

**The Education of True Believers?
Soviet Youth in the 1920s**

A Thesis Submitted to the College of
Graduate Studies and Research
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts
in the Department of History
University of Saskatchewan
Saskatoon

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Abstract

After the October Revolution of 1917, one of the primary aims of the Bolshevik Party was the creation of the “New Soviet Man and Woman.” In the view of the Party, young people, who were presumably more malleable and less influenced by the country’s tsarist past, were the most logical group to become this new Soviet person. This thesis examines the relationship between the Bolshevik Party and young people in the 1920s. It discusses the methods the Party took to influence young people, including the restructuring of the country’s school system, the creation of a national youth organization, the Communist League of Youth (*Komsomol*), and the development of recreational and leisure activities intended to teach youth the values and behaviours appropriate to Communists. It also examines the experiences of youth under the regime, with attention paid to the different experiences had by urban youth as opposed to rural youth, and young men as distinct from young women. Finally, the thesis attempts to assess the degree to which the Bolshevik Party was successful in creating believers among young people.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisor Dr. John McCannon for his excellent advice and encouragement, as well as for his patience over the past several years. I would also like to thank the members of my committee, Dr. Pamela Jordan and Dr. Mark Meyers, for their effort and advice over the course of this project, and Dr. Ludmilla Voitkovska for her enthusiasm and for helping me to improve my Russian language skills, including encouraging me to participate in a study abroad program in St. Petersburg, Russia. This study was completed with financial assistance from the Department of History of the University of Saskatchewan and from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

Most importantly, I would like to thank my friends and family for their support, encouragement and patience, with a particular thanks to my parents, Byron and Lorna Redlick, who I'm sure thought this would never end, but put up with me anyway.

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Introduction

Is it not really natural that youth should predominate in our revolutionary Party? We are the Party of the future, and the future belongs to youth. We are the Party of innovators, and innovators are always followed more willingly by youth. We are the Party of selfless struggle against time-worn decay, and into a selfless struggle the first to go is always youth.¹

This, in 1906, was Vladimir Lenin's response to a critic who implied that the Bolshevik Party was less than respectable because it counted so many young people among its membership, while older supporters appeared to be leaving the Party. Clearly, though, Lenin did not regard the Party's youthful composition as a problem; rather, in his eyes, the country's young people were a natural constituency for the Bolsheviks. Many Party leaders, in agreement with Lenin, believed that young people, who had spent less time under the tsarist system and who had little to lose but much to gain by supporting the Bolsheviks, would be more receptive to the Party's calls for change and more likely to fight on the Party's behalf to bring about that change. While the Bolsheviks most obviously wished to change the political and economic structure of the country, perhaps the most important change they wanted to make was to the country's people. Communist society would require the creation of a "new Soviet man and woman," a person who understood and believed in the principles of Communism, and, most importantly, had a willingness to place the collective good above their own interests.² Here again, the Bolsheviks believed the country's youth was the segment of the population that could most logically become this new Soviet citizen.³ The Party expected it to be difficult to eliminate the bourgeois mentality it believed to exist among the adult population. By contrast, it welcomed the opportunity to

¹ Ralph Talcott Fisher, *Pattern for Soviet Youth: A Study of the Congresses of the Komsomol, 1918-1954* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959), 1.

² This thesis will define communism as the attempt to put the principles of Marxist ideology into political and economic practise. However, all Soviet governments, from Lenin onward, struggled with and debated over how best to define communism and put it into practise. The same struggles and debates took place among Soviet individuals, and between individuals and Party leadership. Recognizing these complications, as well as the fact that the meaning of communism changed over time, this thesis, unless otherwise stated, will use the terms "communism" and "communist" to refer to the official Marxist-Leninist ideology professed by the Soviet government.

³ It should be noted that the Soviet Union was not by any means the only country that saw the importance of imparting specific values and behaviours to its young people; other totalitarian states took similar measures. Democratic countries have also tried to use school systems and youth groups to teach important values and behaviours, although in less coercive ways.

indoctrinate young people and bring them up as true Communists. Consequently, beginning soon after the October Revolution and continuing through the 1920s and beyond, the Party placed a great deal of emphasis on its dealings with youth, creating a centrally controlled youth organization, reengineering the education system and attempting to direct young people toward appropriate leisure and recreational activities.

This thesis will attempt to make a contribution to the literature on Soviet social history in the 1920s, in this case through an examination of the country's youth. It will look at what the Party desired of young people during the period from 1917 to 1928, as well as the methods it used to try to attain the desired results, including the creation of the Communist Youth League (*Komsomol*) in 1918, a group devoted to propagandizing among young people between the ages of fourteen and twenty-three.⁴ It will also examine the ways Party policy affected the lives of young people and how this group responded to the attention that was directed at them. To what extent did youth support the Party and its policies, and why? To what degree did the interests of young people converge with those of the Party? Was their enthusiasm for the new regime genuine, a façade put on for pragmatic purposes, or some combination of the two? I have chosen to begin with the Revolution of 1917 and end with 1928 when Party policies became more radical and violence toward the population became more widespread. The 1920s was a period of relative calm and moderation in the Soviet Union, when people had more freedom of choice (the opportunity, for example, to choose western forms of entertainment over Party approved ones), and their reaction to the regime may not have been solely based on fear, but also on the Party's ideals. The famed memoirist Lev Kopelev titled his autobiography *The Education of a True Believer*.⁵ Taking his title, but in question form, this thesis asks how successful the Party was in its attempts to create believers among the young generation, meaning were young people committed to the Bolshevik Party and its ideology for reasons other than self-advancement or self-preservation?

The first chapter deals briefly with Soviet historiography and questions of methodology. It discusses some of the work done on Soviet youth specifically, and some of the recent

⁴ Although twenty-three was the official upper limit for membership, in practise many young adults continued to participate in the League beyond this age. The upper age limit for Komsomol membership was later raised to twenty-six. The structure of the Komsomol came to resemble that of other Soviet institutions. It was governed by a Central Committee, which sent policy and directives down to its regional committees. The regional committees in turn sent these on to local branches of the organization. During the 1920s, the government also formed a similar group, the Young Pioneers, for children aged ten to fourteen and the Young Octoberists for children even younger.

⁵ Lev Kopelev, *The Education of a True Believer* (New York: Harper and Row, 1980).

scholarship that has examined the question of Soviet identity and may provide useful frameworks to help assess the degree of support for, and belief in, the Bolsheviks among young people.

Chapter Two describes the origins of political involvement among youth and their motivations for political activity. It also looks at the initial steps taken by the Party from 1914 - 1920 to gain influence in the independent youth movements and create the Komsomol. Chapter Three discusses the methods used by the Bolsheviks in the 1920s to increase their control over the Komsomol and their vision for the organization. It also examines the type of citizen the Party hoped to create and the ways the authorities attempted to use the Komsomol, the school system and different types of popular entertainment to achieve their goals. Here, the centrally published youth newspaper, *Komsomolskaya pravda*, is useful, as it provides a good indication of the information the Party wished to impart to the country's youth. In the mid-1920's, for example, it is evident by the attention devoted to peasant issues that the Party felt it important to make young people aware of their desire for greater cooperation with the peasantry. Chapter Four moves on to consider the other side of the equation: the experiences of young people in the early Soviet period. It investigates how Soviet policy affected young people, the ways young people responded to it, and the reasons they did or did not support it. Further, it explores the differences in the responses of urban and rural youth, as well as young men as distinct from young women. Again, *Komsomolskaya pravda* is a useful source, as its attention to issues such as hooliganism and promiscuity showed that the behaviour of young people often did not conform to the Party's expectations. The final chapter attempts to answer the most difficult question posed by this thesis: to what degree was the Party successful in creating believers among young people? Utilizing the memoir literature of those who passed their youth in the USSR during the 1920s (and, to expand the source base, the 1930s) in order to examine how young people interacted with Soviet institutions and what their sentiments toward the regime were, as well as some of the methodologies discussed in Chapter One, this chapter tries to determine in what ways, if any, Soviet youth truly embraced communism.

Chapter 1 - Historiography

In his work on British youth, John Springhall has noted that the study of young people has been a relatively recent phenomenon among historians, beginning in the 1960s. Increasing numbers in the profession turned their attention from the traditional disciplines of political and military history, which focus primarily on society's elites, to social history, which focuses on various groups in society not previously thought to have a significant effect on historical events. In addition to examining how class, gender and ethnicity have affected responses to historical events, historians also began to see how age could be important when assessing the behaviour of individuals, particularly how the attitudes of the young could be different than their elders.¹

This thesis will attempt to contribute to the growing body of scholarship regarding Soviet youth. It will provide an overview of many of the topics discussed by those who have studied Soviet youth in recent years, such as the reactions of different segments of the youth population to the Party and the variety of youth cultures that existed in the 1920s. Additionally, it will attempt to synthesize the recent literature on youth with that done on Soviet identity and public opinion, in the hopes of making an assessment of the amount of support and/or belief the Party generated among youth.

Youth and Soviet-Studies Historiography

Among Soviet historians this desire to consider previously unstudied groups was reflected in the development of the revisionist school of Soviet history to challenge the totalitarian interpretation which had gained a virtual consensus among those who studies the Soviet Union prior to the 1960s and 1970s. The totalitarian school of Soviet history, as one of its critics, Stephen Cohen, has described, regarded the Bolsheviks as illegitimate rulers with little to no popular support who managed to hold power only by virtue of an extremely disciplined and centralized party apparatus and the use of terror against its citizens.² He continued that, while “analyzing mutual influences and interactions between state and society is at the centre of most

¹ John Springhall, *Coming of Age: Adolescence in Britain, 1860-1960* (Dublin: Gill and MacMillan, 1986), 5.

² Stephen F. Cohen, *Rethinking the Soviet Experience: Politics and History Since 1917* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 5-6.

historical and political study” Soviet studies under the totalitarian school “saw only a brutal one-way, decades-long process in which the party-state ‘imposed its ideology at will’ upon an inert society.”³ One historian quoted by Cohen went so far as to say that “because the Soviet system is totalitarian the examination of the ruling party tends to embrace the entire history of the USSR.”⁴ Thus, he studied the Communist Party, not Soviet society as a whole. Of course, not all proponents of the totalitarian school were so unbalanced. Merle Fainsod, for example, did pay attention to various segments of society (such as factory workers and Komsomol members) and their attitudes toward the Soviet regime.⁵ Within the last 10 to 15 years, the Soviet studies field has, to a degree (although not completely), moved beyond the totalitarian – revisionist dichotomy and onto the more recent studies of popular opinion and Soviet identities discussed below.

Western scholars who subscribed to the totalitarian school did not produce a great deal of material regarding the lives of youth under Lenin and Stalin. One notable exception was Ralph T. Fisher’s *Pattern for Soviet Youth: A Study of the Congresses of the Komsomol* which is devoted exclusively to the official youth organization and the congresses it periodically held at which expectations and standards for behaviour were sent by the Party to the Komsomol’s membership via its leadership. While Fisher did take note of some of the conflicts within the organization’s leadership, he did not go on to examine the attitudes of the rank and file Komsomol membership and concluded that the dominant theme to be distinguished from the Komsomol pattern is that of control by Party leaders over the organization from its inception onward.⁶ The lack of attention paid to Soviet society and the emphasis on Party control over the population meant that the discipline failed to understand the changes taking place in the USSR after Stalin’s death in 1953. They either believed that, because the Soviet system was “a monolithic regime without meaningful internal conflicts” it would remain fixed in its present state or that, without Stalin to provide stability and exercise control, the system would collapse. When the system instead survived Stalin and began to evolve in the late 1950s and 1960s the totalitarian interpretation of Soviet history could not account for these developments.⁷

The revisionist school of Soviet history arose as scholars sought to explain the relative stability of the USSR after Stalin’s death and the gradual changes that were able to take place in

³ Ibid., 24.

⁴ John Armstrong, *The Politics of Totalitarianism*, xi-xii, as quoted in Ibid.

⁵ Merle Fainsod, *How Russia is Ruled* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957).

⁶ Fisher, *Pattern for Soviet Youth*, 285-286.

⁷ Cohen, *Rethinking the Soviet Experience*, 25-26.

the Soviet system. They investigated the possibility that some of the country's citizens supported, or at least came to an accommodation with, the regime, that the population was not as badly terrorized or atomized as totalitarian scholars have claimed, and that a certain amount of debate and dissent took place within the Bolshevik Party and society. For the purposes of this study the most important of the early revisionist works is Sheila Fitzpatrick's *Education and Social Mobility in the Soviet Union, 1921-1934*, published in 1979. While it does not focus exclusively on youth, it does look at the debates that took place between different segments of Party leadership and the Komsomol over the best ways to educate Soviet youth. It was also among the first studies to investigate the possibility that support for the regime existed among the country's citizens. Fitzpatrick suggests that the Bolsheviks' policy of giving members of the working class and peasantry preferential access to the education system and to jobs in the country's new industry bred positive feelings toward the government, and that the fact that many people owed their improved positions to the Bolsheviks contributed to the regime's stability.⁸

From the 1980s onward, the amount of scholarship concerning Soviet youth has increased considerably. Isabel Tirado's *Young Guard! The Communist Youth League, Petrograd 1917-1920*, published in 1988, was the first full length western monograph devoted to the Komsomol in the Lenin and Stalin period since Fisher's in 1959. While agreeing with Fisher that the Party desired, and took measures to increase, control over the organization, Tirado places more emphasis on the popular support and spontaneous, grassroots political activism of the young people in the youth groups that would evolve into the Komsomol and on the fight by some of these young people to maintain a degree of autonomy over the movement they had begun.⁹ Much of the other work regarding youth produced in recent years has focused less on institutions like schools and youth groups that were designed to indoctrinate young people, and more on the young people themselves. Later work by Tirado has looked at the experiences of young peasants in their dealings with Soviet authorities, while Anne Gorsuch and Peter Konecny have studied urban youth (in the latter case, university students in particular). Each of these authors has discussed youth who supported the Bolsheviks, youth who did not, the differing ways young men

⁸ Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Education and Social Mobility in the Soviet Union, 1921-1934* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

⁹ Isabel A. Tirado, *Young Guard! The Communist Youth League, Petrograd 1917-1920* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988).

and women reacted to the Party and alternate popular youth cultures that survived throughout the 1920s in opposition to that advocated by the Party.¹⁰

Soviet Values and Identity under Lenin and Stalin

In addition to the recent work concerning youth specifically, a great deal of new scholarship in the field of Soviet social history has appeared as western historians gained better access to Soviet archives, many of which are of interest here. A number have focussed their attention on the values or attitudes the Soviet government tried to impart to its citizens and the extent to which the citizenry accepted and adopted them. One notable work by David Hoffman investigates the types of values and behaviours the leadership felt were appropriate for the New Soviet Person, the methods used to disseminate these values and some of the responses to them. Hoffmann demonstrates that the desire to shape the values of their populations was a common feature of modernity in both liberal democracies and illiberal states like the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany, stemming from eighteenth century Enlightenment thinking which believed that society could be studied and reshaped scientifically to create a rational social order. In the opinion of many Bolshevik leaders, the most important value they wished to teach their citizens was to adopt a collectivist orientation and be prepared to place the interests of society before their own. This, of course, involved adopting correct political views, but also extended to the acquisition of education and culture, demonstrating care for one's person, and exhibiting proper manners. It was particularly important for Party and Komsomol members to adhere to such behaviour, as members who were ignorant, unkempt or uncouth reflected poorly on the Soviet regime, and failure to live up to demands to transform oneself was often looked on as a sign of political unreliability. Hoffmann finds that the results of these efforts were mixed; some had embraced the new values, while others only demonstrated outward conformity.¹¹

¹⁰ While the different responses of urban and rural youth and young men and women have been examined by historians of Soviet youth, the responses of youth from the many different ethnic groups of the USSR have not been similarly studied, likely because memoirs by minority youth and newspaper articles regarding them are considerably fewer than those by and about working class youth, peasant youth and young women. In fact, during the 1920s, minority youth were not a significant presence in the Komsomol. According to a 1926 survey, 75.5% of the membership was Russian, Ukrainian and Belorussian, and a further 7% was identified as Jewish, leaving only 17.5% for all other nationalities encompassed in the Soviet Union. Fisher, *Pattern for Soviet Youth*, 417. Given the lack of information in both the primary and secondary literature, they will not be discussed here as a distinct group. Individual memoirs of minority youth will be included, however, insofar as they share experiences with other young people growing up during this time.

¹¹ David Hoffmann, *Stalinist Values: The Cultural Norms of Soviet Modernity, 1917-1941* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 7-8, 10, 53, 79.

Particularly important are works by those historians who have addressed the formation of identity among Soviet citizens, and it is worthwhile to discuss their attempts in some detail here.¹² Some of the reasons given by citizens point to pragmatism and self-interest, while others indicate acceptance of party ideology. Many times the same people who asserted their belief in the party described at the same time the benefits they accrued from the country's new leadership, leaving one to wonder which factor played the more important role in attracting their support. *Tear Off the Masks: Identity and Imposture in 20th Century Russia*, by Sheila Fitzpatrick, brings together work the author has done on the topic since the early 1990s. Fitzpatrick's book is "about the remaking of identities in a society cast into turmoil by revolution" and investigates "how individuals who find themselves in such situations . . . construct new personae to suit the new circumstances of life."¹³ In Fitzpatrick's view the issue of identity in Soviet Russia was based mainly on social class. The Party assumed that members of the proletariat were supporters of the revolution, while those from the bourgeoisie were not and, especially in the 1920s, spent a great deal of time trying to identify the class position of citizens. However, as a result of years of war and revolution, many people had changed social position and occupation, making it difficult to determine their true class identities and leaving the Bolsheviks to rely on the person's own self-presentation to determine their class identity.¹⁴ Because those who could establish a proletarian identity benefited in so many ways (preferential treatment by schools, municipal housing boards, rationing boards, taxation laws, etc.) many Soviet citizens with ambiguous backgrounds tried to "invent" social and class identities – not in the sense of wholly making them up but in the sense of selecting and interpreting their own biographical data in such a way as to produce an optimal

¹² In addition to those discussed here, a number of other works have in some way examined attempts to inculcate values and develop a Soviet identity among the population. Karen Petrone's study looks at the ways the government used celebrations to demonstrate appropriate Soviet values and behaviours, and garner support for the state. Karen Petrone, *Life Has become More Joyous, Comrades: Celebrations in the Time of Stalin* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000). Lewis Sieglebaum focuses on a particular model of the New Soviet Person promoted by the Party: the *Stakhanovite*, a worker who over-fulfilled his or her production quota, often by record setting amounts, but also demonstrated that he or she was cultured and well-mannered. Stakhanovism, say Sieglebaum, "offered a model of behaviour and a set of values that workers could adopt" to negotiate Soviet society. Lewis Sieglebaum, *Stakhanovism and the Politics of Productivity in the USSR, 1935-1941* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 7, 148. *Everyday Stalinism* by Sheila Fitzpatrick looks at many of the issues Soviet citizens dealt with on a daily basis in the 1930s, including attempts to modify their values and behaviours. Each of these studies shows how citizens could respond to the Party and its policies with enthusiasm, could resist the Party's efforts or could negotiate some sort of middle ground between the two. Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism, Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

¹³ Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Tear Off the Masks: Identity and Imposture in 20th Century Russia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 4.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

(in terms of personal security and career opportunities) result.”¹⁵ People tried, in various ways, to prove they were proletarians, and therefore entitled to the privileges this class identity implied. They were interested in constructing the best proletarian identity possible to take advantage of the potential for upward mobility.

One of the most influential recent works to discuss the creation of Soviet identity is Stephen Kotkin’s *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization*, which examines the building of the industrial city of Magnitogorsk and its residents’ everyday lives. By looking at the behaviour of Magnitogorsk’s workers, Kotkin concludes that the country’s citizens had learned to “speak Bolshevik,” which he defines as “the obligatory language for self-identification and as such, the barometer of one’s political allegiance to the cause.”¹⁶ He cites as an example a letter from one worker’s wife to another, in which the former entreats the latter to encourage her husband to take more pride in his work, become a Stakhanovite and “understand the words of comrade Stalin, that work is a matter of honour, glory, valour and heroism.”¹⁷ What is important here, the author writes, is not that this woman believed what she had written. What was important was that she “recogniz[ed] . . . how to think and behave as the wife of a Soviet locomotive driver should” and “participated as if [she] believed.”¹⁸ Soviet citizens actively tried to demonstrate not only that they were proletarians, but also good Bolsheviks. They did not speak Bolshevik only because of the coercive practices of the state, but also because a Bolshevik identity brought them a range of benefits. He sees the relationship between the state and its citizenry as a “field of play,” and the acquisition of a Bolshevik identity was necessary for a citizen to successfully “play the game.”¹⁹

Kotkin goes on to explore the possibility that sincere belief could have been a motivating factor for citizens to “speak Bolshevik” as well as self-interest and coercion. Because determining the sincerity of expressions of belief is so difficult, the author approaches the question by looking for evidence of radical unbelief among the population. Although he finds little evidence of the existence of radical unbelief, neither did the population uncritically accept the Party’s cause. Rather “elements of ‘belief’ and ‘disbelief’ appear to have coexisted within

¹⁵ Ibid., 3.

¹⁶ Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 220.

¹⁷ Ibid., 219.

¹⁸ Ibid., 220.

¹⁹ Ibid., 224-225.

everyone” as people dealt with the discrepancies between the revolutionary truth promoted by the regime and their own daily experiences.²⁰ While people were certainly cognisant of discrepancies, citizens accepted the “truthfulness of revolutionary truth,” not only because it was necessary to survive, but also because it was “a way to transcend the pettiness of daily life, to see the whole picture, to relate mundane events to a larger design; it offered something to strive for.”²¹ In conclusion Kotkin writes that the regime did manage to

offer a story that people [were] prepared at some level to accept. . . the process of articulating the sanctioned vocabulary and values of society in one’s own words was far from entirely voluntary, linked not merely to access to food and housing, but to one’s safety and the safety of one’s relatives. But the presence of coercion, subtle and unsubtle, does not mean the absence of a high degree of volunteerism any more than the holding of genuine ideals precludes the energetic pursuit of self-interest.²²

Subsequently, several Soviet historians have taken Kotkin’s work as a starting point for their own investigations into the creation of a Soviet identity among the country’s population. Two such scholars, Jochen Hellbeck and Igal Halfin, while praising Kotkin’s contribution, feel that he has placed too much emphasis on the pragmatic reasons that led Soviet citizens to “speak Bolshevik,” and seems to say that while citizens used this language in public, with the exception of a core group of believers, it did not permeate the private sphere. To Hellbeck and Halfin, though, it appears that “the rules of identity formation . . . extended well beyond the confines of ‘official’ Soviet discourse, pervading even individuals’ subjective self-consciousness.”²³ Essentially, they argue that many Soviet subjects did not only speak Bolshevik in public, they internalized it and carried it with them into their private lives. In their estimation, Kotkin has put forward a view of the Soviet subject as “bereft of an ideological agenda of its own,” and when he describes citizens as playing a game, his terminology “assume[s] a high degree of detachment between the subject and its public performance.”²⁴ They disagree with Kotkin because they feel his analysis overlooks the Bolsheviks’ desire to win the souls of their citizens, “to make people understand the Communist program, in order to identify with it and adopt it as their own.” The letter from one worker’s wife to another, which Kotkin says may have simply been an example of

²⁰ Ibid., 228.

²¹ Ibid., 229.

²² Ibid., 358.

²³ Jochen Hellbeck and Igal Halfin, “Rethinking the Soviet Subject: Stephen Kotkin’s ‘Magnetic Mountain’ and the State of Soviet Historical Studies” *Jahrbucher fur Geschichte Osteuropas* 44, no. 3 (1996): 459.

²⁴ Ibid., 458.

a Soviet citizen's knowledge of how to play the game, Hellbeck and Halfin regard as "a call for self-transformation and self-perfection."²⁵ They assert that many took seriously the Party's calls for people to remake themselves into new, better citizens, to purify themselves from the corrupting influences of the old bourgeois order. Those who failed in their attempts at transformation or found themselves questioning the regime often regarded this as an indication that they themselves were flawed, rather than as evidence that the system was flawed.²⁶

Gauging Public Opinion

In addition to those works dealing with values and identity, there have been an assortment of other studies devoted to assessing public opinion. Several have considered the state's efforts to direct public opinion through the popular press. In his recent study, Jeffrey Brooks disagrees with those who have opined that the press was ignored or dismissed by Soviet citizens. It may not have provided an accurate reflection of all public expression, but in his view it "contextualized the Soviet experience and imposed a structure of thinking even among non-believers."²⁷ For young people, the national, centrally directed newspaper was *Komsomolskaya pravda*, which set out the issues that officials believed were important for them to consider. For example, during the mid-1920s *Komsomolskaya pravda* frequently featured articles informing young people that it was not appropriate for Soviet citizens to smoke, drink excessively or exhibit bourgeois behaviour, such as promiscuous sexual activity. Though many young people rejected the Party's definition of appropriate behaviour, they still had to consider it, given that refusal to conform could produce a negative outcome, while adherence could positively impact one's future. Reading the Soviet press was not something one typically did for enjoyment, but to educate oneself about the Party line and glean information necessary to navigate Soviet society.²⁸

This is not to say that the press only reflected the opinions of the Party leadership. During the mid-1920s, Brooks notes, the press acted as a limited forum to air grievances. To an extent, journalists were able to call attention to issues they considered important, request discussion or

²⁵ Ibid., 459.

²⁶ Ibid., 459-460.

²⁷ Jeffrey Brooks, *Thank You, Comrade Stalin! Soviet Public Culture from Revolution to Cold War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), xiv.

²⁸ Matthew Lenoe, *Closer to the Masses: Stalinist Culture, Social Revolution, and Soviet Newspapers* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 72-73.

action.²⁹ This may also have reflected a broader concern with these issues among society. As well, Matthew Lenoë has argued that the Soviet media did, to a certain degree, make attempts to appeal to their readership (especially young, male activists) at the same time they tried to spread their political message. He finds that both these activists, and many labourers, responded well to articles that denounced officials and bosses as class enemies and saboteurs. Even in the 1920s it was an effective tactic for the leaders to scapegoat mid-level officials for the failings of the regime. The practise was continued and intensified in the 1930s, as it both struck a cord among readers, while at the same time conveying to them the message that the Party was on the side of the workers against the “burzhui” and mobilizing activists and workers to aid the Party in its campaign against these enemies.³⁰

The press also attempted to appeal to citizens by responding to their interests and introducing features on less overtly political topics, including science and technology, and adventure and exploration. Such features were often genuinely popular, especially when the media made the effort to turn out material of good quality. Even these topics, however, did not elicit a uniform response. As one historian has written in a study of Soviet explorers and aviators, “the Soviet citizen was capable of reading culture in a number of ways. Instead of subscribing to the official, privileged reading offered by the state, people developed alternate, even oppositional, readings of their own.”³¹ Thus, the campaign to promote bravery and sacrifice, and build pride in Soviet achievements was viewed as such by some, but also as something to be ridiculed as part of the Stalin cult and criticized as a worthless exercise that brought fame and fortune to a few while the majority of the population experienced hunger and deprivation.³² Soviet propaganda did not by any means work on all people all the time, and could produce a range of responses among the citizenry.

Other studies exploring the mood of the Soviet public also indicate the diversity of feelings toward the regime. Sarah Davies’ *Popular Opinion in Stalin’s Russia* uses reports from the Party and NKVD (the state’s secret police force) prepared from, among other sources, citizens’ letters to the press, popular jokes and *chastushki* (short, humorous rhyming verses which often addressed political issues), in an effort to assess the public’s sentiments about the

²⁹ Brooks, *Thank You, Comrade Stalin!*, 27-28.

³⁰ Lenoë, *Closer to the Masses*, 84, 96-97.

³¹ John McCannon, *Red Arctic: Polar Exploration and the Myth of the North in the Soviet Union, 1932-1939* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 143.

³² *Ibid.*, 140-143.

Party and its policies. While rejecting the totalitarian picture of the “atomized, voiceless masses,” she also rejects the other extreme put forth by some revisionist historians, which suggests that ordinary people had the right to complain and criticize the government and that many were satisfied and loyal to the regime. Rather, she asserts that “along the continuum from active consent to active resistance/dissent were a range of heterogeneous positions. There were very few absolute ‘conformists’ and ‘dissenters.’ In practise, people’s views were far more ambivalent and contradictory: opposition to one policy or facet of the regime was quite compatible with support of others.”³³ Her investigation, though, concentrates chiefly on instances of dissent and advances the idea that people were able to find alternate sources of information and ideas other than those offered by official channels, to utilize discourses other than Bolshevism and “illuminate[s] the hitherto neglected body of dissonant opinion which distorted, subverted, rejected, or provided an alternative to the official discourse.”³⁴ By contrast, Robert Thurston is one of those who has put forth the view that many Soviet citizens were, in many ways, satisfied with and supportive of, the Party. In his study of the 1930s, the author contends that Soviet workers, to a greater degree than previously thought, were able to criticize local officials, participate in decision making, and manoeuvre to improve their positions, all of which contributed to their satisfaction with the regime. Even in respect to the terror, he finds that, although some people certainly experienced considerable fear and upheaval, others reported that their lives were not substantially affected and many expressed belief in the government’s claims that enemies of the people and saboteurs were widespread. The “acid test” of the regime, he claims, occurred during World War II when most of the citizenry rose in defence of the Party and the country, indicating their loyalty.³⁵

Some of the most interesting new material to examine public opinion are those that have taken in-depth looks at the lives of particular individuals, using diaries or personal archives to try to determine the extent to which they internalized the Party’s message. The work of the aforementioned Jochen Hellbeck falls into this group. His investigations of several diaries kept by Soviet citizens in the 1930s has led him to conclude that at least some had internalized the Party’s messages to the point that it was difficult for them to “articulate a private identity distinct

³³ Sarah Davies, *Popular Opinion in Stalin’s Russia: Terror, Propaganda and Dissent, 1934-1941* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 6.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.

³⁵ Robert Thurston, *Life and Terror in Stalin’s Russia, 1934-1941* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).

from the political system,” and that any attempt to detach themselves from this identity could be a painful and confusing process, as it forced the individual to place themselves in opposition to the positive self-image they gained as a good Soviet citizen.³⁶ Several of these studies suggest just how greatly some desired to be a part of the Soviet community. Thomas Lahusen’s *How Life Writes the Book* follows the life of the author Vasilii Azhaev and the ways his experiences influenced his writing. As a young man, Azhaev was convicted of counter-revolutionary activities and sentenced to four years corrective labour in a camp in Siberia. Much of his writing demonstrated how a person could be reforged and was perhaps an attempt to prove that he had done just that, and was deserving of regaining his good standing in the Soviet community.³⁷

Finally, the memoirs of those who grew to adulthood in the Soviet Union during the 1920s and 1930s are of great use in trying to determine how young people felt about the Bolshevik Party. The availability of the memoirs, as well as the diaries, of Soviet citizens had increased considerably in recent years, as have studies based on them. Even so, it is difficult to find memoirists whose youth fits neatly within the 1917 – 1928 time frame of this study, and so many of those discussed here include experiences that postdate the 1920s. Since this thesis asks whether or not young people came to support and/or believe in the system created by the Bolshevik Party, memoirists old enough to have a conscious experience of the 1920s will be included, as they were at least partially educated and indoctrinated during this time and thus their attitude toward the regime began to form during this time. As valuable a source as memoirs are, there are certain difficulties in their use as historical sources. Those published in the USSR were subject to the distortions of the censors and may have been changed from one edition to the next in order to conform with the prevailing political mood. They also often downplay or omit the most controversial aspects of Soviet history, such as the famine of 1932-1933, that are of particular interest to historians. In spite of this, Soviet memoirs can provide a good picture of the lives and attitudes of the upwardly mobile individuals who did well in Soviet society.³⁸ Although western historians have been more inclined to use émigré and dissident memoirs as sources, these must also be treated with care. Some historians who have used these

³⁶ Jochen Hellbeck “Fashioning the Stalinist Soul: The Diary of Stepan Podlubnyi, 1931-9” in *Stalinism: New Directions* Ed. Sheila Fitzpatrick (London: Routledge, 2000), 77, 103-104.

³⁷ Thomas Lahusen, *How Life Writes the Book: Real Socialism and Socialist Realism in Stalin’s Russia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997).

³⁸ Hiroaki Kuromiya, “Soviet Memoirs as a Historical Source” in *A Researcher’s Guide to Sources in Soviet Social History in the 1930s*, eds. Sheila Fitzpatrick and Lynne Viola (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 1990), 234, 238-240.

memoirs have noted the presentation of rumours and gossip presented as legitimate explanations for events due to a lack of information in the secretive Soviet society. Also, while memoirists living in the USSR had to tailor their writing to please the Party, those writing for western publication may have tailored their memoirs to appeal to western audiences, playing to the preconceived notions readers held about the Soviet Union and, just as Soviet censors altered texts, western editors may have altered or sensationalized the content of émigré memoirs.³⁹ By making use of both groups of memoirs, I hope to identify the commonalities in the writers' youthful experiences and avoid a presentation that favours either upwardly mobile Soviet memoirists with positive feelings toward the system or émigré sources whose feelings may have been extremely negative.

³⁹ Hiroaki Kuromiya, "Guide to Émigré and Dissident Memoir Literature," in *A Researcher's Guide to Sources in Soviet Social History in the 1930s*, 257-260.

Chapter 2 - The Beginnings of Political Activism Amongst Russia's Youth

“We felt our power,”¹ asserted one young, female supporter of the Russian Revolution in the early days of Bolshevik rule to describe the emotions of her cohort and their sense of importance to the new regime. Her assertion that youth were a significant force in the Bolsheviks' rise to power was not an empty one; the Bolshevik Party confirmed this importance as they sought a closer relationship with the revolutionary youth organizations, leading eventually to the creation of an official Bolshevik youth group known as the Communist League of Youth, or Komsomol, in the fall of 1918.

Political activity among Russian youth did not, however, begin during the Russian Revolution. Youth involvement in political and economic activism commenced in the nineteenth century, first among upper- and middle-class, educated young people. In the early twentieth century, as the working class in general grew, young workers acquired a greater measure of education and also became more politically active. Young people were active in a variety of political movements, including those on the left, like Menshevism and Bolshevism, which increased the influence of those parties on the working class throughout World War I. Not all youth were attracted to these movements solely for political reasons; other aspects of group membership, such as participation in social activities or educational opportunities, also made these organizations appealing. Those who did join leftist youth organizations for political reasons had a variety of political agendas: young workers joined to advance their economic rights, young intellectuals to promote the cause of socialism and young women to capitalize on the promise of equal rights offered by leftist political ideologies. However, issues thought important by the Bolsheviks' young supporters did not always conform to those considered most important by the Party. During the establishment and early years of the Komsomol the Party frequently found itself at odds with its youth organization, as young people attempted to further their own aims while the Party sought to bring the Komsomol under tighter control and marshal its numbers to the support of the Party. In spite of these tensions, large numbers of young people rallied to the Bolsheviks' cause as they seized power in October 1917 and then fought their many

¹ Anne E. Gorsuch, *Youth in Revolutionary Russia: Enthusiasts, Bohemians, Delinquents* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 43.

opponents in a civil war until 1921. Eventually though, the death of many of the Bolsheviks' most passionate supporters during the civil war, along with disillusionment caused by the growing authoritarianism of the regime and the adoption in 1921 of the New Economic Policy – a plan that appeared to compromise the goals of socialism – opened the way for changes in the composition, character and motivation of the Party's young supporters during the 1920s. This chapter will briefly examine the growth of youth political activism, the early steps the Bolshevik Party took to begin to harness youth political enthusiasm to their cause, and some of the difficulties encountered in this process.

The political involvement and radicalization of Russian youth began prior to the Revolution of 1917. Throughout the nineteenth century young people were involved in several attempts to refashion their society. The members of the populist movement and the more militant People's Will organization of the 1860s and 1870s counted many young people among them. There was also a "Young Russia" movement devoted to changing society through the energy and idealism of youth.² These groups, however, were primarily composed of members of the upper class. The preconditions for the emergence of working-class youth groups sympathetic to the Bolsheviks' policies began at the end of the nineteenth and start of the twentieth centuries. By this time, Russian industry had grown considerably. Investment by the tsarist government and foreign capitalists resulted in its rapid expansion, although this expansion was concentrated in a limited number of centres: notably the areas around Moscow, St. Petersburg and the Donets Basin in Ukraine. Newly built, the factories were modern and large and employed thousands of workers in one place, a situation that aided the formation of workers' organizations and unions. In the early 1900s, the land reforms of Prime Minister Peter Stolypin facilitated the movement of peasants previously tied to their land into the urban industrial workforce.³ Prior to this time many industrial workers had lived and worked seasonally in urban centres and retained strong ties to their native villages. Before 1905, for example, 41% of the metal workers of Moscow province continued to own land in their native villages; by 1918 that proportion had decreased to

² Diane Koenker, "Urban Families, Working-Class Youth Groups, and the 1917 Revolution in Moscow," in *The Family in Imperial Russia: New Lines of Historical Research*, ed. David L. Ransel (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1978), 280.

³ Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Russian Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 19, 36.

22%.⁴ Clearly then, the urban population had become more stable. An urban upbringing gave young people several opportunities unavailable to their rural counterparts. Those who resided in cities had better access to education. In Moscow four years of schooling was made compulsory in 1910, and by 1912 62% of the school-age population was enrolled. Young workers also had the opportunity to enrol in the city's vocational education system.⁵ Though limited, even this education had benefits for young workers. Literacy and a basic education allowed greater opportunity for advancement when young people entered the workforce, as demonstrated by the case of Eduard Dune, a young working-class man born in 1899 in Riga, Latvia. His education resulted in rapid promotion to the status of skilled worker at the age of 15, which led to a significant degree of economic independence from his family.⁶ Diane Koenker notes that such situations created a sense of equality among family members and helped to break down traditional patriarchal authority. With relatively little adult supervision and some disposable income of their own young workers were able to participate in various leisure activities which allowed them to create more extensive peer group ties. They were also able to take part in activities of a more political nature, such as reading circles or evening school courses. In these ways young people made contact with one another, a factor that would help later in the building of mass youth groups.⁷ Involvement in the workforce also provided Dune, like so many others, with ever-increasing exposure to the ideas of socialism and parties like the Bolsheviks, as he met older, more politically experienced workers and activists who entered the factories as workers.⁸

Along with the growth of industry in the late 1800s and early 1900s came an increase in unrest among the growing working class. Rapid industrialization is generally accompanied by significant socioeconomic disruption and shock, and, true to form, overall living and working conditions in tsarist Russia were terrible for the lower classes: hours were long, pay was low, housing was overcrowded and outbreaks of disease were common. Furthermore, attempts to better the situation of the working class were met with repression from the government.⁹ After the events of Bloody Sunday in 1905, when government troops fired upon a peaceful workers' demonstration petitioning the Tsar to address their grievances, workers' activities were

⁴ Koenker, "Urban Families," 284.

⁵ Ibid., 288.

⁶ Eduard Dune, *Notes of a Red Guard*, ed. Diane P. Koenker and S. A. Smith (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 16.

⁷ Koenker, "Urban Families," 289, 291.

⁸ Dune, *Red Guard*, 23-25.

⁹ Rex A. Wade, *The Russian Revolution, 1917* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 5-6.

suppressed for a time, but in the years just prior to World War I strikes and demonstrations grew again in frequency and intensity.¹⁰ Historian Rex Wade asserts that by this time the working class was “not merely a deeply aggrieved, growing segment of the population, but one that increasingly saw a connection between the political system and their own wretched condition.”¹¹ This dynamic encouraged workers to form stronger links with radical, revolutionary parties such as the Bolsheviks, who promised to alleviate their conditions. Socialist parties were also attractive to working-class women. Although the Bolsheviks insisted upon the unity of the working class and said that advancements for women would only take place within a larger social revolution, they promised specific benefits for women such as legal equality, voting rights and education, as well as maternity leave and day care.¹² Young people became increasingly attracted to socialist parties after the beginning of World War I. At this point the number of young people in the workforce swelled, as they were hired to replace workers conscripted into the armed forces. By 1917, workers under the age of 21 accounted for 22 to 25 % of the workforce in Petrograd, which totalled approximately 100,000 workers.¹³ The situation in Moscow was the same, as the percentage of youth in the workforce rose from 15% before the war to 26%.¹⁴ While those young workers who were experienced and educated stood to benefit from this situation, many others were hired to do the most monotonous and unskilled tasks, at which they worked long hours for poor pay. Their economic grievances combined with the recently developed youth culture of the cities to produce groups devoted to improving the conditions of workers. These groups generally started in factories with large numbers of young workers, such as the various metal works in Petrograd. Although they were often responsible for carrying out agitation and organizing work stoppages, these efforts did not become a mass youth movement, as they did not yet have a legal right to organize.¹⁵

During the initial stages of World War I Russian society rallied in support of the government. However, by 1917 war casualties had reached 5 million,¹⁶ and the Tsar and his

¹⁰ Fitzpatrick, *The Russian Revolution*, 36.

¹¹ Wade, *The Russian Revolution, 1917*, 6.

¹² *Ibid.*, 118-120.

¹³ Isabel A. Tirado, *Young Guard!*, 12.

¹⁴ Koenker, “Urban Families,” 292. At the same time the number of women employed in industry grew until they accounted for 40% of the workforce. Barbara Evans Clements, “The Effects of the Civil War on Women and Family Relations” in *Party, State and Society in the Russian Civil War*, ed. Diane Koenker, et al. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 109.

¹⁵ Tirado, *Young Guard!*, 14, 16-17.

¹⁶ Fitzpatrick, *The Russian Revolution*, 37. Statistics regarding Russian casualties during World War I vary widely.

government were viewed as incompetent to deal with either the war effort or the problems faced by the general population. Over the war years workers saw wages decrease while prices rose and experienced frequent shortages of goods, especially food. On February 23, 1917, women workers in St. Petersburg went on strike, demanding a resolution to the food shortages. Over the next few days they were joined by more workers and other disgruntled members of society, until the crowds of demonstrators surpassed 200,000. Eventually, troops in St. Petersburg joined the strikers, the Tsar was forced to abdicate and a Provisional Government was established.¹⁷ After the February Revolution the formerly small and isolated youth groups from various factories began to organize themselves into larger groups, particularly in Petrograd. There, a group of young activists canvassed factories across the city to convince young workers that they needed an organization to protect their rights. This organization became known as *Trud i Svet* ("Labour and Light") and by the summer of 1917 had a membership of 50,000. Among the group's aims were the creation of schools for young workers, a six - hour work day and wage parity with older workers. Included in the group's membership were those who claimed to be Bolsheviks, Mensheviks and Anarchists, as well as those who were more politically moderate. Though the group did identify itself as socialist, it avoided affiliating itself with any particular political party, instead advocating for the unity of the working class.¹⁸ The situation was much the same in Moscow, where youth groups declared themselves to be above parties; even a group led by Bolshevik Party members refrained from making support for the Party a requirement for group membership. In addition, while these groups offered courses in political economy and political literacy, they also devoted time to educational and cultural activities and agitation for workers' rights – all things that made such groups attractive to youth.¹⁹

The Russian population had high hopes for reform after the formation of the Provisional Government, which included some moderate socialists along with those from centrist parties. However, the government was reluctant to undertake significant reforms without electoral legitimacy. It failed to redistribute land to the peasantry, deal with the shortages of food or end the country's disastrous involvement in the war. As the government failed to deal with these issues, the working class turned further left toward more radical socialists, like the Bolsheviks,

¹⁷ Tsuyoshi Hasegawa, "The February Revolution," in *The Russian Revolution and Bolshevik Victory*, eds. Ronald Suny and Arthur Adams (Lexington: D.C Heath and Company, 1990), 53, 59-60.

¹⁸ Tirado, *Young Guard!*, 18-20.

¹⁹ Koenker, "Urban Families," 295-297.

who were not tainted by association with the government. This became particularly evident after an attempted counter-revolutionary coup by Lavr Kornilov, a military commander on the right, seemed to threaten the revolution.²⁰ Political affiliation thus became more important among youth groups as the October Revolution approached. In Petrograd the unity of the youth movement was disrupted as many of the grassroots members of Trud i Svet became more radical, following the pattern of the working class in general. Some young Bolshevik supporters challenged Trud i Svet's leadership of the youth movement and created an opposing youth group, the Socialist League of Young Workers (or SSRM), a predecessor of the Komsomol. The SSRM's charter advocated many of the same goals as that of Trud i Svet, such as a minimum wage for youth, a six-hour work day for those under sixteen and voting rights for eighteen-year-olds. However, the group believed its most important task was to develop class consciousness among youth and prepare them to fight for socialism. When referring to socialism the SSRM meant only its pro-Bolshevik version. By the October Revolution the SSRM's membership stood between 20,000 and 32,000, but undoubtedly some of these had defected from Trud i Svet.²¹

During the formation of both Trud i Svet and the SSRM, individual Bolshevik Party members, most importantly Lenin's wife Nadezhda Krupskaya, who would be involved with the youth movement and the Soviet education system throughout the 1920s, offered support and encouragement to the youth groups, though the Party had not yet formulated a policy toward the youth movement. As time passed Party members became concerned that other political parties would use the politically unaffiliated Trud i Svet for their own benefit. Several members of the Bolshevik leadership proposed ways to bring the youth groups into greater contact with their party. Krupskaya, who had made a study of youth in other countries, envisioned an autonomous mass organization that would receive only ideological guidance from the Bolsheviks, claiming that in other countries groups controlled by adults remained small, while those run by young people were more successful. A second group believed that a small, Party-sponsored organization was a better option because new members could then be educated by the Party. At the Sixth Party Congress in August 1917 the Bolsheviks adopted a position that represented a compromise between these two positions. The youth group, they decided, should eventually be a

²⁰ Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Soviet Experiment: Russia, the USSR, and the Successor States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 44-46.

²¹ Tirado, *Young Guard!*, 27-29.

mass organization, but, though still not directly controlled by the Bolsheviks, it should be tied more closely to the Party than Krupskaja suggested. For the time, however, the Party gave its support to the SSRM.²²

From October 29 to November 4, 1918, a year after the Bolshevik seizure of power, the SSRM, along with youth organizations from Moscow and other urban industrial centres, such as the Urals, met in Moscow for a national youth conference that resulted in the creation of the Komsomol. Though the conference was called by the Moscow youth organizations, which had close ties to the Bolshevik Party,²³ it appears that the decision to hold the conference was made by young people themselves; although the majority of the delegates were Bolshevik supporters, members of other socialist parties were present at the meetings.²⁴ Among the most contentious issues discussed at the conference was that of a name for the national youth organization. The Petrograd delegation proposed that “communist” be included in the new organization’s name to make clear its links to the Bolshevik Party. However, many delegates, including some who were themselves Bolsheviks, opposed this suggestion, fearing that such overt links to the Party would discourage more moderate youth, particularly those in rural areas, from joining the organization and thus prevent it from becoming a mass movement nationwide. Though the supporters of the name “Communist League of Youth” eventually won the debate, there were clearly others who wanted the group to include all socialists.²⁵ Also debated were several issues that involved the balance between regional autonomy and central control, for example the question of whether a candidate for election to the group’s Central Committee should be elected by the national congress or at the regional level. Though those who favoured greater centralization won, a number of delegates opposed measures that would increase the control of the centre.²⁶

As the political and military situation grew increasingly precarious for the Bolsheviks in 1919 it became more important for the Party to be able to call supporters to its aid. From 1918 to 1921 the Bolsheviks fought a civil war for control of the country against a number of forces, the most important of which were the White armies devoted to the restoration of the country’s old social order. By 1919 various White forces were advancing on the Bolshevik-controlled centre from Siberia, southern Russia and the Baltics. Surrounded by enemies, the Party worked to

²² Ibid., 30-31; and Fisher, *Pattern for Soviet Youth*, 6-7.

²³ Ibid., 64-65.

²⁴ Fisher, *Pattern for Soviet Youth*, 10.

²⁵ Ibid., 10-11.

²⁶ Tirado, *Young Guard!*, 70.

create a more regimented society that could be mobilized to defend the revolution.²⁷ The Komsomol was one of many organizations to be mobilized in this fashion. At the Eighth Party Congress in March 1919 the Bolsheviks gave their approval to the new national youth organization, claiming at the time that the Komsomol would be allowed “a maximum of spontaneous activity,” activity initiated by the group rather than by the Party. Only a month later, at a session of the Komsomol’s Central Committee, a group of Komsomol spokesmen requested that the Party exercise more control over the organization. In August the Party and Komsomol issued a joint resolution stating that the Central Committee of the Komsomol was directly subordinate to the Central Committee of the Party. The resolution also referred to the organization as being merely autonomous, whereas the Party had previously called it independent and self-standing. One historian suggests that the spokesmen who began this process were almost all members of the Party as well as the Komsomol, and were prompted to take this action by the Party.²⁸ However the process began, the Party was clearly asserting its authority.

The Party envisioned several roles for the new national youth organization. During the revolutionary and civil war periods many Bolshevik leaders, such as Lev Trotsky, commissar of foreign affairs and commander of the Red Army, and Nikolai Bukharin, a prominent Party theorist who often addressed youth, praised the actions of young people and described them as the foremost elements, or vanguard, of the working class. The Komsomol was to unite youth and educate them to become trained reserves for the Party. Komsomolites were to acquire knowledge, especially knowledge of Marxism, in order to prepare for their roles as future leaders. Not only were they to educate themselves, they were also to assist the Party in the task of educating and indoctrinating youth who had not yet come into contact with the Bolsheviks and their ideals. The Komsomol was asked to help establish new schools and courses in political grammar and to organize clubs where youth not in schools could, among other things, receive a political education.²⁹ The second major role the Komsomol was expected to assume was that of military defender of the Revolution. Throughout 1918 and 1919 the Party repeatedly ordered mobilizations of Komsomolites, directing them to serve in the armed forces as political commissars or agitators, as they were considered politically reliable enough to be trusted with these tasks. The Party praised qualities like bravery, vigilance, industriousness, initiative and

²⁷ Fitzpatrick, *The Russian Revolution*, 75.

²⁸ Fisher, *Pattern for Soviet Youth*, 12-13.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 17, 42, 71-74.

spontaneity in the young people who fought on their behalf, but also stressed to them the need for discipline and obedience to authority.³⁰

Many young Komsomolites displayed their devotion to the Party throughout the Revolution and Civil War. The most apparent sign of this devotion was their participation in the fighting during this period. At the time of the Revolution in 1917 approximately 43% of the Red Guards in Moscow were under the age of 25 and 40% in Petrograd were 22 years of age or younger; the participation in the Red Guards of all of these young people was voluntary.³¹ During the Civil War the Komsomol sent 50 – 60,000 of its members into the Red Army. The Petrograd division gave over 70% of its membership to the war effort. Such heavy involvement in the fighting played an important role in forming the identity of the youth organization. The war gave young people a sense of importance as they were called on to defend the revolution; the Komsomol itself gained special status as a politically reliable and committed group on which the Party could depend. Those who participated often considered themselves part of a “fighting brotherhood” and idealized their wartime experience in the years to come. Wartime experience also convinced many youth of the existence of counter-revolutionary enemies and of the need for unity in the face of these enemies.³²

Despite the initial success of the youth groups and the enthusiasm shown by many members for the Party, the movement experienced considerable difficulties throughout the Civil War. By 1920 the nationwide membership of the Komsomol was approximately 400,000,³³ a figure that appears rather low considering that in 1917 the Petrograd youth organization alone had reached 50,000. However, membership in the youth movement had actually declined in some areas after the October Revolution. The high levels of participation in the Red Guards and then in the Red Army removed many of the most dedicated activists from their organizations. Furthermore, after years of war the Russian economy was in collapse. The ability to get supplies and fuel for factories had been disrupted and, although the Bolsheviks nationalized a large part of the economy in an effort to keep it running, many factories were still unable to continue production. Lack of jobs, coupled with food shortages, led large numbers of workers to leave the

³⁰ Ibid., 40-42, 47-48.

³¹ Koenker, “Urban Families,” 300; Tirado, *Young Guard!*, 48.

³² Tirado, *Young Guard!*, 89, 95-96.

³³ Fisher, *Pattern for Soviet Youth*, 28.

cities; their numbers declined from 2.6 million workers in 1917 to 1.2 million in 1920,³⁴ a development that drained young people from the youth groups. Young workers, without seniority, were among the first to suffer from this situation. In the spring of 1918 only 32% of young workers in Petrograd were still employed.³⁵ Some of those who had been active in the youth organizations became disenchanted with them. The groups had initially been formed by young people to act as trade unions that would better their economic circumstances. Under the new economic conditions it was no longer possible to improve the situation of young workers. In addition, as the Party gained more control over the youth movement, the Party began to transform the group into a political and educational organization, not one focused on economic issues. Though the founding congress of the Komsomol declared that one of its aims was the defence of the economic rights of young workers, by 1920 the Party and Komsomol leadership had taken the position that since the Soviet government protected the interests of all workers, young workers did not need an organization to advocate for them.³⁶

The Party also experienced difficulties in its relations with youth who were not members of the urban working class. University students as a group gave the Bolsheviks particular trouble. In an attempt to create a student body more sympathetic to their politics, the Bolsheviks tried to eliminate independent student councils and recruited many students from non-working-class backgrounds into the army to make room in higher educational institutions for working-class youth. The attitudes of those discriminated against in this way only hardened against the Bolsheviks. Students of this class who managed to remain in school learned to survive by giving the outward appearance of acceptance of Bolshevik policy, while behaving differently in their private lives.³⁷ Women, both young and old, were also often suspicious of the Bolsheviks. In spite of promises for equality, education and employment for women, many associated the Party with the chaos and disruption of the war years. Many women had been left to cope with the difficulties of wartime life as husbands and male relatives went to war, and desired the security that traditional institutions like marriage, the church and, in the case of rural women, the peasant commune could bring. These were the very institutions the Bolsheviks threatened and, in general, women (and the peasantry) were more conservative and reluctant to abandon them.

³⁴ Alec Nove, *An Economic History of the USSR 1917-1991* (London: Penguin Books, 1992), 60.

³⁵ Tirado, *Young Guard!*, 44-45.

³⁶ Fisher, *Pattern for Soviet Youth*, 56; Tirado, *Young Guard!*, 169.

³⁷ Peter Konecny, *Builders and Deserters: Students, State and Community in Leningrad, 1917-1941* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1999), 48, 50-51, 53.

Also, those sympathetic to the Bolsheviks were at times disillusioned when promised advancements did not materialize.³⁸ It was among these groups that the Party asked the Komsomol to propagandize.

By the close of the Civil War the Party was taking an increasingly paternalistic attitude toward the Komsomol and young people in general. This attitude was demonstrated in 1920, when the Party intervened in Komsomol affairs to remove a high ranking Komsomolite, Vladimir Dunaevskii, from the organization. Dunaevskii was an outspoken critic of many of the Komsomol's policies. Specifically, Dunaevskii was among those who took the position that young people needed their own group to advocate for their economic interests, and that if the Komsomol paid more attention to this aspect of young peoples' lives, it would increase its appeal among them. He was also a champion of free discussion within the League. Just prior to the Third Congress of the Komsomol, its leaders referred the Dunaevskii problem to the Party's Organizational Bureau (Orgbureau) and together they decided to remove Dunaevskii and others who opposed the official line. In taking this action Dunaevskii claimed the Party had taken the side of a faction within the Komsomol and had allowed a faction within the Party's Central Committee to replace the League's elected governing body.³⁹ In previous years the Komsomol had been called the vanguard of the proletariat. Now the Party said clearly that it was the leading element in Soviet society and that the Komsomol must follow its line. At the end of the Civil War the Party did have a strong core of youth supporters who followed its line. However, these supporters were a relatively small portion of the total youth population, and the Party would clearly have to work to expand its influence in order to make the Komsomol a mass organization.

³⁸ Clements, "The Effects of the Civil War on Women," 108-109, 111-112.

³⁹ Tirado, *Young Guard!*, 154, 187, 189-190.

Chapter 3 - Party Policy Toward Soviet Youth in the 1920s

By 1921 the Bolshevik Party brought the Civil War to a close in its favour and was able to secure its hold on the government. In this position the Party could now begin to put its policies into practise and rule Russia as a Marxist state. Bolshevik leaders believed that this new Marxist state required a new type of citizen to build and populate it: an educated citizen who was committed to the Party and its ideology and willing to carry out the Party's mission. Many Bolsheviks considered young people the best candidates to become the so-called "New Soviet Man" they envisioned, as the younger generation was supposedly less corrupted by bourgeois influences and more malleable than its elders. No doubt, the preponderance of youthful supporters during the Civil War also encouraged the Bolsheviks to believe that young people were more receptive to their message than other segments of the population. The Party attempted to extend its influence over youth in three main ways. First, it wanted to restructure and expand the country's school system, which, prior to the revolution, had primarily served the children of the bourgeoisie. The Party's aim was to create a school system that would better serve the needs of proletarian youth, educate them to become the leaders of government and industry and, ideally, spread the qualities the "New Soviet Man" should possess to the general youth population. Second, the Party continued the process of developing the Komsomol, taking greater control over the organization and turning it into the political, propagandizing body the Bolsheviks desired. Third, the Party used various forms of entertainment and recreational activities to influence young people. These were often conducted by the Komsomol or other Soviet institutions, but were less overtly political than many activities conducted by similar organizations and more appealing to those who were not politically inclined.

The Bolsheviks' interaction with youth in these areas highlighted several issues in the relationship between the Party and the country's young people. The first of these was the question of who could be considered "Bolshevik" youth: that is, which segment of the youth population did the Bolsheviks desire to appeal to? This was particularly evident in debates over who ought to be admitted to the education system and to the Komsomol, and specifically whether space in these institutions should be reserved solely for proletarians or allow entry to members of other classes. The next was the issue of how young people should serve the Party, how they

should conduct themselves and what values they, as the New Soviet Men (and Women), should hold. Finally, the interaction between the Party and youth in these areas showed the tension caused when the Party's desire for greater control came up against young people's desire for greater independence. Many young people were initially attracted to the Bolshevik Party by its emphasis on action and the increased freedom promised by the revolution. The Party's attempts to take more control over the Komsomol and dictate youth conduct were often resented by the young, who challenged the Bolsheviks' right to impose such restrictions on them, as well as some of the Party's ideology. This chapter will investigate the main ways the Bolshevik Party interacted with young people and some of the difficulties encountered therein.

The Bolsheviks did not intend for every Soviet youth to grow up and join the Party, or even the Komsomol. Through the 1920s these organizations remained selective in their membership. They did, however, want to give young people an education that would produce a "Soviet" outlook on life and positive feelings toward the regime. To reach large numbers of young people on a regular basis, the Party would need to become involved with the country's school system. The Bolsheviks believed that the Tsarist era education system had primarily served the middle and upper classes, with few members of the proletariat or peasantry progressing beyond its elementary levels. Obviously, such an institution was unacceptable to the Bolsheviks and would have to be remade to allow the proletariat more access. By the conclusion of the Civil War, what remained of the education system was in a state of collapse and much of the improvements it had made prior to World War I had been wiped out. In some regions of the country illiteracy was actually increasing among young people, who had been denied an education by years of war.¹ This must have been particularly true for the lower classes, which were less likely to afford tuition fees for spaces that were available or have someone capable of teaching them at home. The education of proletarian children was important to the Party because they knew that the majority of those with the expertise needed to run government and industry had not come from the proletariat and were thought to be unreliable, if not hostile to Bolshevik rule. The Party needed to build a class of people that were both well educated and loyal communists if they were to retain power in the country. As Anatolii Lunacharsky, head of the Commissariat of Enlightenment (*Narkompros*) from 1917 - 1929, put it, "the people cannot set up

¹ Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Education and Social Mobility*, 169.

a correct governmental and social life, and cannot manage the economy in a practical way, unless they are educated.”² In 1928, Joseph Stalin, whose hold on power was by this time quite strong, similarly stated to the Eighth Komsomol Congress “[t]he working class cannot become the real master of the country if it does not succeed in overcoming its lack of culture, if it does not succeed in creating its own intelligentsia, if it does not master science and learn to administer the economy on scientific lines.”³ The task of storming the “fortress called science” and building a new life, Stalin declared, belonged primarily to youth.

Unfortunately for the Bolsheviks, Marxist thought on education was not terribly clear. Marx and Engels advanced the notion that education ought to be polytechnical; in other words, the school should teach students various practical skills rather than being purely academic. It was hoped that teaching a variety of skills would prevent workers from becoming trapped in a particular narrow specialization, a result Marx and Engels considered to be the product of capitalist dehumanization.⁴ Marx and Engels’ statements on education were interpreted differently by two groups of Soviet officials. The first, which included many of the high ranking officials of Narkompros, most prominently Lunacharsky and Krupskaya, took these statements to mean that schools should provide a broad general education that would not place limitations on the individual. Though they would provide students with practical training, schools would not be vocational in nature. Priority in the system would be given to children of proletarian origin, but they did not aim to eliminate totally students of other classes from the system; all students would have the opportunity to progress to higher education. The second group, which was composed of representatives from the Economic Commissariat (*VSNKh*), the trade unions and the Komsomol, believed that Marx was advocating teaching young people a variety of practical skills to make them less vulnerable in a changing job market. For this group, the purpose of education was to teach technical and industrial skills to all children, a position which they often supported by referring to the state’s economic needs as it worked to industrialize.⁵ Elements of this group also pushed for the exclusion of upper-class children from the education system. Throughout the 1920s these two groups competed to determine the structure of the Soviet education system.

² Anatolii Lunacharsky, in *Bolshevik Visions: The First Phase of the Cultural Revolution in Soviet Russia*, ed. William Rosenberg (Ann Arbor: Ardis Publishers, 1984), 28.

³ Joseph Stalin, *Works: Volume 11* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1954), 81.

⁴ Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Education and Social Mobility*, 5.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 5-6.

For most of the 1920s the first group, led by Anatoli Lunacharsky, dominated Narkompros, the department in charge of education. Lunacharsky was one of the staunchest supporters of the so-called United Labour Schools, which were to provide elementary and secondary education to children. By “united” Narkompros officials meant that “the whole system of regular schools, starting with kindergarten and going up to the university, must comprise one single body, one single hierarchy.”⁶ All children, most particularly those of the proletariat and the poor peasantry, had the right to progress through the education system as far as they could, instead of being directed into certain schools or professions because of their class. For this reason, until approximately the age of 14, the school was not permitted to separate children into different specializations, and even after this age the principal subjects had to remain the same for all.⁷ The term “labour,” then, did not indicate that the schools were to be vocational. Labour referred to the method that was to be used to teach young people. Soviet educational experts believed that children learned by doing; in Lunacharsky’s words, “what is actually perceived is only that which is actively perceived.”⁸

In order to teach children in a more active way, Narkompros advocated the use of the project method, originally devised by American educator Helen Parkhurst. Students were assigned projects which they were to complete at their own pace. Soviet educators asked that these projects be assigned to groups rather than to individuals and that older or more advanced students be encouraged to help others who struggled. The project method was thus used to promote collective activity and cooperation.⁹ A second way of educating Soviet students was through the complex method. Soviet educators were critical of traditional academic organization, which separated subjects from one another and from their practical applications in everyday life. Instead, they proposed to eliminate the use of subjects and teach using themes which “demonstrated the interconnections of the real material worlds of labour, society and nature.”¹⁰ As described at the time by a Soviet teacher to visiting American educator Scott Nearing,

[w]e are trying to relate the work of the school to the life of the city . . . the students in each class work on problems – one problem at a time. The problem is taken out of the life of the community. The younger the children, the more local and concrete and simple the

⁶ Lunacharsky, “Basic Principles of the United Labour Schools,” in *Bolshevik Visions*, 301.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 302.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Larry Holmes, *The Kremlin and the Schoolhouse: Reforming Education in Soviet Russia, 1917-1931* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 35.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 32.

problem. The children visit the institutions they are studying, analyze them, explain them and, where possible, suggest ways for improving them.¹¹

A class studying the district in which it lived, for example, might study the natural sciences by examining its climate or study mathematics by calculating the rate of illiteracy. The students would be taken on excursions to factories or farms to learn about the economy and organization of labour, and work there to learn some agricultural or industrial skills, and to take part in some socially useful labour.¹² Nearing also found that students were not only allowed, but encouraged to help in the running of their schools. They were asked to run sporting and cultural clubs and sit with teachers and parents on committees that were responsible for discipline, building maintenance and setting the course of study.¹³ Such an approach encouraged students to become more aware of the society around them. Soviet educational theorists hoped these methods would encourage the development of a Marxist world view among teachers and their students.¹⁴

Narkompros's desire for a secondary school system that provided all students with a broad, general education did not go unchallenged. Several different groups, including the economic commissariats, trade unions and the Komsomol, disliked the United Labour Schools. One of their criticisms, voiced in particular by the Komsomol, was that the new school system did not do enough to promote proletarian youth through its ranks. Though Narkompros did extend some preferential treatment to the children of the proletariat, they refused to deny the children of the bourgeoisie the right to education.¹⁵ Those who were more radical wished to use the education system to ensure the dominance of the proletariat. They believed Soviet officials should be more pro-active in their attempts to change the composition of the student body, as this would eventually lead to a generation of well-educated proletarians who would serve as the "red experts" the Bolsheviks' needed to run their country. To this end, radicals advocated the elimination of the United Labour Schools, which they considered to be simply the old Tsarist era gymnasias under a new name. Critics of Narkompros contended that these schools continued to

¹¹ Scott Nearing, *Education in Soviet Russia* (New York: International Publishers, 1926), 41.

¹² Holmes, *The Kremlin and The Schoolhouse*, 33, 35.

¹³ Nearing, *Education in Soviet Russia*, 45-6, 48.

¹⁴ Fitzpatrick, *Education and Social Mobility*, 19.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 42.

serve mainly the children of the bourgeois classes.¹⁶ The Komsomol in particular believed the United Labour Schools were incapable of educating proletarian youth, claiming that “the school is cut off from life, and bourgeois traditions in it are too strong.”¹⁷ The country’s mass schools, they asserted, were “torn away from local party leadership.”¹⁸ Instead, they favoured vocational secondary schools, which would be closer to real-life experience and more appropriate for training Soviet citizens, as individuals benefited from contact with industry. The Komsomol complained that, although local enterprises were supposed to aid nearby schools in teaching children about industry, since the United Labour Schools were not attached to these enterprises, management often did not live up to such expectations, refusing to allow students to tour their enterprises or provide them with needed materials. The organization argued that factory administrators would only consider such things to be their responsibility if the schools were connected with the lives of the factories.¹⁹ The Komsomol proposed several different types of schools to serve the needs of young people: Schools for Peasant Youth, which would combine general education with specialized instruction suitable for those involved in agriculture; Factory Seven-Year Schools, which combined general education with industrial training and would hopefully keep working-class youth in school past the elementary grades; and Factory Apprenticeship Schools, which students would hopefully enter after finishing a Seven-Year School, and which was to provide more specialized vocational training.²⁰ Only after young people had gained some labour experience in schools such as these should they be permitted to go on to higher education in a technical institute or university.²¹ These schools were favoured by many in the Komsomol and economic commissariats on the basis that they might provide young

¹⁶ Gail Warshofsky Lapidus, “Educational Strategies and Cultural Revolution: The Politics of Soviet Development,” in *Cultural Revolution in Russia, 1928-1932*, ed. Sheila Fitzpatrick (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), 86-87.

¹⁷ Fitzpatrick, *Education and Social Mobility*, 47.

¹⁸ O. Maksina, “For Seven-Year Schools in Industry,” *Komsomolskaya pravda*, 21 July 1926, p.3.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Holmes, *The Kremlin and The Schoolhouse*, 85-86. In the case of Factory Seven-Year Schools, the Komsomol proposed that these could be created by preparing the opinion of the factories to accept schools in their midst and then gradually drawing neighbouring schools into the factories. Transforming the United Labour Schools into Factory Seven-Year Schools would be beneficial, the Komsomol claimed, because students entered the higher Factory Apprenticeship Schools with widely varying levels of education, meaning these schools had to give more attention than they wished to general education, which lengthened the time of instruction and increased their costs. Educating students in Factory Seven-Year Schools, they suggested, would allow the Factory Apprenticeship Schools to shorten their courses and reduce costs. O. Maksina, “For Seven-Year Schools in Industry,” *Komsomolskaya pravda*, 21 July 1926, p.3.

²¹ Fitzpatrick, *Education and Social Mobility*, 47.

people with the skills to enter the workforce where well-trained employees were needed for the reconstruction of the economy.

The desire for schools that provided vocational training eventually forced Narkompros to accept that their school system would not be a continuous ladder from kindergarten to university. In addition to the objections raised by various groups to Narkompros's policies, there were several other obstacles to the establishment of a new "Soviet" education system. First, while the Party may have wished to invest in the creation of a new school system, the economic conditions in the 1920s were such that a major investment in education (or in many other social programs) was not possible. The need to rebuild the country's industry after years of war usually trumped investment in social programs. Schools experienced shortages of space, and lacked rudimentary materials like paper, pencils and textbooks. Inadequate funding led to a decline of 30% in the enrolment in primary grades between 1920 and 1924.²² The lack of funding made it necessary for Narkompros to renege on its promise of a free education for Soviet youth and impose tuition fees for all level of schooling, although bourgeois children attending school were expected to pay considerably more than proletarians.²³ Another significant difficulty concerned the quality of the teachers expected to implement the new curriculum and teaching methods. Many, especially those in rural areas, were not very well educated themselves. Some had not finished secondary schooling and most had little or no experience with the advanced pedagogical methods they were expected to use. Others were simply resistant to Narkompros's innovations, refusing to abandon subjects or allow more student participation in school administration.²⁴ All of this compromised the Party's ability to educate students as it wished.

The Party also worked to restructure post-secondary education, which had been even more a bastion of the upper classes than the elementary and secondary schools. Throughout the Civil War period non-Communist students continued to be the majority in institutions of higher learning, with the political opinions of liberal democratic and various leftist parties represented among the student body and in student government.²⁵ The first priority for the Party was to change the composition of the student body. In higher education, it appears, they were more conscious of the class of potential students and determined to ensure that the "correct" elements

²² Holmes, *The Kremlin and The Schoolhouse*, 28-29.

²³ Holmes, *Ibid.*; and Nearing, *Education in Soviet Russia*, 48.

²⁴ Holmes, *The Kremlin and The Schoolhouse*, 14.

²⁵ Fitzpatrick, *Education and Social Mobility*, 88.

entered post-secondary education. Younger children would have time to acquire Bolshevik values; the post-secondary students of the 1920s needed to be chosen with more care. The Party preferred to see the children of workers or those who themselves had spent time in the workforce admitted to the universities and technical institutes. These youths, however, were generally ill prepared to undertake university level studies. To help those who were already beyond secondary school age to enter advanced studies, Narkompros created the *rabfaks* (workers' faculties); workers, preferably Communist Party or Komsomol members, above the age of 16 were sent to preparatory courses by trade unions, factory committees or the Party in the hopes that they would proceed through higher education and on to responsible positions in government and industry. Although workers of any age were eligible for the *rabfaks*, they tended to be fairly young; 70% were between 20 and 29 years old.²⁶ To ensure the acceptance of the preferred elements, Narkompros developed a quota system in which priority was given to students who had come from the *rabfaks* or were members of trade unions, the Komsomol or the Communist Party, regardless of their academic performance. The children of the bourgeoisie were left to compete for a limited number of spaces remaining after these groups nominated their allotted number. Such admissions policies did work to change the composition of the post-secondary student body. By 1923 those from the working class and peasantry accounted for 41% of the student body, and by 1928 they were 53% of its population.²⁷

Still, the Komsomol continued to express concerns that the number of spaces reserved for its members were inadequate, especially as its enrolment grew and more Komsomolites expressed a desire to pursue higher education. Given the limited number of spaces available to the organization, the Komsomol insisted that the utmost care must be taken when choosing those to be sent on to higher education, and only those most devoted to the Party ought to be selected. For the Komsomol, this meant selecting those of the appropriate class background and, moreover, only those workers and peasants who were the most active participants in the life and work of the Komsomol. Selection of applicants to higher education ought to be made at the public meetings of local Komsomol cells, which, they asserted, would prevent the wrong type of person from being admitted.²⁸

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 50, 89.

²⁷ Konecny, *Builders and Deserters*, 66, 68.

²⁸ "Recruitment in VUZy and Rabfaks," *Komsomolskaya pravda*, 11 June 1925, p.1. This article did, indirectly, address the topic of the suitability of Komsomol youth for higher education, advising cells to choose only those who

Once young people were admitted to post-secondary studies the Party took further steps to ensure that its chosen students would continue to look positively on the Soviet government. Measures were taken against student groups that voiced their opposition to the Bolsheviks and any independent student councils were disbanded. In 1924, instead of simply trying to curtail the activities of such students, the Party took action to remove them from institutions of higher learning by launching a *proverka*, or verification, of the student body. For the Lunacharsky-led Narkompros, the main purpose of the *proverka* was to weed out academically unqualified students who were occupying valuable space in the system. For others in the Communist Party, its purpose was the elimination of oppositionists, not only those considered class aliens, but of communist students who did not toe the official party line as well.²⁹ The early 1920s was a period of internal struggle within the Party, as different factions debated over the future of the revolution and, eventually, who was to succeed Lenin as leader. In late 1923 and 1924 the alliance of Joseph Stalin, Grigorii Zinoviev and Lev Kamenev competed against Trotsky for control of the Party. By the spring of 1924 Stalin and his allies had secured their victory over Trotsky. However, the struggle revealed that Trotsky, who asserted that Party leaders had betrayed the working class and its revolution with the introduction of NEP and encouraged the younger generation to continue the revolution and fight the growing bureaucracy of the Party, had many supporters among post-secondary students. At a meeting of the Narkompros collegium, attended by Zinoviev as the voice of the Politburo, the decision was made that each student should be assessed on the basis of his or her “academic success, social position and . . . political suitability.” The student *proverka* helped eliminate from higher education not only bourgeois and opposition-minded students, but also Trotskyite students, all of whom were thought responsible for spreading improper attitudes to otherwise loyal communist students.³⁰

Trotsky’s opposition group was not the only one appealing to students in the early 1920s. The Workers’ Opposition shared many of the same concerns as the Trotskyites. This group also asserted that the Party had betrayed the workers during NEP, particularly by its continued reliance on bourgeois specialists to run industry. Workers’ Oppositionists accused Party leaders, who came mainly from the intelligentsia, of sympathizing with the specialists and of not giving

were fully prepared for what they were to be taught; otherwise they would receive nothing from their stay and be forced to quit their studies. Individual Komsomolites were entreated to study well and be first in testing.

²⁹ Konecny, *Builders and Deserters*, 103-104.

³⁰ Fitzpatrick, *Education and Social Mobility*, 97-98.

enough power to the workers. They demanded greater working-class control of industry and more representation in the Party leadership.³¹ The views of such opposition groups appealed to young Communists as they promised a more rapid transition to the socialist society young supporters had expected the Party to create after the Civil War. The failure of socialism to materialize immediately disappointed many of the young. These groups also seemed to promise a more active role for youth in Soviet society and, if the interests of the workers were more aggressively advanced, greater opportunity for promotion for young Communists.

The attraction of many young Communists, especially those sent on to higher education, to factions of Bolsheviks who opposed the Party's official policies was worrisome to the leadership. To many, it indicated that the political education given to young people had been insufficient. In particular, students' support for Trotsky demonstrated to Bolshevik leaders that many were ignorant of Party history, including Trotsky's Menshevik past and his disputes with Lenin. After the 1924 *proverka*, efforts were made to improve political education in post-secondary institutions. In 1925 the Party's Central Committee required that large universities establish chairs in the History of the Bolshevik Party and Leninism. All institutions of higher education required students to complete courses in Party history and political economy in their junior years and Leninism and dialectical materialism in their senior years.³² In this way it was hoped that all students would come to a "proper" understanding of party policy and be better able to follow the "correct" party line.

The second major sphere in which the Party interacted with youth was the Komsomol itself. While the school system was meant to expose all young people to Bolshevik ideology, the Komsomol was to further educate the Party's most committed young supporters and turn them into a force that would work on behalf of the Party. As the preceding chapter described, by the conclusion of the Civil War the Party had done much to bring the youth movement under its control, going so far as to remove elected officials who disagreed with Party policies. Throughout the 1920s this process continued, although the Party often found that its pronouncements were still not simply accepted by many in the Komsomol, but were actively debated. At the Komsomol Congresses of 1921 and 1922, the Party's desire for a mass youth

³¹Sheila Fitzpatrick, "The Bolsheviks' Dilemma: Class, Culture and Politics in the Early Soviet Years," *Slavic Review* 47 no.4 (1988): 606-608.

³²Fitzpatrick, *Education and Social Mobility*, 73-74; and Konecny, *Builders and Deserters*, 113.

organization whose purpose was to educate and propagandize among as many young people as possible clashed with the desire of some young delegates for an organization with a more restricted membership and a larger role in politics. There was a considerable movement among some Komsomolites to restrict the numbers of young peasants and intelligentsia in the organization in order to maintain its proletarian character. Though the Party did permit the exclusion of some undesirable elements, it appears that some branches of the organization, particularly in Ukraine and the Caucasus, went too far and conducted purges in violation of the Central Committee's instructions. The Party position was stated to the Komsomol by Evgenii Preobrazhenskii, one of the Party's prominent economic theorists, who asserted that as the Komsomol's task was to indoctrinate these youths, it would be wrong to expel them before they had time to absorb a Communist education.³³ He also said that the Komsomol, in undertaking a general purge, was showing an unhealthy desire to take over governmental functions and challenge the Party. A second request of Komsomol members at these Congresses was to raise the entrance age from 14 to 16 years, arguing that eliminating the youngest members would allow the League to play a more important role in the country. Again, Preobrazhenskii accused the Komsomol of trying to challenge the Party. The Party was evidently worried that the Komsomol was a potential rival in terms of leadership and informed the Komsomol that, although previously, when the government apparatus was weak, it had been necessary for the League to undertake some governmental tasks, this was no longer the case. Though Komsomolites as individuals were encouraged to be active in politics, the Komsomol as an organization was to focus on indoctrination.³⁴ Even though the Party line on both of these debates was eventually adopted by a majority vote of Komsomol delegates, many young members still felt free to challenge the Party's views, and their vision for the youth organization still included a role in the political life of the country.

As the 1920s continued, greater constraints were placed on the ability of Komsomolites to debate the Party line. The Komsomol Congresses of 1924 and 1926 witnessed a crackdown on

³³ Stalin also addressed the topic of peasant recruitment in a 1925 article detailing the tasks of the Komsomol in the present period. In response to the question of whether the Komsomol should attempt to draw into the organization members of the poor and even middle peasantry, as well as worker youth, or to devote its attention to the upbringing and education of those already a part of the group, Stalin replied that this ought not be an either – or question. While reassuring the group that reinforcement of the proletarian kernel of the Komsomol was an important task, he insisted that it was not only an organization for worker youth. It must work toward incorporating the best elements of rural youth in the organization in order to secure a lasting union between the two parts of the country. Joseph Stalin, "On the Problems of the Komsomol," *Komsomolskaya pravda*, 29 October 1925, p.2.

³⁴ Fisher, *Pattern for Soviet Youth*, 84-89.

all types of youthful opposition by the Party and less criticism on the part of young people. As had happened in post-secondary education, Komsomol issues had become part of the larger struggle between Stalin and Trotsky. Trotsky and his ideas appealed to many in the Komsomol, as he called for a more active and aggressive approach to building socialism, rather than the slower, more measured approach of the New Economic Policy and Stalin's own line, "socialism in one country." Trotsky argued that youth should be assigned a larger role in the politics of the country, as their enthusiasm and initiative would ensure the revolution was a continual process, not a one-time occurrence. Such opinions were likely close to the way young people thought of themselves.³⁵ Party and Komsomol leadership made it quite clear at these congresses that no opposition would be tolerated. Stalin condemned the idea that youth would be the critical element in pushing the revolution forward and said that this idea was put forward by "those who want to drive a wedge between the cadres and the younger party element."³⁶ Party authorities and Komsomol leaders attempted to snuff out the Trotskyist opposition among youth with expulsions and propaganda campaigns in Komsomol clubs and the press.³⁷ In a 1925 article published in *Komsomolskaya pravda* on the seventh anniversary of the organization's establishment, Stalin reiterated the position that the youth group be subservient to the Party. Though not formally created as a Party organization, Stalin reminded the Komsomol that it worked under the leadership of the Party, and must have trust in the Party. Further, the Komsomol must remember that without the Party's leadership, it could not fulfill its fundamental task of educating worker and peasant youth in the spirit of communism.³⁸

It became increasingly clear to Komsomol members that any deviation was unacceptable. Komsomolites were criticized for trying to "copy" the Party and to gain influence in politics, while others were accused of Komsomolite "syndicalism" and working only for the Komsomol. Still others who attempted to stay out of the struggle for power were accused of "neutralism" and told that, at a time when some in the Komsomol were siding with the Trotskyite opposition, they must weigh in against these mistakes.³⁹ Given such demands by the authorities, it was not surprising that the debates at the 1924 and 1926 Congresses were much more subdued than those of previous congresses. Most resolutions at these congresses were passed

³⁵ Gorsuch, *Youth in Revolutionary Russia*, 84-85.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 85.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 86.

³⁸ Joseph Stalin, "On the Problems of the Komsomol," *Komsomolskaya pravda*, 29 October 1925, p.2.

³⁹ Fisher, *Pattern for Soviet Youth*, 113-114.

unanimously and without significant discussion. Criticism of the Party was more restrained, especially in reference to Party leaders, and any pronouncements that were likely to become part of Party doctrine and thus were above questioning. Additionally, in order to exert more control over the League, the Party ensured that over 97% of the delegates of both these congresses were either Party members or candidate members, not just Komsomol members. The size of the Presidium, the governing body of the Komsomol, was increased from 15 people to 45 people in 1924, and then again to 63 people in 1926. This indicated that the Presidium was to have little real power and decisions were to be made by a small group representing the interests of the Party.⁴⁰ Between this infiltration of the Komsomol leadership and the campaign to eliminate any expression of dissent, the Party had come a long way toward bringing the Komsomol into line.

With the youth organization under greater control, the Party could begin to direct its activities more effectively. To an extent, the Komsomol continued to be required to fulfill military duties after the Civil War. As Emilian Yaroslavsky wrote in his seventh anniversary address to the Komsomol advising the organization on the roles it was now expected to perform, “everyone, who takes an interest in the fortunes of our Red Army and Red Navy men, knows the the Komsomol organization . . . is quite irreplaceable in the business of preparing the best composition of the Red Army and Red Navy.”⁴¹ Military training remained a requirement for all male Komsomolites and, following the 1921 Kronstadt uprising in the Red Navy’s Baltic fleet, the organization was instructed to establish patronage over the navy. Members already in the navy were expected to be models of discipline for the rest of the fleet. Others were asked to provide moral and financial support to the navy by corresponding with sailors and their families and taking up collections to improve their financial situations. By 1926 Komsomolites made up about 40% of navy personnel and seemed to have served their intended purpose of increasing the discipline and reliability of the fleet.⁴² The reason for the Party’s desire to see more Komsomolites in the armed forces was not primarily due to the fact that they wished for a large increase in the number of the forces to fight battles at that particular time. The Party felt that the increased Komsomol presence would improve the political literacy of military personnel and acceptance of the Bolsheviks among them.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 123-124.

⁴¹ Emilian Yaroslavsky, “The Role of the Komsomol,” *Komsomolskaya pravda*, 29 October 1925, p.3.

⁴² Fisher, *Pattern for Soviet Youth*, 99-100, 138.

The function served by Komsomol recruits to the navy was the principal role envisioned by the Party for the organization: that of political indoctrination. Komsomol clubs ran political education courses that were supposed to be mandatory for all members. To extend its reach the Komsomol set up “Red Corners” in factories, schools and dormitories, where young people could gain access to political books, newspapers, and other educational material.⁴³ In Komsomol clubs and in schools study circles were established in which young people could learn about Marxism, Leninism and political economy, and discuss politics and current events.⁴⁴ Such courses were divided into several different categories to account for the varying levels of political literacy of the students. The lowest were those school and club circles intended for new or poorly educated Komsomol members, in addition to youth who did not yet belong to the Komsomol. At the highest level were the “Leninist Circles,” which required members to study the works of socialist thinkers and gain a significant understanding of this material so that they, in turn, could become propagandists and teach the material to others.⁴⁵ The results of these efforts, however, were not always what the Party hoped. In one assessment of the political education system, the Komsomol estimated that it had formed 26,000 political circles, embracing 450,000 students. While many of these students made concerted efforts to learn, the political preparation of the Komsomolites expected to lead these circles was often poor, which resulted in the political education of young people proceeding along “incorrect channels.” There were many examples reported of Komsomolites giving ignorant responses to the questions posed by their students, creating an overall impression of weakness in the political education system and need to improve the training of leaders.⁴⁶

While organizations to propagandize among youth existed throughout urban areas, the network for political education was much weaker in the countryside, where the number of Komsomol cells was far lower than in the cities. Although some Komsomol cells had been founded by demobilized soldiers who returned to their villages after the Civil War, many of these cells folded during the early years of NEP.⁴⁷ Often, the Komsomol activists sent to work in rural

⁴³ Gorsuch, *Youth in Revolutionary Russia*, 58.

⁴⁴ Konecny, *Builders and Deserters*, 112.

⁴⁵ Peter Gooderham, “The Komsomol and Worker Youth: the Inculcation of ‘Communist Values’ in Leningrad During NEP” *Soviet Studies* 34, no.4 (1982): 510.

⁴⁶ “Deficiencies in Political Education,” *Komsomolskaya pravda*, 24 June 1925, p.3.

⁴⁷ Other cells were formed by village youth themselves. According to one young man, in order for the youth of his village to establish a Komsomol cell they needed to register it with the provincial Komsomol committee. Then, the district committee would sponsor individuals for Komsomol membership, and send more experienced members to

areas viewed the peasantry as backward and hostile to the regime and openly showed their contempt for them. For their part, the peasantry looked upon the Party and its representatives with suspicion and distrust, remembering the enthusiasm of young Party members who served in grain requisitioning brigades during the Civil War.⁴⁸ However, the peasantry made up 80% of the country's total population and half of them were 19 years of age or younger.⁴⁹ Therefore, if the Bolsheviks were to create a population loyal to them, they would have to gain acceptance from the peasantry. Even though the number of rural Komsomol cells had declined, there were still more of them in the countryside than there were full-fledged Party cells. This fact, combined with the large number of peasant youth, meant that a great deal of the indoctrination of the peasantry fell to the Komsomol. In the eyes of the Party, this indoctrination was becoming particularly important because the activity of non-party peasant youth in various "initiative groups" was growing. The aims of these groups were often the same as those of local Komsomol cells, and such groups were, in some cases, better able to achieve their goals. Party leadership worried that if the Komsomol did not work to involve broad masses of peasant youth, the best elements of poor and middle peasant youth would join these groups, rather than the Komsomol.⁵⁰

Beginning in 1923 the Party, as a part of its new "face to the countryside" policies, instructed the Komsomol to expand its work among peasant youth. In advising the Komsomol that political education was to be one of its important roles, Yaroslavsky wrote that the more peasant youth were drawn into Soviet institutions like the Komsomol and found themselves on more even terms with the working class, the easier it would be to realize the communist reconstruction of society, and build socialism in the countryside, as well as the city.⁵¹ During much of the 1920s the Party was divided over the issue of conciliatory policies toward the peasantry and the inclusion of peasants in Soviet organizations, with Trotsky and his supporters opposing these steps and Stalin and his allies, for the moment, advocating them. A similar divide appeared in the Komsomol's leadership, remaining even after Stalin's faction had prevailed over Trotsky. The majority of the Komsomol's leadership and many of its members worried that the

the village to act as instructors. A minimum of three members were needed to officially constitute a cell. Petro Grigorenko, *Memoirs* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1982), 20-21.

⁴⁸ Isabel Tirado, "The Komsomol and Young Peasants: the Dilemma of Rural Expansion, 1921-1925" *Slavic Review* 52 no. 3 (1993): 461-463.

⁴⁹ Isabel Tirado, "The Komsomol and the Krestianka: The Political Mobilization of Young Women in the Russian Village, 1921-1927." *Russian History/Histoire Russe* 23 nos. 1-4 (1996): 346.

⁵⁰ "We Must Instruct the Broad Masses of Peasant Youth," *Komsomolskaya pravda*, 21 June 1925, p.3.

⁵¹ Joseph Stalin, "On the Problems of the Komsomol," *Komsomolskaya pravda*, 29 October 1925, p.3.

large numbers of peasants they were expected to recruit would outnumber the working-class youth and cause the organization to lose its proletarian character. In July 1924 the leader of the opposition, Oskar Tarkhanov, was removed at the Party's request by the Komsomol Central Committee's Secretary, Nikolai Chaplin, a proponent of greater cooperation with the peasantry. Chaplin and the Party argued that the Komsomol was to be the representative of all Soviet youth and ought not to aim for total class purity. Although the Party could exclude people on the basis of class, the purpose of the Komsomol was to take in as many young people as possible and educate them to be good Soviet citizens. Even if they were not to be admitted to the Party upon their passage from the Komsomol, it was hoped they would be politically reliable enough to assume positions of local authority.⁵² At the same time Tarkhanov was ousted, the Komsomol officially adopted the "face to the countryside" policies and then set targets for social classes at 40% workers, 50% peasants and 10% other.⁵³ By 1926 53.7% of the League's members were peasants, for a total of about 900,000 out of 1.75 million members.⁵⁴

In addition to gaining a political education for themselves and propagandizing among others, Komsomolites were asked to take part in what was referred to as social, or socially useful, work. In 1926 at the 8th Komsomol Congress, Krupskaja addressed delegates on the four lines of work among Young Pioneers, which were also applicable to young people of Komsomol age. Chief among these was that each member of the organization was to be a social worker and to learn to work for the collective good: to replace "I" with "we". In particular, Krupskaja asserted that young people ought to participate in collective labour. For example, young people were encouraged to involve themselves in *subbotniks*, which were (in theory) voluntary, unpaid days of work given to the state.⁵⁵ Time was designated for various campaigns, such as cleaning up and repairing areas of one's city or travelling to the countryside to assist with the harvest.⁵⁶

One of the Komsomol's most important social work campaigns was the struggle to teach basic literacy skills. As previously mentioned, large numbers of the Russian population, particularly in rural areas, were illiterate. Although 88% of urban males could read, only 68% of rural men and one-third of rural women were literate.⁵⁷ Naturally, in order to acquaint young

⁵² Tirado, "The Komsomol and Young Peasants," 466-468.

⁵³ Ibid., 468-469.

⁵⁴ Fisher, *Pattern for Soviet Youth*, 128-129.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 115-116

⁵⁶ Gooderham, "The Komsomol and Worker Youth," 508, 510.

⁵⁷ Fitzpatrick, *Education and Social Mobility*, 169.

people with the principles of communism, at least basic literacy skills were needed, and the Komsomol (along with other Soviet institutions) was asked to aid the under-funded and overburdened education system to spread literacy. Individually, each Komsomol member was supposed to improve his or her own level of education, and teach others to read as well.⁵⁸ As an organization the Komsomol created literacy courses and brought libraries to rural areas.⁵⁹

The third, and least formal, manner in which the Party tried to interact with youth was through recreational activities and entertainment. According to Trotsky, “the character of a child is revealed and formed in its play” and “in forming the character of a whole class, when this class is young and moves ahead, like the proletariat, amusements and play ought to occupy a prominent position.”⁶⁰ Such activities were less obviously political and therefore had the potential to attract young people who were not interested in the Komsomol per se. These activities, Soviet officials believed, could also demonstrate appropriate behaviours to youth. Athletic clubs, run by Komsomol branches, trade unions or the Red Army, were one way to involve and hopefully influence young people who were not attracted to the politics of these organizations. Soviet officials first worked to close all other sporting organizations to eliminate competition and then set up their own clubs - for example, the *Spartak* athletic clubs run by the Komsomol.⁶¹ The numbers of clubs and their participants grew considerably through the 1920s, as mass sporting events were used as a way to promote collective activity and as an antidote to bourgeois competition.⁶² Large scale physical culture demonstrations were held, during which participants often did gymnastics or callisthenics in unison. To further promote collectivism, organizations focused on the achievements of the clubs as a whole, rather than celebrating individual achievements. Komsomol newspapers, for instance, did not publish the names of individual victors, but only the Spartak detachment to which they belonged.⁶³ By 1926 membership in the athletics clubs had reached 2.5 million, of which only slightly more than 10%

⁵⁸ Fisher, *Pattern for Soviet Youth*, 167.

⁵⁹ Nadezhda Krupskaya, *On Education: Selected Articles and Speeches* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1957), 152.

⁶⁰ Leon Trotsky, *Problems of Everyday Life and Other Writings on Culture and Science* (New York: Monad Press, 1973), 32.

⁶¹ Gooderham, “The Komsomol and Worker Youth,” 508.

⁶² Konecny, *Builders and Deserters*, 75. Noted Yaroslavsky, sports clubs also played an important role in raising a generation of healthy youth, which was important in the building of military strength. Emilian Yaroslavsky, “The Role of the Komsomol,” *Komsomolskaya pravda*, 29 October 1925, p.3.

⁶³ Gooderham, “The Komsomol and Worker Youth,” 511.

were Komsomolites.⁶⁴ This last statistic indicates that the sports clubs were successful in bringing politically non-affiliated youth into contact with Soviet organizations and ideals.

Another way to involve those who were less politically committed was through opportunities for entertainment, such as drama groups. Such activities had been popular among pre-Komsomol youth groups, and some members acknowledged them as the reason they became involved in these groups. This remained true after the formation of the Komsomol, as participation in drama circles was one of the most popular activities offered by the Komsomol, especially among young women. Young people were not only enthusiastic participants in the drama circles of their clubs, they were also avid consumers of the theatre. The most well-known of the theatre troops directed at young people was the Theatre of Working Class Youth (or *TRAM*), which performed plays exclusively directed at youth and dealt with such subjects as how a good Soviet citizen behaved in relations with the opposite sex or what one's proper attitude toward labour ought to be. This group, along with other, smaller drama circles, were able to instruct young audiences about the new identities they were to assume in Soviet society in a way that was less overtly political than instruction in Komsomol clubs. Performances were well attended and succeeded in attracting not only Komsomol youth, but street youth and bourgeois youth as well. In 1923 more than twice as many people attended these performances than attended political lectures and discussions,⁶⁵ showing the importance of such activities to broadening the influence of Soviet institutions. Film, according to Trotsky, held even more promise as a means of "making amusement a weapon of collective education."⁶⁶ Films could be widely distributed, could propagandize on any subject and could be used to reach even the illiterate. Furthermore, films could create such interesting and engaging spectacles that they could compete with unwanted influences, like those of the taverns and the churches.⁶⁷

The Party hoped that activities like those described above would be able to replace those they considered bourgeois and dangerous to the political and moral health of Soviet youth. The continued presence of western movies, dances and fashions in Russia disturbed officials, who saw in them a rejection of their ideals. They believed that entertainment ought to contribute to the improvement of both the individual and society, and to this end advocated activities such as

⁶⁴ Fisher, *Pattern for Soviet Youth*, 136.

⁶⁵ Gorsuch, *Youth in Revolutionary Russia*, 60-61.

⁶⁶ Trotsky, *Problems of Everyday Life*, 32.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 32-34.

museum excursions or the aforementioned drama groups, which served educational purposes.⁶⁸ Bolshevik moralists also believed that exposure to western entertainment would encourage Soviet youth to imitate the inappropriate behaviours they modelled, like the hooliganism of popular movie characters or the sexual behaviour suggested by the favoured dances of the day.⁶⁹ Western fashions were looked on disapprovingly because they diverged widely from the simple and functional dress thought to be appropriate for the Soviet citizen. Western dress was considered extravagant and a way of showing a tendency toward individualism, as it separated the wearer from the bulk of the proletariat.⁷⁰ One final activity of particular concern to Party leaders was alcohol consumption among young people. During NEP discipline and self-control were prized qualities and those who indulged in alcohol obviously did not display these traits. Drunkenness was equated with violence, hooliganism and loss of productivity in the workplace. One commentator asserted that “each one of our comrades who is drunk is an evil agitator against our very core, against our affairs”⁷¹ To combat drunkenness among youth the Komsomol held demonstrations, gave public lectures on the harm alcohol did to the body and tried to direct young people toward activities that were socially useful, rather than harmful to the collective.⁷² In this area, as in many others, the Party’s views of appropriate behaviour and desire for better direction of their young supporters conflicted with young people’s desire for greater militancy and more freedom. The next chapter will discuss in greater detail the reactions of young people to these attempts by the Party to supervise and govern their conduct more thoroughly.

⁶⁸ Anne Gorsuch, “Soviet Youth and the Politics of Popular Culture During NEP,” *Social History* 17 no. 2 (1992): 191-192.

⁶⁹ Gorsuch, *Youth in Revolutionary Russia*, 65, 128.

⁷⁰ Gorsuch, “Soviet Youth and the Politics of Popular Culture During NEP,” 195.

⁷¹ Gorsuch, *Youth in Revolutionary Russia*, 67-68.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 67-69.

Chapter 4 - Youth Reaction to Party Policy

Throughout the 1920s the Bolshevik Party, in an attempt to capitalize on youthful enthusiasm for its revolution and social change, focused considerable attention on creating communist supporters among the younger generation. The education system, an officially sanctioned youth organization, and recreational and leisure activities were all developed in such a way so as to train young people to think and act like good communists. But how did the Bolsheviks' policies, in these specific areas and more generally, affect young people living under the Bolsheviks during the 1920s, and what impact did they have on youth reaction to the regime?

Groups of young people experienced the 1920s differently under the Bolshevik Party. Urban, working-class youth were generally the most privileged of these groups, experiencing preferential access to education and the Komsomol, and enjoying an easier path into positions of responsibility in the Party and the workplace. At the same time, they were subject to ever-increasing supervision and discipline as the Bolsheviks attempted to evolve from a revolutionary party to a respectable government. This class of youth also found itself in dire straits as the economic policies of NEP led to factory downsizing that left them vulnerable to dismissal and disillusioned with the revolution that had promised power to the workers. Peasant youth too found themselves with better access to education and the Komsomol, as the Party needed to gain influence and support among the country's peasant majority, but had to cope with the Party's attacks on traditional peasant life. Young women were attracted to the Bolsheviks by promises of equality under the law and in the workplace, and freedom from the burdens of housework and childcare. However, they soon found that, though changes were made to laws, in practice women continued to be relegated to low-ranking positions in the workplace and the Komsomol, while the institutions that were supposed to free them from traditional burdens did not appear. This chapter will investigate the contradictory and sometimes uneasy relationships different segments of the youth population had with the Bolshevik Party, and the positives and negatives that led them to varying degrees of acceptance of the Soviet state.

In some respects, it appears that the Bolsheviks' efforts to build a constituency among young people were successful. After several years of fluctuation in the early 1920s, Komsomol

membership began a steady climb. By 1925 it topped 1,700,000, eventually reaching 1,960,000 in 1928 and 2,897,000 in 1930.¹ Of the 1,700,000 members enrolled in 1925, 800,000 were urban and primarily working-class youth. Although more recruitment of rural youth resulted in a decline in the overall percentage of urban youth in the Komsomol, an increase in absolute numbers of proletarians let the group claim in 1926 that it encompassed 45% of all youth engaged in urban and factory production.² The Komsomol press asserted that the slogan “one hundred percent of working class youth in the Komsomol” could be realized in the near future.³

Komsomol numbers likely rose among this group as young people perceived that the Party was able (or at least trying) to make positive changes for them. Education was one of the most greatly desired of the advantages the Party promised. When the authors of *The Soviet Citizen*, a study based on surveys and interviews conducted among Soviet refugees after WWII, examined those in their sample who were born between 1900 and 1919 (those who grew up in the early Soviet period) they found that more than 60 % of those from peasant and working class backgrounds as adolescents hoped to move out of these classes and make their living in some way other than manual labour, requiring some degree of education.⁴ As discussed in the previous chapter, this group was the primary beneficiary of the Party’s involvement in the education system. Between 1924 and 1928 the percentage of working-class students in higher education rose from 20.7% to 26.5%. The percentage of Communists in the student body rose from 10% to 17% and that of Komsomolites from 9.5% to 20.1%. When applying to higher education working-class (and peasant) applicants had a 1 in 2 to 1 in 3 chance of admission, while white-collar applicants had a 1 in 5 to 1 in 10 chance of admission, depending on the institution to which they applied.⁵ As well, about one-third of students, presumably mostly of working-class origin, were given stipends by the state or industrial enterprises to help cover the cost of living expenses.⁶ The Party also made efforts to help young workers remaining in the factories. They established a quota for the number of juvenile workers (those 18 years of age and under) that factories were expected to employ. Juveniles were to work only 6 hours per day, but were to be paid wages for a full 8-hour day, and they were to be apprenticed while they worked. Factories

¹ Fisher, *Pattern for Soviet Youth*, 409.

² *Ibid.*, 128-9, 131.

³ “The Komsomol and Worker Youth,” *Komsomolskaya pravda*, 21 October, 1925, p.1.

⁴ Alex Inkles and Raymond A. Bauer, *The Soviet Citizen: Daily Life in a Totalitarian Society* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959), 79-80.

⁵ Fitzpatrick, *Education and Social Mobility*, 107.

⁶ Konecny, *Builders and Deserters*, 71.

were also instructed to set up schools for these young workers to attend after their shortened work day, so that some could take advantage of the new opportunities to move on to higher education.⁷ In response to the needs of those above the age of 18, who had moved beyond apprenticeships and factory schools, but wished to remain in production and improve their qualifications, the Party began evening courses and technical schools.⁸

However, many working-class youth found that, while the Party's intentions were good, in practice their promises did not live up to expectations. Those who managed to pass from the factories into higher education were undoubtedly grateful for the new opportunities Bolshevik rule made possible, but most still found their circumstances quite difficult. Though factory schools and rabfaks tried to bring the education level of proletarian students up to par, young workers still found themselves unprepared for the level of study expected of them by the universities and technical institutes. Their presence was resented by the professoriate and the bourgeois students, who felt the proletarians were unworthy of places in these institutions and disliked watering down courses so the incoming proletarians could keep up.⁹ Aside from their difficulties with the material they were expected to master, working-class students were handicapped by their living conditions. Though they were given priority when stipends were handed out, the country's economic conditions meant that the amount handed out by the state was not enough to push most students above the poverty line. According to one study, students at one Leningrad institution spent half of each month's stipend on food, and even then only half of them could afford to eat every day. The average daily caloric intake of Moscow students was estimated at between 800 to 1000 calories (compared to the 2000 calories considered to make up a normal diet).¹⁰ Many students were also unable to afford decent housing. They lived in dormitories so overcrowded that some shared beds or slept on the floor, or rented space (sometimes no more than a corner of a room) in someone else's apartment. The tribulations of student life were chronicled in N. Ogniov's *Diary of a Communist Undergraduate*, a popular novel of the 1920s. Ogniov's main character, Kostya Ryabtsev, a devoted young Communist, finds himself admitted to university, but without a stipend or a place in a student hostel. Consequently, the young man devotes as much of his time to finding a meal and a place to sleep

⁷ William Chase, *Workers, Society and the Soviet State: Labor and Life in Moscow, 1918-1929* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 109.

⁸ "The Komsomol and Worker Youth," *Komsomolskaya pravda*, 21 October 1925, p.1.

⁹ Konecny, *Builders and Deserters*, 59.

¹⁰ Gorsuch, *Youth in Revolutionary Russia*, 34.

as he does to his studies.¹¹ Crowded and often unsanitary conditions, combined with poor diet and the strain of trying to keep up with classes often too advanced for them, led to illness and fatigue among students, making it difficult for them to complete their studies successfully.¹² While the Party had given working-class youth greater access to education, it had by no means removed all the obstacles keeping them from taking full advantage of it.

Young proletarians who remained in the factories also experienced difficulties, in spite of the Party's attempts to improve their circumstances. As mentioned before, measures had been taken to protect youth in the workforce. During World War I and the Civil War large numbers of youth had entered the workforce to replace conscripted workers. In the early 1920s soldiers from the Red Army were demobilized, and many experienced ex-workers returned to the cities in search of work. As they returned they displaced younger, less experienced people from the workplace. In addition to concerns about the material hardships unemployment caused young people, the Party also worried that jobless youth would fall outside its influence. A great deal of political education was conducted in the workplace and without the influence of the factories' Komsomol clubs it was feared that they would fall away from the collective and cease to take part in the social work or political activities the Party valued, and instead turn to hooliganism.¹³ In response to rising youth unemployment, the Party instituted a youth quota: 7% of each factory's workforce had to be juveniles. Unfortunately, this quota was rarely met, a fact due at least partially to the implementation of other laws that were intended to improve the lives of young workers, but which ultimately conflicted with the goals of the New Economic Policy. To help bring about a recovery in the economy, the Party instructed industries to cut costs, balance their books and improve efficiency and productivity. Because workers 18 and under had to be paid a full day's wage for 6 hours of work, needed to be provided with apprenticeships, and had to be educated in schools run by the enterprises, they were more expensive to employ than older workers who could work a full day and were often already skilled. To meet the Party's economic targets, employers shied away from hiring young people.¹⁴ By 1926, over two-thirds of the country's juveniles were jobless. Two years later, 44% of those unemployed were between the

¹¹ N. Ogniov, *The Diary of a Communist Undergraduate* (Westport: Hyperion Press, 1973)

¹² *Ibid.*, 33; Konecny, *Builders and Deserters*, 71.

¹³ "On Work among Unemployed Youth," *Komsomolskaya pravda*, 16 June 1925, p.1. According to another article in *Komsomolskaya pravda* 42.7% of those arrested for hooliganism had been born to working class families. This number rose to 75% when taking into account those who were currently members of the working class. S. Bezbopodov, "Hooligan – Enemy of Cultural Revolution," *Komsomolskaya pravda*, 12 April 1928, p.3.

¹⁴ Chase, *Workers, Society and the Soviet State*, 109, 142.

ages of 18 and 24, and another 31% were between 25 and 29.¹⁵ This prevented many working-class youth from acquiring the training they needed to be productive workers in the future. It also meant they suffered from the same type of housing conditions and poor diet as many students.

For both proletarian students and young workers, the Komsomol attempted to be an effective advocate. The organization campaigned to remove the bourgeois professors who looked on proletarian students unfavourably and demanded that the state increase the amount of support given to these students to alleviate their poor living conditions. Later in the 1920s, when the Party responded to low graduation rates and the poor quality of graduates by raising the standards required to enter higher education, the Komsomol opposed the measure on the grounds that it would prevent proletarian youth from gaining access to the system. The organization was also instrumental in the campaign for the 6-hour work day and quota for juvenile workers and in establishing training schools to teach industrial skills to youth who could not find apprenticeships or gain work experience.¹⁶ The Komsomol soon found, however, that it could do relatively little for the bulk of the youth population. The economic circumstances of the state in the 1920s meant that no matter how much they campaigned, financial support for students was unlikely to increase. Bourgeois professors and university graduates remained necessary to economic reconstruction. Young workers remained unattractive employees, and thus were given little opportunity to work, even when they had managed to acquire industrial skills in training schools. In addition, the Komsomol's initial purpose as an economic advocate for young workers was undermined as the Party turned it into a closely-controlled propaganda organization. The group found it difficult to advocate for youth unless their interests were in line with those of the Party.

The difficult living conditions faced by many young people in the 1920s, combined with the Party's increased desire to enforce discipline, upset many young people. Those who had joined the Komsomol during the Revolution and Civil War periods were particularly likely to be confused and disillusioned by the Party's change of direction. The most committed of this group responded to this turn of events by clinging to their revolutionary, civil war personas and remaining more militant than the Party desired. Among this group of young people was Klaus Mehnert, a German visitor who wrote about his travels in Russia in the 1920s and early 1930s.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 150.

¹⁶ While the Komsomol viewed such policies as desirable for their membership, they were not necessarily useful in the larger picture. For example, although the removal of well-educated bourgeois professors would have pleased the radical element of the Party's young supporters, it would have lowered the quality of the professoriate and set back the education of the industrial cadres the Party needed to rebuild the economy.

He recalled that “[d]amned NEP’ and ‘devilish NEP’ were phrases frequently used at this time.”¹⁷ In the absence of a clear opponent to fight against, as they had had during the Civil War, militant youth identified NEP as their new enemy. In regard to the policy, one Komsomol member wrote to Trotsky “when you walk along the street and see the satisfied well-fed faces and patent leather shoes alongside some adolescent worker, 90% of whom have tuberculosis, then straight away you . . . become ashamed. Was it really necessary to have the October Revolution, during which so many people were killed, only to return to the past?”¹⁸ Militants were clearly upset at the return of capitalists (the NEPmen), and of stores, restaurants and entertainment that catered specifically to them. To many young people, NEP represented a failure, and the responsibility for this failure fell on the older generation who, they believed, had not carried the revolution through to its conclusion. Instead, they felt, the old revolutionaries had become part of the new elite that more and more resembled the old ruling class in appearance and actions.¹⁹

Militant communist youth were also upset with the new role the Party envisioned for them during NEP. Prior to NEP, “young people had served as respected participants in the forging of a new society . . . and youth had achieved a new level of independence and engagement in both the workplace and the political sphere as they stepped into adult roles.” By contrast, during NEP “equal participation was denied in favour of training and education and Komsomol’tsy were made to feel like children again.”²⁰ They complained that the Komsomol had become overly bureaucratic and spent its time in meetings, conferences, and formulaic political education courses instead of doing the meaningful work among youth and the larger society that militants felt it was intended to do.²¹ Those who were legitimately interested in learning about Marxism were sorely disappointed in the political education provided to them by the Komsomol and the education system. One student commented, “the Komsomol organization provides its members with only the monotonous teachings of Communism, without any reference to arguments and views of other socialist parties and their leaders. And even if it refers to these views, they come pre-packaged by the Main Political Enlightenment [Committee] or by the Central Committee.”²² Often times, it was these young people who were drawn to opposition groups within the Party,

¹⁷ Klaus Mehnert, *Youth in Soviet Russia* (Westport: Hyperion Press, 1933), 61.

¹⁸ Anne Gorsuch, “NEP Be Damned! Young Militants and the Culture of Civil War,” *The Russian Review* 56, no. 4 (1997): 567.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 568.

²¹ Gorsuch, *Youth in Revolutionary Russia*, 83.

²² Vladimir Brovkin, *Russia After Lenin: Politics, Culture and Society, 1921-1929* (London: Routledge, 1998), 129.

most prominently the Trotskyite opposition discussed in the previous chapter, which promised youth the active, leading role they desired. Some current and former Komsomol members established new, informal groups, such as the “Union of Young Marxists,” which was devoted to the study of Marxism in all its variants.²³ These young people were not opposing communism itself, but the way the Bolshevik Party had gone about building communism in Russia.

Young militants also made their opposition to the Party’s new path known through less obviously political means. Part of the Bolsheviks’ plan for youth was to refine their behaviour and improve their morals. Militant youth, however, often developed differing views from those of the Bolsheviks regarding behaviour and morals appropriate to communists. Militants labelled the Party’s desire for supporters who were disciplined, orderly, educated and well-mannered as “philistinism” (*meshanstvo*), which to them referred to anything reminiscent of the pre-revolutionary order.²⁴ One obvious way of challenging the Bolsheviks’ notion of propriety was in their manner of dress. While the Party asked young people to dress in neat, respectable clothing, radicals clung to their Civil War era attire. Komsomol members, female as well as male, continued to wear leather jackets and clothing that was generally ragged and ill-kept, while proletarian students attended their classes in worker’s caps and the same dirty clothing they wore to the factory. This rejection of cleanliness and orderliness was also evident in the state of many lodgings and in the desire of many radicals to continue with leisure activities that involved smoking and drinking alcohol, activities the Party also considered undisciplined and inappropriate. Young radicals felt that spending too much time or money on one’s appearance or lodgings signified that one was exhibiting too much individualism and separating oneself from the proletariat. By differentiating themselves from both the bourgeois NEPmen (and women) with their fashionable clothing, and the old Bolsheviks, who now appeared in government in suits and ties, these young people felt that they were demonstrating their commitment to the revolution. The Party countered that such behaviour did not show commitment to the revolution, but rather prevented the working class and communist supporters from becoming cultured.²⁵

Young radicals also challenged the Party’s interpretations of appropriate male/female relations among people in a socialist society. Following the writings of Marx, Engels and a third German Marxist, August Bebel, the Party asserted that men and women ought to be treated as

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Gorsuch, “NEP Be Damned,” 573.

²⁵ Ibid., 574-5, 577; Konecny, *Builders and Deserters*, 243.

equals in their society and that marriage and sexual relations should be determined by mutual affection and respect, rather than economic necessity, which they contended was the basis of marriage in capitalist societies. Therefore, laws were changed to recognize common-law relationships as marriages and divorces were made easily attainable. They did not, however, seek to destroy the institution of marriage. Marx, Engels and Bebel were all clear that, with women's subserviency removed, marriage was desirable; casual sexual relations were discouraged.²⁶ While the intent of most of the Party's leadership was simply to create a society where women had greater freedom and equality, others advocated more extreme forms of social reorganization, suggesting, for example, that the need for marriage and the family would soon wither away. Many young radicals gravitated to those Bolshevik thinkers who expounded theories of "free love" or to Alexandra Kollontai's view, as they understood it, that sex was merely a physiological need and not something that needed to be confined to marriage.²⁷ Just as dressing in suits and ties was regarded as a remnant of bourgeois society, marriage and the family were looked upon by some as institutions from the bourgeois past.²⁸ For some young communists premarital sex became accepted practice, but one that disturbed many older Bolsheviks. Lenin's dislike of such promiscuity, for example, is well-known. Evidence from surveys of students taken during the 1920s suggested that, in fact, young Russians were not significantly more sexually active than they had been prior to the revolution.²⁹ However, perhaps the fact that some among them justified their actions with reference to Bolshevik ideology and claims that they were acting as one ought to in a communist society caused a great reaction among Party leadership. Through the press and popular literature Party officials tried to counter the notion that promiscuity was permissible in a communist society. They argued that those who behaved in this way were demonstrating a "petty-bourgeois attitude of self-indulgence" and implored them to exercise discipline.³⁰ Commissar of Health Nikolai Semashko approached the issue from a medical perspective, telling young people that a disorderly sexual life led to disease, as well as the loss of intellectual and physical strength. Scientific studies, he claimed, proved that sexual

²⁶ Richard Stites, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Russia: Feminism, Nihilism and Bolshevism, 1860-1930* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 258-262.

²⁷ It should be noted that Kollontai's ideas regarding marriage and sexual relations were much more complicated than this and were misinterpreted by many, including youth. She did not reduce male/female relations to a series of sexual encounters, but instead envisioned marriage evolving into "a comradesly and warm union of two free and independent, labouring, equal members of communist society." Stites, *The Women's Liberation Movement*, 351.

²⁸ Brovkin, *Russia After Lenin*, 117.

²⁹ Konecny, *Builders and Deserters*, 204.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 206.

excess weakened the organism and left little energy for other matters. He asked them to devote their attention to more important, interesting and healthy pursuits.³¹

While some Communist supporters remained more radical than the Party wished, others in the Komsomol and among the general urban youth population became apathetic toward the Party. In the years immediately following the Civil War (1921-1922), Komsomol membership declined from about 400,000 to about 250,000 as members grew disappointed with the organization and withdrew.³² The Komsomol's central newspaper acknowledged in several articles that activists were becoming disillusioned with the organization's work. After joining the group full of ardour for its work, many young activists soon found themselves overburdened with an enormous amount of meetings, social work and positions on various committees, to the extent that they found the work interfered with their jobs or schooling, and left them little leisure time. Further, the newspaper conceded, young activists were often given very little preparation or direction in their work, which resulted in activists running around, but accomplishing little. Consequently, many lapsed into passivity and apathy.³³ One Komsomol member, Nikolai Bocharov, recalled that many in the organization, particularly those who had joined during the Revolution and Civil War, reacted to the advent of NEP with despair. Some turned to alcohol, while others gave up their work in government and the Komsomol. He noted that similar sentiments were visible among some older Party members as well.³⁴ Also contributing to the decline in Komsomol numbers was the fact that some were expelled from the group because they refused to conform to stricter discipline and give up prohibited activities like smoking, and drinking alcohol. Komsomol surveys taken in 1923 revealed that nearly 20% of the group's membership (urban and rural) was purged because of drunkenness, trouble-making and poor discipline.³⁵ Delegates to the Komsomol's 1922 Congress expressed their concern that the

³¹ Nikolai Semashko, "Sexual Education and Health," *Komsomolskaya pravda*, 15 August 1925, p.4. In a recent work, Gregory Carleton notes that the Bolsheviks were not alone in claiming that an "abnormal" sex life was detrimental to one's health and intellect, and drew one away from more important pursuits. Many western experts made similar arguments. Gregory Carleton, *Sexual Revolution in Bolshevik Russia* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburg Press, 2004), 75-77.

³² Fisher, *Pattern for Soviet Youth*, 80.

³³ V. Belyaev, "Why Old Activists Leave League Work," *Komsomolskaya pravda*, 13 January 1925, p.3.

³⁴ Nikolai Bocharov, "Off the Beaten Track," in *Soviet Youth: Twelve Komsomol Stories*, ed. Nikolai K. Novak-Deker, (Munich: Institute for the Study of the USSR, 1959), 47.

³⁵ Gooderham, "The Komsomol and Worker Youth," 573. The Party, Komsomol and their press fought a constant battle against alcohol. Their position, however, was somewhat undermined by the fact that, in an attempt to curb the dangerous consumption of *samogon* (homebrew) and raise revenue, the state began selling alcohol itself. The Komsomol was thus in a position of having to campaign against the state-sanctioned alcohol and the arguments of

Party's preoccupation with controlling young people's behaviour discouraged some from joining the organization, claiming that "rough worker youth would not take to such petty rules of conduct."³⁶ There was some validity to this concern, as one Komsomol-aged youth explained "[i]f I want to get a drink, I'll get a drink, if I want to go to a party, I'll go to a party, but a Komsomol member can't. So why should I join?"³⁷ Not only were many non-Party youth put off by the strict behavioural standards the Komsomol attempted to impose, some demonstrated an active rejection of them. Throughout the 1920s, hooliganism among youth was a particular worry of officials. A study of hooliganism in Leningrad discussed the presence of youth gangs in the city who frequented taverns, drank to excess and started brawls. At times they attacked the Komsomol, vandalizing its clubs and disrupting their activities. One Komsomol group told of making an attempt to open a new Komsomol club. The local gang organized fights and drinking bouts near the club and terrorized its visitors until the club shut down. Hooligan culture, concluded one Komsomolite, had driven down their culture.³⁸

Such attitudes were not atypical in the 1920s. One of the most common complaints levelled at the Party and Komsomol was that activities directed toward youth were simply boring. The original youth organizations had attracted young people by offering a variety of activities, both political and otherwise. Activities offered in the 1920s focused heavily on educating youth. Meetings, lectures and study circles occupied much of the time young people spent in Komsomol clubs. Even events that were supposed to be exciting, like celebrations of the revolution, had become repetitive and devoid of the spontaneity that had been part of the Bolsheviks' initial attraction for youth.³⁹ Though leisure activities were still offered by the clubs, they too were educational in nature. Films, for example, were popular among youth, but they felt that those produced by the Party were usually didactic, filled with heavy-handed propaganda and low in entertainment value.⁴⁰ Dances were thought to encourage promiscuous behaviour, so the Komsomol tried to replace them with marches set to music. Often, Komsomol clubs simply ignored Party directives and held dances or showed western films as a way to attract youth to the

some Komsomolites that, since the state sold the alcohol and profited from it, there was no reason they should abstain. F. Anylov, "The Komsomol – In the War with Alcohol!," *Komsomolskaya pravda*, 22 October 1925, p.1.

³⁶ Fisher, *Pattern for Soviet Youth*, 83.

³⁷ Brovkin, *Russia After Lenin*, 113.

³⁸ S. Bezborodov, "Hooligan – Enemy of Cultural Revolution," *Komsomolskaya pravda*, 12 April 1928, p.3. The article reported that in one Leningrad courthouse alone, 32 536 people were charged with hooliganism. The newspaper asserted that to understand the true scope of the problem, one had to multiply the numbers by three.

³⁹ Gorsuch, *Youth in Revolutionary Russia*, 62-63.

⁴⁰ Gorsuch, "Soviet Youth and the Politics of Popular Culture During NEP," *Social History* 17, no.2 (1992): 193.

clubs. The officially sponsored activities that continued to find favour among youth were those that managed to avoid becoming rigid and formulaic, such as the plays put on by TRAM, a group consisting of young proletarians who wrote and performed plays that addressed the issues facing youth and demonstrate appropriate communist behaviour in a realistic and less formulaic manner than much other available entertainment.⁴¹

In spite of the complaints made by young people about the Komsomol's activities, they could still be attractive to youth who desired a peer group and feared being ostracized by others their age. The Party's efforts to monopolize the extracurricular activities available to youth meant that Bolshevik-sponsored youth groups and activities could be attractive to them. When Lev Kopelev discussed the activities of his Pioneer troop his recollections focused just as much on the social aspects of the group as on their political activities. The troop met in Kopelev's apartment, and had a sociable atmosphere where their political work, like writing newsletters, was accompanied by singing and joking and was followed by games of a non-political nature.⁴² To be excluded from such activities was an unpleasant experience for children. One son of a village priest remembered that bourgeois children like himself were prevented from holding positions in the school community and were further made to feel like outsiders by teachers who tried to embarrass them in front of their proletarian peers. Moving from the countryside to the town he "did [his] best to adopt all the new ways of the younger generation" and was then "accepted by the school community."⁴³ He tried to change his identity to fit in with his peers and be allowed to take part in the same activities they did.

Problematic for the Bolsheviks was the fact that the very things they campaigned against were present in NEP society and tempted young people. As noted, going to the movies was a popular pastime among youth. In Moscow, for instance, 80% of them went to the movies on a regular basis. Through much of the 1920s, American and European movies continued to be shown on Soviet screens, competing with Soviet productions for the attention of viewers. To the disappointment of Party and Komsomol officials, youth from all classes preferred western dramas, detective stories and adventures to the agitational or educational Soviet productions, and under the prevailing conditions of NEP, where each enterprise was expected to pay for itself,

⁴¹ Lynn Mally, "The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Youth Theatre TRAM," *Slavic Review* 51, no.3 (1992): 413, 417-418.

⁴² Kopelev, *The Education of a True Believer*, 74.

⁴³ N. Khvalynsky, "Life in the Countryside," In *Soviet Youth: Twelve Komsomol Stories*, 112.

Soviet officials were unable to ban western films from the country, as the revenue they produced was used to fund the Communists' own productions. The popularity of western films troubled Bolshevik moralists, who feared young viewers would accept and emulate the behaviour they witnessed in these films, which was often contradictory to that promoted by the Party. Young people, however, were much less concerned with the messages of the films; for them movies were entertainment and a form of escape from their often difficult lives. Eventually, Soviet studios began to produce movies that embedded ideological messages in dramas or adventure films, hopefully combining entertainment with education.⁴⁴

Film was not the only form of western popular culture that filtered into Soviet society during the 1920s. The bourgeois "flapper" culture, with its distinctive fashions, music and dances, was also attractive for some urban youth. Young women wore cosmetics, bobbed their hair and dressed in high heels and short skirts in imitation of images they saw in western movies and fashion magazines, while young men wore double-breasted suits and ties. They frequented the restaurants that reappeared once NEP permitted small-scale business, and went to private dance halls to learn the foxtrot and the Charleston. The Party obviously disliked the presence of such elements of capitalist culture in Russia; it was particularly troubling that working-class and even Komsomol youth were attracted to the flapper culture, as well as bourgeois youth. For most young people this culture appealed to them simply because it was fun and provided them with a temporary escape to a lifestyle more glamorous than that of the typical Soviet student or young factory worker. For others, however, involvement in this culture could have been a way to make a political statement. Just as young militants demonstrated their commitment to socialism by choosing certain forms of dress and leisure activities, this subgroup used the same means to signal their rejection of socialism. This same ambiguity can be seen in the famous "swing kids" phenomenon that emerged in Nazi Germany during the 1930s and the war years.⁴⁵ The Party, though, tended to view all involvement in the flapper culture as political. Young people who spent a great deal of time and money on themselves were showing dangerous tendencies toward individualism and, by showing their favour for bourgeois fashions and entertainment, were

⁴⁴ Gorsuch, "Soviet Youth and the Politics of Popular Culture," 192-194.

⁴⁵ Detlev J.K. Peukert, *Inside Nazi Germany: Conformity, Opposition, and Racism in Everyday Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 166-169; Bruce Pauley, *Hitler, Stalin and Mussolini* (Wheeling: Harlan Davidson, 1997), 121.

rejecting working-class culture. The Party also felt that the provocative dress and dances of the flapper culture encouraged the promiscuity it was campaigning against.⁴⁶

One final manifestation of young people's discontentment with or rejection of the Party in the 1920s was a rise in the rate of suicide. While the suicide rate had risen overall in the Soviet Union, the largest numbers were among those 24 years of age and under.⁴⁷ No doubt, some of this was due to the stress caused by unemployment, poor living conditions and the difficulties of student life. For others, the decision to commit suicide was brought about by disappointment in the Party or Komsomol, or the belief that they themselves had failed to live up to the expectations of Soviet society. In suicide notes Komsomolites complained that the organization was "rife with glaring careerism and bureaucratism" and full of "thousands of self-seeking people trying to worm their way into the Party," rather than those who, like them, were truly committed to the Komsomol and the building of socialism.⁴⁸ They also expressed the sentiment that their work in the organization was of no use and that they were superfluous to society. Party officials were generally unsympathetic in response to suicide. Those who committed the act were judged to be lacking the discipline and strength of character needed by a Soviet citizen and were accused of having isolated themselves from the collective, which resulted in their discontent and suicide.⁴⁹

In regard to the psychological state of youth in the early days of NEP, Nikolai Bukharin commented that NEP

has not set before youth any vigorous, colourful, sharply defined, militant, heroic task. In the period of the Civil War there stood before youth a colossal task of unprecedented beauty. It captivated them; their relations to it were unusually clear and obvious: they had to kill the common enemy – world capitalism . . . The switch over to the rails of the New Economic Policy immediately tore out this pivot. What is heroic about fighting concessionaires? . . . So there has come, after the period of intense heroic struggle and with the shift to the New Economic Policy, a sort of demoralization, a sort of spiritual crisis among Communist youth and youth in general.⁵⁰

This certainly seems to have been the case among many Komsomol youth. They were upset by the apparent betrayal of socialism by the very Party that had promised to bring about a radical transformation in society, and they were disappointed by the diminished role they were told to

⁴⁶ Gorsuch, "Soviet Youth and the Politics of Popular Culture," 195-199.

⁴⁷ Gorsuch, *Youth in Revolutionary Russia*, 178.

⁴⁸ Brovkin, *Russia After Lenin*, 128.

⁴⁹ Gorsuch, *Youth in Revolutionary Russia*, 179; Konecny, *Builders and Deserters*, 253.

⁵⁰ Fisher, *Pattern for Soviet Youth*, 79-80.

play in it. In the absence of a “heroic task” some turned away from the organization, which had to compete for their attention (and the attention of the general urban youth population) with a variety of diversions offered by NEP society. Gradually, however, it does appear that the Party succeeded in attracting a new group of young supporters, those who were less attracted to the Komsomol’s militant past and more receptive to the discipline expected by the Party.

At the same time, the Party attempted to extend its base of support among the peasantry. The relationship between the Bolsheviks and the Russian peasantry was uneasy throughout the Revolution and Civil War. The Bolshevik takeover of power had allowed the peasantry to seize farmland from large-scale landowners and redistribute it amongst themselves, an action long desired by the peasantry. An unintended result of this action was an increase in the strength of traditional ways of peasant life. The village commune became increasingly important, as it regained the authority to distribute land; in some cases peasants not only partitioned the newly acquired land, but also repartitioned all the village land, as well as that of independent peasants who rejoined the communes for greater security during the Civil War. The traditional patriarchal household, in which several generations lived and worked together, was also strengthened out of a need for survival. Like other combatants of the Civil War, the Bolsheviks employed forced requisitioning of grain to feed their army, as well as the urban areas they controlled. The policy was resented by the peasantry, who responded by reducing the amount of grain sown or hiding their grain surplus. In some regions, peasants formed so-called “Green Armies” and rebelled against both the Bolsheviks and the White Armies. The rebellions, combined with poor growing conditions that decreased yields, worsened the food situation to the point that 1921 and 1922 saw famines in several of the Soviet Union’s main grain-producing regions, while the cities too experienced food shortages.⁵¹

After the conclusion of the Civil War, Lenin began to stress the need to create a *smychka* (link) between the cities and the countryside as a part of the process of rebuilding the country’s economy and stabilizing the Party’s hold on power. Requisitioning of grain was ended and replaced by a fixed tax-in-kind (which eventually became a monetary tax) assessed to each peasant household. The Party hoped that this would encourage peasants to increase their grain

⁵¹ Lewis Siegelbaum, *Soviet State and Society Between Revolutions, 1918-1929* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 40-41, 45-46.

production beyond what was needed for their own use, as they were to be allowed to sell their surplus for profit. As well, more goods were transferred from the cities to the countryside in an effort to encourage peasants to sell their surplus and support industry, rather than keep their grain in the hopes of getting higher prices. Combined with better growing conditions, these policies produced an improvement in the circumstances of the peasantry that the Party hoped would strengthen the *smychka* and gain at least their acquiescence to Soviet rule.⁵²

To further their influence in the countryside, though, the Party needed to place its personnel among the peasantry, who would be able to spread the Bolsheviks' ideology. Here again, young people were considered good candidates to do this. Particularly in the early 1920s, this task fell to Komsomol cells which, although not large in number, were still more numerous than Party cells in the countryside. Most of these cells were founded by young men returning to their villages from the Red Army or the cities, and had encouragement, but not a great deal of aid, from the Party. As was the case with many of the Bolsheviks' endeavours in the 1920s, the resources needed to support rural Komsomol cells were scarce. In the early years of Soviet rule, the Party managed to provide some funding to institutions in the countryside (the Komsomol clubs, literary societies, and schools) that would educate the peasantry and enable them to comprehend at least the basics of Bolshevik ideology. Under NEP, funds for such undertakings were in short supply. By 1923 only 16.1 % of reading rooms and 47.7% of libraries that existed two years before still functioned.⁵³ Also, particularly after the Komsomol began to expand in the mid-1920s, the Party had difficulty guiding its young rural followers; there were 41,000 Komsomol cells and only 47,000 members or candidate-members of the Party to provide them instruction.⁵⁴ It could therefore be difficult for the members of early rural cells to propagandize among peasant youth when they themselves were not very well versed in Party doctrine.

The new Komsomol cells also found that, as in the cities, they faced competition for the attention of youth. Many villages had home-grown youth groups known as *kul'turki* that predated the Revolution. These groups were established and run by the educated elements in the villages, often teachers, and they fulfilled some of the same social functions – such as spreading literacy and campaigning against alcohol consumption - that the Komsomol claimed as part of its purpose. They also provided village youth with leisure activities like dances and drama circles.

⁵² Ibid., 87, 90-91.

⁵³ Ibid., 93.

⁵⁴ Fisher, *Pattern for Soviet Youth*, 129.

As in the cities, such activities attracted young people, and the rural Komsomol found that it would have to do more than give political lectures to build a membership. To the Komsomol kul'turki were unacceptable competition, and Komsomolites did their best to harass these groups and steal their members. However, much of the time the kul'turki remained popular, while the Komsomol was looked upon with suspicion.⁵⁵ Additionally, several religious organizations continued to run youth groups. Even at the end of the 1920s the combined membership of the Baptist Youth (*Bapsomol*), Christian Youth (*Khristomol*) and the League of Young Believers was roughly equal to that of the Komsomol.⁵⁶ As in the cities, the Komsomol recognized that to increase its popularity among rural youth, it would have to use a wider variety of activities besides lectures and social work. The organization's press directed its rural cells to pay greater attention to activities like drama circles, choirs and "living newspapers" (in which young people read aloud or acted out the news of the day), in addition to giving lectures on themes that would be interesting to the peasantry. By doing so, it was believed that rural youth would come to them, rather than to the church.⁵⁷

Competition and lack of resources were not the only impediments to the spread of the Komsomol in the countryside. The behaviour of the organization could also alienate young peasants. Some of the early rural Komsomol leaders who brought the group to the countryside (and the initial followers they attracted) became known for their "hooliganish" behaviour. Village leaders noted disapprovingly that Komsomol members, who were often unsupervised by adults, engaged in drunken parties, got into fights and generally acted with disrespect toward peasant authorities and traditions. Komsomol authorities noted this attitude as well, writing of Komsomolites who behaved crudely in the villages, loafed about instead of taking part in the work of the village and, when approached by villagers, showed a dislike for interaction with them.⁵⁸ These activities sometimes attracted those who were more interested in causing trouble than in attending lectures or running reading rooms, and made other youth (and their parents) feel it was better to stay away from the organization.⁵⁹ The fact that some Komsomol members, particularly those who had joined during the Civil War and fought in the Red Army, remained

⁵⁵ Isabel A. Tirado, "The Revolution, Young Peasants and the Komsomol's Antireligious Campaigns, 1920-1928," *Canadian-American Slavonic Papers* 26, no.1-4 (1992): 98.

⁵⁶ Fisher, *Pattern for Soviet Youth*, 143.

⁵⁷ M.P. Pavlov, "The Komsomol and the war for a new peasant way of life," *Komsomolskaya pravda*, 9 July 1925, p. 1.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Brovkin, *Russia After Lenin*, 110-111.

extremely militant and continued to carry weapons was also a deterrent for some peasant youth. Many recalled that during the Civil War, the Komsomol had been one of the institutions involved (enthusiastically) in the hated grain requisitioning brigades, and the fact that in some places Komsomolites continued to act as local militias and take actions like removing elected members of village soviets they felt were not militant enough increased suspicion toward the group.⁶⁰

The Komsomol's own policies sometimes impeded the growth of the organization. As discussed in the previous chapter, the League was divided over its policy toward peasant youth. Some argued that incorporating large numbers of peasants would dilute the proletarian character of the organization. Others insisted it was the responsibility of the group to provide all the country's youth with a political education. In the early 1920s, the rapid expansion of Komsomol cells into rural areas frightened some in the organization, and some provincial and district committees started to forbid the recruitment of more peasants. Peasant youth who wanted to join had to campaign for admittance. The Bolshevik Party ordered the Komsomol to recruit more rural members, and the organization responded, but to avoid angering the "depeasantizers" it concentrated its efforts on those referred to as the "rural proletarians:" the *batraki* (landless peasants who provided hired labour for others) and the *bedniaki* (poor peasants who owned just enough land for subsistence and often hired out their labour as well).⁶¹ However, the Komsomol continued to exclude the *seredniaki*, the slightly more prosperous middle peasants who made up a great deal of the rural population. This was still an unsatisfactory situation for many young peasants, especially because the aforementioned land distribution had resulted in greater equality among the peasantry, lessening the difference between poor and middle peasants at this time.⁶²

In 1924 and 1925 the Party became more insistent about its wish to incorporate more peasants into the Komsomol and declared that in addition to poor peasants, the League should accept the villages' "progressive forces," which could include middle peasants and members of the village intelligentsia.⁶³ At this time, scarcely a day passed without mention of peasant issues in *Komsomolskaya pravda*. In particular, these articles emphasized the need for greater cooperation between the Komsomol and the peasantry. The peasantry, they claimed, was not a dangerous opponent of the proletariat, but instead a backward ally. The organization entreated its

⁶⁰ Isabel A. Tirado, "The Komsomol and Young Peasants," 464.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 465.

⁶² Siegelbaum, *Soviet State and Society*, 41.

⁶³ Tirado, "The Komsomol and Young Peasants," 468.

members to lose the bad habits they had acquired during the Civil War, and instead to take root in the countryside, treat the peasants as equals and learn from the experience of the leading members of the peasantry. Only by approaching the peasants as friends could proletarian influence grow in the countryside.⁶⁴ The wishes of the Party, though, were not enough to change the attitude of some Komsomol activists sent to work in the countryside during the 1920s. Their attitudes were enough to discourage others from joining the group. Urban Komsomolites sometimes looked down upon peasant youth as backward and uneducated, and behaved in a heavy-handed and condescending way that rural youth resented.⁶⁵ As peasant youth entered the organization they began to demand control over their local affairs and more representation at national congresses to make their concerns known.⁶⁶

Even more offensive to many peasants, including some who joined the Komsomol, was the organization's attitude toward religious beliefs. The peasantry in general remained more religious than their urban counterparts, while the Komsomol was one of the most vocal and enthusiastic supporters of the campaign against religion. During the Civil War and the years immediately after, the Orthodox Church was one of the few institutions to pose an effective challenge to the Bolsheviks' authority. The Church had been an ally of the tsarist government and active in the country's politics; church leaders continued to be politically active after the Revolution, and most of them came into conflict with the Bolshevik leadership.⁶⁷ The Party took many steps to eliminate a potential political rival, among them an aggressive propaganda campaign in which the Komsomol took a leading role. The most prominent and controversial aspect of the campaign involved the Komsomol holidays, during which Komsomol cells staged alternate, secular celebrations on days like Christmas and Easter. The official intent of these celebrations was to educate the peasantry about the pagan origins of church practices or to show the similarities between Orthodoxy and other religions in a way that would attract people to these festivities rather than to the church. Often, though, these events became an excuse for young men to engage in hooliganish behaviour, like drinking and playing pranks on worshippers. They

⁶⁴ "Komsomolites and the peasantry," *Komsomolskaya pravda*, 14 June 1925, p.1.

⁶⁵ Tirado, "The Revolution, Young Peasants, and the Komsomol's Antireligious Campaigns," 99.

⁶⁶ Tirado, "The Komsomol and Young Peasants," 471.

⁶⁷ Daniel Peris, *Storming the Heavens: The Soviet League of the Militant Godless* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 24-25.

could also degenerate into outright blasphemy, with activists removing the crosses and bells from churches and seizing their valuables, or destroying icons, religious books and images of Christ.⁶⁸

The actions of the Bolshevik Party and the Komsomol against the Church alienated large numbers of peasants. As a part of its “face to the countryside” campaign, begun in 1924, the Party eased its stance on religion. The aggressive attacks on religion, it had to acknowledge, had not made a significant dent in the number of believers in the countryside and encouraged the growth of other religions, like the Baptists and their youth group, the Bapsomol, as an alternative to their own youth group, because many youth were simply unwilling to conduct attacks on the Church. To recruit more young peasants into the League, the Komsomol had to tone down its involvement in antireligious propaganda. The group was ordered to stop the irreverent demonstrations on religious holidays and the destruction of church property. Instead the Komsomol was to use lectures, antireligious circles and practical demonstrations to explain to peasants that science and technology could explain the same problems (such as illness or poor harvests) that religion claimed to explain. For example, peasants were to be shown how modern farming techniques, not prayer, would produce good crops. If people saw that God had nothing to do with good or bad harvests, propagandists reasoned, religious belief would fade away. Overall, the attention paid to antireligious work declined at this time.⁶⁹

One final deterrent for young people who may have wished to join the Komsomol was parental disapproval and distrust of the organization. Parents feared that, just as the Komsomol taught young people to question religion, it would teach them to question other aspects of peasant life, such as the traditional peasant *dvor* (household), where generations of families lived and worked together under the authority of the father or oldest male. The land redistribution discussed previously had strengthened this system, as land was divided based on household size. It was in the best interest of the household for children, especially sons, to stay and contribute their labour to the household, which would become less productive without them. Parents worried that children who joined the Komsomol would begin to neglect their responsibilities to the household and that their involvement in the group would make them rebellious. They also

⁶⁸ Ibid., 39; Tirado, “The Revolution, Young Peasants and the Komsomol’s Antireligious Campaigns,” 105-106.

⁶⁹ Peris, 28-29; Tirado, “The Revolution, Young Peasants and the Komsomol’s Antireligious Campaigns,” 108-109, 111.

worried that its influence would lead their children to leave the household altogether, which would then result in land being taken from the household because its size had decreased.⁷⁰

Komsomol membership further exacerbated generational tensions in the countryside by giving young peasants positions of responsibility in the village that they would never have held before the introduction of Bolshevik power. Government policy in the countryside gave young people 16 and older the right to participate in village organizations, including the right to vote in these organizations. Part of the Komsomol's role in the villages was to explain these rights to the adult population and to ensure that young people living and working under the control of their families were able to take initiative and become involved in the Komsomol's activities, like *artels* and societies for common tillage in which labour and resources were pooled together and profits were shared, activities which were often hindered by the prejudices of their families.⁷¹ The village commune, dominated by older men, had previously been the primary authority in the village. With Bolshevik power came new institutions, like the soviets, where younger peasants, particularly those who had spent time outside the village and had become acquainted with Bolshevism, could find positions of influence. Naturally, there was friction between the traditional village authorities and the new, Bolshevik institutions, run by younger men from whom village elders resented taking orders.⁷²

In spite of the difficulties associated with joining the Komsomol, the organization's rural cells grew considerably in the 1920s. In July 1924 only 300,000 of the Komsomol's members were peasants. By December 1925, after the Party implemented policies to form a better relationship with the peasantry, this number tripled to 900,000.⁷³ In the first three months of 1925, 92% of the Komsomol's new cells were located in rural areas.⁷⁴ Clearly, the organization held some appeal for peasant youth.

There were several reasons the Komsomol appealed to young peasants. For some, the appeal came from the same factors that discouraged others from joining the League. Tension between generations deterred some, but, for others, becoming involved in the Komsomol provided an escape from the patriarchal authority of the *dvor* and the village in general, and

⁷⁰ Tirado, "The Komsomol and Young Peasants," 463-464.

⁷¹ A. Barishev, "The Komsomol and cooperation with the village economy," *Komsomolskaya pravda*, 14 June 1925, p.1.

⁷² Tirado, "The Revolution, Young Peasants and the Komsomol's Antireligious Campaigns," 102.

⁷³ Fisher, *Pattern for Soviet Youth*, 129.

⁷⁴ Tirado, "The Komsomol and Young Peasants," 470.

provided a means by which to rebel and assert their independence from their families. Noted one Komsomol member, “the majority of peasants, who were hostile to everything Soviet, forbade their children to join;” in return, “the young were driven to rebel against the ban, and many of my school fellows joined the organization, to the strong disapproval of their parents.”⁷⁵

For many, the prospect of assuming greater authority in the village was attractive. The Komsomol collected taxes, enforced laws and promoted the regime’s various campaigns. The group also ran candidates in elections to various local government bodies. The *volost* (the smallest administrative district in Russia) executive committees - smaller bodies than the soviets where power was soon concentrated - had the highest proportion of youth in Party institutions in the countryside. One historian has concluded that it was those between 25 and 35 years of age who represented Party power in the countryside in the 1920s.⁷⁶ Power was available to those even younger than this. Komsomol member Nikolai Bocharov, who had acted as the secretary of the bureau of his local Komsomol cell in 1924, recalled that the same year, at the age of 17, he was also named chairman of the village soviet, elected candidate member of the *volost* executive committee and chosen as a delegate to the *uyezd* congress of soviets, a *volost* being a small administrative district and the *uyezd* being the next administrative district above the *volost*. He concluded that his “advancement was entirely due to [his] Komsomol organization and to the Lipetsy Volost Party Committee, which saw in [him] an efficient and active Komsomol official.”⁷⁷ Prior to Soviet power it was unthinkable that anyone of this age could have held positions of such importance in local government, and such opportunities attracted some to the Komsomol and the Bolshevik Party.

Another factor in the Komsomol’s appeal to rural youth was the group’s promotion of itself as a progressive and modernizing force. The organization did much to promote literacy and education in the countryside, especially in the years when the regime could not afford to fund such efforts and relied on groups like the Komsomol to fill the void. It also claimed responsibility for the introduction of new technology, such as radio, and improved medical practises that would better the peasantry’s quality of life. Perhaps most importantly for the countryside, the Komsomol demonstrated new farming equipment and methods, and explained to

⁷⁵ W. I. Hryshko, “An Interloper in the Komsomol,” in *Soviet Youth*, 91.

⁷⁶ Siegelbaum, *Soviet State and Society*, 47-48.

⁷⁷ Bocharov, “Off the Beaten Track,” 51.

peasants how, for example, the use of fertilizers and crop rotations could improve their yields.⁷⁸ Most often, young people were most impressed by these new innovations. In regard to agriculture, one rural youth stated “[o]ne thing . . . was quite clear to me: there could be no improvement in agriculture unless scientific methods were used. The way in which productivity had been raised, with the help of the state . . . [was] plain to me and my Komsomol friends . . . thus I became a keen champion of Soviet policy in rural areas.”⁷⁹ Young people likely saw the Komsomol as a way out of the backwardness that characterized village life, and membership in it as an opportunity to participate in the modernization of the countryside.

Finally, the Komsomol represented promise not only for the improvement of life in the village, but also, for the intelligent and the ambitious, a way out of it. The treatment accorded to young peasants was not as favourable as that given to proletarian youth, but their access to education does appear to have improved in the 1920s. To serve rural youth Narkompros established the Schools of Peasant Youth, which gave students a general and political education, while also teaching them the skills necessary for farming. While the apparent intent of the schools was to prepare students to take up farming, 62% of the student body were poor peasants without enough land to make farming their occupation. In fact, only one-third returned to farming, while the others either continued their studies in rabfaks or agricultural or pedagogical technicums, or took white-collar jobs in the countryside. About half of the students in these schools were Komsomol members, and considering this and their positions as “rural proletarians,” they had an advantage in gaining admission to higher education and places in the Soviet workplace.⁸⁰ For peasant youth, Komsomol membership and Soviet rule could provide a means of upward mobility within the village, or out of the village altogether.

Another group for which the Bolsheviks’ seizure of power seemed to promise upward mobility in society was women. Of all the political parties competing for power during the Revolution, the Bolsheviks had the most women in positions of authority, and they had the most detailed and ambitious plan to improve the place of women in Russian society. The Party declared that once it was in power, women would gain “universal suffrage, equal civil and legal

⁷⁸ Tirado, “The Revolution, Young Peasants and the Komsomol’s Antireligious Campaigns,” 102, 111.

⁷⁹ N. Khvalynsky, “Life in the Countryside,” in *Soviet Youth*, 112.

⁸⁰ Fitzpatrick, *Education and Social Mobility*, 60-61. A Central Committee directive promised to reserve 60% of the spaces in provincial agricultural institutions and 30% of the spaces in provincial industrial institutions for peasant youth. “Recruitment in VUZy and Rabfaks,” *Komsomolskaya pravda*, 11 June 1925, p.1.

rights . . . full equality of access to education and employment, regulation of working conditions . . . and maternity benefits.”⁸¹ The Bolsheviks also promised that housework and child care would be done by publicly funded institutions, recognizing that if women were to participate fully in society and politics as the equals of men and become economically self-sufficient they would have to be freed from the domestic tasks that consumed much of their time.⁸²

During and immediately after the Civil War, it appeared that the Bolsheviks were making strides toward equality for women. The 1918 Code of Marriage, the Family and Guardianship created equality for women under the law, made divorce easily attainable at the request of either spouse, granted limited alimony in the event of divorce and entitled all children, legitimate or not, to parental support.⁸³ At the same time, the Bolsheviks took steps to protect women in the workplace by preventing employers from assigning them tasks that may have been harmful to their health and providing them with paid maternity leave.⁸⁴ Some young women reported benefiting from the social programs begun by the Party. One young, urban Communist recalled that when she gave birth to her first child, she was sent to a new maternity hospital where, as a part of the Soviet government’s campaign to reduce infant mortality, she was able to stay for several days while staff taught her to care for her new baby.⁸⁵ Another young woman spent five years of her childhood in a state-run children’s home, which she remembered as an adequate home that ran a model experimental school for the children who lived there.⁸⁶ Such social welfare programs enjoyed widespread support among the population. The growth of facilities such as public dining halls in factories during this period gave credence to the claim that the Party would lessen women’s burdens. Access to higher education also appeared to have improved. In 1920-1921, women accounted for 49% of the student body. Although they were still a small minority in the technical institutions, during this time women outnumbered men in the *vuzy* (universities) and in the medical and pedagogical institutions comprised a significant majority.⁸⁷

⁸¹ Barbara Evans Clements, *Daughters of Revolution: A History of Women in the U.S.S.R.* (Arlington Heights: Harlan Davidson, 1994), 38.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 38-39.

⁸³ Wendy Z. Goldman, *Women, the State and Revolution: Soviet Family Policy and Social Life, 1917-1936* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 51-52.

⁸⁴ Clements, *Daughters of Revolution*, 41.

⁸⁵ Sofia Pavlova, “Taking Advantage of New Opportunities,” In *A Revolution of Their Own: Voices of Women in Soviet History*. Eds. Barbara Alpern Engel and Anastasia Posadskaya-Vanderbeck (Boulder: Westview Press, 1998), 66.

⁸⁶ Antonina Bereznaia, “Overcoming an ‘Incorrect’ Birth” In *A Revolution of Their Own*, 106.

⁸⁷ Konecny, *Builders and Deserters*, 66-67.

In the countryside a campaign was launched to recruit girls into the Schools for Young Peasants. In 1924-1925 young women comprised 10-15 % of the student body. The next year this number had reached 25% and in some provinces women accounted for up to 40% of all pupils.⁸⁸

The Party also made some efforts to involve women in the political life of the country. Marxists had always considered women a potential constituency to which they could appeal. Bebel had written of women being doubly oppressed, first by the capitalist system and also by men within marriage, and urged them to join with the socialist movement to overcome this oppression. After the Revolution, however, several Bolshevik leaders, including Lenin and Kollontai, recognized that a great deal of hostility and fear existed among women toward the new regime and that it would be beneficial to create a group to organize and carry out propaganda work among women specifically. Consequently, in 1919 they formed the *Zhenotdel* (Women's Division).⁸⁹ Zhenotdel representatives, often young women, sometimes no more than teenagers, travelled the country, explaining why women ought to support the Party, encouraging them to become involved in their local Party organizations, and setting up local Zhenotdel branches that would elect women to go as delegates to national conferences to receive further education and discuss how to improve the lot of women. Delegates to these conferences were also offered the opportunity to serve internships in government departments and trade unions, giving them some political experience and, perhaps, a chance to move into positions of greater importance in the future.⁹⁰ The other group that offered young women political experience was the Komsomol. Early on, the Party's promises of equality and opportunity seem to have been particularly appealing to young women; in January 1921 women accounted for 40% of the League's membership. Over the next four years, this percentage declined substantially, to a low of about 12%, before rebounding, as the Party issued instructions to the Komsomol to focus more attention on young women and place more of them in positions of importance.⁹¹ One study of young women published in *Izvestiia* indicated by the mid-1920s they were quite eager to join the Party's youth organizations. Of a thousand young women surveyed at one school 32% said they wanted to join the Pioneers or Komsomol, while another 23% had already done so.⁹²

⁸⁸ Isabel A. Tirado, "The Komsomol and the Krestianka: The Political Mobilization of Young Women in the Russian Village, 1921-1927," *Russian History* 23, nos. 1-4 (1996): 359.

⁸⁹ Stites, *The Women's Liberation Movement*, 235, 329.

⁹⁰ Clements, *Daughters of Revolution*, 54.

⁹¹ Tirado, "The Komsomol and the Krestianka," 347; Fisher, *Pattern for Soviet Youth*, 135.

⁹² "Without the moon," *Izvestiia*, 8 March 1928, p.6.

The dramatic decline in female participation in the Komsomol in the early 1920s was the result of several factors. Young women likely lost some of their enthusiasm for the Party and its youth group as many important promises to women went unfulfilled. Women's equality was based to a great extent on their ability to earn a living independent of men. As was the case for juvenile workers, years of war had opened up spaces in the workplace for women; by 1920, 46% of the workforce was female, and women had even managed to move into the better paid industries traditionally dominated by men, such as mining and metallurgy. Also like young workers, they were often less skilled than the male workers they had replaced, and they were quickly dismissed once the war was over. Employers claimed that, since they had to give women paid maternity leave and could not assign them certain tasks in the workplace, women were too expensive to employ in the cost-accounting climate of NEP. This, combined with measures taken to protect young workers, may have left young women doubly disadvantaged when trying to find work. Throughout the 1920s, women accounted for a disproportionately high number of the unemployed.⁹³ The percentage of women in higher education also declined from 49% to about 30% of the total student body, probably due, once again, to an influx of returning soldiers.⁹⁴ Those fortunate enough to retain their jobs or gain places in higher education found that they still had to deal with the burdens of the household. The public dining halls, laundries and day cares that had been established earlier faced the same cost-accounting pressure as industries themselves. Many of these facilities were forced to close and the extension of such services was out of the question.⁹⁵ Lack of an independent wage, lack of education and the continuation of heavy domestic burdens continued to stand in the way of women's full participation in the Party and society.

Parental disapproval also hampered young women's participation in Komsomol or Party activities. In both urban and rural households, daughters provided a great deal of domestic labour, and parents feared that young women who joined the Komsomol or other Soviet organizations would soon neglect their household responsibilities. Many believed that a young woman's place was in the home and could see no use in teaching a girl about politics. Some parents, especially among the peasantry, worried that if girls became involved with the Komsomol, they would become opinionated and outspoken, and would be considered unsuitable

⁹³ Goldman, *Women, the State and Revolution*, 110, 112, 115.

⁹⁴ Konecny, *Builders and Deserters*, 67.

⁹⁵ Goldman, *Women, the State and Revolution*, 126-128.

for marriage. In rural areas, where a good marriage could improve the family's economic circumstances, this was a particular concern. Finally, the fact that Komsomol activities took place at night, without adult supervision, combined with the organization's reputation for hooliganism and sexual promiscuity, made parents fear to have their daughters associated with the group because they might be considered "loose" or immoral. In some cases, the parents of young women who joined the Komsomol refused to provide them with necessities, resorted to corporal punishment or even disowned their daughters.⁹⁶ One Komsomolite writing for the organization's newspaper claimed that he had personally witnessed five such incidents where families beat and drove from home daughters who tried in some way to challenge the traditional authority of the peasant household. While in urban areas young women had the opportunity to work outside the home and gain a measure of financial independence, for peasant girls this was often not an option. Although the Party had given peasant women property and inheritance rights, it was difficult to exercise these rights, and property continued to pass to sons, or to sons-in-law if the daughter was an only child. Thus in practise they remained dependent on their family or husband's family. This made it difficult to enter the Komsomol if the family was opposed.⁹⁷ In order to calm the fears of peasant families and encourage more young women to join the Komsomol, local cells were encouraged to pay more attention to their needs. Some rural cells had success establishing circles for young women within the cells that focused on teaching things like pattern-making and sewing, and then included a small amount of political discussion. These circles were able to gain support among the peasantry, who even aided them in acquiring sewing machines and other needed materials.⁹⁸

Those young females most dedicated to the Party and the Komsomol tried to live up to the Party's image of the New Soviet Woman. She was strong, independent, studious, secular and socially aware, rather than preoccupied with the "private" concerns of the home.⁹⁹ Many avoided looking feminine or taking part in "female" activities. They wore the same clothing (leather jackets and boots) as their male comrades, and rejected make-up and jewellery. They wanted to study and take up careers in non-traditional fields. After marriage some expressed a desire to live

⁹⁶ Gorsuch, *Youth in Revolutionary Russia*, 99-100; Tirado, "The Komsomol and the Krestianka," 352.

⁹⁷ I. Mazilova, "The Komsomol and peasant girls," *Komsomolskaya pravda*, 1 August 1925, p. 3.

⁹⁸ A. Chekalin, "Peasant girls in the League," *Komsomolskaya pravda*, 15 September 1926, p.3.

⁹⁹ Tirado, "The Komsomol and the Krestianka," 363.

independently of their husbands and earn a salary of their own, and even gave up their children to grandparents or institutions so they could continue their work in the Komsomol.¹⁰⁰

Ironically, the attitude of male Komsomol members was perhaps the greatest deterrent to young women joining the League. Even the hard work and dedication of female activists was not enough to convince many male Komsomolites to welcome more young women into the organization. One historian has pointed out that many male members looked upon the Komsomol as a type of fraternity, or boys' club, forged by their common experiences in the Civil War, and did not see young women as having any place there. They would not address female Komsomol members as "comrade" and often played practical jokes on the outnumbered women in their cells.¹⁰¹ Male activists refused to take women seriously or accept them in positions of authority. In her study of female members of the Komsomol youth theatre, TRAM, Lynn Mally notes that in the theatre's plays, which during the 1920s were written by young male Komsomolites, "the Komsomolka was never in a position of ultimate authority."¹⁰² Women were often depicted as merely assistants to male leaders, and in the few instances where women were shown to be in positions of authority, the result was depicted as chaotic for the group, with the young woman unable to maintain order and discipline, restored only when a male leader takes over. In the TRAM organization itself, women did not achieve leadership roles, even though they were more strongly represented there (30-40% of membership) than in the general membership of the Komsomol, and were vital to the group's success.¹⁰³

The official position of the Party and Komsomol was to work at placing more women in positions of authority. In the countryside, women accounted for 9% of the membership of rural cell bureaus in January 1925; by November of the same year they made up 15.5% of these bodies, and in certain areas almost 25%. However, few of them reached the pinnacle of local responsibility, the position of cell secretary. Those who did so were often simply figureheads, given their positions due to pressure from the Komsomol's Central Committee. The local male activists often tried to make things unpleasant for female secretaries in the hopes they would quit. Generally speaking, the Komsomol relegated young women to traditional roles within the group. The one area of Komsomol work where women achieved significant numbers of leadership roles

¹⁰⁰ Gorsuch, *Youth in Revolutionary Russia*, 111-113.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 101.

¹⁰² Lynn Mally, "Performing the New Woman: The Komsomolka as Actress and Image in Soviet Youth Theatre," *Journal of Social History* 30, no.1 (1996): 81.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 81-83.

was in the League's work with the Pioneers, the communist children's organization. There, women made up one-third of all Pioneer troop leaders and one-quarter of all the chairmen of provincial level Pioneer bureaus.¹⁰⁴ Thus, the League essentially replicated traditional forms of female labour such as child care and success here was not a great victory.

In the private sphere as well, male activists often resisted change to traditional gender roles. Trotsky himself stated that instituting legal equality of men and women in the Soviet Union was a simple problem to solve, "[b]ut to achieve the actual equality of man and woman within the family [was] an infinitely more arduous problem . . . unless there is actual equality of husband and wife in the family . . . we cannot speak seriously of women's equality in social work or even in politics."¹⁰⁵ It was much easier to say domestic habits needed to change than to actually achieve the change. Komsomol members were supposed to form part of the enlightened segment of the population and to set examples for the rest of society. However, when most Komsomol members married, they expected their politically active wives to reduce the time they spent with the Komsomol, or leave the group altogether. These expectations, combined with the added household duties faced after marriage, caused many politically active young women to give up their work outside the home. When they left, though, these young women were accused of having become petit-bourgeois, an extremely insulting description to apply to one in the Soviet Union. Some female Komsomol members reacted angrily to this characterization, saying not only that young married men had failed to change their expectations of family life, but that the Komsomol itself did not give enough attention to the difficulties facing young women who tried to balance Komsomol work with the demands of a household.¹⁰⁶ Said one young woman, "I want to be a productive Komsomol member . . . but escaping from the oppression of the kitchen is beyond my strength . . . what does the Komsomol do? Absolutely nothing. We married women are without hope, in the dark . . . but the Komsomol sleeps, leaving its members behind; if a girl gets married there is no place for her in the Komsomol."¹⁰⁷

What was most disturbing, and likely what did most to cause young women to avoid the Komsomol, were the attitudes of so many of the League's members toward women sexually. Many male Komsomolites had come to view the family as an outdated institution, one that drew

¹⁰⁴ Tirado, "The Komsomol and the Krestianka," 360-361, 363.

¹⁰⁵ Lev Trotsky, "From the Old Family to the New," in *Bolshevik Visions*, 90-91.

¹⁰⁶ Mally, "Performing the New Woman," 86; Gorsuch, *Youth in Revolutionary Russia*, 103, 107; N. Markovsky, "The Komsomol or the Kitchen," *Komsomolskaya pravda*, 13 August 1926, p.3.

¹⁰⁷ Gorsuch, *Youth in Revolutionary Russia*, 103.

a person's attention away from the concerns of the masses. Those who fell in love and married, they felt, "succumbed to bourgeois individualism."¹⁰⁸ At the same time, young men developed what Komsomol Secretary Nikolai Chaplin referred to as a "devil-may-care attitude" toward sexual relations, expressed in slogans such as "each Komsomolets can and must satisfy his sexual needs" and "each Komsomolka is obliged to help him out, otherwise she is a philistine."¹⁰⁹ The results of such attitudes were detrimental to young women. It was not uncommon for young men to live with or marry one girl after another and then, taking advantage of the ease with which one could divorce, leave them once they became pregnant. According to one survey, 27% of young women reported this treatment.¹¹⁰ Although Soviet law entitled women to alimony and child support, it was often difficult to locate the man involved, and if he could be found, his salary was generally too small to provide adequate support for multiple women and children.¹¹¹

Making matters worse was the pressure often placed on young women to become involved in a sexual relationship. One young woman, who entered the Komsomol filled with enthusiasm for and dedication to the Party, recalled being sent as an inexperienced activist to head a district women's section. Once there, she soon found herself the object of unwelcome advances made by several Party and Komsomol officials, including her superior, the district Party Secretary. When she rejected these advances, she was informed that they were simply practising "the new communist way of life" and that there was "no place for bourgeois morality in the party. The party has thrown it out the window."¹¹² In many cases young women were extremely vulnerable to these advances, particularly those who lived and worked in the countryside. They were often alone and dependent on Soviet officials for their living. The Zhenotdel received many complaints from young women claiming that Party or Komsomol officials would only aid them in their work in return for sexual favours. At times, young women were even threatened with expulsion from the Komsomol if they did not sleep with their superiors.¹¹³ Unsurprisingly, such circumstances frightened young women away from the Party and the Komsomol. Despite all these problems, it does appear that there was growing interest among youth toward the Party and its youth group, the Komsomol. It remains to be discussed in the next chapter whether this

¹⁰⁸ Brovkin, *Russia After Lenin*, 147.

¹⁰⁹ Tirado, "The Komsomol and the Krestianka," 352.

¹¹⁰ Gorsuch, *Youth in Revolutionary Russia*, 105.

¹¹¹ Goldman, *Women, the State and Revolution*, 140-141.

¹¹² Paraskeva Ivanova, "Why I Do Not Belong In The Party," in *In the Shadow of Revolution: Life Stories of Russian Women*, eds. Sheila Fitzpatrick and Yuri Slezkine (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 213-215.

¹¹³ Brovkin, *Russia After Lenin*, 151-153; Tirado, "The Komsomol and the Krestianka," 351.

interest was a result of genuine belief in the Bolsheviks and their ideology, or merely the result of the perceived opportunity to benefit from their rule.

Chapter 5 - Assessing Belief Amongst Soviet Youth

Previous chapters have explored the origins of the socialist youth movement, the Bolshevik policies that were intended to create the “New Soviet Person” out of the country’s youth, and the effect these efforts had on the lives of young people in the 1920s. Using a selection of memoirs, diaries and interviews, this final chapter will attempt to determine the Bolsheviks’ degree of success in creating supporters among youth in the Soviet Union. Attempting to determine the degree of belief in ideology among the Soviet population is quite difficult. There were those among the country’s young people who described their great hope for, and in some cases almost unquestioning belief in, the Soviet system; others expressed their opposition to the regime even as youths. Many fell somewhere between these two extremes, experiencing a more complex and ambiguous relationship with the Bolsheviks. Some of this middle group who were Komsomol members and professed adherence to the Party’s ideology were at the same time concerned with their careers and well aware of the benefits membership in Soviet organizations could bring. Others who remained outside the Komsomol could still express support for some of the Bolsheviks’ aims while rejecting others, or may have begun as believers and then experienced disappointment and disillusionment as the Party failed to meet their expectations. This discussion will be aided by the more recent work of historians such as Stephen Kotkin and Jochen Hellbeck, who have proposed new ways of understanding how the country’s citizens developed their Soviet identities. Such scholars have done much to examine whether these Soviet identities were genuinely accepted and internalized by the population, or whether they were put on by citizens who recognized that these identities were necessary to successfully navigate Soviet society.¹ As this chapter will demonstrate, the degree to which young people adopted Soviet identities, and believed in these identities, varied greatly from one individual to the next. It is apparent, though, that there was at least a segment of the youth population who took the Bolsheviks’ ideology and calls for self-transformation seriously, at least for the time.

¹ For a further discussion of the work recently done on Soviet identity, see chapter 1.

Regardless of individual reactions to the Bolsheviks, certain commonalities emerge. Unsurprisingly, many of those who expressed their opposition to the Bolshevik Party came from classes deemed by the authorities to be enemies of the Soviet Union: the children of *kulaks* (wealthy peasants), priests and the bourgeoisie. As the children of supposed class enemies, these young people found that their lives became, or were in danger of becoming, much more difficult, in contrast to the promises of improvement the Party made to other youth. At first such groups were subject to lesser annoyances, like heavier taxation than their fellow villagers or deprivation of voting rights. However, toward the latter part of the 1920s and into the 1930s, the treatment of these groups grew increasingly harsh. Many of these young people either experienced, or lived in fear of, the break-up of their families as a result of Bolshevik policy. This was particularly true of those from kulak households or the rural intelligentsia. Often, the father of the family was arrested and the rest of the family members were left to fend for themselves. Many children scattered, leaving their villages in an attempt to escape the stigma of their backgrounds. Keeping their class-enemy backgrounds secret, though, was quite difficult, and several recalled that, just as they thought they had successfully escaped their backgrounds, they were informed on, forced from their jobs or schools and sometimes evicted from their living quarters and deprived of their residence permits. Naturally, after being informed on once, securing subsequent jobs, living quarters or places in educational institutions became more problematic. Interviewed in the 1990s, one woman described her circumstances and those of others in the same position in the 1920s and 1930s as “living under a sword of Damocles,” forever fearing that their pasts would be uncovered and their lives disrupted once again.²

Memoirists who belonged to these segments of the population often describe responding to Soviet power in a purely pragmatic manner. Knowing the turmoil that identification as a class enemy could cause young people who had been, or feared being, labeled as such went to great lengths to assimilate as much as possible into the proletariat in order, as Sheila Fitzpatrick has argued, to cover up their disadvantageous social origins and create an optimal identity for themselves.³ One young woman, whose family was dekulakized in 1929 when she was 13 years old, told how she fled from her village to Moscow where she tried to blend in, taking a job in a

² Elena Dolgikh, “Under a Sword of Damocles,” and Anna Dubova “Living Someone Else’s Life,” in *A Revolution of Their Own: Voices of Women in Soviet History*, ed. Barbara Alpern-Engel and Anastasia Posadskaya-Vanderbeck (Boulder: Westview Press, 1998)

³ Fitzpatrick, *Tear off the Masks*.

factory and attending its school. In order to do this, though, she first had to write a letter renouncing her family. This letter was a complete fiction, as she maintained contact with them and, once able, spent some of her earnings trying to improve their situation, but was necessary for her to begin a new life. Though her family was temporarily reunited in Moscow, they were soon informed on by a Komsomol girl her sister had become friends with, and the family had to flee again. She managed to remain in Moscow and, in a further attempt to conceal her past, married a Komsomol member, the secretary of a village soviet near Moscow who was charged with identifying and disposing kulaks. She did not love him, but the marriage acted as a cover for her.⁴

A second young woman reported a similar experience. In 1927 or 1928, at the age of 17 or 18, she was in the midst of her course at a teacher's college when a letter arrived, demanding to know why a kulak girl was being allowed to study there, and she was soon expelled. She gained admittance to another college to finish her course, but only after she renounced her kulak family. She did not, however, cut ties with her family and because of this, her background continued to cause her problems; she was informed on once again and fired from her first teaching position.⁵ Such situations were not uncommon. The Party encouraged young people to break with family members who did not embrace the new order, and later would encourage them to inform on family who expressed opposition to the Party. The iconic example of this is the state's campaign to make a hero out of one teenage boy, Pavlik Morozov, who, in 1932, denounced his father as a kulak sympathizer and was allegedly killed by family members in return.⁶ Some young people cut themselves off from families willingly, but for others it was simply a matter of survival. For those who took this course out of necessity, though, the separation from loved ones was no doubt distressing and likely to produce resentment toward the regime that forced them to take such measures.

The use of Soviet institutions to build more advantageous identities appears to have been widespread, as the recollections of W. I. Hryshko make abundantly clear. In 1929, while in his mid-teens, Hryshko was a member of a school literary group that produced a leaflet expressing

⁴ Dubova, "Living Someone Else's Life," 29-32.

⁵ Dolgikh, "Under a Sword of Damocles," 157, 164-165, 168.

⁶ For a full investigation of Pavlik Morozov see Catriona Kelly, *Comrade Pavlik: The Rise and Fall of a Boy Hero* (London: Granta Books, 2005). The author notes that Pavlik's murder was not the only one of its kind. Both before and after, there were several other instances of children informing on family members and others and being assaulted or murdered as a consequence. Kelly, *Comrade Pavlik*, 137-138.

anti-Soviet and pro-Ukrainian nationalist views. The literary circle was labelled a counter-revolutionary organization and Hryshko spent six months in jail for his part in it. After his release he left his native village without any type of identification and moved to the city of Kharkov, hoping to leave his identity as a counter-revolutionary son of a wealthy peasant behind him. He took a job in a factory, became a shock worker and, when it was clear that the factory's Komsomol cell did not spend much effort looking into the social origin of new applicants, thus making the risk of exposure low, he acquiesced to the Komsomol's request that all young workers who entered the factory school (FZU) join the youth organization.⁷ The FZU offered a training course for skilled workers up to the age of 18, and according to Hryshko most were in his situation: they wished to continue their education, but had some flaw in their past that prevented them from entering any other educational institution. Of the FZU students who joined the Komsomol Hryshko saw two types: one that wanted only to improve their skills and find better work in the factories, and a second for whom the FZU was a first step to higher education. Hryshko claimed that

the pupils of the second group had a higher standard of intelligence and, as I later found out through being once of them, included many youths of non-proletarian origin who were concealing their past. For all of us, the FZU, the fact of being workmen, and our membership in the Komsomol, were merely steps to a later career. As a result, we tended to be more highly disciplined and efficient, to learn and work more thoroughly than the rest and at the same time to be better and more active Komsomol members.⁸

In fact, the secretary of the school's Komsomol cell, who was regarded as an excellent organizer and fanatical Communist, was later revealed to be the son of a priest who had concealed his origin and entered the Komsomol in the hopes of someday becoming an engineer.⁹ In Hryshko's opinion there were many young people like him who simply used Soviet institutions like the FZU and the Komsomol to try to create new identities and achieve a better position in Soviet society.

Fictional accounts of the 1920s and 1930s also confirm the desire of young non-believers to build a new, Soviet identity. In Anatolii Ryabkov's novel *Children of the Arbat*, Yuri Sharok, the son of a petit bourgeois tailor is described as feeling that "somehow the Revolution was thwarting him."¹⁰ He has no use for politics and the Komsomol until a meeting with a lawyer

⁷ Hryshko, "An Interloper in the Komsomol," in *Soviet Youth*, 92-94.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 97.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 97-98.

¹⁰ Anatolii Ryabkov, *Children of the Arbat* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1988), 29.

shows him that it is possible to become wealthy working within the Soviet system. At that point he joins the Komsomol and begins to make contacts with people who might be useful to him. Throughout, in his interactions with people Sharok is shown choosing his words very carefully in an attempt to anticipate the responses people wish to hear and to ingratiate himself with those who matter. Eventually, he is asked to become an NKVD officer, a position he accepts not because he has any belief in the organization's work or the Soviet system, but because it seems to offer him a safe, comfortable existence.¹¹ Young people, both real and fictional, recognized that the surest way to get ahead was to make others believe they were proletarians, and furthermore, Bolsheviks. Understanding this, they tried to ensure that there was no reason for others to suspect them of being anything else.

With the exception of the aforementioned Hryshko's time in an anti-Soviet literary circle, which he soon worked to cover up, none of those surveyed appear to have taken part in organized, political opposition to the Soviet regime. As demonstrated by studies on public opinion, however, Soviet citizens did express their discontent and disagreement with the regime in a variety of smaller ways. Children and young people played pranks and told jokes, often in imitation of the adults around them, which could be interpreted as anti-Soviet. Schools reported that portraits of Soviet leaders were frequent targets of vandalism. Jokes circulated among the student body at the expense of Soviet power; for example "Lenin liked to wear shoes, but Stalin prefers boots. Why? . . . Because Lenin led us down a dry, clean path, but Stalin more and more is taking us through a swamp."¹² It also, according to Davies, became popular among students to "decipher SSSR as 'Smert Stalina spaset Rossiuu' (Stalin's death will save Russia)."¹³

Of course, not all young people who played pranks and told jokes at the expense of Soviet leaders and their policies were necessarily opponents of the Party; some no doubt were simply amusing themselves or repeating things they heard elsewhere. For others though, the jokes likely reflected their true feeling toward the Bolsheviks. One student was reported to have drawn unflattering caricatures of Stalin and sung a song in which Stalin was referred to as the "General of our unhappy life."¹⁴ Another student asserted that in the event of war "[t]he bourgeoisie will attack the Soviet Union, the kulaks will rise up, recruit the kolkhoz farmers to their side, and

¹¹ Ibid., 374-379, 381.

¹² Lewis Siegelbaum and Andrei Sokolov, *Stalinism as a Way of Life: A Narrative in Documents* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 368, 372.

¹³ Davies, *Popular Opinion*, 176.

¹⁴ Ibid., 174.

everyone together will take action against Soviet rule,” because the living conditions of the people, especially in the countryside, were so unsatisfactory.¹⁵ Several of his fellow students agreed. While their opposition may not have involved a sophisticated critique of Marxism itself, it is clear that many young people in the 1920s and 1930s were dissatisfied with their circumstances and placed the blame for their troubles, and the troubles of others, squarely on the Bolsheviks, whose policies separated them from their homes and families, prevented them from gaining their desired education and employment and generally caused suffering all around them.

If being on the receiving end of the state’s discriminatory policies bred resentment and opposition toward the regime, the opposite was also true, as those who found their lives improved under Soviet power were likely to look upon the regime favourably. One theme repeated many times throughout the recollections of Soviet youth is that of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds rising (in varying degrees) from poverty to good positions in Soviet society.

Georgy Zhukov, who would go on to become the most celebrated Soviet military commander of World War II, was slightly older than most others examined for this study and thus had a longer memory of life before the Bolsheviks. Born in 1896 into an extremely poor peasant family, he was apprenticed to a furrier at the age of eleven. There, he and the other apprentices often worked from 6:00 am to 11:00 pm and were by more senior craftsmen and their master, standard practice at the time. From an older craftsmen, he learned about the Bolsheviks and their policies. Although he did not wish to fight in World War I, feeling that since he was not part of the elite, it was not in his interest to fight for the existing regime, he was soon drafted into the tsar’s army, where he experienced still more cruel treatment from those in authority over him. As a non-commissioned officer, he began to disseminate Bolshevik propaganda to the soldiers under him, and shortly after the revolution, in 1918, he volunteered for the Red Army and his career began its ascent.¹⁶ Petro Grigorenko, the son of a Ukrainian peasant farmer born in 1907, had equal cause to be grateful to the Bolsheviks for his opportunities. Prior to the October Revolution, Grigorenko had been accepted to a secondary school in a town near his village. At

¹⁵ Siegelbaum and Sokolov, *Stalinism as a Way of Life*, 371.

¹⁶ Georgy Zhukov, *The Memoirs of Marshal Zhukov* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1969), 24-25, 32-33, 42, 44. It should be noted that Marshal Zhukov’s sincerity here cannot be taken for granted. It is common for military memoirists who served in the tsarist army to emphasize their reluctance in doing so. Similarly, other Soviet officials who wrote their memoirs may have emphasized the contrast between miserable lives in the tsarist past and wonderful lives in the Soviet present.

the time of the revolution, he defended a young Jewish boy from a beating by one of his classmates, the son of a wealthy man. The next day he arrived at school to be told by the director that he had been expelled for defending a “kike.” Grigorenko believed that this action was taken under the influence of the wealthy boy and his father. Only in 1921, in a workers’ seven-year school, was he able to continue his secondary education. He was subsequently able to attend several institutions of higher learning and went on to a successful career in the Soviet military.¹⁷

Leonid Potyomkin was born in 1914 into an even more disadvantaged background. In his diary, Potyomkin wrote of his family’s life during the famine of the early 1920s. Starving, he stole flour from a mill for himself and his family and was later sent out by his mother to beg for alms and bread. During these times, he recalled, he was mocked and scorned by those he encountered and felt as though he was “the lowest, most insignificant of all people.”¹⁸ In the early 1930s, upon meeting an aunt for the first time in ten years Potyomkin reported “. . . she exclaimed, ‘what happiness! Who would have thought back then that you would be studying at the institute?’ She hadn’t seen through the shell of poverty to the potential in me and she hadn’t known that personal merit is enslaved by material deprivation.”¹⁹ He continued “no, its not by sheer chance that I’m in the institute, it’s the necessary consequence of the socialist revolution, which raised us up from below.”²⁰ In addition to his technical education at the Sverdlovsk Mining Institute, Bolshevik power also afforded Potyomkin the opportunity for a cultural education, which he clearly valued greatly. His diary is peppered with references to concerts, to the ballroom dance classes he organized and taught to other students, and to his writing and participation in the institute’s literary circle. After attending a lecture on literature, he wrote that “[t]he lecture nourished me with food that was sincerely desired . . . deeply thirsted for,” and that he regarded “the challenge to master culture, understand art, to love the beautiful” as a reward for him.²¹ Without Bolshevik power, he implies, all of this would have been out of reach for someone like him, born into extremely disadvantaged circumstances. After completing his education he worked his way from his first job as a borehole sampling worker to eventually become vice-minister of geology of the USSR.

¹⁷ Petro Grigorenko, *Memoirs*, 11-13. For an example of a young woman rising from humble origins to great success in Soviet society, see Pavlova, “Taking Advantage of New Opportunities,” in *A Revolution of Their Own*.

¹⁸ Leonid Potyomkin, “The Diary of Leonid Alekseyevich Potyomkin,” in *Intimacy and Terror: Soviet Diaries of the 1930s*, ed. Veronique Garros, et al (New York: The New Press, 1995), 276-277.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 283.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*, 252.

It was not necessary to rise to great heights for one to look favourably on the regime. One young woman, born in Moscow, described a childhood full of poverty and hunger in which she was sent out to work during the summers for pitifully small wages. She left school in 1918 at age 14 and as an adolescent was frequently unemployed because she possessed no skills. After the revolution she was able to enrol in a training course provided by the textile union and found employment as a weaver. Her experiences in the factory were positive: the foreman treated the workers well and, she claimed, the union made sure they were not exploited. She eventually became a union activist, joined the Party and was promoted to the position of foreman of the factory's quality control department.²² The fact that the rise of such people was relatively modest did not make them any less appreciative than those whose advancement was more impressive. The feelings of many Soviet young people were likely well represented in the words of Leonid Brezhnev, the future leader of the Soviet Union, who wrote regarding his pre-revolutionary youth in an industrial town “. . . I knew, like the other sons of the workers, that I would be going to the mill with its leaping flames, in my father's footsteps. No other fate in the settlement was thinkable. The factory hummed loudly, reminding us of itself, and I knew that this was my lot.”²³ Undoubtedly, many young people from the working class and peasantry passed their youth with the same belief. Those who had grown up in poverty, or who had been treated unfairly under the old regime naturally credited the Bolsheviks with their new-found opportunities. In the minds of those who benefited from Bolshevik rule, their successes may have been taken as evidence that the Party's policies were correct and reinforced their belief in the Party and its ideology.

However, it would be a mistake to say that the sole reason young people supported the Bolsheviks was that they benefited from the party's policies. It is clear in many memoirs that numerous young people were attracted by the values of equality, community and mutual aid that the Bolsheviks espoused, and truly believed in working and sacrificing for the good of the whole. One young man who went on to become a Komsomol member noted that the teacher who first introduced him to socialism emphasized words like “*ideal, gumannost'* (humanism), *chelovekolubie* (love of man), *narodnoe blago* (the good of the people), *narodnoe delo* (the people's concern), *lyubov' k narodu* (love for the people).”²⁴ Writing about his experiences in the 1920s, another young man remembered particularly the spirit of the Komsomol at the time.

²² Anna Balashova, “A Worker's Life,” in *In The Shadow of Revolution* 243-251.

²³ Leonid Ilyich Brezhnev, *Memoirs* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1982), 4.

²⁴ Lev Kopelev, *The Education of a True Believer*, 26

Komsomolites, he said, tried to exercise Communist principles in all aspects of their lives. If someone had two or three good suits of clothing or had managed to come by extra food or cigarettes, he “kept only what was most essential and gave the rest to his comrades. Not to share . . . not to help a comrade in need, was looked upon as a disgrace, as behaviour unworthy of a Komsomol member.”²⁵ A young woman recalled feeling that it was a shameful thing that her family was better off than those of her friends, living in their own apartment while others were crowded into communal apartments. She was actually relieved to discover that her mother had to look for extra work and pawn their winter coats to make ends meet because it meant that they were not so much better off after all. This commitment to equality began early in her life when, as a little girl in church she was told that all people were equal, the rich were not better than the poor and that in order to proceed to a better world, one had to work as part of a community. Later, in the Soviet schools and her Pioneer detachment she heard the same message, with the exception that people working together could build a better world on earth. To her, the ideals of Communism appeared to be noble and just.²⁶

Victor Kravchenko, born in 1905, reported the same spirit of community and comradeship among his fellow Komsomolites. While working in a mine as a young man, he and other Komsomol members formed an *artel*, a group that worked together and was paid as a unit, rather than as individuals. The group lived together, taking turns doing the household chores. Kravchenko supposed “that a young nobleman admitted to court life under the Tsar had that same feeling of ‘belonging’” that he did in this environment.²⁷ Like many others, he also expressed the feeling of being part of something larger and more important than himself and of being willing to sacrifice for the good of the community. After joining the Komsomol he felt that “[n]ow life had for me an urgency, a purpose, a new and thrilling dimension of dedication to a cause. I was one of the elite, chosen by History to lead my country and the whole world out of darkness into the socialist light . . . [m]y privileges, as one of the elect were to work harder, to disdain money and fore swear personal ambitions. I must never forget that I am a Comsomol [sic] first and a person

²⁵ Nikolai Luney, “Blind Faith in a Bright Future,” in *Soviet Youth*, 31.

²⁶ Raisa Orlova, *Memoirs* (New York: Random House, 1983), 57-58.

²⁷ Victor Kravchenko, *I Chose Freedom: The Personal and Political Life of a Soviet Official* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1946), 38.

second.”²⁸ It was evident that he, and those like him, were genuinely dedicated to the ideals of Communism.

Also evident in many memoirs is the commitment felt by some young people to become the New Soviet Man or Woman. As historian Jochen Hellbeck has argued, there was an element of the country’s population that took seriously calls to transform themselves into Soviet citizens. This was evident in one of the diaries of Alexander Afinogenov, who was born in 1904, grew to adulthood in the 1920s and rose rapidly to become one of the country’s best-known playwrights. In the early 1930s, however, his plays began to receive criticism from the highest Soviet leadership and in the purges of 1937 he was expelled from the Writers Union and the Communist Party and ostracized by his former peers. Instead of blaming the Soviet system or those who had denounced him for his difficulties, Afinogenov placed the blame directly on himself. He acknowledged, both publicly and in his diary, that success and fame had caused him to become lazy and complacent, and that his association with disgraced literary figure Leopold Averbakh had corrupted him, caused him to degenerate and produce literature that was not “what the country wanted.”²⁹ Afinogenov looked at his denunciation as an opportunity for self-renewal; he wanted to purify himself and become a better Bolshevik in hopes of being recognized again as a member in good standing of the Soviet community.³⁰ In his diary he wrote to himself that this would come “but first you have to perform honest work for the country and its best people. These people, right now they are marching across Red Square. The radio is transmitting their laughter, their shouts of hurrah, their merry songs. Right now you are not among them; that hurts terribly. But earn the right to join them again!”³¹ Afinogenov hoped to demonstrate that he was worthy of returning to the Soviet community by writing a novel that would trace its protagonist’s path through degeneration, crisis and then recovery, demonstrating that it was possible to remake oneself into a new and better Soviet citizen.³²

The story of Paraskeva Ivanova was not dissimilar. Ivanova joined the Komsomol as a young woman in 1920 and soon became a candidate member of the Communist Party. Full of enthusiasm, she declared that she would live for the Party. She was sent to the country-side to

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Jochen Hellbeck, “Writing the Self in the Time of Terror: Alexander Afinogenov’s Diary of 1937,” in *Self and Story in Russian History*, ed. Laura Engelstein and Stephanie Sandler (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), 76.

³⁰ Ibid., 81.

³¹ Ibid., 88.

³² Ibid.

work for the Party where she became the subject of the unwanted attentions of her superior, Comrade Ganov, who convinced her that only bourgeois ladies were opposed to having sexual relations outside of marriage and that under Communism families had become obsolete.³³ Although Ivanova did enter into a sexual relationship with Ganov (and others) she remained uneasy with her new lifestyle and eventually decided not to apply for full party membership. This decision was not, however, due to the terrible treatment she experienced at the hands of many party officials. She declared “I am ill and must leave the party. I need prolonged, serious treatment . . . I am sick and must leave the ranks in order to look around and understand, truly understand, where we are now, so that later (I am still young) I can join Lenin’s – not Ganov’s - struggle with renewed energy.”³⁴ Like Afinogenov, Ivanova did not blame the Bolshevik Party or the system it had created for her misfortune; there might be some corrupt individuals within it, but Lenin’s struggle was still a noble cause in her eyes. Her situation, she appears to have believed, resulted from her own inadequacies and, again like Afinogenov, she put the onus on herself to become a better Bolshevik, to “purge” herself of “filth” in order to enter the Party as a worthy member.

Striving for self-perfection and purification was not limited to members of the proletariat, but extended to children of the bourgeoisie and intelligentsia as well. Raisa Orlova, who was born in 1918 to a bourgeois family, remembered believing that there was something inadequate about her because of her class origin. A Pioneer leader once told her that, as the daughter of a white-collar worker and member of the intelligentsia, she could not possibly understand the working-class soul. This sent fear into the young girl’s heart as she wondered “[d]oes it mean that I’m not worthy to participate in the revolution?” She thought to herself, “I’ll do what’s necessary so that no trace of white-collar worker is left in me.”³⁵ She was later initially refused admittance to the Komsomol because of her class origin (a fact that made her miserable) but she did not question the legitimacy of the decision, instead convincing herself that this was the way things should be.³⁶ She had accepted the Party’s message that said that the proletarians were the best of the people, and that she must become one of them.

³³ Paraskeva Ivanova, “Why I Do Not Belong In The Party,” in *In The Shadow of Revolution*, 215.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 217-218.

³⁵ Raisa Orlova, *Memoirs*, 153-154.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 12. Such attitudes were also reflected in the fiction of the day. In Lydia Chukovskaya’s novel *Sofia Petrovna*, the title character’s young friend Natasha Frolenko was the daughter of a colonel and landowner, but wanted desperately to be considered a Bolshevik. Her applications to the Komsomol were repeatedly turned down in

Several memoirists wrote retrospectively that their belief in Communism was so complete and their desire to transform society so great that they did not think to question the Party's methods and would not have listened seriously to anyone who did. To Petro Grigorenko, who had come from an impoverished peasant background, the idea that proletarian rule would raise everyone to the same level, create a society in which there would be no difference between city and countryside or mental and physical labour and ensure that the needs of each member of society was met was very exciting. In the minds of Grigorenko and his fellow Komsomolites the implementation of these ideals would bring about the happiness of all people and thus made it a goal worthy of considerable sacrifice, even the sacrifice of one's life. To them, the attainment of universal happiness was a beneficial enough goal to warrant extreme measures to the point that Grigorenko said, "we failed to ask what gave us, a minority of the people, the right to re-educate the rest and to suppress those who refused to be re-educated, to deny them the possibility not only of refuting us, but even merely of disagreeing with us."³⁷

Belief in the principles of Communism was so strong among those like Grigorenko that they were willing to deny the rights of others without questioning the correctness of their actions. After the fact he wrote "we believed so strongly in Communism that we were ready to accept any crime if it was glossed over by the last bit of communist phraseology . . . confronted with something unpleasant, we compelled ourselves to believe that it was an isolated phenomenon and that on the whole the country's state of affairs was just as the party described it – in other words, just as it was supposed to be according to communist theory."³⁸ While Grigorenko and others confessed to being aware of "crimes" and justifying them, there were also those who claimed to have been unaware of such things altogether. As Orlova attested

[i]f in 1935 a person had appeared . . . who was courageous enough to talk about the peasants who were starving and who had been driven from their land, about the workers in freezing barracks who were dying from epidemics and backbreaking labour, about the concentration camps . . . about the falsehoods of propaganda, no one would have believed him, he would have been jeered and cursed . . . even in the unlikely event that he might have managed to utter such words.³⁹

spite of her demonstrations of loyalty to the regime. However, she did not dispute the Party's decision to consider her a class alien and keep her out of its organizations, instead trying to make herself over in the hopes of one day being worthy to enter the Bolshevik community. Lydia Chukovskaya, *Sofia Petrovna* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 10-11, 24-25.

³⁷ Grigorenko, *Memoirs*, 17.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 36. See also Kopelev, *The Education of a True Believer*, 122.

³⁹ Orlova, *Memoirs*, 83.

For these young people, at this point in their lives, acceptance of the regime appeared total. Even when they did see the wrongs done by the Soviet government, they were unable or unwilling to extrapolate from what they did see in order to conclude that there was something fundamentally wrong with the Soviet system.

Many young people had more complex feelings toward the Bolshevik regime. As previously discussed, many were attracted to the Party by the positive ideals it advanced, and some of those who were undoubtedly true believers expressed misgivings about the regime when the Party's actions seemed to contradict the ideals and values to which they had initially been attracted. Eduard Dune fought enthusiastically as a Red Guard during the Revolution, but some of his experiences fighting in the Red Army during the Civil War began to make him uneasy. Toward the end of the Civil War, in response to various peasant uprisings, the army issued an order proclaiming Red terror, giving local tribunals the right to execute rebels who refused to turn in their weapons. Since most of the rebels fled when the Red Army approached, local officials often simply identified people who had at some point spoken out against the Soviets and punished them merely for expressing disagreement. These measures, Dune realized, were no different than the actions he deplored when used by the White Army, and he expressed concern about such behaviour. Though for the time being he remained convinced that the Bolsheviks' path was the right one for the country, he continued to question policies that seemed to oppose their initial promises of greater freedom and equality for the people.⁴⁰

In the case of Lev Kopelev, born in 1911, his initial concern occurred as the New Economic Policy allowed some people to become rich while others suffered greatly. He was further shocked by the Party's deportation of Trotsky, a hero of the revolution, "like a member of the White Guard" in 1929, as the Bolsheviks now refused to permit debate even within the Party. He was drawn to the Trotskyite Opposition, which spoke out against the NEP, and became persuaded that Stalin was a "power-hungry bureaucrat" who was "hoodwinking the Party" and that the bureaucratic state was exploiting the working class."⁴¹ He was arrested for distributing pro-opposition literature, but was soon released and, having resolved his doubts for the moment, returned to Party work, applying to the Komsomol and taking part in the collectivization

⁴⁰ Dune, *Notes of a Red Guard*, 211-212, 223, 228-229.

⁴¹ Kopelev, *The Education of a True Believer*, 166, 177-179.

campaign in the Ukrainian countryside. As a Komsomol member he was charged with the task of encouraging the peasants to turn over their quota of grain to the state and with searching the homes of those who did not fill their quotas for hidden reserves. At the beginning of the campaign, Kopelev was sincere in his agitation among the peasantry; he believed that he was doing his revolutionary duty by collecting grain so that the urban workers could be fed and the industrialization drive made to succeed, and that the peasants were deliberately trying to sabotage the Soviet government's efforts by hoarding grain. As time went on, though, he was more often ashamed of the things he did in the countryside and, along with his fellow Party workers, came to realize that the peasants were not sabotaging the grain collection plan, but had no more grain to give and would soon be without food for themselves. In spite of this, Kopelev remained in the Komsomol, convinced of the goodness of many of the Party and Komsomol workers he knew and of their sincere desire to work for the benefit of society. He hoped to discover that this was the result of overzealousness on the part of local officials, and not the intention of the leadership.⁴²

Victor Kravchenko was another young believer who awoke to the shortcomings of the Party. Kravchenko's father had been a revolutionary prior to 1917, although he was not associated with any particular political party. While he was initially pleased by the Bolshevik victory, his son recalled that he soon became depressed, worrying that rule by the Bolsheviks alone would only mean exchanging the old masters for new ones and that the people would still not be free. Kravchenko's father discussed the failings of the new regime with his son many times, but the young man was soon convinced that the goals and ideals of the Bolsheviks were similar to those his father had worked for all his life. Kravchenko threw himself into Komsomol work wholeheartedly, but as he went about his daily life he could see many of the ills of Soviet society: the suffering of the peasantry, the waste of the industrialization campaign and the fact that the situation of the working class had not improved since the revolution.⁴³ His sentiments toward the regime were likely reflective of the others discussed here, as well as many others. When his father asked him how he could reconcile his involvement in the Party with the injustices that were evident all around them, the young man replied

I know that there are plenty of shortcomings, careerism, swinishness and hardship in practical everyday life. I don't like those things anymore than you do. But I look at them

⁴² Ibid., 230-235, 240-247.

⁴³ Kravchenko, *I Chose Freedom*, 21, 37, 74-80.

as phases that will pass. The job of turning a primitive country into a modern, industrial socialist state is gigantic. It can't be done without mistakes and even injustices. But I don't want to stand aside and criticize. I want to work honestly inside the Party, fighting against evil and sustaining what is good . . . I believe in its purposes and I want to give all I have to make them come true.⁴⁴

There were many young people who were neither ignorant of the Party's crimes (as Orlova claimed) or able to fully dismiss them (as Grigorenko has said). At the time they believed that these crimes were excesses caused by local overzealousness or incompetence, not what was intended by Party leaders, and that these problems could be overcome if people like themselves made sincere efforts to work with the Party to build a socialist society. This feeling seems to have been reinforced by the fact that all knew others around them who strove to live up to the positive ideals that attracted them to Communism and who worked on behalf of the regime to do what they believed would improve the lives of the country's people. As adults, though, all three of these men would leave the Party and the Soviet Union, having been let down by the Party they faithfully served in their youth.

Others who had mixed sentiments toward the regime were those who accepted the Bolsheviks, participated in Soviet society, attempted to live up to the calls for self-transformation, and yet were never considered full Soviet citizens. Considering many of her experiences with Bolshevik power, Vera Fleisher, who was born in 1909, might have been expected to be an opponent of the Party. Her father, a priest, was arrested several times and finally perished in a work camp in the 1930s, and her mother died alone because her children feared being associated with a class alien. Fleisher's class origin was a stigma for most of her life; she was not able to pursue the education she wanted and was only able to secure a place in a teacher training school with the help of an older brother who had served in the Red Army. Although she was an excellent educator and her name was put forward for various awards and promotions, once her class origin was known she was always passed over for such accolades. While she was fully aware that the policies of the Soviet government were the cause of her difficulties, this did not lead her to reject the Party; in fact, she defined herself as a "communist at heart." She claimed to have been a proponent of Soviet ideology, felt that she had been involved in useful work and was, overall, satisfied with her life. At least part of Fleisher's attraction to the Bolsheviks was patriotic: they were striving to make the Soviet Union a great, powerful country

⁴⁴ Ibid., 54.

and she, along with many of her generation, found this goal appealing and was willing to sacrifice for this aim.⁴⁵ Fleisher's story illustrates the fact that one did not have to be a beneficiary of the government's policies in order to identify with the regime. In W. I. Hryshko's opinion, the children of class enemies he knew only appeared to embrace the Bolsheviks to ensure themselves security or advancement. However, it is possible that, in spite of the obstacles placed in their way, some aspects of the Party's agenda appealed to them and they tried to find ways to participate in Soviet society.

While Fleisher's feelings toward the Soviet regime remained basically positive throughout her life, others who were refused participation in Soviet society came to hold more negative sentiments toward Soviet power. One such young man was Stepan Podlubnyi, whose family had been dekulakized in 1929 when he was 15 years old. He and his mother then moved to Moscow under forged documents claiming proletarian origin. Podlubnyi accepted the Bolsheviks' position that as the child of a kulak there was something wrong with him; he had a "sick psychology" and needed to be re-educated. He also believed, as Soviet social scientists of the 1920s claimed, that those like him could become members of the proletariat if they "denounced their origins and displayed proletarian consciousness."⁴⁶ Thus, he began to keep a diary in which he tried to cleanse himself of his kulak past, even drawing up year-end balance sheets to review the progress he made throughout the year toward acquiring the characteristics of the New Soviet Man. He also hoped the diary would one day serve as the basis for an autobiographical novel to show how the old classes could be reborn under the new order and also prove that he had undergone a successful re-education. He joined the Komsomol, became the leader of a shockworker brigade, and expressed satisfaction when he felt that his efforts to become one of the proletariat were working.⁴⁷

At the same time, Podlubnyi became increasingly critical of the regime. At first this was difficult for him because, as historian Jochen Hellbeck writes, attempts at detaching himself from the values of the state invariably entailed a rejection of his positive self and forced him to condemn himself as a "'useless,' 'pessimistic,' and 'reactionary' person."⁴⁸ Later, though,

⁴⁵ Vera Konstantinovna Fleisher, "Daughter of a Village Priest," in *A Revolution of Their Own*, 86-87, 90, 92-93, 97-98.

⁴⁶ Jochen Hellbeck, "Fashioning the Stalinist Soul: The Diary of Stepan Podlubnyi, 1931-9," in *Stalinism: New Directions*, 83.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 81, 88, 96.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 104.

criticism of the regime became less difficult for him. Podlubnyi's kulak origins were exposed, and he was expelled from the Komsomol and the medical institute he attended. His mother, a semi-illiterate peasant woman, was arrested as a Trotskyite, even though she, like her son, had embraced the new order and tried to reconstruct herself. Many others around him experienced similar fates, and Podlubnyi wrote of them that "they all are wonderful people, they are the best – celebrated heroes of labour. One could draw a very interesting conclusion."⁴⁹ To Podlubnyi, it seemed that they had all faithfully tried to live up to the Party's expectations, at times were heroes, and they deserved to participate fully in Soviet society. When he realized that people whom the regime had also categorized as "kulaks" were unlikely ever to be accepted as Soviet citizens, he began to think the Bolsheviks' policies were unjust and condemned them and Bolshevik leadership more strongly.

Finally, as Kotkin has argued, belief and disbelief could coexist within the same person. Such people did not, even for a time, believe unequivocally in the Bolsheviks' ideology, but they found aspects of it that they could support. One young man, born into a priest's family in 1913, grew supportive of the regime when he became convinced that Soviet agricultural policy, by promoting the use of scientific methods and machinery, would help farmers to overcome their poverty, and he determined to become an agronomist to help the government implement their policies in the countryside. His attitude toward the regime hardened as he witnessed both the effects of collectivization on the countryside and the arrest of his father. While his position toward the government changed, he continued to work as a member of the Komsomol in the struggle against illiteracy, and believed that he was doing genuinely useful work. In both these circumstances, the young man in question gave his support because he believed that the Soviet government's policies, as they were presented to him, would have a positive effect on the country and its people.⁵⁰

Others vacillated between belief and disbelief as they struggled to reconcile the positive ideals the regime promoted with their own life experiences. Typical of this group was the story of Anastasyan Vairich, a Pioneer, then Komsomol member, in Armenia in the 1920s and 1930s. Throughout his time in these organizations Vairich went through periods of both enthusiasm and disappointment. His initial enthusiasm for the work of the organizations was dampened by the

⁴⁹ Ibid., 106.

⁵⁰ N. Khvalynsky, "Life in the Countryside," in *Soviet Youth*, 112-113, 115.

arrest of some of his Komsomolite friends as Trotskyite oppositionists in 1927. Once his shock subsided, though, he became one of the most active Komsomol members in his college, taking great interest in his work organizing Pioneer camps, teaching illiterates and reporting for *Avantgarde*, the Komsomol newspaper of the Armenian Soviet Republic.⁵¹ This work, he wrote, corrected his former political doubts. The events of 1927 “no longer appeared in quite such dark colours . . . I came to think that the events of that year were merely passing difficulties in the development of the country.”⁵² His opinion reversed when he was sent to the countryside to help the Party collectivize the villages. After a series of terrible events which proved to him that the Bolsheviks’ policies were not reflective of the people’s wishes, he and others authored a satirical paper describing the events, for which they were put on trial. Luckily, the trial took place just prior to the publication of Stalin’s 1930 article “Dizzy From Success,” so their sentences were light; most received only a reprimand. This article, in which Stalin (unfairly) blamed the problems with collectivization on the deviations of local officials, Vairich said, calmed their fears, and he again went to work with “zest.”⁵³ He continued this pattern and gradually drifted away from the Komsomol. While such young people perhaps wanted to believe in what the Bolsheviks were promoting and, as Kotkin has said, to think that the troubles they encountered in everyday life contributed to some greater good, this became more difficult as they encountered the more brutal aspects of the Soviet regime, and they could no longer believe. The conflicted sentiments of many young people perhaps demonstrates just how genuine the belief was among those young people who had embraced communism in the 1920s and 1930s and later came to see that it was not what they had expected. As one young man put it, “I dedicated my youth to the search for truth, but I regret that I did not search where it was to be found.”⁵⁴ They had come to their beliefs because they considered the goals of communism to be positive. In the final analysis of his youth, one former Komsomolite, who during World War II became a member of General Vlasov’s army – Soviet prisoners of war who agreed to fight against the USSR for the Germans - wrote that “there is much of which I cannot approve in what I had had to do, but I cannot reproach myself for my years in the Komsomol. They were years of

⁵¹ Vairich, “Youth It Was That Led Us,” in *Soviet Youth*, 63-64

⁵² *Ibid.*, 64.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 67-68.

⁵⁴ Alimov, “Through the Eyes of My Youth,” in *Soviet Youth*, 73.

unclouded faith in a great future and years of youthful ardour. In all probability, if I had the chance of living my life over again, I would choose precisely the same course.”⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Lunev, “Blind Faith in a Bright Future,” in *Soviet Youth*, 40.

Conclusion

In the 1920s the Bolshevik Party began its rule with ambitious plans not only for political and economic change, but for social change as well. Arguably, this was the most important aim of the Revolution, for, as one sympathetic young German observer noted “of what use are all the Socialist factories and ‘kolkos’ in the world if they are not operated by Socialist men and women? There was no necessity to sacrifice millions of human beings solely in order to mechanise the country; the sacrifice will only have been not in vain if a better human being is the outcome.”¹ Bolshevik leaders had high hopes that the majority of the population would embrace the Communist values and identity they promoted, particularly those young enough to grow up under the influence of the Party. Most importantly, this “better human being” would grow up with a collectivist worldview: he or she would be willing to forego rewards or satisfaction in order to contribute to the betterment of society and ought not try to distinguish themselves from their peers through their appearance or behaviour. The Party also aimed to create a person who was well-educated and cultured, an effort that not only involved sending more members of the lower classes through higher education and exposing them to high culture (theatre, museums and classical music, as opposed to western films, dance halls and the foxtrot), but also included attempts to direct manners, dress, personal hygiene and morals.

The Party’s efforts to exercise control over the country’s youth and propagandize among them increased throughout the 1920s. The Komsomol, which had envisioned itself as a somewhat autonomous partner of the Party, found that more and more it was issued marching orders and expected to fulfill the Party’s demands without question. The school system was restructured, and both institutions were expanded in order to reach greater numbers of young people. As demonstrated here, however, this was not always a one-way street in which the Party made pronouncements that were accepted uncritically and carried out perfectly by those on the receiving end. When the Party wished to implement policies regarding the Komsomol, school system and, especially, individuals’ behaviours and lifestyles, it often drew the ire of young people, not only from those who never expressed support for the Bolsheviks and who at times

¹ Mehnert, *Youth in Soviet Russia*, 11.

showed a preference for western entertainment and lifestyles, but also from those who strongly supported the Party and desired more radical change than the Party had implemented.

Any attempt to make an assessment of the degree of support for, and belief in, the Bolshevik program is filled with difficulties. The Komsomol grew steadily from just under 3, 000, 000 in 1930 to a membership of 18, 000, 000 throughout the USSR in 1953, the year of Stalin's death.² However, even if one considers these numbers as a percentage of the youth population, an accurate picture of the amount of support for the Party is not necessarily gained. As has been discussed here, behaving outwardly as though one was a loyal Bolshevik was not always indicative of true feelings. Some of those who joined the Komsomol (and the Party) did so only in order to advance their positions in society or protect themselves by covering up "bad" social origins. On the other hand, some of those who did not take steps to join these organizations, or who were refused admittance, still declared themselves to be proponents of the Party. It was also possible for individuals to vacillate between belief and non-belief, or to be committed to certain aspects of the Bolshevik program (for example, social welfare policies) while disagreeing with others.

Much of the evidence presented in this attempt to investigate belief in the Soviet system among youth in the regime's early years has been based on the memoirs of those who grew up during this time. Questions are always asked about Soviet memoirists and the reliability of their writings: to what extent did those writing in the Soviet Union downplay or omit the negative aspects of Soviet society while emphasizing those that were positive, and to what extent did those writing in the west for western audiences do the reverse? A segment of the memoirists from both groups, regardless of how they came to view the regime later in life, recalled that in the early years of the Soviet Union they felt a genuine excitement about the regime and a hope that it would improve the lives of the country's people. Many recalled their own willingness to make sacrifices for the good of the whole and their gratitude to the Party for offering them a wider range of opportunities in their lives. It is also worth noting that numerous young people, whether they were true proponents of Bolshevism or only supporters of selective policies, came to oppose the regime because it failed to live up to its own ideals. Some of those who came to be opponents of the government did not (at least immediately) reject Leninism; they opposed the

² Fisher, *Pattern for Soviet Youth*, 409.

government on the grounds that it had perverted Lenin's teachings.³ This signals that there were those who took the Party's ideals seriously, who tried to live up to them and were disappointed when they were not upheld by those in power. At least to a degree, then, the Party had success in its work among youth, although in many cases perhaps it is more accurate to call them socialists, rather than Bolsheviks.

³ During the 1920s this manifested itself in the interest young people took in the so-called Trotskyite Opposition and various other groups. At the end of the 1940s, this sentiment was expressed by a group of high school and university students arrested and tried after they formed an underground organization that was accused of plotting against the Soviet government. In her memoirs one member of this group, sentenced at the age of 18 to 25 years in the GULAG, wrote that in the camps she met other young people who had been members of underground organizations. She recalled that "almost all of them were supporters of the ideas upon which the Soviet state had once been formed. It was only within these limits that they thirsted for justice, and Marx and Lenin remained their indestructible gods." Like herself, they simply wanted the Soviet Union to live up to its own founding principles. Alla Tumanov, *Where We Buried the Sun* (Edmonton, NeWest Press, 1999), 113.

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