A: 42 (boy and girl doing lessons together); CKQ Ox-03 PF 10B: 10]. And friendships were sometimes initiated on the grounds of exactly the sort of high-minded feelings that were depicted in ideal representations of schoolchild behaviour. One Leningrad girl, for example, made a durable and much-valued friendship with a newcomer to the school whom she had upbraided for taking part in a poison-pen letter campaign against another girl. Rather than taking umbrage at the scolding, the friend was so impressed by her *blagorodnyi postupok* (noble act) that their relationship immediately entered another phase [CKQ Ox-03 PF 13A: 12].

A comparably contradictory area was that of opposite-sex friendships. On the one hand, the sort of disinterested *tovarishchestvo* that was envisaged as the ideal by propaganda, with no romantic element whatever, was relatively unusual. On the whole, close friendships tended to involve individuals of the same sex. Girls who had a presence in groups of boys usually had an entrée to the group because of a blood relationship (for instance, they had a brother in the gang).¹ Cases are reported of boys attaching themselves to groups of girls (without there necessarily being a blood relationship), but this seems not to have been the norm [CKQ-Ox-03 PF 11A: 9–10]. A more characteristic pattern of opposite-sex friendship was the *skolnyi roman* (school romance), a genre of attachment that tended to flourish from, at the latest, about the age of fifteen or so [CKQ SPb-03 PF 3A: 18; cf. Oxf/Lev SPb-03 PF 16A:

¹ Cf. the account of a *patsanka* (ladette) of this kind in [Oxf/Lev SPb-03 PF 18A: 41]. For the official view of *tovarishchestvo* between boys and girls, see e.g. [Oseeva 1978: Vol. 1. P. 94], 'I stand for the friendship of girls and boys, no-one should be insulted or laughed at' (a contribution to the class *stengazeta*); and the 'Boys and Girls' discussions running in *Leninskie iskry* for 1961: e.g. 'Vopros o devchonkakh i mal'chishkakh', *Leninskie iskry* 9 December 1961, 3.

75]. According to some recollections, indeed, all this began considerably younger:

It all started right back in Class 1 [with the seven year olds], yes absolutely, child love, everyone was involved, all the time, and... well, there were quite a lot of pretty serious feelings, genuine, from the time I can first remember, someone would always be sighing after someone else, and writing little notes, yes, yes, I remember all that very well [...] They'd pass notes during break times, the little boyfriends and girlfriends [CKQ Ox-03 PF 3B: 11].¹

Though such romances were almost always entirely innocent in a sexual sense, they were also clandestine: pupils were wary about exchanging love letters in lessons, because of the risk of getting caught by the teacher [CKQ Ox-03 PF 3B: 11]. Still more remote from adult culture were the various genres of erotically-linked folklore, such as the pornographic manuscripts circulating secretly among some boys, the sexual anecdotes, or the pieces of information about human reproduction, many in exaggerated or distorted form, and phrased in pungently obscene language, that circulated among adolescents. Slightly more respectable, but still beyond the official fringe, were the sentimental albums cultivated by some teenage girls, which paid tribute to calf love as well as to intense friendships between girls themselves [‘Vospominaniya’ 2003: 6].

As binary relationships, romances were, of course, still more threatening to the collective spirit than friendships; more importantly, this emphasis on eroticism (of however sublimated a kind) was in dramatic contrast to the extremely puritanical character of official school culture, where discussions of reproduction tended not to get beyond pollen and stamens, and where all behaviour deemed to be sexual in nature was the subject of extreme disapproval. It goes without saying that any girl unfortunate enough to get pregnant was likely to be treated extremely badly; she would probably, just for a start, be debarred from taking her school examinations [Oxf/Lev SPb-03 PF 25A: 34]. But even far less physiological matters than this sent the moral regulators into a lather. For example, in the late 1970s it was considered indecent for girls to wear trousers (which were held to be a product of the evil influence of the West, *‘rastlennoe vliyanie zapada’*: the mini skirt, also the subject of earlier disapproval, had by this time become respectable) [CKQ Ox-03 PF 13A: 11]. And menstruation was the subject of meticulous circumlocution. Suffering from the condition was an acceptable excuse for missing *fizkultura* sessions, and hence readily admitted to by pupils who found

¹ Young people who felt an attraction to their own sex went through traumatic experiences at this stage, of course, since their ‘school romance’ usually had to remain undeclared. See e.g. [CKQ-M-03 PF 2A: 6–7; CKQ-M-03 PF 4A: 7–8].

sport a bore, but the accepted technique for putting in a claim to indulgence on these grounds was to speak of oneself as ‘sick’ (*bolna*) in the abstract, rather than to specify the condition concretely [CKQ OX-03 PF 3B: 11].¹

The gulf between the brusque frankness of the playground and the puritanism of the schoolroom was nothing less than enormous. In the words of one Leningrader born in 1967:

Two poles get set up, on the one hand you’ve got literature, the nineteenth-century Russian classics, that’s really what ‘literature’ meant, and on the other, you’ve got those crude everyday conversations, which are all the cruder because of the taboos. And so the emotional... your ideas about the emotional side of love would get based either on all the extremely sublimated material in the Russian classics, or on the obscene talk and jokes, where everything got called by its name. Or to put it differently, the flip side of prudery was obscenity. And we were stuck between those two poles — there wasn’t a possible third position [CKQ SPb-03 PF 3A: 19].

This elegantly analytical explanation may be set alongside the ventriloquisation of schoolboy attitudes by one working-class Leningrad man, who, explaining why his teenage love had to remain secret, combined both the discourses, nineteenth-century poetry and playground talk, that had shaped him. ‘*Girls! I didn’t give a damn about girls! I sighed away. From a distance.*’ [Oxf/Lev SPb-03 PF 18A: 41].

Yet overall the situation was a little more complicated than this. Children’s own attitudes shared (perhaps spontaneously) some of the squeamishness of official culture. Even exchanging a kiss could seem transgressive; to get pregnant seemed no less than monstrous.² Conversely, schoolteachers played a part not just in tolerating, but in encouraging, teenage romances. In many schools, 23 February (Soviet Army Day) and 8 March (International Women’s Day) were celebrated as gender-specific festivals, and girls and boys were directed to honour the opposite sex by organising cards and presents:

We all looked forward so much to it, we’d arrive wondering: what would

¹ [CKQ OX-03 PF 3B: 11]. However, the issue of menstruation also generated a clash between two imperatives of official school culture: the suppression of the physiological on the one hand, and the total surveillance of pupils on the other. When girls used ‘sickness’ (in the euphemistic sense) as an excuse to cry off games, this was logged in the register by a teacher (usually a man) as B (for *bolna*), and the teacher would also check each time the excuse was used to make sure that it matched with the standard length of the cycle (28 days — no allowances were made for the fact that in young girls this ‘norm’ far from always applies). (Email from informant in CKQ OX-03 PF 12-PF 13, 17 July 2003).

² [CKQ OX-03 PF 8B: 12 (the kiss)]; [Oxf/Lev SPb-03 PF 25A: 34 (pregnancy)]. The disapproval of the latter informant is particularly striking, given that he was involved in a gang, drank and smoked from his early teens, and also sniffed glue: [Oxf/Lev SPb-03 PF 24B: 23].

they give us, what would they give us? What toys, what flowers? Often it was chocolates. The eighth of March was the most exciting day in the school calendar [...] And if we made sure to give them something nice on the twenty-third, we'd get something nice back on the eighth. No, it really was 'do as you would be done by, do as you would be done by'! [CKQ Ox-03 PF 8B: 15].

Some teachers went to the lengths of formalising these arrangements, allocating every girl a boy on 23 February, and every boy a girl on 8 March (this was normally done by a 'class supervisor' during the 'class hour'). The celebrants were supposed to present their 'consort' with cards, flowers, and gifts, and generally wait on him and her throughout the day [CKQ Ox-03 PF 11B: 10]. Of course, these 'arranged marriages' would not necessarily overlap with spontaneous *romany* (indeed, a Soviet teacher's sense of civic duty would probably have encouraged him or her precisely to work against such spontaneous *romany* by pairing off different pupils). But the sentimental behaviour learned was what 1990s British educational jargon termed 'a transferrable skill' — that is, it created stereotypes that were likely to shape informal relationships as well.

The 'Last Bell': Leaving the School for Ever

As with the 'First of September', the transition out of the school had both a celebratory and a practical level. School-leavers were treated to ceremonies ushering them out into the world; at the same time, more prosaically, the cessation of contact with school brought with it the need to get used to a new life, almost certainly in a place of further study. Whether at a factory school (PTU) or technical college (*tekhnikum*), which occupied the bottom rungs in terms of tertiary-level prestige, at a workshop (*masterskaya*), an institute, or (at the top level in terms of status), a university, the school-leaver would move into a different circle, make new friends, quite possibly lose touch with his or her old ones, and — whether immediately or slightly later — begin to feel fully adult. The break with school was therefore perceived by many as the end of childhood.¹

The celebratory side of school-leaving had two phases. On the one hand, there was the 'last bell' itself, an occasion which, like the First of September, involved the participation of the whole school, but was particularly concentrated on one group of pupils, in this case those who had just completed their ten-year stint of education, and were about to sit their examinations. This celebration — involving the ritual of ringing the last bell itself, speeches, songs, dances and so on — had a considerably longer history than the First of September.

¹ See e.g. [CKQ SPb-03 PF 3A: 20] (in this case, the informant recalls having the sense of lost childhood in class 8 because *others* were leaving the school for good).

Anna Grigorova's schoolgirl diary of 1928, for instance, recalls that the end of the year was marked by an evening of amateur dramatics, choral songs, and even a performance by a jazz band [Grigorova 1928: 48–50]. An important part of the ceremony was the ringing of the last bell itself, which in some schools was always done by the smallest female pupil, who was carried to the bell in the arms, or on the shoulder, of the tallest (male) school-leaver.¹

On the other hand, alongside these informal ways of marking 'the end of school' also came a more recent and more pompous style of celebration, the 'school-leavers' ball' (*bal vypusknikov*). The pre-war years saw the appearance of isolated cases of this genre. In 1936, for example, the Flower Festival in Kiev, organised at the behest of Pavel Postyshev, the Secretary of the Ukrainian Communist Party as well as of the Central Committee itself, included a celebration of the end of the school year with boat trips, a sports festival, and a 'leavers' ball' in the Pioneer Palace.² However, it was not until the late 1940s that the 'leavers' ball' appears to have become a set tradition. Significantly, this was a point at which ballroom dancing — in some cases accompanied by instructions to the participants that the opposite sexes should not speak to one another or even that they should hold hands only through a handkerchief — became a popular leisure activity.

The feelings inspired by the break with school life tended to be positive. It meant leaving an institution that was associated by many with vexatious regimentation, and having the promise of a more independent life. So there was every reason for a celebration. On the other hand, school leavers in this era were significantly less likely to be impressed by the celebratory side of school-leaving than children arriving at the school were. Now that youth culture in the Soviet Union was undergoing a kind of clandestine globalisation, as Western goods and particularly Western music began to circulate through foreign radio stations, bootleg tapes, and items brought by visiting foreign students and tourists (whose numbers also increased significantly from the early 1960s), the traditions of the leavers' ball seemed out of kilter with the rest of the world in a way that would not have been so clear when the festival was first set up. In many schools, a formal waltz was an essential part of the occasion, yet, unlike their contemporaries in, say, Austria, Russian young people of this generation were not taught ballroom dancing. The results were sometimes farcical:

¹ My thanks to Albert Baiburin for this reminiscence.

² *Pionerskaya pravda* 85 (24 June 1936): 3. P. P. Postyshev was one of the first local Party chiefs to court 'kiddy appeal' in his personal cult: during the mid-1930s the Pioneer press regularly carried unctuous tributes to what he was achieving in terms of children's welfare. See e.g. *Leninskie iskry* 27 July 1934: 4–5, 'U Pavla Petrovicha Postysheva'.

*'The School Waltz' was played on the First of September and on Teachers' Day, but it was the leavers' ball where it was the linchpin of the programme. The leavers were expected to dance a waltz to the tune in the big school hall. A few couples would be picked out in advance and taught to waltz (in my day [the 1970s and 1980s] none of us children had the first idea how to waltz any more, but it was still considered that any properly-behaved person,¹ even if still of school age, should be able to do this). It all looked pretty dire. At some point in the evening 'The School Waltz' would be put on the turntable, and everyone in the school hall (teachers, parents, school-leavers and so on) would go and stand round the walls, and the miserable 'chosen few' would come out into the middle, clumsily invite each other to the waltz, and then try and dance, clashing their feet together and tripping up every so often. Their classmates would snigger mercilessly, while the teachers hissed, 'In the past **everyone** knew how to waltz' ['Vospominaniya' 2003: 5–6].*

Pupils' last contact with school was thus in harmony with the paternalist and archaising character of the institution more broadly. They themselves had no say in how they celebrated leaving at an official level; the real celebrations were therefore likely to take place outside the school building. Independent parties would in any case have been going on for several years before the 'last bell' was heard. So far as the school administration was concerned, the end of class 8 was of no particular significance: those going on to a *tekhnikum* or PTU 'left quietly and without any fuss' ['Vospominaniya' 2003: 6]. But for the pupils actually leaving, this was obviously a significant occasion; and for those who stayed, the end of class 8 brought not only separation from those leaving, but also the completion of the first set of state exams. Not surprisingly, this is often remembered as a young person's first experience of drinking alcohol in quantity, possibly to excess, and first 'grown-up' style party as well. For many, therefore, the 'last bell' was essentially an irrelevance, in emotional terms; and, rather than laying the foundation for a life of gratitude and happy memories of schooling, accompanied by regular attendance at school reunions (*yubilei*), it marked a one-way trip out of the school gates, acting not so much as a rite of passage as an annoying reminder of the kind of parade-ground drill (*mushtrovka*) that had made first contacts with school alienating, and that — for a significant contingent of pupils — soured a good deal of later experience as well.

¹ Literally, 'member of the intelligentsia' [*intelligentnyi chelovek*].

Conclusion

This paper has examined some of the rituals and practices, some everyday and some festive, that characterised the late Soviet school. I have argued that the ceremonial aspects of the Soviet school had a relatively insignificant function at this era; similarly, the ideological content of the school programme, the moral education (*vospitanie*) doled out at school assemblies and pep talks by the ‘class supervisor’ and others, was regarded with indifference if not contempt by many of those forced to listen to it. At the same time, extreme indiscipline was also uncommon. What held the school together was not so much orientation to the outside demands of ‘motherland’ and ‘Party’ that were proclaimed on festive occasions, but camaraderie and indeed collusion between pupils and teachers, and between pupils themselves. Practices such as *podskazka* and the use of *shpargalki* not only helped those at the sharp end of unrealistically demanding, centrally-assigned programmes to cope, one way or another, with their academic load, but also introduced a modicum of vitality and improvisatory interest into routines that would otherwise have been stultifying. Notable at this era too is the increasing involvement of individual teachers in extra-curricular activities; pupils’ most rewarding experiences of anything connected with the school would often be the literary societies or school trips organised by a ‘class supervisor’ or other teacher, rather than anything that went on in the classroom itself.

What pupils heard about in ‘classroom hours’ (*klassnye chasy*) and other sessions of indoctrination was social commitment and self-sacrifice; what they were learning in terms of school *practices* was much more about rule-bending, and the possibility of a high degree of private free-thinking if external decorum was maintained. In the words of a woman born in the late 1950s: ‘*After all, I led a double life [...] you know exactly what you can say to who, and what you can’t* [CKQ-Ox-03 PF13B: 13]. While this divide should not be imposed retrospectively on the Stalin era, when the patterns of conformity and non-conformity, for many Soviet citizens, worked rather differently, it appears to be of general validity for the post-Stalin era.

All of this might seem to point towards a continuity between school and society more broadly at this period, towards an argument that pupils were learning ‘how to behave’ in Soviet life at large. In a classic article about ritual upheaval in the sixteenth-century English school, Keith Thomas has argued that when pupils engaged in riots to demand their release from school at the end of terms they were employing and learning behaviour stereotypes to do with robust self-assertion that were of importance to the English parliamentary system and to processes of negotiation with governance more generally at the time [Thomas 1976]. In similar vein, it might be said

that the late Soviet school was preparing pupils for a world where rule-bending and the de-ideologisation of interior life were endemic. The tolerance of *podskazka*, for instance, pointed to the fact that supposedly all-embracing rules in fact always had loopholes, and that relying on informal co-operation was essential to 'getting through somehow': both these lessons were extremely relevant to Soviet culture of the post-Stalin era [Ledeneva 1998].

At the same time, reasoning from Soviet school to Soviet society too directly runs the risk of facile conclusions. Schools are — as emphasised earlier — peculiar institutions in many countries, and many things about the Soviet school related more to the 'school' side of the categorisation than to the 'Soviet' one. In late twentieth-century Germany also, techniques such as *podskazka* were widespread, but did not spill over into tolerance of informality and botching in the workplace.¹ British schools in the 1960s and 1970s usually had strict rules about uniform, and single-sex institutions dominated, but their products were (judging by personal observation) not usually either particularly conformist in sartorial terms, or especially chaste, once they reached adulthood. In the Soviet Union too, there were limitations to the direct influence of schools on life more generally. For one thing, Soviet schools were actually more effective as 'Soviet' establishments than many others. They came nearer to fulfilling their planned norms than did many (most?) establishments in the outside world, and the network of informal relations known as *blat* occupied a relatively marginal position here: parents might pull strings to get children placed in schools outside their catchment area, but pupils themselves had (in the typical school) little leverage in individual terms over teachers and the school administration. If the school education was at once academically demanding and stultifying, it did succeed in providing clever pupils — including those from backgrounds where there was no history of academic achievement — with an incentive to learn. As the paradox invented by Viktor Shklovsky, and cited as the epigraph to this paper, has it, 'Actually, a bad school is a good school'. In this case, the limitations of the information propounded in the Soviet classroom could provide the stimulus to look beyond the programme. Liberal educational programmes can have the disadvantage of making their products feel glowingly self-satisfied about their own achievements; there was little chance of this particular feeling being inspired by a system that constantly demanded more and different from its subordinates.

Yet if one considers the Soviet school's political and social brief of producing docile Soviet citizens, the educational process in the post-

¹ The German word for *podskazka* is *Einsagung*. As noted earlier, there is not as yet an adequate secondary literature about this side of school life, but contacts of mine with experience of the German classroom confirm the prevalence of this technique, use of cribs, etc.

Stalin era seems to have clocked up more failures than successes. In the 1930s and 1940s, a good many children had happily absorbed the patriotic and socially conscious teaching that they received.¹ Equally, there were children who were simply very grateful to be in school at all, knowing that they were the first generation of their family with proper access to education.² As educational opportunity began to be taken for granted, and as ideology and official ceremonial became increasingly out of phase with the broader patterns of children's existence, particularly older children's, so the fact of access on the one hand, and the ideological side of the school on the other, had less and less effect both in the short and in the long term. The official side of school was perceived by most in compartmentalised terms, as a phase of life to be lived through, but then forgotten about as rapidly as possible. 'By the end of Class 9 [age 16], everyone just dreamt of getting out of school as soon as possible, and many people really hated the place,' recalled a woman born in the late 1960s. 'School patriotism' was preserved for some time by the custom of putting together commemorative albums, with pictures of school-friends, drawings, sentimental inscriptions, and questionnaires about personal preferences. However, 'the idea that schooldays were the best days of your life vanished completely a year or two after school was finished' [*Vospominaniya* 2003: 6]. The school, then — contrary to the desires of educational planners — did not so much provide an education in how to live, as it inspired a sense of what was *not* important in life (political rhetoric, moralistic discourse), and a conviction that 'real life' existed somewhere as remote as possible from these. While the argument for the lasting force of ideology at an unconscious level carries some weight ('No matter how much a Soviet person was convinced that the dogma propounded to him in school was false, he still had to deal with it, one way or another, all his life' [Vail, Genis 1996: 121]), it was above all in the realm of daily life where school life made its lasting contribution.

APPENDIX 1

The codes 'Oxf/Lev SPb-02' and 'Oxf/Lev SPb-03' refer to interviews conducted by Aleksandra Piir in St Petersburg (in-depth interviewing is being carried out from October 2002 among c. 30 informants across a range of generations who grew up in working-class families and in or-

¹ [CKQ-0x-03 PF 1A: 3]; [CKQ-E-03 PF 2A: 2]; [CKQ-E-03 PF 3A,B: *passim*]; Yakov Avidon in [Kent 1997: 189]; Lev Anninsky in [Kobo 1989: 54].

² As e.g. in [CKQ-E-03 PF 1B: 4]; [CKQ-E-03 PF 2A: 3].

phanages, and among teachers and other professionals working with children who recall the Soviet period). The code ‘Oxf/Lev M-03’ refers to interviews conducted by Yuliya Rybina in Moscow (in-depth interviewing is being carried out from March 2003 among c. 30 informants across a range of generations who grew up in working-class families, and among teachers and other professionals working with children who recall the Soviet period). The code ‘CKQ-Ox-03’ refers to interviews carried out in Britain, ‘CKQ-SPb-03’ to interviews carried out in St Petersburg, and ‘CKQ-E-03’ to interviews carried out in Ekaterinburg by Catriona Kelly (these informants come from a range of different Russian cities and mostly from official/intelligentsia backgrounds). Each informant (except for those from Ekaterinburg, and CKQ-M-04 PF 4, where the interviews were shorter) was interviewed for approximately 3 hours, normally as two sessions of approximately one and a half hours, using a 68-point questionnaire (on childhood generally) or a 46-point questionnaire (for former professionals: see p. 116 n. 3). The questionnaires were drafted by Catriona Kelly and then revised by her in collaboration with Albert Baiburin and Alexandra Piir.

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