

THE NEW SOVIET EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

July 1959

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Introduction

Last year the widely praised and apparently successful Soviet educational system became the object of attack, discussion and reform by the Communist Party. Behind the attack led by Nikita Khrushchev lay serious economic and ideological problems for the Soviet Union.

The educational crisis developed as a result of the increasing number of secondary school graduates who were refused admission to the universities and were untrained for work in factories and collectives. Between 1953 and the end of the 1958 academic year some 3,500,000 graduates of regular secondary schools were not admitted to the universities for which they had been prepared. The gap between the number of secondary school graduates and first-year admissions to the universities increased steadily from 1952 when there were 315,000 graduates and 260,000 admissions, to 1958 when there were 1,340,000 graduates and only 210,000 admissions. The number of full-time students in universities dropped steadily from a high of 300,000 in 1954 to a low of 210,000 in 1958.

The necessity for re-vamping the educational system was introduced by Nikita Khrushchev as follows:*

"In the work of our schools and higher educational establishments there are fundamental shortcomings.... the time has come to reshape radically the entire system of education...."

Among the shortcomings Khrushchev noted that the school system was "separated from life...and production," was "not suited to practical education," and did "not prepare youth for useful

* The policy and program for the school reform appear in four papers as follows: Khrushchev's address to the 13th Komsomol Congress in April 1958; his memorandum "On Strengthening the Ties Between School and Life and on the Further Development of Public Education in the Country" delivered to the Presidium of the Party Central Committee in September 1958; the theses of the same title approved by the Plenum of the Party Central Committee and the Council of Ministers of the USSR in November 1958; and the School Law enacted by the Supreme Soviet in December 1958.

labor." He said that the basic conception of the secondary schools at that time, namely that their task was to prepare students for higher education and to impart academic knowledge unrelated to production, was "incorrect." As a first task he said:

"It is evidently necessary, in educating and bringing up children in the schools, to prepare them psychologically from the very first grade for taking future part in socially useful work, in labor, in creating values necessary for the development of the socialist state....

"The most important thing here is to issue a slogan and make this slogan sacred for all children entering schools--that all children must prepare for useful work, for participation in the building of a communist society.

"...an indispensable condition, is to train all boys and girls, while in schools, for participation in physical work at plants, factories and collective and state farms, in any work that benefits society."

Graduates of the 10-year schools not only lacked technical training, they were unwilling to accept manual work. The schools were charged with failing to prepare students for life--that is, for production, and with contributing to an unhealthy separation between mental and manual work. In his speech before the 13th Komsomol Congress in April 1958 Khrushchev criticized the young Communist leaders for the lack of discipline among the youth of the country, for their unwillingness to work, and for their bourgeois ideas which maintained a class society. He accused youth of having a "lordly contempt for labor" and of being "loafers." He said that the first and foremost task now was to train youth to do physical labor, that the failure to "inculcate the deepest respect for the fundamental principles of socialist society" must be remedied, and demanded that the Komsomol take an active part in carrying out the reforms to be made in the schools and elsewhere.

A. Description of the New System

The drastic revision of the educational system, beginning with the academic year 1959-1960 and scheduled for completion within three to five years, is designed to meet the shortage of vocationally-trained and -motivated manpower and to eliminate the political unrest spearheaded by intellectuals. The primary object of the schools will be to support the economic program by training the required manpower.

Fundamental changes in the educational system call for: (1) a compulsory work-study program concentrating on vocational and polytechnical training throughout the entire school system; (2) stringent political and ideological requirements for admission to higher educational institutions; and (3) ideological indoctrination to create the ideal Communist-man envisioned by the Soviet Union.

The new school plan calls for eight years of compulsory education for all students starting at the age of seven. In order to make room for the new vocational-technological courses, which will be both theoretical and practical, the social sciences and humanities will be reduced.

In the second stage of the secondary level (9th to 11th or 12th grades), students will hold regular jobs and study mainly in their spare time. Different arrangements for classes will be made and students will enroll in accordance with their interests, capabilities and school quotas, which will be determined by the economic plans of the country.

The present sprawling system of factory training schools, industrial trade schools, mining schools, labor reserve building schools, trade union technical schools, and factory apprenticeship schools of the economic councils and departments, which have lagged behind the requirements of industrial and agricultural production, are to be reorganized to fit the new school system.

Three basic types of schools have been set forth in the new educational theses as follows:

1. Three-year evening or correspondence secondary general-education schools, combined with a regular job.

2. Three-year general educational labor-polytechnical schools, with approximately one-third of the time devoted to trade practice and production.
3. Specialized secondary educational technicums.

The first two schools will provide courses which will prepare students to apply for higher educational institutions. The last will prepare students for positions as junior specialists such as technologists and foremen. Since most students (about 80 percent) will not enter the universities or higher-level institutions, they will enroll in terminal vocational-technological courses. The heaviest enrollment is expected in the evening and correspondence schools. No mention has been made of the number of students who will cease their studies at the end of the eight-year compulsory schooling because of the restrictions placed on entrance to higher educational institutions.

The vocationalized secondary schools are similar to the former labor reserve schools which could not meet the manpower needs of the economy under a voluntary system. The Labor Reserve Administration had maintained that these schools provided a general secondary education until last year when it was admitted that they lacked cultural content. The new curriculum for the reformed school shows an even further decline in liberal arts courses: they will train competent technicians, but they will not graduate truly educated men and women.

An exception to the work-study program is to be made for the gifted student. How many students this will involve on the secondary level has not been stated, but the 20 percent of the university student body to be admitted on the basis of open competitive examinations will come mainly from this group. In his introduction of the impending school reform program Khrushchev said that:

"For those gifted children who early show special ability in any particular field--mathematics, physics, biology, music, art--there would be appropriate secondary schools which would prepare them for the corresponding colleges and professional schools."

There was considerable discussion during the formulation of the new system about specially-gifted students and the need to preserve and develop their talents. Educators and scientists

were particularly concerned that the education of this group should not be interrupted by work assignments. They pointed out that the most productive years in a student's life were between the ages of 16 to 23 and that interference with their intellectual development during this period would be a loss to the State. This very small, carefully selected group will be separated from the multitude and accorded special treatment. For the rest, even those training for scientific and professional careers, a continuity of education will have to be maintained through evening and correspondence courses pursued in addition to regular jobs. For them a high premium will be placed on persistence.

The vast majority of students now know that they can not hope for a higher education. The State expects to increase correspondence courses above the secondary level but university facilities and full-time enrollments will not be expanded. Eighty percent of this limited enrollment (210,000 in 1958) will be reserved for veterans and those with two or more years of employment who must compete within their own ranks for admission. This policy has actually been the practice for two years. Candidates will be selected by committees which include representatives of the Trade Union and the Party. Admission will depend, in addition to academic performance, upon socio-political recommendations from the students' places of employment and Komsomol groups. It is apparent that the other 20 percent of the university enrollment, reserved for open competitive examinations, will come mainly from the group of gifted youth selected and specially trained in the lower grades.

The general balance of work and study in higher education was outlined by Khrushchev in his memorandum to the Central Committee Presidium in September 1958 as follows:

"It seems advisable that most schools of higher education offer the first two or three years of instruction so that young people combine their studies with a job. This would make it possible to select from among the great number of young people who want to go on with their education, those who have demonstrated that this desire was not a passing fancy, that they really had a thirst for learning and the patience and industry to pursue it. Only then, beginning with the third year,

could the privileges be granted--the students could be released from their work for three days a week. During the last two years of study it may be found advisable to free students altogether from work, except for the time required to do practical work as part of the college curriculum."

Thus, even after the student has gained admission to the university his work performance and general behavior must continue to satisfy the Party. Only after approximately three years of further testing for ideological and political reliability will the higher education student have proved his right to education on a full-time basis. A high premium has been placed on orthodoxy.

The beginning of the first seven-year plan (1959-1965) and the School Reform coincide not by accident but by design. Some 3,000,000 new workers will be required annually to meet the manpower needs of the Soviet economy, as programed in the plan. The total increase in the work-age population (15 to 69 years) during this period will not be this large and the number which would normally be expected to go into the labor force from it is only about 800,000.

In 1958 the number of students in grades 8 to 10 was 3,500,000, a decrease from the 5,200,000 in 1953 (caused by the low birth-rate during the war years). The economic manpower problem could partially be met by diverting the school population into factories, mines and collectives. The new study-as-you-work plan which starts with the 9th year of "school," has been devised to supply Soviet production with this needed labor power. Compulsory education is to be cut back from 10 to 8 years; those who wish to continue secondary school after the 8th year may do so in conjunction with a regular job or in an apprenticeship relation to industry; and those who go on to higher education will continue to devote a considerable proportion of their time to a regular job.

The new school system is designed to meet ideological-political problems which came to the surface in the Soviet Union with sudden force in early 1956. Students and intellectuals were among the most outspoken in their political criticism after the 20th Party Congress indictment of Stalin in February. As political unrest continued throughout the year and reached a second

peak during the Hungarian uprising, Khrushchev warned student dissenters that they would be expelled from the universities and sent to the factories.

Alexander Kaznachev, the Russian who defected in Rangoon recently, said that students represented the most progressive sector of the population and that the Soviet system had been unable to control their natural intellectual curiosity and convert them into trusted Communists. During the Hungarian revolution, he said, they demonstrated, held meetings, passed resolutions and went on strike. The greatest opposition, according to Kaznachev, occurred among students at Moscow University, the government technical high school, and the International Relations Institute.

In December 1956, students in Moscow and other large cities circulated news about the Hungarian uprising in handwritten bulletins--news which they had surreptitiously gathered from Western broadcasts and Polish and Yugoslav papers. The official Soviet line was questioned by students and whole classes in Moscow and other large cities were reported to have walked out on instructors who parroted the official propaganda. The spirit of free inquiry had not been eradicated.

Intellectuals and artists, relying on the new freedom which was released with the denunciation of Stalin, wrote poems, essays and stories, and generally demanded complete freedom of expression. Dudintsev's Not By Bread Alone was published in official journals and proved to be a boomerang to the Party. Young intellectuals acclaimed it and Dudintsev was compelled to say that he had not intended the message which they read into it.

Other books and poems became symbols of the feelings of the Russian people in their search for self-expression and freedom. But the "thaw" had its reaction in Party injunctions against license in expression, by which was meant anything contradicting Soviet "socialist realism." Twelve scientists lost their jobs for agreeing that Stalin was not the only man to blame for the past. The Kiev Writers Union expelled two members for the same crime.

Scores of Leningrad students were sent to Siberia and other disciplinary measures were taken against students throughout the USSR wherever they demanded that de-Stalinization should include other responsible members of the Party. Two fourth year students at a Radio Engineering Institute, both with good records, were expelled for raising questions about the adventures of the Communist Party in 1917-1918. Their questions

had been stimulated by John Keed's Ten Days That Shook The World. Although the students were reinstated, after they admitted their errors, the Komsomol paper unexpectedly took up the problem and the Case of the Questions became an open issue. Further disciplinary actions were taken by the Party and improper questions were no longer voiced openly.

The system which had produced the scientists and technologists urgently needed by the Soviet Union, also produced intellectuals who questioned the system that had trained them. The most serious opposition occurred in Poland and Hungary but the restlessness in Russia was also getting out of control. The first official notice of the failure of the educational system to indoctrinate its citizens came with the appointment of Ekaterina Furtseva, a member of the Presidium, to deal with the "problem of youth." This was the first admission by the Soviet Union that the problem was not simply one of rowdyism and delinquency. The new school reform carries out Khrushchev's threat to student dissenters to send them to the factories.

B. Opposition to the New System

Discussion of the proposed educational theses was carried on throughout the USSR by educators, scientists, factory officials and Party leaders. While most of the discussion reported in the Soviet press supported the reforms or proposed variations in administration, some opposition to the theory underlying the new system was expressed.

Educators showed their concern over the disappearance of general education from school curricula. To send students after the eighth year of school directly into factories, they said, would prevent youth from obtaining the treasured "certificate of maturity," the diploma essential for admission to the university. In other words, it would eliminate the liberal arts from their education. To postpone education to a more advanced age, they said, would deprive the student of his optimum years for learning.

The charge also was made that general culture would be neglected. The inadequacy of musical education was noted and it was pointed out that the elimination of courses in this field would reduce the already low level of musical taste in the country. Educators said that students in the pilot courses which preceded the comprehensive reform of the system had become disinterested in their studies as soon as they knew that they would not have an opportunity to go to the university.

For three decades Soviet youth had been encouraged to aspire to social betterment through education. Parents saw in education the opportunity for their children to rise above manual labor, to prepare themselves for professional careers and to live more desirable social lives. Knowledge, education and science were accepted for their intrinsic value, as ends in themselves, as well as means of upward social mobility. And the State encouraged these values, hopes and aspirations in the people. Marx had said that all sides of the individual should be developed to the limit of his intellectual capacity.

But Marx has been rejected and the educational emphasis is anti-intellectual. The social sciences are to be taught in only a few, carefully selected, fragmented courses. The fate of the humanities has been explicitly stated in Thesis 18 (the only mention of humanities in the otherwise lengthy document on the reorganization) as follows:

"There must certainly be no reduction or attenuation of education in the humanities as a result of the school reorganization. The humanities are extremely important for the formation of the pupils' Communist world outlook."

Since many new vocational courses are to be introduced into the curricula, humanities courses will have to be reduced and attenuated.

The USSR magazine in 1959 presented a succinct statement of the materialistic world-outlook of the Communist system in the following article entitled "Education for Socially Productive Work":

"With the new seven-year plan designed to make the Soviet Union the world's number one producer, education assumes an even more significant and central role."

The plan calls for an 80 percent increase in industrial production, a 70 percent increase in agriculture, and significant technological improvements such as mechanical modernization and automation. The article goes on to say that:

"To meet these changing conditions more quickly and effectively the law provides for a uniform system of vocational training...."

While the priority of utilitarian goals in the Soviet Union has always been recognized, the present educational policy explicitly acknowledges the priority and reduces the schools to the level of labor activity.

The creation of a new class, that is the "small fraction of secondary school graduates admitted into higher and technical schools" was criticized in Pravda in late 1957. Nonetheless, the people at that time hoped that they or their children would be members of the new class and would be able to better themselves. The new school system, rather than eliminating this elite, creates a more exclusive and privileged one. This group will stand out against the overwhelming majority which will be directed into the factories, mines and farms--a majority which will be denied access to the information, ideas, and literature that might cause them to question the basis of their own political-economic system.

The Soviet school system will no longer support the hopes and aspirations of the people; it has become the means to further only the economic, political and military ends of the State.