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'School Superstitions' at the Turn of the Twentieth Century: The Perspective of Adults¹

I. By the free admission of specialists in school folklore, all that we know about its history *'is derived from memoirs and belles-lettres. These certainly contain an abundance of material, but from such a variety of locations and times that we are able to form only the most general of impressions of what Russian school folklore was once like'* [Belousov 1998: 8]. The fragmented character of our knowledge in this field is hardly likely to be overcome at any point in the future. In such a situation, any addition to the existing complex of known materials, even a relatively minor one, is no doubt of considerable interest, all the more so in cases where such 'new' texts happen to form a system of sorts.

The word 'new' is here deliberately placed in inverted commas, for the materials that will be discussed in this paper were published quite some time ago — in the first quarter of the twentieth century. However, to this date they

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have not been used by researchers in school folklore. This is hardly surprising, since the material in question comprises excerpts from not particularly well-known memoirs and also an article from a rather peculiar, medico-pedagogical publication, which a folklorist would be likely to come across only by accident. The first part of this paper will for this reason be devoted to a description of these materials.

II. Possibly the most interesting study in school folklore at the beginning of the twentieth century was conducted by A. V. Vladimirsky. In the history of Russian medicine he is best known as a specialist in children's psychic anomalies and is described as '*one of the most active campaigners for the general training and education of mentally retarded children at the beginning of the twentieth century*' [Zamsky 1995: 234]. In 1912 he published an article devoted, by his own definition, to '*school superstitions*' [Vladimirsky 1912]. At this time Vladimirsky taught on the teacher-training courses of the Froebel Society, and also lectured at the Psycho-Neurological Institute.¹ He asked his students, who had all attended secondary school in the recent or not so recent past, to write down recollections from their school days. The doctor appears to have requested that they focus especially on 'superstitions' current in the school environment. In addition, Vladimirsky collected similar data directly from primary and secondary schools in St Petersburg (although this material is not explicitly cited in his article), and he also seems to have included some information from his own personal recollections. The article was based on all this material, which appears to have been quite substantial (Vladimirsky mentions that some of his students apparently filled entire exercise books from cover to cover [Vladimirsky 1912: 127]).

In his article, Vladimirsky provides long quotations from his students' writings, and then interprets them primarily as an indicator of the pathological influence of the school on the pupils' psyche. If this article is to be examined as a source of information on school folklore at the beginning of the twentieth century, then one must bear in mind that by '*school superstitions*' Vladimirsky understood first and foremost certain omens that Russian schoolchildren used to foretell their future, and also certain special magical practices with which they hoped to influence it.

III. No less interesting, though somewhat more fragmentary, is the information that can be gathered from the following two works of the memoir kind.

The first is the reminiscences of the famous Soviet educational

¹ in St Petersburg. [Editor].

theorist S. T. Shatsky,¹ entitled ‘Years of Searching’ [Shatsky 1958]. The first edition of this work appeared in 1924, and was in fact originally intended not as a memoir but as a kind of artistically conceived study in educational theory. It consisted of two parts: the first described the old system of education, while the second provided principles for the organisation of a new, ‘true’, ‘proper’ school. Since we are interested only in a small fragment from the first part, let us examine that section more closely. On the one hand, it is a description of the memoirist’s own school past; on the other, it contains Shatsky’s commentary on these recollections, from the perspective of an experienced educator. The period described runs from 1888, when Shatsky entered the first year of Moscow’s sixth gymnasium, up until 1896, when he graduated. In the book’s preface Shatsky states unequivocally that, as he sees it, it was precisely his school experiences that spurred on his subsequent pedagogical interests and activities: *‘I understood this clearly only when I re-examined some of my old notes where I had described for myself the early years of my education. While leafing through these notes I suddenly realised something that had not entered my head previously: that while at school I had a constant feeling that the way I was being taught was neither the right way to study nor the right way to teach. And that my own pedagogical faith grew directly out of my negative evaluation of the pedagogy that had been applied to me’* [Shatsky 1958: 201]. And indeed, by reading the memoirist’s description of his educational past, one is immediately convinced that the way he was taught was just not ‘the right way’. Against this background, Shatsky’s own education system of the future stands out as all the more humane and grandiose. Although caution demands that we suspect that the first section of this work contains some exaggerations that suit the author’s reformist agenda, from the perspective of the material that interests us here, namely ‘school superstitions’, we could actually ignore this circumstance with a clear conscience, simply noting the memoirist’s undisputed and clearly formulated agenda.

Just as clearly articulated is the purpose of the series of reminiscences by a somewhat less well-known author, F. M. Orlov-Skormorovsky — a physician, who, while dying of syphilis in Vladimir at the beginning of the 1920s, decided, before going to his grave, to describe his life

¹ Stanislav Shatsky (1879–1934), born into a Russianised Polish family from Smolensk province, in fact first came to public notice as an educationalist through his work with juvenile delinquents in Moscow during the 1900s and 1910s. In the 1920s, however, he held an important position in the Commissariat of Enlightenment as the Director of the First Experimental Station, a network of experimental schools and kindergartens in Kaluga province. After the First Experimental Station was closed down in 1932, he was briefly the director of the Moscow Conservatoire. A substantial study in English is William Partlett, ‘Breaching Cultural Boundaries with the Village School: S. T. Shatsky and the First Experimental Station of Narkompros’, PhD. Thesis, Oxford, 2005. [Editor].

and his past in such a way that no one would ever even dream of regretting the disappearance of tsarist Russia. He hoped to spur the intelligentsia to take part in the monumental transformation of the world by showing how terrible the social order destroyed by the Bolsheviks had been in all its manifestations, including, especially, the family, the school and love. Orlov-Skomorovsky's cycle was entitled *Towards Humanity!* and its tone was openly sermonising. Thus, these memoirs too had clear, pre-formulated, aims in view. The volume that interests us in particular is *The Calvary of the Child* — the first book in the cycle of reminiscences devoted to the author's childhood and adolescence (up to the age of fourteen and a half), originally published in 1921 [Orlov-Skomorovsky 1994].¹

IV. Having described some of the characteristics of these sources, let us now look specifically at the information that they contain on school folklore.

Data on superstitions current among schoolchildren is found especially in A. V. Vladimirsky's work. In his students' accounts, the bad omen encountered particularly frequently is that of dropping a textbook on the floor. *'To drop a book while revising or preparing for a lesson was considered to be a sign that the following day the teacher would call you out to answer questions.'* *'If you accidentally drop a book, it means the teacher will ask you questions.'* *'If you drop a book, you'll be called out.'*² Similarly, if a pupil forgot to close the textbook after studying from it, the belief was that the teacher would ask him or her questions on it the next day. Or, if one happened to start writing down a dictation on a page which already contained a grade, this was considered to be a guarantee that the grade for the new work would be lower. There are also mentions of omens associated with coming across a funeral procession: such an encounter was able to bring either failure or, alternatively, unprecedented success in class. On the other hand, coming across a teacher in the street never promised anything good.

The primary task of superstitious rituals performed by schoolchildren was to minimise the danger that came from the teacher, above all to avoid a bad mark, or, indeed, to escape being asked questions full stop: *'In order to avoid being "questioned" one had to recite "O Mother of God" three times and make the sign of a circle through the air all the way around oneself. This helped ward off the danger that*

¹ The memoirist was born in 1889 and entered secondary school around 1898–99, attending the *gimnazii* [high schools with a programme of education focusing on classical languages] in Per-nov and Lodza.

² i.e. expected to answer questions in class, according to the tradition of 'oral testing' used in Russian schools both during the nineteenth century and during the twentieth. (See Catriona Kelly, "'The School Waltz': The Everyday Life of the Post-Stalinist Soviet Classroom' // *Forum for Anthropology and Culture*. 2004. No. 1. Pp. 107–58.) [Editor].

threatened all the time. 'For fear of being called out, the sign of the cross was made over the surname in the register and also at the teacher, as he walked in, so that he would not ask questions. A small circle would be cut out of paper and the following words would be written on it: "Remember, O Lord, David and all his meekness". The paper was then folded up and placed in the corsage of the dress. This was done to avoid being called out.' 'In order for the teacher to be kind, pins were hidden inside the chair or were placed underneath the chair' [Vladimirsky 1912: 136]. A number of characteristic rituals involved tying knots: 'To avoid being called out, a small knot was tied on the apron and one then had to hold on to this knot for the duration of the lesson.' 'If a pupil did not want to be called out, she held in her hand both corners of her apron and tied one of them into a knot' [Vladimirsky 1912: 135].

Judging by Vladimirsky's materials, the notion of getting to school via the 'correct' itinerary, as a procedure guaranteeing a favourable day at school, was extremely widespread among schoolchildren. Many former gymnasium pupils remembered that they had chosen their route to school once and for all, and that they then perceived any diversion from this route as a veritable catastrophe. Using a different route was understood to result in disaster at the other end. 'One could enter the school through either the big front doorway or a smaller side gate just next to it. While my brother always went through the main entrance, I used only the side gate and nothing could force me to go through the other one. I clearly remember how, one day, my brother deliberately pushed me through the doorway into the school. I couldn't stop crying, and realising I was already in the school yard I felt the compulsion to turn around and run out' [Vladimirsky 1912: 133].

Generally speaking, the route to school could become a serious ordeal, where any unexpected and accidental element potentially carried some sort of threat. These threats could be overcome by special magical procedures. Like the threat itself, the procedures neutralising it often arose quite spontaneously. There are plenty of examples in Dr Vladimirsky's article, and a similar subject can be found in Orlov-Skomorovsky's memoirs as well: 'If I throw a stone at the tree standing by the path on route to school and hit it, I won't get a two. I throw the stone, and ... bull's eye! But if I am now overtaken from behind by another pupil, I'll still get a two, ... so I hurry up' [Orlov-Skomorovsky 1994: 46].

Both in Vladimirsky's article and in Orlov-Skomorovsky's memoirs one encounters mentions of various fortune-telling practices that a schoolchild would perform at the beginning of a school day either before setting off to school or on his way there. 'How many glasses will there be on the table? If the number is even, then I won't get a one for the Latin paper, but if the number's odd, then things aren't so good...

The number of glasses was odd, which meant things looked bad; I felt pained, anxious... But then I saw a cab go past, and this was again an opportunity to try and guess my fortune: will it stop in this street or will it turn into the next one? If it turns I'll get a two... And then I pick a flower and start to pull the petals off. If their number is even, I won't get a two; the number turns out to be odd — a shiver goes down my spine... [Orlov-Skomorovsky 1994: 45]

We find the same topic of fortune-telling in Shatsky's memoirs. The memoirist describes his journey to school: *'I come out into the street feeling the inevitability of the fate that awaits me... I don't miss a single church, chapel or cross to make a prayer. I suddenly spot a tram... I look at the number on the carriage — could I read the numbers in such a way that in the end I get 5, 10, 15 or 20...? At the corner of a house there are some telegraph poles. I count the steps to them. I need for there to be 45, 50 or 55 steps — any multiple of 5. The number of steps seems ominous — 49. But this might not be as bad as it looks — if one subtracts four from nine, one gets five — a hidden five... This is how I added and subtracted, multiplied and divided, approaching my place of reckoning'* [Shatsky 1958: 208].

V. Summing up our brief description of these 'new' materials on school folklore, let us dwell on just a few key moments. Firstly, by using this data it becomes possible to trace the existence of an actual folkloric tradition. It is important to remember that Shatsky's reminiscences refer to the late 1880s — early 1890s, i.e. that the hero of that account is the bearer of a tradition ten years older than that of Orlov-Skomorovsky and twenty years older than that of Dr Vladimirsky's students. One must also note the geographical diversity of the data. Orlov-Skomorovsky is describing his school days in Lodza, Shatsky attended the gymnasium in Moscow, while Vladimirsky collected his material in St Petersburg. One must also take into account that among Vladimirsky's students there could have been those who came from different parts of Russia. The same tradition of so-called 'school superstitions' can, in fact, also be traced in materials from the Soviet period.¹ Judging by the personal recollections of the author of this paper, the tradition in question seems to have still been alive fifteen years ago!

Secondly, this data can shed light on the character of the interrelation between the school system of the turn of the twentieth century, the children who were inside this system, and the adults who were situated 'outside' it. The author of the present paper is a historian by speciality and researches historical topics that have little to do with folklore itself. For this reason, the aim here is not to interpret the above data from the viewpoint of traditional Russian culture,

¹ Cf. Samuel Marshak's poem 'Omens' (Primety), [Marshak 1971: 161].

even though it is obvious that the school generates situations where children resort to mechanisms of reducing uncertainty and countering dangers similar to those found in that culture. The universe of the school is perceived by children as an alien world, requiring the use of magical devices, especially against the teacher, as if against an evil spirit. In themselves these mechanisms are far older than the school that prompts children to resort to them. What is referred to as the tradition of school superstitions is generated not just through some sort of continuity (which is actually not traced in memoirs), but also by the peculiarities of the child's world-view, which is to a certain extent refractive and depends on certain structures of folkloric tradition. In other words, what is striking is not so much the mechanism of borrowing but that of the spontaneous engendering of folkloric forms. All the more so since, as we must recall, our materials are geographically and chronologically dispersed.

However, in the given case, from the perspective of the study of the relationship between the world of adults and the world of children, what is particularly interesting is to see how adult contemporaries and former bearers of the tradition interpreted these so-called 'school superstitions'. The second half of the paper will be devoted to this topic.

VI. For Dr Vladimirsky the presence of 'superstitions' in schools was first of all an indicator of certain psychic deviations brought about by an imperfect system of education: *'in a schoolchild there are so many pathological factors, so many deviations from the norm..., that to study our schoolchild is tantamount to studying the pathology of childhood...'* [Vladimirsky 1912: 126]. Vladimirsky sees the mechanism of the emergence of superstitions and omens firstly in the fundamental properties of child psychology — in the child's naturally underdeveloped will and weakness of critical thinking. Secondly, what then spurs this pathology on is the *'deadly oppression and constant expectation of danger...'* The fear experienced by the schoolchild is studied by Dr Vladimirsky right down to its physiological manifestations. If one were to use our current terminology, Vladimirsky is effectively saying that stress, caused by fear, creates certain disturbances in the child's heartbeat, breathing and digestion. And it is precisely in this context that he then examines school folklore [Vladimirsky 1912: 139–40]. It is not difficult to observe that in Vladimirsky's view the phenomena of children's culture, such as omens and magical rituals, have no value in and of themselves, but work simply as symptoms of pedagogical and psychological pathology, in just the same way as a pulse with *'tonic inertia'* or *'superficial breathing'* [Vladimirsky 1912: 139–40].

The same can be said of the other authors. All the more obviously so, in fact, since the memoirists, as we remember, had a clear agenda

of their own. One of Orlov-Skomorovsky's tasks was to demonstrate, using the example of his own life, the pathology of the pre-Revolutionary family and school. According to his reminiscences his father regularly beat him for poor results at school and, as he elaborates, *'this incessant torture and uncertainty about what was going to happen, not just the next day, but even in the next half-hour, developed in me ... suspiciousness and a persistent need to guess my fortune, and this latter work of my brain continued unceasingly, every day, and even at night, in my sleep...'* [Orlov-Skomorovsky 1994: 45]. Like Vladimirsky, Shatsky describes in his memoirs the pathology of the pre-Revolutionary school and his description of superstitions serves as yet another proof of this pathology. All of Dr Vladimirsky's informants themselves perceived their recollections as indicators of the imperfections of the school system. As grown-ups, as students, future doctors and teachers, the former bearers of this tradition of school superstitions have ended up renouncing it, denying any value and seriousness to it: *'All that I have written here is the truth, but it is not my fault but the fault of the gymnasium which had created such thing.'* *'It is hard to list all the procedures that we used; they now look so absurd and stupid that I am embarrassed to admit to them.'* Vladimirsky, in fact, also writes his article not just as an outside observer, but as a former gymnasium pupil who recollects clearly that in his own time he himself was not immune to *'the superstitions of a schoolchild'* [Vladimirsky 1912: 132, 134].

Given such an understanding of children's superstitions, the following assertion by Vladimirsky sounds perfectly logical: *'If one tried to discover some sort of sense or governing idea in the fabrication of all these different omens, one would inevitably fail, for there is no system here, no logic to it...; [the schoolchild] simply has a need to create a protector, a kind of patron for himself'* [Vladimirsky 1912: 139]. The situation becomes all the more interesting when Vladimirsky, in order to demonstrate the bizarre and absurd nature of superstitions, chooses, as an *'amusing'* illustration, actual folkloric material, citing *'the curious little book by N. Martsinkevich The Customs and Beliefs of the Ukrainians'*. Significantly, the beliefs of the Ukrainians are said to arise from *'childlike [sic] naivety'* and from the poetic spirit of this people, while the omens of the schoolchildren come only from the *'oppression of the entire pedagogical system'* [Vladimirsky 1912: 130]. Children are therefore denied the right to an autonomous culture. In fact, schoolchildren's folklore and the folklore of the 'Ukrainian people' are not of the same order but qualitatively different. The fact that no one discussing school superstitions (and primarily those who actually grew out of this tradition) saw them as anything but a peculiar indicator of the failings of the school system or as simple by-products of a particular type of education is telling: *children's culture, or at least this part of it, was not perceived as having*

any value in itself, whether as part of school life, or as part of the system of beliefs about the everyday, or as part of Russian folklore. The conclusion was therefore quite straightforward: change the school, pacify the children, and the superstitions will vanish of their own accord.

If, however, one yielded to the temptation of interpreting these 'school superstitions' in the way one analyses traditional culture, then perhaps the most striking contrast between the cultural sense of these superstitions and Dr Vladimirsky's explanation of them can be observed in the understanding of the tradition of wearing old clothes to an exam. A former pupil writes: *'To exams I always went in the oldest suit I could find, usually one that I no longer wore... I also put on my oldest boots, and only in this outfit did I consider myself to some extent guaranteed against failing. What is strange is that I noticed this wearing of old garments and footwear in other fellow pupils, but I wasn't copying them myself ... especially since we all did this in secrecy from each other, fearing that we might be ridiculed'* [Vladimirsky 1912: 137]. If we try to interpret this custom from the perspective of modern anthropology, we could refer the category of 'the old' to something 'of one's own', something familiar and homely [Baiburin 1993: 45]. In an exam situation, which could be seen as a situation of transition from the old to the new, the pupil seeks to enlist the support of familiar objects. This is why one should not reject the idea of the isomorphism of the part and the whole. From this perspective, the custom of wearing old clothes to an exam can be placed alongside superstitions of some students at the end of the twentieth century that I myself came across — namely that it was a bad idea to wash, and especially to wash one's hair, before an exam, because the idea was that one could thereby 'wash off' some of the knowledge (i.e. by removing even just one part of the old system).

Now, Dr Vladimirsky's interpretation of the above custom becomes all the more curious in this context: *'... the device is based on the assumption that a clean suit would indicate to the teacher that the pupil was leading a comfortable life and the teacher was therefore less likely to be merciful than if he thought that the pupil was poor and needed to be pitied...'* It is characteristic that only in this particular 'superstition' Vladimirsky is, thanks to this interpretation, willing to see at least 'some sense' in the pupils' behaviour [Vladimirsky 1912: 140]. Otherwise the custom would be meaningless.

It is important to emphasise one crucial point: this is not an issue of folklore studies being out of touch. Quite the reverse: one of the few systematic studies of children's subculture at the beginning of the twentieth century known to folklorists today was conducted by A. P. Serebrennikov, who was in fact not a folklorist, but a teacher at a labour colony for juvenile delinquents [Belousov 1992: 45]. Here,

too, child folklore is seen as interesting primarily as a symptom of pathology. It appears that what we are dealing with here is the interrelation of two subcultures: the 'world of adults' and the 'world of children', where school folklore is seen exclusively as an indicator of the pathology of childhood without any independent cultural value of its own. What we see here is some sort of mechanism of *blindness* towards children's school folklore.

What is the cause of such an attitude? It is important to remember that both Vladimírsky and Orlov-Skomorovsky were physicians. So why did child school folklore interest primarily doctors, specialists in pathology, rather than folklorists? Especially since rural children's folklore was already quite well-known at this time. In order to clarify this, we must look at some of the specificities of the reigning attitude towards children at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

VII. First of all, from the perspective of the positivist science of this era, the child was not perceived as essentially different from the adult — everything in the child was understood to be the same as in an adult, only in an embryonic state of development. The difference was of a quantitative rather than of a qualitative nature [Solovtsova 1910: 206]. When this perspective was followed up consistently to its logical conclusion, the child inevitably dropped outside what was perceived as 'the norm'. As an example of this sort of argument we can cite the book by G. Ya. Troshin [1915], *The Anthropological Foundations of Education. A Comparative Psychology of Normal and Abnormal Children*. The classifications that are the interim results and conclusions of Troshin's study are based on the view that the child is, in principle, an abnormal being. The norm is represented by the adult, and not just any adult, but by an educated and civilised altruist, who has the following range of moral qualities: love of mankind, an inbuilt imperative of conscience and goodness, higher intellectual, aesthetic and religious feelings, '*which are usually inter-mixed with one another and related to a higher morality*' [Troshin 1915: 516], etc. This, of course, is just an ideal and it would be naïve to assume that Troshin would have insisted on its actual existence. On the contrary, he himself asserted that the full range of these qualities is rarely found in real-life adults. He also insisted that this norm actually started forming only at school age. However, the rigour of Troshin's classifications proved victorious in the end: when he evaluated children in terms of their moral and intellectual development, they ended up in the section of the graph with imbeciles and the mentally retarded. The adults, by contrast, were simply divided into those who conformed to the ideal and those who did not — they were all situated on the graph entitled '*The Norm. Adulthood*' [Ibid. 1915: 169, 516, 539].

Next, when discussing children's creativity, Troshin described it as being on the same level as the creations of savages, likening children's fantasies to the myths of primeval peoples (something entirely in the spirit of the times, as evident in Troshin's reference to Lévy-Bruhl). When systematising children's capacities for active behaviour, he looked for analogies in Stone Age human society. When discussing children's reading habits, he said that '*one notes great similarity between children and the uncultured classes*', since for both groups, he continued, were characteristic elements in reading such as '*love of the fantastic, the miraculous, the tendency to enact the contents of books right down to the last detail*' etc. This was totally out of step with the manner in which adults from the educated classes read, since '*here we see coming to the fore the higher emotions, such as the sense of truth, the sense of beauty, the love of those who are insulted and injured*' [Ibid. 1915: 483, 512, 704, 749]. Thus here as well the child is inserted into a particular hierarchy of values, and at one of the lower points in the hierarchy to boot.

Even more curious is Troshin's classification of the structure of the human personality, where he distinguished three parts — the physical, the social and the spiritual personality: '*it is widely accepted that there is a hierarchical relation between them — the physical personality is subordinated to the socio-moral, which is in turn subordinated to the spiritual personality*'. From what follows it becomes clear that the so-called '*physical personality*' is primary and more primitive than the other two, and that this personality is precisely the dominant one in children up to a certain age. Troshin then explained vices such as egotism, greed, stubbornness and '*destructiveness*' in some children by the hypertrophy of the '*physical personality*' after this age [Troshin 1915: 533–36].

Let us stress again that Troshin reiterates that all these lowly properties and manifestations of the children's nature should not be seen as deviations as such, but simply as a natural (age-related) characteristic of the child as such. The point, however, is precisely that even so, the child, whenever included in a classification, invariably found itself outside the norm. This, moreover, was not just Troshin's view, but something repeated by most doctors writing on children at the time. Doctors regularly spoke of the instability of a child's nervous system, of its pronounced suggestibility and of its general susceptibility to psychic illnesses. Now, the fact that the child is here being consistently compared to an adult is nothing surprising in itself. What is important is that in this era, such comparison invariably referred the child outside the psychic norm, beyond the boundaries of the normal as such. What is more, it is evident that in the given system of ideas, the norm can be seen precisely as the status that children lack by their very definition. These views among physicians were then capable of sanctioning some much harsher and

rather more strongly worded statements that one reads in the press of this era — for instance, the statement that at a certain age all children are '*maniacs*', or that all children between the age of 14 and 18 require '*a doctor, rather than a teacher*'.¹

If the norm is the adult, and if there are no qualitative differences between the adult and the child, then it is perfectly logical for children's folklore and culture (as simply an underdeveloped form of adult culture) not to have any value in itself. The child was considered to be first and foremost a future adult. Everything else remained on the periphery of positivist thinking. I wish to stress again that I am not speaking here of children's subculture itself, but of the attitude of adult professionals to it.

Secondly, one must also consider certain aspects of the political culture of adults, however remote this topic may seem at first sight. The critique of the school was one branch of a critique addressed to the tsarist regime as a whole. In this context the entire school subculture automatically assumed the status of a social pathology, and thereby became a weapon of attack on the existing social order, and a means of depicting the imperfection of the surrounding world. In this sense Orlov-Skomorovsky's ideas are hardly new, since descriptions of the school system were regularly tied to critique of the regime in the writings of Korolenko, Garin-Mikhailovsky, Andreev, and Chekhov.

Thirdly, of course it would be erroneous not to mention here a particular attitude that obtained to the urban milieu, its culture, and particularly its daily life. The town was seen as unhealthy, threatening, damaging to its inhabitants. Commentators of the era sometimes even insisted that '*the city itself is an insanitary phenomenon, its very nature causes it to spread disease and death*' [Anon. 1913]. The threatening image of the city was widespread in Russian literature of the turn of the century (see e.g. [Guro 1997]; cf. [Radatskaya 1996]). And the urban schoolchild was perceived differently from the half-starved, dirt-poor, but 'natural' schoolchild of the Russian countryside.

The above points also, in our view, enable us to shed some light on the problem of the emergence of child folklore studies in the form that we are familiar with today, and based on the postulates which we now see as axiomatic. Although this is not something that directly concerns the topic of this paper, one could perhaps say that the post-Revolutionary flourishing of pedagogical, psychological and folkloric studies of childhood seems hardly accidental in this context. This development was not just a consequence of the removal of admin-

¹ *Golos pravdy* [Voice of Truth]. 9 Jan 1910. no. 1319.

istrative obstacles and the transformation of the political situation. What was important was that with this transformation of the world of adults, the world of children had changed as well. Having gone through famine, war and the revolution, the world of children was transformed to such an extent that it had become a serious problem which could simply not be tackled within the framework of the old conceptions of childhood.¹

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¹ As an example, one can cite the problem of homeless (*besprizornye*, lit. 'unsupervised') children and the struggle with the concept of 'moral defectiveness' [*moralnaya defektivnost'*] carried out by many educators and psychologists in the 1920s. The notion of 'moral defectiveness', inherited from the nineteenth century, appeared to be a rather convenient explanatory schema that enabled the placing of homeless children into the adults' image of the world. And yet it was useless when it came to solving the problem of educating these children. It is telling that in order to refute the notion of 'moral defectiveness' P. P. Blonsky had to disprove the fundamental theoretical conceptions of the above-mentioned book by G. Ya. Troshin, *The Anthropology of Education*. Cf. [Blonsky 1979].

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