



German Historical Institute Washington Bulletin, Supplement
Bd. 14 (2019)

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A HISTORY OF THE “SOVIET”: FROM BOLSHEVIK UTOPIA TO SOVIET MODERNITY

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Introduction: Crossing out “Proletarian,” Writing “Soviet”¹

In early 1936, Aleksandr Kosarev, the thirty-three-year-old leader of the All-Union Young Communist League (Komsomol), and his Central Committee worked away on a draft of the organization’s new membership rules. The draft was forwarded directly to Joseph Stalin, who must have spent hours hand-editing the lengthy document. The resulting document was cleansed of what most scholars today would associate with the signature Bolshevik *lingua franca* of the socialist project undertaken in the Soviet Union. Stalin consistently crossed out the familiar Bolshevik terms, categories, and metaphors that Kosarev had copied from the old rules. Stalin wrote “nonaffiliated” in place of “proletarian” and “laboring” in place of “class conscious.”² Two months later, at the Komsomol Congress that gathered to adopt the new membership rules, Stalin began to use the term “Soviet” to refer to these “party-less” and “laboring” young people. The toast with which he ended the Congress, “Long live the Soviet youth,” sounded like a definitive corrective to Kosarev and other weathered Komsomol leaders, who still preferred to refer to their organization as the “young generation of the proletarian revolutionaries.”³

The odd but explicit opposition between the Bolshevik political *lingua franca* and Stalin’s discursive intervention carried out under the rubric of the “Soviet” cannot help but give a scholar of modern Russia pause. On what conceptual grounds does one account for the oddness of the Stalin-Kosarev controversy, which, as we will see, far from being an inexplicable glitch, permeated the 1930s political, cultural, and institutional struggles over changing meanings of the socialist project under construction in the modernizing Soviet society? What, for example, could the notion of the “Soviet youth” capture in the mid-1930s that the Bolshevik *lingua franca* could not? And, why did contemporaries deploy the terms “Soviet,” on the one hand, and the “Bolshevik-proletarian,” on the other, as notions that were discordant at best, and oppositional, at worst?

1 I am grateful to *Social History* for allowing me to draw on materials published in Anna Krylova, “Imagining Socialism in the Soviet Century,” *Social History* 42, no. 3 (2017): 315–41, in this essay, DOI: 10.1080/03071022.2017.1327640, reprinted by permission of Taylor & Francis Ltd, <http://www.tandfonline.com>.

2 “Ustav VLKSM,” draft, RGASPI, fond 1, opis 23, delo 1157, list 64.

3 “Da zdravstvuet sovetskaia molodezh!,” editorial, *Komsomolskaia Pravda (KP)*, 22 April 1936; “Rech Kosareva”, *KP*, 16 April 1936; see also Kosarev’s report to the congress, *KP*, 13 April 1936.

These questions present a serious challenge to the field of modern Russian history and the broader scholarly community that draws on the field's analytics. Vividly, they throw into sharp relief the limitations of the longstanding convention that has allowed scholars to conflate most basic categories of modern Russian history in their work: the Soviet, the Bolshevik, the proletarian, the socialist. When utilized in the analysis of cultural change over the course of the twentieth century, this convention rests on a body of scholarship that assigns cultural continuity to what is, in fact, a period of social and economic transformation unprecedented in Russian history. Most recently, for example, scholars have viewed the *Soviet* socialist experiment as *Bolshevik*, *proletariat-inspired*, *collectivist*, and avowedly *illiberal*, and falling within an anti-individualist and anti-capitalist camp of utopian projects to transform human nature and society. In fact, as I have argued previously, it is the treatment of the Bolshevik collectivist, illiberal, and anti-capitalist objectives as the “fundamental tenets” of the Bolshevik/Soviet project that has allowed scholars of modern Russia to be comfortable with the interchangeability that informs our use of the “Soviet” and “Bolshevik” notions. For example, figures of speech in which the “Soviet people” accept, resist, or subvert the “Bolshevik,” that is, “collectivist,” that is, “socialist” modernity have become familiar and unproblematic in academic narratives, both in the scholarship on Stalinism as well as on the post-Stalinist period.⁴

In my previous work, I have explored how this accepted view of Soviet modernity as predicated on fundamental, Bolshevik tenets has impacted contemporary work on Soviet subjectivity. Our conceptualization of the Soviet subject, for example, is characterized by a striking lack of interest in exploring qualitative differences between the “New Man” — the militant proletariat-styled, Bolshevik ideal of the 1920s — and the “New Soviet Person” — a discursive creation of the 1930s. Regardless of the decade, the generic New Man and/or Soviet person demarcates the Soviet cultural project of the twentieth century as a *longue durée* component of Soviet history and as a self-evident category of scholarly analysis. Either “new” or “Soviet,” the ideal subject is identified with a Bolshevik “collectivist orientation” and, depending on the circumstances, with one’s willingness or eagerness to derive or merge one’s personal life with the life of the collective.⁵ It is hardly an imposition, I argued, to say that Stalinist modernity and, to a significant degree, the whole Soviet period are

4 For an extended discussion of the state of the field’s analytics and approaches to Stalinist and post-Stalinist modernity from the grounds of Bolshevik tenets, see Anna Krylova, “Soviet Modernity: Stephen Kotkin and the Bolshevik Predicament,” *Contemporary European History* 23, no. 2 (2014): 167–92.

5 Jochen Hellbeck has focused on Soviet citizens who turned this dictum of the collective’s supremacy (which I refer to as the collective ideal without borders) into an exasperating practice of self-policing inclinations toward personal considerations and happiness. For these individuals, the argument goes, the collective became the “ultimate measure of individual happiness and fulfillment.” Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution on My Mind: Writing a Diary under Stalin* (Cambridge, MA, 2006), 146, 349–50; for a discussion of the “Soviet self” and the “Soviet subject” in the context of the 1920s, see, for example, Igal Halfin, *From Darkness to Light: Class, Consciousness, and Salvation in Revolutionary Russia* (Pittsburgh, 2000), 35–38; also Igal Halfin, *Terror in My Soul: Communist Autobiographies on Trial* (Cambridge, MA, 2003), 283.

presently viewed as one collective-inspired and anti-liberal attempt at remaking human nature.⁶

In this essay, I further my interrogation of the unsettling implications of such a Bolshevik-identified view of socialist modernity. One problem I consider here is the defining term in modern Russian history — the “Soviet.” Impossible to avoid, the notion, I argue, tends to remain historically unsignified. Defined through the complex adaptation and reconfiguration of Bolshevik utopian objectives and used interchangeably with them, the “Soviet” — as a concept, language, and cultural practice — lacks a history in its own right, a history in which its fundamental aspirations part with the Bolshevik utopia.

My goal in this essay is to zero in on this pivotal term of modern Russian history and, in so doing, to account for the conflicting terms of the Stalin-Kosarev controversy. In what follows, I refrain from treating Stalin’s intervention as a history-making move of an all-powerful dictator capable of shifting cultural codes and vocabularies single-handedly. Rather, I approach Stalin’s 1936 imposition onto the Komsomol organization, which was still a rather small and militant community at that time, as symptomatic of a deep restructuring of the societal understanding and expectations of socialism — a development not under anyone’s direct control. Thus, I ask where the discordant notion of the “Soviet” in Stalin’s political rhetoric came from. Further, I explore what connotations the term “Soviet” carried prior the 1930s.

Here, the history of the “Soviet” thus begins in the 1920s within the formation of Bolshevik discourse. Far from being a versatile cultural marker, “Soviet” in this context connoted a narrowly defined political-administrative principle of the Proletarian Republic — the rule of the Soviets — and, as such, resided within the symbolic possibilities of the Bolshevik *lingua franca*. Connoting just one aspect of the proletariat’s historical mission, its creation of new principles of governance, the term was powerless to define phenomena that exceeded its realm of connotations. As a result, it completely lacked the identity-, value-, or quality-signifying and -ascribing powers for which it is known today. In the 1920s politico-discursive universe, it was impossible to refer to the proletarian New Man ideal as “Soviet,” or to call upon citizens residing in the territory of the Soviet Union as “Soviet people,” or to compliment someone on one’s “Soviet character” or “Soviet personality.”

The birth of the concept as we use it today — as a signifier of a distinct and inherent quality of a personality, a nation, things and goods —

6 Such an approach, of course, does not prevent scholars from studying changes, shifts, developments, and adaptations that the alleged Soviet/ Bolshevik utopia underwent in the twentieth century without losing its presumed undergirding tenets. For a detailed explication of this critique, see Krylova, “Soviet Modernity,” 167–92; idem, “Imagining Socialism.” On developments within Soviet legal culture, and mainstream artistic and literary conversations away from the Bolshevik and the Socialist Realist traditions, see Benjamin Nathan, “Soviet Rights-Talk in the Post-Stalin Era,” in *Human Rights in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann, 166–90 (Cambridge, UK, 2011); and idem, “The Dictatorship of Reason: Aleksandr Vol’pin and the Idea of Rights under ‘Developed Socialism,’” *Slavic Review* 66, no. 4 (2007): 630–63; a pioneering essay is Susan E. Reid, “Toward a New (Socialist) Realism: The Re-engagement with Western Modernism in the Khrushchev Thaw,” in *Russian Art and the West*, ed. Rosalind P. Blakesley and Susan E. Reid, 217–39 (DeKalb, 2006); see also Anatoly Pinsky, “The Diaristic Form and Subjectivity under Khrushchev,” *Slavic Review* 73, no. 4 (2014): 805–27.

occurred in the 1930s when the political discourse of the Soviet Union underwent a significant transformation to relate the new realities and demands of the emergent industrial society. Suddenly, that is, in a course of several years, in the mainstream national press, the state school system, at public Komsomol and party events, and even in the routine work of Komsomol and party institutions, the “Soviet” turned out to be an indispensable conceptual tool for thinking about modernity and socialism.

The explosion of the signifying powers of the “Soviet” concept in the 1930s, which I trace in the second half of this essay, marks a radical discontinuity in the concept’s history and in the Soviet Union’s imagining of a modern socialist society. As such, it was neither an add-on to nor a revision of the Bolshevik tradition. Rather, it is under the rubric of the “Soviet” and by means of building a new Soviet-marked language of modernity that the prewar society began to re-imagine the contours and basic principles of the socialist alternative to capitalism. The Soviet Union’s experiment with socialist modernity, in other words, contains more than one normative script, and it is not a history of continuity.

At its early stages, the emerging Soviet-marked *lingua franca* was a cultural response to the glaring fact that the 1930s assault on Russia’s industrial and cultural backwardness brought about a modernity that defied the Bolshevik scripts of the 1920s. One of the first striking departures from the Bolshevik tenets was carried out not by Stalin but by desperate journalists in an effort to address emergent social phenomena that seemed to contradict Bolshevik ideals — the first army of school graduates heading for university degrees and middle-class careers. It was in relation to this cohort, as this article shows, that the term “Soviet” was first used as an identity-signifying category. The term “Soviet” in this new usage connoted a “Soviet personality” that, contrary to the ideals of the 1920s, was no longer predicated on one’s merger with the collective, that is, one’s *de facto* ontological disappearance in it. Nor was this new “Soviet personality” first and foremost measured by one’s class position. The new political discourse under the rubric of the “Soviet” foregrounded culture, education, and one’s professional and personal self-realization as indispensable markers of Soviet socialist personality. As importantly, it did not abandon the notion of the socialist collective but redefined it. To its creators and users, the emergent “Soviet” *lingua franca* did not herald a termination of the socialist project but rather the first steps towards a distinct —

post-Bolshevik — socialist vision necessitated by the needs of the modern society under construction in the Soviet Union.⁷

The focus of my exploration of this post-Bolshevik concept, language, and cultural practice falls within the social, political, and cultural realms that first faced the limitations of the Bolshevik worldview and were forced to experiment, that is, mainstream journalism, the national Kosomol headquarters and its local organizations, the state secondary school system, and public events organized on behalf of the “Soviet youth.”⁸

The “Country of the Soviets” without the “Soviet People”

Contrary to the conventional scholarly use of the term as a versatile signifier, the term “Soviet” connoted a narrowly defined political-administrative principle of governance in the 1920s: the rule of the proletariat via its representative councils — Soviets (*soveti*). The Soviets were first formed by striking workers during the Russian Revolution of 1905. Nearly immediately, a young and militant Russian Marxist, Vladimir Lenin, the leader of a radical Bolshevik wing of the underground Social Democratic Party, theorized that they embodied the proletarian creative energy to make history and to offer new forms of political and administrative governance to the world.⁹

Having sprung to life again in 1917, the Soviets gave a name to the “first country of the victorious proletariat” — the Republic of the Soviets — and to its government, determined to differentiate itself via the “Soviet” principle of state organization from “bourgeois” models. What the “Soviet” of the 1920s signified — as customary figures of political and everyday speech, such as “the country of the Soviets,” “Soviet state,” “Soviet power,” “Soviet Russia,” and “Soviet Republic,” captured — was the establishment of the proletariat-generated political-administrative organization of the Soviet Union in the form of a proletarian dictatorship.¹⁰

7 The analysis of the “Soviet” undertaken here thus also questions neo-traditionalist interpretations that treat the discontinuities in the Bolshevik discourse of the 1930s as a return to pre-Bolshevik systems of signification and argue that the transformation of

Soviet society ended the Soviet experiment with socialism. See, for example, critical discussions of the neo-traditionalist school of thought in Michael David-Fox, “Multiple Modernities vs. Neo-Traditionalism: On Recent Debates in Russian and Soviet

History,” *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 54 (2006): 535–55; David Hoffmann, “Was There a ‘Great Retreat’ from Soviet Socialism? Stalinist Culture Reconsidered,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 5, no. 4 (2004): 651–74.

8 For an analysis that takes the history of the “Soviet” beyond the scope of this essay into the 1930s state educational system, party and state educational policies and reforms, as well as pedagogical theory and practice, see Krylova, “Imagining Socialism.”

9 For an analysis of the impact of the Revolution of 1905 on Bolshevik conceptualizations of the working class, see Lars Lih, *Lenin Rediscovered: What Is to Be Done? in Context* (Boston, 2006); Anna Krylova, “Beyond the Spontaneity-Consciousness Paradigm: ‘Class Instinct’ as a Promising Category of Historical Analysis,” *Slavic Review* 62, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 1–23.

10 As prevalent figures of political and everyday speech in the 1920s, “the country of the Soviets,” “Soviet power,” “Soviet Russia,” and “Soviet Republic” run the risk of generating endless citations. Citations in this section are thus representative examples only of these articles, reports, and speeches that directly refer to the nature of the Soviet-proletarian state, the Soviet-proletarian worldview of the ruling class, and anti-Soviet/anti-state moods; see Ya. Yakovlev, “O ‘proletarskoi kulture’ i Proletkulte,” *Pravda*, 24 October 1922; “Tov. Trotsky na s’ezde,” *Pravda*, 14 October 1922; Riutin, “Melkoburzhuaiznye cherty neomenshevizma,” *Pravda*, 6 January 1928; Teumin, “Uchebnik perioda sotsializma,” *KP*, 13 September 1931.

Connoting a political-administrative principle of the class that was eagerly expected to realize its historical mission on a global scale, the “Soviet” of the 1920s also inherited the working class’s assumed “international” ambition.¹¹ Especially in the early 1920s, state and party leaders, Bolshevik-affiliated journalists, and writers saw “Soviet power” as a transnational form of governance that did not have to respect national borders. The Hungarian Soviet Republic and the Bavarian Soviet Republic of 1919 seemed to support the thesis.¹²

As such, “Soviet” did not carry a meaning outside the Bolshevik-Marxist political discourse that unconditionally situated the proletariat as the “progressive class” — and simultaneously as the liberator of mankind from social injustice, the incarnation of true human nature, and the creator of new social forms. “Soviet” thus captured and was synonymous with one of the proletariat’s many creative activities on behalf of history.

As a result, it is futile to look for 1920s references to “Soviet values,” “Soviet character,” or “Soviet patriotism,” not to mention discussions and social policies in the name of the legendary “New Soviet Person” or “Soviet culture.” Throughout the decade, the term “Soviet” was powerless to describe the nature and qualities of individuals and social groups living in the territory of the Soviet Union.

The best way to illuminate the naming, descriptive, and conceptual limitations of the notion of the “Soviet” is to draw attention to the fact that, within the political and literary discursive universe of the period, there were “Soviet citizens” but no “Soviet people.” “Soviet citizens” referred to the class-divided, ethnically diverse, and antagonistic individuals and social groups living under the proletarian rule of the Soviets, who did not easily add up to any collective noun or adjective.

Symptomatic of the lack of a term to address Soviet citizens as a whole was a prevalent use of such vague, unidentified forms of address as “masses” and “population.” The word “population” generated especially awkward phrases in the Bolshevik language. Speaking as late as 1929, at the Seventh Congress of the Union of Educational Workers, Commissar of Enlightenment Anatoly Lunacharsky still had to employ that unnamable all-Union term “population” to refer to proletarian, peasant, employee, and intelligentsia masses and their feelings, thoughts, and demands: “The population feels perfectly well the full weight of non-culturedness... The population understands perfectly well that what comrade Lenin said... The population has

11 For analyses of the role of the international and transnational imagination in Bolshevik politics and culture, see V. A. Shishkin, *Stanovlenie vneshnei politiki poslevoennoi Rossii (1917–1931) I kapitalisticheskii mir* (St. Petersburg, 2002); Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment: Cultural Diplomacy and Western Visitors to the Soviet Union, 1921–1941* (Oxford, 2011).

12 “Glavnyi urok III Kongressa,” *Pravda*, 12 July 1921; see also G. E. Zinoviev’s speech at the Second Congress of the Communist Youth International and L. D. Trotsky’s speech at the Russian Young Communist League: “Rech tov. Zinovieva,” *Pravda*, 12 July 1921; “Tov. Trotsky na s’ezde,” *Pravda*, 14 October 1922; for a continuation of this discourse, see “Budushchee prinadlezhit nam,” *KP*, 18 August 1929.

understood perfectly well and now demands from the government ... to have its cultural hunger satisfied..." The Soviet as a signifier of a distinct or inherent quality of a personality or a nation endowed with some common features did not yet exist for Luncharsky to draw on.¹³

The narrow understanding of the "Soviet" citizenship as living under "hammer and sickle" rule also informed literary and poetic undertakings in the Soviet Republic. Take, for example, the well-known 1929 "Poem about the Soviet Passport" by Vladimir Maiakovsky. In it, the "red-skinned paper" that Maiakovsky parades during his foreign travel is "a bomb," "a hedgehog," "a razor" because it serves as a threatening reminder to "those very official gentlemen," gathering up passports, that a new kind of state has come into being. The "Soviet passport" is thus simultaneously and narrowly the symbol of a new state principle and a "red-taped paper" produced by the Soviet state's bureaucratic machine.¹⁴

The red-taped world of Soviet bureaucracy with which Maiakovsky begins his poem empowered the most common use of the "Soviet" in the 1920s press, literature, and everyday language. To the vast majority of Soviet citizens, whether they welcomed Maiakovsky's ode to the Soviet state or not, whether they worked in or outside the Soviet apparatus, "Soviet" signified the cumbersome bureaucracy of Soviet institutions. The term rang with negativity. In the early 1920s, contributors to *Pravda* already could offer, in an indisputably self-evident tone, the following list of administrative realities known as "Soviet": being routinely late for work, irresponsible indifference toward fellow citizens, unnecessary proliferation of paperwork as a way to avoid one's duties, bribe-giving and bribe-taking — "in one word," as Yakov Yakovlev, the party's propaganda chief, summed up in a 1922 feature article, "our wasteful-irresponsible-Soviet style" (*nash razgildiaiskii-sovetskii obrazets*).¹⁵ In Maiakovsky's case, the Soviet passport was, in fact, the only Soviet paper for which the poet pledged his admiration and respect. Every other red-taped Soviet document he would "chuck without mercy/To the devil himself."¹⁶

Another classic of the era, Fedor Gladkov's novel *Cement*, written between 1922 and 1924, offers multiple variations on the Soviet theme as a bureaucratic routine, set up to realize the rule of the working class and yet threatening and boycotting this new principle of governance.¹⁷ Devoted to the post-Civil War reconstruction and the market-friendly and, to the novel's characters, deeply unsettling New Economic Policy, much of the novel's plot takes place within

13 "Doklad narodnogo Komissara Prosveshcheniia PSFR tov. Lunacharskogo," in *Narodnoe obrazovanie v SSSR* (Moscow, 1929), 74.

14 In less than a decade, millions of schoolchildren would read the poem and would be able to expand the meaning of the "Soviet" in their imagination toward distinctly Soviet qualities of the Soviet people. VI. Maiakovsky, "Stikhi o sovetskom pasporte," *Izbrannye stikhi* (Moscow, 1936).

15 Yakovlev's two-part article was devoted to a critique of the Proletcult movement and its leaders: Ya. Yakovlev, "O 'proletarskoi kulture' i Proletkulte," *Pravda*, 24 October 1922.

16 Maiakovsky, "Stikhi o sovetskom pasporte," *ibid.*

17 Here I do not engage the novel as a founding canon of Socialist Realism. Rather, I treat it as a monument to the period — that is, as a deliberate compression of the everyday language, expressions, and literary debates of the 1920s and thus ideally situated to introduce us to the nuances and limitations of everyday Soviet-speak.

- 18 Fedor Gladkov, *Tsement* (Moscow, 1947), 30.
- 19 Gladkov, *Tsement*, 28, 30; see also 24, 54, 118, 121.
- 20 The 1920s debates about New Men, mankind, culture, and, specifically, education and upbringing without the use of the “Soviet” as an identity-ascribing category also run the risk of generating endless citations; see, for example, V.I. Lenin, *Zadachi soiuzov molodezhi* [a speech delivered at the Third Congress of Russian Young Communist League, 2 October 1920] (Moscow, 1966); O. Tarkhanov, “Itogi IV s’ezda RKSM. Vmesto predislouviia,” *IV s’ezd RKSM. Stenograficheski otchet. 21-28 Sentiabr 1921* (Moscow, 1925), 3-6; Nikolai Bukharin’s speech on working youth’s upbringing and education at the Fifth Congress of the Russian Young Communist League, *Pravda*, 14 October 1922.
- 21 Research on the Bolshevik, Marxist worldview and practice has a rich bibliography that goes back to the 1950s. See, for example, Alfred G. Meyer, *Marxism: The Unity of Theory and Practice* (Cambridge, MA, 1954); Leszek Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism: Its Rise, Growth, and Dissolution* (Oxford, 1978); Michael David-Fox, *Revolution of the Mind: Higher Learning among the Bolsheviks, 1918-1929* (Ithaca, 1997); Igal Halfin, *From Darkness to Light: Class, Consciousness, and Salvation in Revolutionary Russia* (Pittsburgh, 2000); Mark D. Steinberg, *Proletarian Imagination: Self, Modernity, and the Sacred in Russia, 1910-1925* (Ithaca, 2002).
- 22 See Wendy Goldman’s brilliant analysis of the way labor and social policies in the 1920s clashed with working-class economic interests: Wendy Z. Goldman, *Women, the State and Revolution: Soviet Family Policy and Social Life, 1917-1936* (Cambridge, UK, 1993).

the walls of the flourishing Soviet bureaucracy. To Gladkov and his characters, “our Soviet ... daily life” (*sovetskie budni*) narrowly means the work done or sabotaged in numerous rooms and offices of Soviet councils and party committees.¹⁸ As a result, the “Soviet worker” (*sovetskii rabotnik*) in the novel is not defined by any inherent qualities. “Soviet workers” could be good — “firm and tested” administrators — or bad — opportunist, unmotivated, unqualified bureaucrats. Regardless of one’s attitude, a “Soviet job” in a Soviet institution, epitomized by a life of sitting at a desk and moving papers, is hardly an exciting prospect. It is precisely “this Soviet and party daily life” that the novel’s main character, Gleb, the worker-hero of the new proletarian age, decides to “disturb.”¹⁹

In the 1920s, whether we follow the political discourse on the “Soviet state” as a realization of the proletarian will to govern or its popular version that allowed for a counterposition between Soviet bureaucracy and proletarian rule, we face a narrowly defined notion of the Soviet, either as a part of the proletarian self-realization through governance or its negation.

The Short-Lived History of Bolshevik Utopia

The founding Bolshevik discourse of the Republic of the Soviets proved fully sufficient to empower Bolshevik intellectuals, revolutionaries, and statemen to carry on their class politics without having to draw on the “Soviet” as an identity-ascribing category.²⁰ In fact, within the vibrant and militant Bolshevik political discourse of the 1920s, it was inconceivable to refer to the sought-after New Man as a “Soviet.” The New Man of the 1920s was, of course, modeled on the proletariat, an innate collectivist formed, in accordance with the Marxist theory of productive and creative labor, on the factory floor and in the midst of class struggles. The working class, as it was then asserted to be and since then much written about, contained in itself a script of alternative socialist modernity. From within this philosophical and political ideal, working-class personal aspirations were understood either as identical to or derivable from the needs of the collective good.²¹

In the 1920s, this philosophical and political worldview reigned supreme but its powers to set, to describe, and to evaluate virtually anything in relation to the “proletariat” were largely unleashed on paper: newspapers, journals, magazines, routine educational and celebratory speeches.²² During the First Five-Year Plan (1928-1932), the

Bolshevik vision of collectivist modernity seemed to triumph in deeds as it finally materialized into radical social policies that celebrated, privileged, and promoted the working class and decidedly discriminated against other classes.²³ The popular metaphors of the 1920s that called for the remaking of human material in the image of the working class — literarily “remelting” or “recasting” (*pereplavka*) — exploded at the time of the First Five-Year Plan and pronounced industrial labor as the privileged tool and the industrial plant as the privileged place for making ordinary people “new.” Anatoly Lunacharsky elaborated this Bolshevik vision-to-become-reality in his featured article “What Kind of Person Do We Need?,” which was serialized in *Komsomolskaia Pravda* in 1928. Reframing issues raised in the debates of a few years earlier as tangible goals, Lunacharsky wrote that there in the midst of “intimate unity” with material, machines, and tools, larger industrial collectives, and “different kind of chemical processes,” factory newcomers were made into the proletariat, with its “production-based qualities,” “natural collectivism,” “natural predisposition towards truly scientific understanding of things,” liberated appreciation of beauty, unbounded creativity, and organic antagonism toward self-centered limitations of capitalist/bourgeois forms of being.²⁴

The education system responsible for the making of new socialist citizens also seemed to be moving into the space of production and productive labor. Throughout the 1920s, the Komsomol and the Commissariat of Enlightenment had been lobbying for the Bolshevik dream of making general education radically polytechnic and relocating it into “the proximity of factories and plants,” and now the dream seemed to be acquiring tangible funding. The Komsomol organization, already led by Aleksander Kosarev, fought militantly and successfully for factory-based schooling to be expanded to the masses — the project that translated the Bolshevik-Marxist theory of the collectivist productive worker into a nationwide institution. During the high point of this polytechnic campaign, when enrollment numbers increased in just one year from 73,000 in 1929 to 473,000 in 1930, Kosarev’s Central Committee worked de facto as a state agency, supervising the construction, operation, and even instruction of factory-based schools. The organization, together with the Commissariat of Enlightenment, celebrated what appeared to them to be the definitive beginning of a qualitatively different system of national education. The party’s support for the campaign at the 16th Party Congress in 1930 reinforced everyone’s expectation that

23 For the recent research on the unevenness of this process of “proletarianization” and increasing rates of exploitation, see Andrew Sloin, “Theorizing Soviet Antisemitism: Value, Crisis, and Soviet Modernity,” *Critical Historical Studies* 3, no. 2 (Fall 2016): 249–81; see also Goldman, *Women, the State and Revolution*.

24 A. Lunacharsky, “Kakoi chelovek nam nuzhen,” *KP*, 22 July 1928; “Za bolshee iskusstvo bolshevizma,” *KP*, 11 May 1931; L. Perchik, “Idet izumitelnaia pereplavka liudei,” *KP*, 10 August 1933. See also Polonsky’s and Riutin’s articles, which presented the reader with the opposite of the proletariat, the petite bourgeoisie, Viach. Polonsky, “O meshchanskoi beletristike,” *KP*, 19 February 1929; Riutin, “Melko-burzhuzaznye cherty neomenshevizma,” *KP*, 6 January 1929; for more metal-processing-, technology-derived terms (such as “zakaliat,” “vulkanizirovat”) or machine- and collective-identified narratives and images, see N. Ivushkin, “Novoe pokolenie Moskovskoi organizatsii,” *KP*, 28 September 1931; E. Kriger, “Liudi – sobytiia, liudi – geroistvo,” *KP*, 7 September 1931; Ev. Kolesnikov, “Istoriia v odnoi mashine,” *KP*, 30 October 1931.

factory-based education would become the main educational venue of the first socialist state.²⁵

- 25 In 1931, fifty workers of Kosarev's Central Committee worked at different construction sites supervising the construction of factory-based schools (*shkola fabrichno-zavodskogo uchenichestva* [FZU]). For an impressive record of the Komsomol's decisive involvement in the organization of the FZU system in the early 1930s, routine dealing with the Council of People's Commissars, the Party Central Committee, and militant participation in the state discussion on the reform of the Soviet secondary school system, see RGASPI, fond 1, opis 23, delo 1006, list 49-50, 54-55, 56-58; delo 1003, list 38-43. On Kosarev's personal role, see V. Kozlov, "Sterzhnevaia zadacha," in *Aleksandr Kosarev, Sbornik vospominanii* (Moscow, 2002), 67-69; N. Trushchenko, *Kosarev* (Moscow, 1988), 168; see also Mark R. Beissinger, *Scientific Management, Socialist Discipline, and Soviet Power* (Cambridge, MA, 1988), 105-106; Kenneth M. Straus, *Factory and Community in Stalin's Russia: The Making of an Industrial Working Class* (Pittsburgh, 1997), 114-15; Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Education and Social Mobility in the Soviet Union 1921-1934* (Cambridge, New York, 1979), chapters 3, 9, 10.

- 26 N. Pogodin, *Poema o topore in Sobranie sochinenii, Tom I* (Moscow, 1972), 136, 155-57.

- 27 V. Kataev, *Time Forward!* (1932). Proletarian poets, writers, and literary critics who wrote for *Komsomolskaia Pravda* and *Literaturnaia gazeta* in the early 1930s also resolutely set the "intimate" in opposition to the proletarian and the new. See A. Volkov and B. Meilakh, "Za bolshevitskuiu literaturu o molodezhi," *KP*, 30 September 1931.

Similarly radical interpretations of the Bolshevik vision of socialist modernity and "new people" came into being in literature and on stage, seemingly finalizing the divorce of the New Man ideal from cultural languages of individuality. In industrial classics of the Five-Year Plan period, the New Man happily disengaged from the world of interpersonal relations and individual peculiarity unrelated to work and, indeed, seemed to identify his personal fulfillment entirely with the collective purpose. This development was powerfully announced, for example, in a highly acclaimed 1931 play with a telling title, *Poem about an Axe*, by Nikolai Pogodin. As Pogodin's characters galloped on and off the stage, the viewer got acquainted with a new role model: a proletarian or proletariat-emulating hero portrayed at moments of "sleepwalking" home after an intense day of work and contemplating an answer to the problem that had been tormenting him for months. Suddenly, the hero is brought up short by a solution. He charges back to work, without remembering that he has not slept for days.²⁶

The most extreme representation of such a work-consumed character comes from another hit of the period, Valentin Kataev's 1932 novel *Time Forward!* The author's hero Ishchenko illustrates well the extreme erasure of personal life depicted in the industrial novel. His ability to feel anything for his pregnant wife Fyenyia is vitiated by intense and complete dedication to his work that, in the form of a "burning, insistent thought," overtakes his whole being. "If he could only... get rid of her, get her off his hands, and get back to the sector!" he thinks as he takes the pregnant Fyenyia to a hospital.²⁷

Such "sleepwalking" and work-consumed characters did not have any personal time to themselves. Nor did they seek home, let alone an intimate relationship, as a destination. Unlike his 1920s predecessor who, devoted to the revolutionary struggle and reconstruction work, still longed for private happiness but did not know how to achieve it or willfully turned private life into a painful sacrifice, the popular hero of the early 1930s achieved complete personal satisfaction on a construction site. For this industrial hero, the personal and the collective become one, and even the world of intimacy (a major issue in the 1920s) ceases to be of interest.

And yet, contrary to the prevailing scholarly consensus, this Bolshevik collectivist discourse and practice were short-lived. Ironically, the

key to understanding why this was so lies in the undergirding tenets of Boshevism: the belief that members of the working class are naturally predisposed collectivists, the living negation of the individualist ethos of capitalism, and the kernel of the future socialist society.²⁸ Journalists and Young Communist functionaries were the first to confront the limitations of the Bolshevik *lingua franca* to account for emergent, unanticipated complexities of the modern society under construction in the prewar decade. Already in the early 1930s, advocating the proletarian path toward mankind's liberation while reporting on the millions of children in the rapidly expanding educational system made journalists, for example, look like prisoners of their own device. On what grounds was one to include classroom children, this living embodiment of the world of study's crippling alienation from the world of production, in the New Man project?

The question became increasingly acute as the decade witnessed record growth in the number of children in the expanding state school system, from 12 million in 1931 to 32 million in 1940. At the same time, the 1930s shattered the Komsomol and party constituents' expectations for the radical remaking of the secondary school system along the lines of the factory-based ideal. Heeding the needs of modern society, which called for continuous secondary and higher education — the launching ground for classic middle-class careers such as accountant, economist, planner, engineer, scientist — the party began to require academic and competitive education for the postrevolutionary generations as early as 1931. The remainder of the decade saw an avalanche of school reforms and educational initiatives that unconditionally parted ways with the polytechnic dreams of the earlier period. To “study well” was highlighted as schoolchildren's primary obligation, and it was now placed within the four walls of a classroom.²⁹ In 1937, a labor class holdover from the 1920s dreams about people's polytechnic education that met only once a week was removed from the national curriculum.³⁰ The school population's much resented alienation from the proletarian experience became set in stone.

The school reform turned militant Komsomol activists of the Kosarev generation into confused and resentful functionaries who could hardly wrap their heads around schoolchildren, for whom “proletarian

29 Between 1931 and 1937, the Party Central Committee and the Council of People's Commissars issued nine decrees. These included the September 1931 Decree on Primary and Secondary Schools; the August 1932 Decree on School Curricula and Regime in Primary and Secondary Schools; the February 1933 Decree on Textbooks for Primary and Secondary Schools; the May 1934 Decree on the Structure of Primary and Secondary Schools of the USSR; the May 1934 Decree on the Teaching of Civic History in the Schools of the USSR; the September 1935 Decree on the Structure of Learning and Rules of Conduct in Primary, Incomplete Secondary, and Secondary Schools, and they were published in *Pravda*. See the editions of 5 Sep. 1931, 1; 28 August 1932, 1; 16 May 1934, 1; 4 Sep. 1935, 1; 5 July 1936, 1.

30 Members of the Komsomol Central Committee were still distressed by this fact in the early 1940s; see the 1940 report “O trudovom vospitaniu shkolnikov,” RGASPI, fond 1, opis 23, delo 1423; Larry E. Holmes, “Magic into Hocus-Pocus: The Decline of Labor Education in Soviet Russia's Schools, 1931–1937,” *The Russian Review* 51 (Oct. 1992): 545–65; see also Fitzpatrick, *Education and Social Mobility*, ch. 10; E. Thomas Ewing, *The Teachers of Stalinism: Policy, Practice, and Power in Soviet Schools of the 1930s* (New York, 2002), 7; Larry E. Holmes, “School and Schooling under Stalin, 1931–1953,” in *Educational Reform in Post-Soviet Russia: Legacies and Prospects*, ed. Ben Eklof, Larry E. Holmes, and Vera Kaplan, 56–101 (London, 2005).

28 For the most comprehensive and insightful discussion of the Marxist

identity discourse that “placed labor at the center of ideas about the

self,” see Steinberg, *Proletarian Imagination*, 69–71, 103–12.

psychology” was supposed to become a school assignment and the factory, a sightseeing trip (a cultural tradition started in the 1930s). In an act of uncoordinated unity, driven by a resilient institutional practice and mindset, Komsomol leaders and rank-and-file workers did not heed the government requests accompanying the school reform to refocus their work on the school generation. In fact, they obstructed the unavoidable change in the social composition and the proletarian ideal of their organization right into the mid-1930s.

The membership numbers for the years of 1931 and 1939 demonstrate vividly what this obstruction meant in practical terms. In 1936, there were only 234,919 Komsomol members in Soviet schools, constituting less than 6.5 percent of the organization’s membership, which fluctuated from 3 million in January 1931 to 4.5 million in 1934 and back to 3.6 million in January 1936. The growing numbers of school youth did not begin to translate into growing numbers of Komsomol members until Stalin’s intervention in 1936, with which this essay began.³¹ What is more, Komsomol activists, those who had been seasoned in the proletarian debates of the 1920s and, most recently, in the campaign for factory-based education, treated school teenagers who did manage to become Komsomol members as “second-rate members,” piling them together with another “second-rate” group — “young employees” with office jobs. A typical city Komsomol committee, Kosarev’s close coworker and friend V. Bubenkin admitted in 1936, could go for months without “discussing one single school-related topic” and without “admitting a single person from the schools” into the organization.³²

Journalists covering youth and school issues faced challenges of their own. Having abandoned the idea of factory-based polytechnic education for the first postrevolutionary generation in Soviet schools, the party did not offer a language to address the change. The cultural code to address the school generation alien to the revered Bolshevik project was not immediately apparent. The first half of the 1930s was spent groping for a term that could describe the youth who witnessed the grand industrial effort of the First and Second Five-Year Plans from within the walls of Soviet schools. Unable to fit these young people into a proletarian profile, journalists initially resorted to uncommitted and vague terminology. Writing for the Komsomol main national newspaper, *Komsomolskaia Pravda*, writer and journalist Vera Ketlinskaia, for example, referred to the school youth as “successors,” whom she still defined as outsiders to the “intense construction

31 For a compilation of published statistics, see Ralph Talcott Fisher, *Pattern for Soviet Youth: A Study of the Congresses of the Komsomol, 1918-1954* (New York, 1959), 409.

32 Between 1932-37, Bubenkin served as *Komsomolskaia Pravda*’s editor-in-chief. V. Bubenkin, “Nekotorye voprosy Komsomolskoi raboty v shkole,” *KP*, 8 April 1936; “Po-novomu rabotat s molodymi sluzhashchimi,” *KP*, 22 March 1936. The problem of excluding white-collar workers from the Komsomol organization persisted into 1937; see RGASPI, fond 1, opis, 23, delo 1291, list 21-23.

of socialism.” Other journalists got around the problem of naming the cohort disconnected from the working-class experience by taking pride in “the studying youth” or by simply omitting the usual “proletarian” in front of “kids,” “children,” “teenagers,” and “youth.” Until his arrest in 1938, Kosarev, who regularly wrote for *Pravda* and *Komsomolskaia Pravda* and whose speeches were reprinted in all the major national newspapers, preferred “our youth,” “the Stalinist generation,” and “the young person of the country of socialism” — the figures of speech that allowed him not to comment on the class nature of the school generation.³³

In the mid-1930s, journalists began using the term “Soviet” to refer to this alien generation of the country of socialism were preparing for even more alienating middle-class careers. For the first time, “Soviet” became a signifier for school youth separated from the proletarian world of production and, at the same time, synonymous with socialism.

As such, the term “Soviet” was tried out in a poll of teenagers from the Soviet Union and France. The poll was published and discussed under the caption of “Soviet children” and “French children” between November 1934 and January 1935 in *Pravda* and *Komsomolskaia Pravda*. As *Pravda* and *Komsomolskai Pravda* editors explained, eleven children from each country, “coming from similar social backgrounds” and all between eleven and fifteen years of age, were asked about their life goals, career plans, and general world awareness.³⁴ It was likely Western outsiders — French journalists — who suggested that the editors use “Soviet” as a descriptor for the children’s identity. Ironically and yet not surprisingly, given the use of the word “Soviet” in the West, first instances of its use as a marker of identity produced in the Soviet Union appeared in the Soviet press when journalists cited foreigners. One of the earliest examples can be found in a 1932 article by journalist E. Estova, who informed her readers that “what amazed foreign delegates and tourists the most in the Soviet Union” was its “Soviet youth and Soviet children.”³⁵ In this case, this identity-assigning understanding of “Soviet” was a literal translation from German and was unique in the Soviet Union’s cultural universe of the early 1930s. What set *Pravda* and *Komsomolskaia Pravda*’s 1934/1935 use of the term “Soviet” apart from earlier cases was that the “Soviet children” did not thereafter disappear from the newspaper until its next encounter with a Western publication but entered the press to stay, becoming a topic of discussion and reporting

33 A. Kosarev, “Uzlovye zadachi komsomolskoi raboty,” *KP*, 24 May 1938.

34 “15 voprosov sovetskim detiam,” *KP*, 29 November 1934; readers’ letters in response to the Soviet-French poll, *KP*, 1 January 1935.

35 E. Estova, “Pokolenie, rozhdennoi Oktiabrem,” *KP*, 30 October 1932.

on character, personality, sensibility, *et cetera*, from then until the end of the Soviet Union.

In the spring and summer of 1935, the term “Soviet” was picked up again by *Pravda*, this time to cover the first graduating class of the Soviet ten-year school and an unprecedented government reception in its honor. The June reception of this quintessentially classroom youth heading for more classroom learning in the institutions of higher education was held on the government’s initiative and on its territory, in the Column Hall of the House of the Soviets.³⁶ In the coverage of the reception, a *Pravda* editorial celebrated the “Soviet Person” for the first time when it called upon its readers to “have a look at the Soviet youth, at the Soviet children,” these “true new people, cut out of new material” and “inoculated with qualities of the Soviet person.”³⁷

When, in the following spring of 1936, Stalin addressed the Xth Congress of the All-Union Komsomol Organization as “Soviet youth” — the example with which this essay began — he treated not only Kosarev but the organization’s “proletarian youth leaders” to a public lesson on how to use a new category of identity.³⁸ By the end of the decade, journalists had turned “Soviet” into an active identity signifier. The schoolchildren (*ucheniki*), the kids (*rebiata*), the teenagers (*podrostoki*), the student body (*studenchestvo*), and the youth (*molodezh*) all became “Soviet.”³⁹

The mid-1930s rise of this Soviet-marked discourse was more than a mechanical replacement of one category with another. More than just a word, “Soviet” served as an overarching rubric. Under it, journalists and party leaders, soon to be followed by rank-and-file functionaries and activists, writers and literary critics, and the youth themselves, engaged with the emerging modern society, its complex social structure, and with the individual/collective dilemma in terms formerly missing from the official discursive space. In order to understand the magnitude of the cultural development, we need to explore the making of the Soviet into a distinct cultural language and signifying practice.

The “Soviet”: A Concept, Language, and Cultural Practice

Let us go back to the first episode of the featured use of “Soviet” in the poll of “Soviet and French children.” Within it, the term “Soviet” was resolutely employed independently from the Bolshevik discursive

36 “Pokolenie velikogo budushchego,” *Pravda*, 29 June 1935; Yuri Zhukov, “Molodye sovetskie patrioty,” *KP*, 16 April 1936; “Tsvetushchaia iunost Rodiny,” *KP*, 2 June 1935.

37 “Pokolenie velikogo budushchego,” *KP*, 2 June 1935.; also see “Organizovat vypolnenie reshenii s’ezda,” *KP*, 24 April 1936; “Proverochnye ispytaniia v shkole,” *Pravda*, 25 May 1936.

38 “Da zdravstuet sovetskaia molodezh!” *KP*, 22 April 1936; for experimentation with the “Soviet youth” talk before the congress, see “Preds’ezdovskaia tribuna: Obiazannosti komsomoltsa,” *KP*, 15 March 1936; G. Glezerman, “O Novoi programme Komsomola,” *KP*, 30 March 1936.

39 “Sila i moshch sovetskogo naroda,” *Pravda*, 24 July 1938; “Po-Bolshevitski podderzhat zamechatelnyi pochin,” *KP*, 11 July 1938; Evg. Vorobev, “Na vsem gotovom,” *KP*, 10 September 1938; E. Kononenko, “Egoisty,” *KP*, 21 March 1938; E. Kononenko, “Grubost,” *KP*, 3 January 1939; “Vooruzhit kadry Komsomola marksistskoleninskoi teorii,” *Pravda*, 21 February 1939; teenagers began to refer to themselves as “Soviet” in *Komsomolskaia Pravda*; see, e.g., “Dnevnik Toni Shatrovoi,” 18 March 1936; S. Kolosov, “Chest sovetskogo shkolnika,” 14 November 1938.

tradition. It was used to relate the content of the school teenagers' dreams and aspirations, the meaning of which conflicted with the "proletarian" ideal.

At first glance, the French children and the children from the Soviet Union appeared to be markedly different. While planning on ambitious professional careers, the French kids were enraptured by trivial and inconsequential dreams for themselves. The "Soviet children" were predictably doing the opposite of trivial dreaming. They seemed to be obsessed with serious "studying," which served as the leitmotif of the Soviet portion of the poll.⁴⁰ However, what perhaps is even more worthy of a historian's attention is not what set the teenagers from the Soviet Union and France apart in this propagandistic project, but what they had in common. A striking commonality between the French and Soviet children was their professional ambition, which carried not a trace of the "proletarian" ideal as a concept or life goal. Out of the eleven "Soviet children," only two were from working-class families. This fact alone could have been easily explained away should the non-proletarian kids have fancied proletarian career paths for themselves. But the contrary was the case. Betraying no defensive intonations, the majority of the admired Soviet children (eight out of eleven) reported dreams of professional self-realization that would preclude them from having first-hand working-class experience in production. Having excused themselves from the ranks of the proletarian community, they saw their futures unfold into institutions of higher education and professional careers as pilots, coaches, doctors, writers, actresses, ballet dancers, and engineer-inventors.⁴¹

Having declared their professional goals as their life goals to be achieved by means of continuous study, the young people, however, did not part with the discourse on class per se since they were asked about their parents' social origins. The change was, I argue, subtler. What was missing from their answers was the familiar Bolshevik discourse on class prescribing that one's individual identity be oriented around one's class origins; that is, what was missing was the notion of class as the primary marker and signifier of one's self. What was new was a socialist profile presented as one of highest achievements of the industrializing nation that revolved around professional choices and featured education and culture as essential social experiences bestowing individual status and value. In it, no class represented an ideal type to be imitated by all; "class" no longer figured as a privileged category of identification, but was merely one among many.⁴²

40 "15 voprosov...", *KP*, 14 November 1938; letter by schoolboy V. N. Buianov, *KP*, 1 January 1935.

41 "15 voprosov...", *KP*, 14 November 1938; also see Ania Mlynek's speech on behalf of the first graduating class of the Soviet ten-year school in the Column Hall of the House of the Soviets, 1935, "Vystuplenie Ani Mlynek," *KP*, 3 June 1935; "Pismo vypusknikov moskovskikh shkol tov. Stalinu," *KP*, 2 June 1935.

42 To avoid a misunderstanding, the argument here is not about the disappearance of the class discourse but about a plurality of class discourses in late 1930s Stalinist culture. For an influential analysis of the 1930s class identity discourse, which utilized the prerevolutionary category of "sosloviia" to explain a move away from class thinking, see Sheila Fitzpatrick, "Ascribing Class: The Construction of Social Identity in Soviet Russia," *The Journal of Modern History* 65, 4 (December 1993): 745-70.

Perhaps the best way to illustrate the novelty of this concept and language entering the mainstream of official culture and the changing meaning of the class discourse is to note the new treatment of the working-class kids it featured. The two such children who participated in the Soviet-French survey and modestly wanted to become metal turners were no longer singled out or praised as ideal specimens of humanity by either the journalists or readers subsequently responding to the newspaper. In the discussion that followed the poll's publication, the decision to become a turner was a professional choice of little popularity. Kids whose responses to the survey were featured in the newspaper did not want to become workers. They began their letters with excited statements that they recognized themselves in these schoolchildren who were preparing for non-proletarian careers as writers, engineers, and athletes.⁴³

The schoolchildren's new life ideals and role models signaled a major crack in the monolith of the proletarian ideal of the New Man as well as a striking expansion of the conversation about socialist modernity in the national press. In addition, the young people who wrote to the newspaper also introduced the first accounts of the post-reform school culture that had been constitutive of their mindsets. The Soviet youth told readers about their exciting recreational activities, which indiscriminately included "visiting the factory," going to the theater, going to the movies, visiting a club, skiing, and skating. "Liusia, I think you go sightseeing [too]," wrote a teenager from the Cheliabinsk region, sharing his everyday life with a survey participant. "We visited the factory and also they took us to the club."⁴⁴

Visits to the factory constituted a tribute to the proletarian culture, which was on its way to becoming a tradition to be studied, visited, consumed, practiced once a week, but not to be lived. I argue that turning workers and their factories into an exhibit for "Soviet children" was one of constitutive moments in the making of the Soviet concept, marked by a practice of voyeuristic observation of the working class and, simultaneously, alienation from it.

In the mid-1930s, journalists writing for major national newspapers made a major effort to bring the worldview and the language of the Soviet-marked youth into the press. How did the young people themselves account for their nonproletarian aspirations? For young journalists and self-proclaimed experts on the Soviet youth's inner world, such as Elena Kononenko and Yurii Zhukov, the school theme constituted a professional opportunity to differentiate themselves

43 Ibid.; letters by schoolchildren Kolia Kuznetsov, V. N. Buianov, Vladimir Starukhin, V. Agapova, *KP*, 1 January 1935.

44 Letter by Vania Komissarov, *KP*, 1 January 1935.

from the journalistic cohort that preceded them and its traditional contempt of non-proletarian young people. Thanks to them, *Pravda* and *Komsomolskaia Pravda* became leading sites of construction of the “Soviet” vision of socialism as the Soviet school became a routine and no longer perpetually negative subject of reportage. Together with the “new Soviet person,” there thus also appeared a new Soviet journalist who frequented the Soviet school and produced a long list of school-based documentary articles, investigation reports, sketches, and short stories.

As a result of these efforts, which reverberated across the national press, the new — Soviet — hero also turned out to have a new biography that foregrounded Soviet teenage preoccupations with their “innate gifts,” a figure of speech from the period. The new post-Bolshevik biography displayed little use for the previous decade’s familiar narratives of “building” or “remaking” the self either to emulate or strengthen a working-class character. With the new leitmotif of “discovery” of one’s “innate gifts,” notions of “self-building” acquired new connotations.

For example, according to Soviet teenagers featured in *Pravda*, deciding on one’s professional calling was predicated on a discovery of one’s individual talents and innate abilities, or, in the language of this evolving discourse, one’s “nature-given” and, thus, unique self. Published surveys of Soviet children and teenagers answering questions such as “Who do you want to be?” presented young people narrating their very short lives as gradual, sometimes effortless, and sometimes frustrated and torturous, discoveries of their latent talents and professional predispositions.

Starting with 1934 and 1935, when the first surveys of teenagers’ post-school plans appeared in *Pravda*, this new “Soviet” model of searching on one’s own for one’s “nature-given abilities” already constituted a shared *lingua franca* of autobiographical essays by school graduates. Seventeen-year-old Vitalii Moskalev, a son of an accountant, like 115 other graduates in his Stalinskii district of Moscow, concluded in early May 1935 that his school journey of self-exploration naturally called for higher education. In a manner typical of his cohort and strikingly different from the proletarian biography, Moskalev organized his autobiographical essay around his nature-given individual “inclinations.” He offered a close account of his Soviet self, whose innate dynamics and progress the teenager had been closely following since he was thirteen years old:

I have felt love toward nature since childhood. At the age of 13, my inclinations towards natural sciences, mainly biology, geology, and astronomy, manifested themselves.... My interest in natural sciences grew gradually. At the age of 15, it reached a high point and acquired a more concrete form: I focused my studies on biology. Since the age of 16, I have felt a strong striving toward research and scientific work. Because of it, I felt compelled to apply to a circle of young biologists at the Zoo.... After graduation I intend to apply to the biology department of the Moscow State University.⁴⁵

The mid-1930s coverage of Soviet teenagers, I argue, introduced into the mainstream of official culture a post-Bolshevik identity discourse that relied on a notion of a human nature that pre-existed class. In the articles, sketches, and short stories that journalists devoted to the Soviet youth, “nature” handed out gifts, enabling or disqualifying people for certain professions, regardless of their class belonging and thus individualizing the human predicament. Venturing into schools and encountering teenagers in person, journalists enriched the conversation about human nature and the making of the Soviet person with more detail.

45 Essay by Vitalii Moskalev, *Pravda*, 9 May 1935; also “Sovetskaia shkola i Komsomol,” *Pravda*, 7 Feb. 1936; N. Sats, “Tsentralnyi detskii teatr,” *Pravda*, 28 Feb. 1936; “Schastlivoe detstvo,” *Izvestiia*, 29 June 1936; “Prazdnik molodosti i sily,” *Izvestiia*, 12 July 1937; A. Krylova, “Nashi deti,” *Izvestiia*, 18 July 1939.

46 See Kononenko’s discussion of a survey of children’s New Year’s wishes on the eve of 1936 at another school that introduced readers of *Komsomolskaia Pravda* to pupil X, who intended to become a better filmmaker than the Vasiliev brothers; to pupil Kukharev, who wanted to become “the best mathematician and win the first prize among mathematicians and physicists” in his district and city; and to pupil Arkhipov, who aspired to be “a well-known painter like Repin and Vasnetsov,” to name just a few featured dreams. E. Kononenko, “Podrostki,” *KP*, 28 January 1936.

Becoming an expert on youth issues, Elena Kononenko, in particular, confessed in her serialized contributions in *Komsomolskaia Pravda* that she was taken aback at the ambition and “confidence” with which some children and teenagers drew parallels between themselves and their chosen role models — Soviet filmmakers, French writers, mathematicians, and Russian prerevolutionary painters — across class lines and historical epochs.⁴⁶ She was equally attentive to the pervasive anxiety among the recently designated Soviet people about their individual capabilities, since many children feared that their search for an innate gift would not yield a desirable outcome.

Familiar to most scholars of Soviet Russia, though not yet a focus of academic research, the fears of “mediocrity,” “stupidity,” and “talentlessness” — the flipside of the modern preoccupation with one’s nature-assured individual self — constituted, I contend, another defining trope of the emerging Soviet culture. To Kononenko, worrying about one’s “talentlessness” (*bezdarost*) and “mediocrity” (*posredvennost*) appeared to be so rampant among Soviet schoolchildren that she turned a meeting with a teenager torn by doubts about his individual talents into a plot in her 1936-37 essays.

One such character was sixteen-year-old Arkadii Ch., to whom Kononenko devoted an essay in August 1937. By the time she met Arkadii, she wrote, the teenager was suffering from paralyzing “disappointment in himself”: formerly the best student in his class, Arkadii confessed to lacking any motivation to do anything. The cause of his depressed state was the devastating conclusion he had reached that he “had no talents” and “was a mediocrity.”⁴⁷ Though it is difficult, given the limits of our academic interpretive paradigms, to account for this young Soviet person obsessed with his own self to the degree of depression, Arkadii and the other young people who appeared in *Komsomolskaia Pravda* during the second half of the 1930s constitute a historical — “Soviet” — subject in their own right.

Putting his generation’s ambitions for self-realization into practice, Arkadii’s particular choice of role models were test pilots Mikhail Gromov and Andrey Yumashev. In the spirit of his cohort, he valued the two pilots for their professional skill, which enabled them to set world records and become famous. Parting with the Bolshevik class-centered identity discourse of the previous decade, Arkadii, according to Kononenko, was convinced that Gromov and Yumashev were gifted individuals because they were singled out by nature, not class: “Do you really think that anybody can be like Gromov? And you think I do not know what you are going to say?!..., [t]hat he [Gromov] is a master of his profession, that he has worked very hard for all these years. But after all, he is still a talent!?! Mother Nature has imparted him with abilities....”⁴⁸

At the heart of Komsomol and the national press, then, this teenager dreamed of glory in his own name, that is, as someone uniquely gifted and different. Kononenko’s reply was indicative of the complex and contradictory cultural situation Soviet journalists found themselves in. On the one hand, she drew on familiar Bolshevik tropes from the 1920s and explained to Arkadii and her readers that they should “derive their personal glory from the glory of their motherland.” On the other hand, now speaking in a different — “Soviet” — register, Kononenko assured Arkadii that a “path toward glory is open to each citizen *in his/her own name* and in the name of the motherland [*vo imia sebia I rodiny*].” As a result, Kononenko encouraged Arkadii to derive his sense of self from a larger whole and, at the same time, acknowledged that the “name” (i.e., identity) of an individual citizen and the name of the country were two distinguishable entities.

47 E. Kononenko, “Mechty o slave,” *KP*, 5 August 1937.

48 Ibid.

In their essays on teenage vanity, journalists did more than simply posit a tormented modern individual. Their essays exemplified what foregrounding of that kind of individual meant for rethinking the classic individual-collective conundrum of the socialist tradition. Journalists' interest in young Soviet people's nature-given selves turned out to be intrinsically connected to an even larger question: How were these new Soviet people to navigate between their innate gifts and the collective good?

The reconsideration of the individual-collective relationship that began in *Komsomolskaia Pravda* resulted in an acknowledgement that individual experience in modern society had a complex structure and incorporated new notions of distance, boundary, and connection. The second half of the 1930s also saw the rapid production of a new language with new figures of speech journalists employed in attempts to capture Soviet modernity. Initially, much was borrowed from post-reform school culture.⁴⁹

As mid-1930s teenager questionnaires attested, a new ritual was clearly in the making in the Soviet school: pledging one's investment in what was now more and more often referred to as the "social good" (*obshchestvennoe*) rather than the collective. Utilizing new figures of speech, the youth proudly and repeatedly stated that they wanted to be "useful" (*byt' poleznym*) to society; they were eager to "pay their debt" back to the party and society for the time they had spent on their individual development; they felt "responsibility for the collective."⁵⁰

The very possibility of voicing one's relationship to the collective good in terms of "usefulness," "debt," and "responsibility" constituted, I argue, a marked development of the public conversation about the individual and his social milieu. In a society where, less than a decade previously, an individual was to become one with the collective in order to begin one's rise toward a new humanity, and in a society where the dictum to be a collectivist man was often understood as making a virtuous sacrifice of one's personal striving, an invitation to be simply "socially useful" was a conceptual step forward. The notion of "being socially useful," for example, no longer implied that the personal and the collective (or the social) were identical or merge-able, nor that the personal was a derivative of the collective. Instead, the agenda to be "socially useful" implied that the personal and the social were distinct and distinguishable experiences, entities that needed to be related but not equated with one another.

49 In "Imagining Socialism in the Soviet Century," I directly address the problem that the "speaking Bolshevik" figure of speech, coined by Stephen Kotkin, posits when used indiscriminately in relation to different periods of Soviet history, particularly, its postwar decades. Krylova, "Imagining Socialism," 316-19.

50 See the essay by Nikolai Mikhailov, *KP*, 9 May, 1935; letter by ten graduates of Moscow school #5 of the Proletarsky district, *KP*, 1 June 1935; letter by V. N. Buianov (the Gorkovsky krai), *KP*, 1 January 1935. For examples of the "giving up all one's strength" tropes circulating in the mid- and late-1930s press next to the emerging new language of "being socially useful," see "Otvaga I doblest sovetskikh liudei," *KP*, 20 October 1938.

The youth's discursive register contrasted strikingly with that of their parents' generation. The parents continued to write to newspapers with stories of their "sacrifice," "disregard," and "neglect" of their personal aspirations as the highest virtue and proof of their selfless participation in common cause of the proletarian remaking of the country — that is, in the manner most familiar to scholars of modern Russia.⁵¹

In the late 1930s, the conversation about the relationship between the personal and the emerging modern society in the lives of educated and professional youth found its way into newspaper editorials in *Pravda* and acquired a new official terminology. The old — Bolshevik — clichés that identified the individual with the collective were losing their seemingly universal applicability. The new — Soviet-marked — clichés of "connecting" (*sviazyvat*) one's "personal happiness...to the well-being of the country" that Soviet journalists tried out in the late 1930s implied both a relation and a differentiation between the personal and social realms.⁵² The confidence projected by editorials that such a connection was to be harmonious was of course a wishful mobilizing gesture, but the change in vocabulary from "deriving" the personal from the collective to "connecting" the two was profound.

By the end of the 1930s, the Komsomol organization had no choice but to start mastering and even developing the new, Soviet language of socialist modernity and to begin a painful reorientation toward the Soviet school and its constituency. This process was facilitated by the change of the Komsomol leadership brought about by the Great Purges. Between 1937 and 1938, Kosarev and his militant Komsomol elite were replaced with new cadres whose immediate practical task, posited by the party, consisted of bringing the school and white collar youth into the ranks of the Komsomol organization.⁵³ In 1936, the Komsomol opened its ranks to all "Soviet" young people regardless of social origin. The number of school-based Komsomol members increased by almost six times by 1939 and reached 1,500,000. The change of the Komsomol's day-to-day activities and responsibilities was equally impressive. The new Central Committee now made it its business to conduct careful surveys of schoolchildren's grades and to monitor students' time devoted to study. It reported on grade inflation to the Party Central Committee and organized competitions in school physics, chemistry, and mathematics.⁵⁴

By the late 1930s, joining the Komsomol was no longer tantamount to coming to the proletariat, as Komsomol activists had believed less

51 Letter by Tonia Gubarevich's father, comrade Gubarevich, *KP*, 1 January 1935; "Lichnaia i obshchestvennaia zhishn," *KP*, 22 August 1937.

52 "Po-bolshevitski podderzhat zamechatelnyi pochin," *KP*, 22 August 1937.

53 For the best discussion of objectives and methods of the Great Purges, see Oleg Khlevnyuk, "The Objectives of the Great Terror, 1937-1938," in *Stalinism: Essential Readings*, ed. David L. Hoffmann, 158-76 (Oxford, 2002).

54 See RGASPI, fond 1, opis 23, delo 1358, list 68-69; delo 1423, list 67-68; delo 1427, list 32-36, 37, 40; delo 1470, list 89-108; delo 1315, list 2-9.

than a decade before. Instead, foreshadowing the kind of revisions to be applied gradually to the Soviet state's founding documents over the next thirty years, the Komsomol organization remade itself in the image of the "New Soviet Person." The Komsomol line towards factory-based education underwent a corresponding change. No longer were factory-based schools, which steadily deprived students of hours devoted to general education, treated as a training base for new humanity. In a factory-based school, working-class youth became skilled workers, not "new people."

Conclusion

The history of the "Soviet" — as a concept, language, and cultural practice — thus makes one rethink the presumed monopoly of the Bolshevik tenets on political, institutional, and cultural terrains of the prewar and, by extension, postwar Soviet Union. As early as the mid-1930s, the Bolshevik proletariat-styled scenario for alternative modern life began losing its cultural currency to engage the emerging modern society under construction in Russia. The graduating cohorts of the expanding school system, on whose behalf the term "Soviet" as an identity-ascribing category first appeared, had especially little in common with the Bolshevik ideal of the New Man, which uncompromisingly insisted on the proletarian collective as the indispensable blueprint for a socialist way of being. The rise of new connotations of the "Soviet" in the press, school, and public events was thus necessitated by the magnitude of the social change that, in the mid-1930s, was most vividly objectified by school graduates preparing for middle-class professional careers. Impossible to ignore and badly needed, this growing army of white collar and specialized professionals, defining as much of non-market as of market modernities, required a new language. It was also during the second half of the 1930s that Soviet journalists, party and state officials, and song writers experimented with the post-proletarian connotations of the term Soviet by describing the identity and qualities of the people living in the territory of the Soviet Union as "Soviet," such as in "Soviet people" and "Soviet patriotism."⁵⁵

55 See, e.g., Karl Radek, "Sovetskii Patriotism," *Pravda*, 1 May 1936; V. I. Lebedev-Kumach, "Esli zavtra voina," song, 1938; "Rodnoi Stalin," editorial, *Pravda*, 21 December 1939.

In other words, Stalin did not invent the concept of the "Soviet" with its new connotations in 1936. Instead, astutely sensing the limitations of the Bolshevik master vision, he borrowed the new, still-in-the-making term and language from the emergent effort taking place in the press and the school system. His editing corrections of the

Komsomol Membership Rules made him undoubtedly a highly influential participant in the construction of the new cultural language of socialism. As a result, he too added to the conflict-ridden terrains of official culture and party policies that, I argue, defined the epoch of the Great Purges.

The history of the “Soviet” does not end in the 1930s, of course. Rather, it marks the beginning of a long cultural process — the gradual, expansive, and never complete departure of the Soviet Union’s socialist project from the straitjacket of the 1920s romance with the proletariat. Far from being uniformly enchanted by the proletarian collective, different Soviet generations, already in the 1930s, spoke different languages of socialism, including the one that evidenced a concern with the delineation of boundaries between the personal and the social in a socialist society and bore witness to the fact that such preoccupations do not constitute the prerogative either of capitalist modernities or the twentieth century liberal tradition.

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