

Democracy in the Russian School

The Reform Movement
in Education Since 1984

Edited by

Ben Eklof and Edward Dneprov





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First published 1993 by Westview Press, Inc.

Published 2018 by Routledge
52 Vanderbilt Avenue, New York, NY 10017
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Democracy in the Russian school : The reform movement in education
since 1984 / edited by Ben Eklof and Edward Dneprov.

p. cm.

Includes index.

ISBN 0-8133-1349-X

1. Education—Russian S.F.S.R.—History—20th century.

2. Educational change—Russian S.R.S.R.—History—20th century.

I. Eklof, Ben, 1946— . II. Dneprov, E. D.

LA583.R88D46 1993

370'.947—dc20

92-5888
CIP

ISBN 13: 978-0-367-00436-1 (hbk)

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The Peredelkino Conference, October 18, 1986, where the "pedagogy of cooperation" was formulated. *From left to right:* Sh. Amonashvili, L. Nikitina, S. Soloveichik, S. Lyсенkova, V. Matveev, B. Nikitin, V. Shatalov, V. Karakovsky, I. Volkov, A. Adamsky, G. Aleshkina, and E. Il'in. (Photo by Yuri Vladimirov; provided courtesy of Stephen Kerr and Simon Soloveichik.)

1

Democracy in the Russian School: Educational Reform Since 1984

Amidst the turmoil and excitement of events of recent years in the former Soviet Union, changes in education have, perhaps understandably, attracted little attention in the West. As important as education is, most would consider it an issue for the "day after," once more pressing issues of economic and political stabilization have been resolved. Lenin once remarked caustically of the liberal enthusiasts in the Committee for Literacy in St. Petersburg at the turn of the century: "If they think they can change the world, let them try!" Lenin's skepticism about the capacity of schools to affect social change, and cynicism about those who try, has a modern ring, more so than the ameliorationist, Enlightenment-driven views of nineteenth-century Russian reformers, who believed that schools could be used to dispel the darkness of popular ignorance, to promote science and a modern cast of mind--to *transform* society. Today, schools seem mired in the woes of society, incapable of holding up against powerful currents increasingly marginalizing formal education, or subverted by poverty, crime, declining attention to the printed word, and the seeming irrelevance of the curriculum. Schools do a better job of *replicating* society than of changing it.

Yet today in the Russian Federation a team of militant reformers has come to power in the restructured Ministry of Education. They are determined not only to redesign the school system, but also to use the new schools to create a different society, one peopled by individuals capable of taking initiative and responsibility and of building a participatory democracy.

The Minister of Education, Edward D. Dneprov, is an historian by training, steeped in the issues, perspectives, and even rhetoric of the period of Russia's Great Reforms during the 1860s, but also a *shestidesiatnik* (or "man of the sixties") in that he came to political maturity in the era of the Twentieth Party

Congress and Khrushchevian reforms. Dneprov was responsible for putting together in 1988 a team of sociologists, psychologists, philosophers and innovators in education. This team was joined under the umbrella of *VNIK-shkola*, or, roughly, "Ad Hoc/Temporary Research Committee on the Schools" which in turn produced a set of *kontseptiï* (concept papers or guidelines) for reforming teacher training, overhauling the general education school, implementing continuing education, and restructuring pre-school education. The ideology of this movement stems from the "pedagogy of cooperation" which was first articulated in 1986,¹ but which has deeper roots in the developmental psychology of Lev Vygotsky,² the pre-revolutionary and early Soviet progressive education tradition, and diverse Western currents which have long influenced Russian pedagogy.

It is the task of this brief introduction to outline the history of the current reform movement in Russian education, to summarize its program, and to comment briefly upon the current status of the schools in the context of the current situation in Russia as a whole.

I am not a fully detached observer of these events. Trained as a social historian, I first met Dneprov in the archives, and a close professional and personal relationship developed around our mutual interest in the history of Russian education. In the summer of 1989 Dneprov attended a conference held in Philadelphia on the Great Reforms in Russian History; by then it had become obvious that his energies were elsewhere. As his prominence rose in the reform movement, so my own attention was diverted to current concerns in education, at least partially to understand why my colleague had become a public figure, what his program was and what its prospects for success were, and last, but not least of all, what perspective his training as a historian of pre-revolutionary Russia had contributed to his current activities. I admire and respect Dneprov and the team which came together under VNIK. This does not mean that I do not have an independent perspective, or that I am entirely unskilled of certain components of the program or elements of the ideology. Yet it would be dishonest to conceal the personal connection that exists.

Moreover, having received my training as a social historian, I have developed a profound wariness of what Marx called the "illusion of politics," i.e., the belief that changes in society flow from the pens of legislators, or that there is any direct relationship between the beliefs and programs of politicians and what actually happens in schools. Instead, I see schools as arenas of "contestation," in which the diverse agendas of children, parents, teachers, administrators and the community at large are negotiated and the outcomes are unpredictable. I am ill at ease looking at schools "top down," but this is exactly what this volume is about. The reader is cautioned that I know more about what is happening in the corridors of the ministry than in the corridors of the schoolroom, where indeed the situation today seems to be remarkably diverse, volatile and--perhaps more than at any other time in the twentieth century--quite

independent of ministerial control. There is no question in my mind that the "pedagogy of cooperation" and the VNIK program are eminently worthy of attention; for here many of the rich strands making up *obshchestvennost'*, or public consciousness in Russia today, can be studied, and the often contradictory relationship between these strands investigated. I am also certain that there is no way to fully understand Russian education today without reading the documents emanating from the ministry. The massive survey research conducted by VNIK and the formerly secret materials now released by the ministry provide us with extremely valuable information on conditions in the schools as well as on attitudes of key actors (pupils, parents, teachers). Nevertheless, this is primarily a study of the *prescriptive* rather than the *descriptive*; let the reader be forewarned.

Soviet Education Before 1985

The Soviet school emerged in stages and drew its inspiration from a variety of sources. The school system in Imperial Russia had been built from the top down, beginning with research institutions and universities, turning later to secondary schools, and only in the second half of the nineteenth century extending to primary education. It was structured along continental lines, and was especially heavily influenced by German pedagogy and administrative practices. At the same time, alternative approaches enjoyed considerable appeal among educators; particularly important were the preachings of Lev Tolstoy and, after 1905 the writings of John Dewey on education. The first Soviet school legislation (1918) and early approaches to education during the NEP period (1921-1929) reflected the profound influence of progressive theories and practice, both Russian and Western.³

The Soviet system of education which developed under Stalin and was elaborated, rather than dismantled, under his successors, uprooted the progressive, inquiries-oriented and democratic tradition of NEP.⁴ As it emerged, the Stalinist school was an integral part of what the ideology of perestroika labelled the "administrative-command" system. Like the system as a whole, education was characterized by a "top-down" approach: vertical lines of authority extended downward from the ministries through the regional and district authorities (*ronos, goronos*) to the directors of schools, teachers, and ultimately the pupils. There were ways directors could exert a measure of independence, and differences in teaching style certainly created diverse climates in the classroom.⁵ Under Brezhnev, as belief in communism evaporated and opportunities to advance in society narrowed--leaving many youth "warehoused" in vocational schools or indifferent to grades--alienation spread and disciplinary problems became serious in many areas. Nevertheless, the system remained characterized by authoritarian approaches, uniforms, homework, rote learning

in large classrooms, and a uniform and tightly controlled curriculum. The Communist Party maintained tight control over definitions of historical truth and interpretations of current reality, even as Soviet literature increasingly portrayed a reality at odds with such interpretations and as young people gained more and more access to alternative sources of information.⁶ Funding was rigidly controlled by the central authorities, and directors of schools were left virtually no discretion in allocating revenues.⁷ At the same time, the proportion of national income devoted to education was steadily declining, and calculations of outlays per capita placed the Soviet Union far behind most developed countries in expenditures on education.⁸ Teachers worked extraordinarily long hours⁹ and had virtually no autonomy in the classroom or representation outside it; the official teachers' union served largely as a "transmission belt" or company union to convey directives from above. As for research in education, it was dominated by the Academy of Pedagogical Sciences, first founded in 1944 and employing (in 1985) 1,700 specialists in 15 (22 by 1991) various institutions. Although the Academy included talented and dedicated people, it tended to stifle competition (in fact there was no procedure for competition for grants in research), and it was held in low regard, both at home and abroad (in daily speech, it was distinguished from the "Big Academy" or the Academy of Sciences).

Reformers today argue that the Stalinist school suppressed individual identity formation (*lichnost*), and worked instead to produce "cogs" (*vintiki*--a word borrowed from a famous utterance by Stalin). The contrast may be too stark, but there can be no doubt that the Soviet school encouraged conformity and political docility, and generally suppressed initiative as well as independent thought. The perceived needs of the economy and the state were put above those of the individual. On the other hand, because over time more and more subjects were added to the curriculum (creating, incidentally, the problem of *mnogopredmetnost*, subject overloading) less and less attention could be devoted to socialization, or upbringing (*vospitanie*). By the 1970's the central goal of education had become imparting "ZUNY," which was the educator's derogatory shorthand for the Russian language equivalents of "knowledge, habits, and skills."

By the time of Brezhnev's death, problems had mounted, as had frustration with the seeming inability of in-house approaches to address these problems. According to the Soviet press at the time, education suffered from "overloaded syllabuses, textbooks, and pupils," from a shortage of qualified preschool and school-level personnel, from inadequate school buildings and equipment. According to official data, as late as 1988 21 percent of all students attended schools in buildings without central heating, 30 percent were in schools lacking indoor plumbing, 40 percent studied in schools lacking a sewer system, and forty percent (more in rural districts) had no access to sports facilities. More than a quarter of all children attended school in second or even third shifts.¹⁰

The content of the syllabuses and textbooks was "conceptually overexacting," though "taught by the same old methods." Formalism in assessment procedures was accompanied by widespread abuse--the notorious *protsentomania*, whereby virtually all students were passed on to the next grade, regardless of genuine level of achievement.¹¹ In short, overworked teachers, whose status in society was rapidly declining, were being required to teach an overloaded curriculum to an increasingly unmotivated student body in crowded classrooms, with inadequate facilities and few amenities, and using antiquated methods.¹²

Official Reform Before 1985

Despite the rigid control exerted over education by the Communist Party and the Academy of Pedagogical Sciences, it would be a mistake to overlook the waves of reform which broke over the Soviet school in the decades preceding Gorbachev's rise to power. Reformers divided into two more or less distinct camps: those who urged more equality, more uniformity and more applied, especially vocational, training; and a more disparate group urging diversity, decentralization and a range of experimental, individualized approaches--a *differentiated* education which its opponents would call elitist.¹³ It would be wrong to label the former the official camp, and the latter the opposition, for debate took place *within* official circles and in the official press, and there is no *necessary* link between egalitarianism and centralization (indeed, NEP educational policy was egalitarian and placed great emphasis upon local school boards, while the Stalinist school was highly centralized, authoritarian and differentiated--in that it practiced streaming). Nevertheless, it is generally true that the egalitarian strain was linked with a belief in centralized hierarchy, conservative patriotism and an authoritarian classroom. It dominated the Central Committee, the ministry and the Academy of Pedagogical Sciences. Similarly, the drive for differentiation tended to be located at the margins of the official educational community, but was supported by the burgeoning middle classes and scientific community, which had little interest in programs forcing their offspring to work in factories or the fields and were inclined to oppose "levelling." This strain was transmitted in informal seminars within the educational community, by innovative approaches introduced in "marginal" subjects such as art and music,¹⁴ through experiments in isolated schools (often repressed after intervention by the Academy of Pedagogical Sciences), and by a small number of committed reformers within the APN, protected by psychologist Vasily Davydov, whose international reputation gave him a measure of inviolability.¹⁵ Within the reform movement today, the names of V. Sukhomlinsky, V. Shatalov, and S. Lysenkova, all teachers who suffered in the 1970s from the heavy hand of the Academy, are revered.

Under Khrushchev, a major reform was launched in 1958, in an attempt to make access to secondary schooling and the universities more democratic, and to force children of white-collar families to receive training in manual labor (thereby gaining respect for the more lowly trades). Khrushchev's drive to "polytechnize" the schools met with fervid resistance, and proved to be "administratively impracticable, socially unacceptable, and inadequately financed."¹⁶ Nevertheless, a simultaneous drive to increase the amount and quality of foreign language instruction in the ordinary schools made progress, and special schools were opened in language, art, music and the sciences.¹⁷

Perhaps the most interesting set of reforms were those launched in 1966 and implemented throughout the 1970's--which came to be known as the (L. V.) Zankov reforms. These reforms rolled back the effort to "polytechnize" education and reemphasized the importance of a general education over labor training. In this, and in the implicit rejection of Khrushchev's efforts to enhance the prestige of manual labor, they were "conservative." But they also sought to revive aspects of the progressive tradition by introducing "developmental instruction" (*razvivaiushchee obuchenie*) as well as the new math and a social science curriculum which would incorporate new teaching approaches and contrasting perspectives (in order to combat the growing influx of information from Western sources; still, however, leading students to *correct* answers). What is particularly interesting about these reforms is that they legitimated the developmental and (through electives and the expansion of special-profile schools) differentiation components of the progressive tradition, making them part of the official reform effort.¹⁸ These reforms did make some headway. However they ultimately foundered on the fundamental contradiction inherent in efforts to reinvigorate society from above, in efforts to enlist society's energies in the service of goals set by the state. This contradiction was a fatal flaw in Khrushchev's reforms. In fact, it has roots in Russian policy formation extending back as far as the Great Reforms under Alexander II (1855-1881).¹⁹ Moreover, these efforts demonstrated the growing difficulty of devising measures that would satisfy the diverse constituencies represented in the school and the society as a whole.

Thus, there was some evolutionary change (particularly curriculum modification, and increasing length of schooling) and there were departures from the monolithic model of the general secondary school.²⁰ Paradoxically, many of these reforms ultimately contributed to the sense of crisis in education by the early eighties. Curriculum overloading was a way of avoiding fundamental change, and reflected processes occurring in the political environment as a whole. Interest group negotiations had become the way by which the Brezhnev leadership integrated all powerful sectors into the system. As long as the pie (the economy) continued to grow, each group could be mollified with a small increment from year to year. Similarly, in education, various groups (the scientific community, ideologists, industrial managers) all pointed to the

exponentially growing volume of knowledge in the world and demanded time to impart more information. But the potential of the economy, like that of the school-day, was finally exhausted. To borrow the terminology of Soviet economists, the *extensive* approach to economic growth, whereby abundant resources were thrown at problems with little concern for cost or efficiency, was now bankrupt. Life, both inside and outside the classroom, was now a *zero-sum game*--my loss is your gain, and vice versa--unless the entire system, both school and economy, could be restructured to function according to *intensive* principles. What this meant in economic terms was relatively clear, or became so under Gorbachev: privatization, marketization, dismantling of the old command structures, and reliance upon individual initiative--the so-called *human factor*. But what did this mean for the schools? What traditions and what rhetoric could reformers in education call upon? Essentially, it meant that the old method of imparting an ever-growing body of information by means of traditional, "frontal," techniques (in Russian, the equivalent is roughly "the informational-explanatory method") had to be discarded, and the old, pre-revolutionary dream of helping students "learn how to learn" revived, now through methods built around developmental psychology.

In fact, one more attempt was made to square the circle, and to find a solution to the mounting problems of the school through incremental reforms which left the system fundamentally intact. The 1984 reform, initiated under Andropov, then Chernenko, but with the active participation of then-Politburo member Michael Gorbachev,²¹ pursued several goals: to substantially increase funding (especially capital inputs and teachers' salaries); to encourage more children to pursue vocational rather than general education curricula after the eighth grade (surveys conducted at the time showed that most parents thought this was a wonderful idea, but not for their own children); to lower the age of entry from seven to six (thereby giving children an extra year of formal schooling and diminishing overloading, but also taking children out of the hands of incompetent kindergarten teachers, where child-care had been largely reduced to custodial functions); and, once again, to revise the general curriculum, improve teaching training and rewrite textbooks. The draft reform was published with great fanfare in early 1984, a huge, orchestrated "public discussion" ensued, and the final legislation emerged virtually unchanged three months later.²² In January, 1985, a plan was issued for introducing computer education, and in April new rules were issued to govern teacher-pupil relations.

Gorbachev, Glasnost', Perestroika, and Education

But soon the law was a dead letter, overcome by events in the world outside, and labelled a typical product of the "era of stagnation" (the ritualistic, and quite inaccurate, phrase used to describe the late Brezhnev period in contrast to the

period of "renewal" under Gorbachev--such simplified descriptors and polarities were, ironically, one of the most characteristic features of Soviet political culture).²³

Indeed, since 1984 the Soviet Union has experienced a seemingly endless series of tumultuous events. Chernobyl, the Armenian earthquake and revelations of environmental devastation as well as "human degradation"²⁴ fought for headlines with the remarkable political changes which led to the first free elections in the Russian Empire since 1917, the establishment of the People's Congress of Deputies and, finally, to an end to the Communist Party monopoly over political power. In 1988 a powerful movement for political independence emerged on the empire's borders; in 1989 Eastern Europe won its political independence, and at the close of 1991, the Soviet Union itself disintegrated, leaving Russia aligned with most of the former republics in a fragile commonwealth (the CIS). The very scale and excitement of the momentous changes underway obscured, for the moment, the failure to develop or implement vitally necessary economic reforms.

Framing all of these events was the dismantling of censorship and elimination of police controls over the thought and behavior of the citizenry. Education has always been an issue of genuine and immediate concern to important segments of the Soviet population.²⁵ In a climate in which the national history, the economy, environment and political structures were all examined and found critically deficient, it was only natural that education would undergo particularly harsh critical scrutiny, and be labelled yet one more example of *katastroika* (the catastrophe wrought by perestroika). There is a universal tendency toward hyperbolic rhetoric, and especially the rhetoric of catastrophe, in education; this global perception of crisis in education, then, reinforced the national sense that everything was wrong, but that the schools were in particularly deplorable condition.²⁶

After the famous April 1985 Plenum, in which the newly installed General Secretary of the Communist Party, Michael Gorbachev, called for serious change in the country, educators began to express dissatisfaction with the 1984 reform.²⁷ The newspaper *Teachers' Gazette*, under the editorial leadership of Vladimir Matveev, became a muckraking instrument of reform, as well as an organizational core for the innovation movement. Under its aegis, a group of innovative educators met at the writers' colony of Peredelkino in October, 1986. Claiming that working in isolation in different schools over a span of twenty-five to forty years, they had all come up with a common philosophy and similar approaches to the classroom, they issued a Manifesto under the rubric of "The Pedagogy of Cooperation." Over the course of the next two years, three other manifestos were issued, putting forth the philosophy of the "New Pedagogical Thought," which called for more humane relations between teacher and pupil, a "dialogue of cultures," an "open school," greater respect for the autonomy of childhood and for the role of play in learning, and for freedom of choice as well

as self-government. Its proponents called the Pedagogy of Cooperation an "open-ended approach" and welcomed diversity in the classroom. They recognized that much of what they advocated was not original; what was different now was that the time was ripe, the environment more conducive, to establish a more democratic classroom, and make the school "an outpost of perestroika." At the same time, these educators went beyond abstractions to suggest ways to bring about a more democratic and humane environment in the classroom, as well as to promote effective learning. These included approaches which had been developed and tested, often in less than optimal conditions, by innovators such as I. Volkov, D. El'konin, B. Nikitin, Sh. Amonashvili, V. Sukhomlinsky, E. Il'in, S. Lysenkova, D. Ogorodnov, V. Shatalov, and M. Shchetinin. *Teachers' Gazette* also sponsored Eureka societies of reform-minded educators.²⁸ Like other "informal" groups springing up throughout the country, these societies mushroomed--there were some 500 by 1989.²⁹ In January, 1987, when a new Statute of General Secondary Education was promulgated, it was immediately attacked by *Teachers' Gazette* as contradicting the call for democratization of society issued at the January Plenum of the Central Committee of the Communist Party and as a virtual carbon copy of the earlier, 1970 Statute.

In one sense, the reform movement was a local embodiment of high politics, taking its cue from the general directions of reform under Gorbachev, and especially glasnost and democratization. But it also represented the renewal, or legitimation, of long marginalized or even repressed perspectives in education, the triumph of the progressive (used as a descriptive rather than a normative term) tradition against the educational establishment--the ministries, the Academy of Pedagogical Sciences and the official Teachers' Union. And the increasing official emphasis upon "the human factor" privileged education in the rhetoric of perestroika, for if the success of reform depended, in the long term, upon fostering qualities of initiative, independence and responsibility, what could be more logical than to begin with the schools? Thus, the period 1985-1987 witnessed the emergence of a campaign for greater teacher autonomy in the classroom and for new approaches to the child. At the same time, in the press criticism was widespread of special profile schools catering to the elite. Thus, the wave of criticism of the schools comprised elements of egalitarianism as well as support for differentiation.³⁰

Unsurprisingly, there was bureaucratic resistance to reform, and the Academy of Pedagogical Sciences launched a fierce campaign (especially at an in-house gathering in December, 1986) to discredit both the reform movement in education and its most prominent proponents. The Ministry of Enlightenment in Moscow dragged its heels, and (except in Estonia, Kazakhstan and Georgia--see Chapter 5), the outlying regions continued to perform ritual obeisances while maintaining traditional practices.³¹ But by mid-1987 Gorbachev's sweeping

personnel changes were beginning to have an impact on both the Party and the ministries.

In February, 1987, a group of educators, including several representatives of the APN, met with a writers' group at the House of Literature in Moscow to discuss the theme "school and society." Several of the APN representatives criticized the pedagogy of cooperation movement but one of this group, Dneprov, offered his support, and called for a "revival of the public education movement" of the late nineteenth century as well as for the "destatization" (*razgosudarstvlenie*) of the schools. Matveev, who attended the meeting, published the text of Dneprov's speech (Chapter 6). A day later Yegor Ligachev, second to Gorbachev in the Politburo, but a staunch conservative as well, addressed the APN, and mockingly criticized Dneprov for erring as an historian by 150 years (there had been, he asserted, no official school in Russia since the reign of Nicholas I). But on April 17, Gorbachev addressed the Twentieth Congress of the Komsomol (Young Communist League), and sharply criticized the educational community for *probuksovka*, or stalling on reform.³² What was causing the delay? Here is Dneprov's explanation:

As with other reforms, educational reform has encountered a series of obstacles and barriers during its conception and promulgation. At the first and second stages of school reform--the period of preparation and adoption--the primary obstacles were ideological. During those years when the reforms languished, and during the first, "pre-market" period of implementation, political and societal barriers came to the fore. Today, the greatest dangers are associated with economic barriers. We emphasize that economic barriers have only recently become pre-eminent, rather than earlier, as others assert, perhaps to defend their failure to act, or even simply to sabotage the reform.

An understanding of the nature of the obstacle course encountered by the school reform was essential not merely to adopt the correct tactics of maneuver, but also for devising a general strategy for development and implementation. That this was so was evident even at the initial stages of the reform to the proponents of school reform and to many others, but not to the architects and captains (*proraby*) of perestroika, for whom the light dawned only much later.

At the onset of perestroika its initiators believed that the only way to overcome the inexorably approaching crisis was via *acceleration* of the economic machine. But adoption of the slogan *uskorenie* led to traditional, short-sighted extensive measures, which were simply dangerous in this context. After all, we were proposing to accelerate movement which was hurtling us into an abyss. The same could be said of the schools, where the ongoing crisis was only exacerbated by the 1984 reforms.

It soon became clear that the old economic wagon had built-in limits to the speed it could achieve--it could never become an airplane, nor even a steamship. For that, an entirely new design was called for. This put radical economic reform on the agenda. But it, like the effort then underway to reform the school reforms, could not take place without the larger context of overall societal and economic transformation. And so, reform of the political system was put on the agenda. But here it was suddenly "discovered" that at the end of the reformers' tunnel loomed the greatest obstacle: the pillars of outdated ideological nostrums, holding back economic, political, and social--including school--reforms.

The fact that this chief obstacle loomed large from the start gave a bitter ideological coloration to the project of school reform from its early days. And this fact prompted an equally bitter and protracted struggle against school reform. This struggle was "personally" directed by the Science and Education Section of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, which mobilized the army of official educators, well-nourished by the CC, into waves of frontal and flank attacks.³³

An All-Russian Congress of Educators was scheduled to be convened in order to discuss ways to improve implementation of the 1984 reform. But it was to be packed with the old guard and was unlikely to produce a coherent agenda. On the eve of the Russian Teachers' Congress Dneprov published another article in *Pravda*, ("Faith in the Teacher") in which he proposed postponing the nation-wide congress. The article was heavily censored (particularly passages criticizing the 1984 reform) but nevertheless, in line with similar calls being made by leading reformers like Shalva Amonashvili and V. F. Shatalov, brought into currency the phrase "reform of the reform" and linked Gorbachev's recent criticism of the slow pace of perestroika to the lack of change in education. A day after the article appeared, on June 2, then Minister of Enlightenment of the USSR, S. G. Shcherbatsky, announced that the scheduled nation-wide conference had been postponed.

In July, new First Deputy Minister of Education A. A. Korobeinikov sent a note (co-signed by leading child psychologist, Anton Petrovsky--today the head of the reconstituted Russian Academy of Pedagogical Sciences) to the Central Committee of the Communist Party calling for additional funding for education, the establishment of a working group to draw up a package of reform proposals, and a conference of the Central Committee on educational concerns.³⁴ The note reached Ligachev, who in place of a conference (*soveshchanie*) proposed a more weighty plenum.

Frustrated by his inability to make progress, Dneprov withdrew from the working group brought together in the APN to propose reform, and travelled to Estonia in July and August in order to make contact with a reformist group in

the Estonian Ministry of Education working on a radical set of measures for education. But in the Fall, he had several meetings with Yegor Iakovlev, Gorbachev's closest ally and the intellectual architect of perestroika as well as Politburo man responsible for education and ideology. At the encouragement of Iakovlev and Ligachev (who was bidding to replace Iakovlev in these spheres), a small group of five to seven individuals came together to work out a set of proposals to present to the Central Committee. This group, the embryo of *VNIK-shkola*, submitted its "platform" on December 31, 1987. A month earlier Dneprov, with behind-the-scenes assistance in dealing with the censor from powerful figures in the CC, managed to publish yet another article (Chapter 5) which included much material deleted from his previous article. This was followed, on February 13, 1988, by another piece (Chapter 3) calling for a major overhaul of the way education was administered and for elected school boards and, on March 1, by proposals to overhaul the Academy of Pedagogical Sciences (Chapter 7).

Dneprov has repeatedly called 1988 a major turning point in the history of Russian education, a year in which genuine reform "from below" was initiated, replacing the stage-managed efforts of previous years. This argument has much in favor of it; but there can also be little doubt that the trigger of this new reform from below was the speech "from above" by Yegor Ligachev on education to the Central Committee Plenum which convened on February 17, 1988, and that the subsequent Plenum resolution on education for the first time empowered teacher-innovators, until then waging an unequal struggle against the superior forces of the APN. In this speech Ligachev listed the woes plaguing Soviet education, lambasted the bureaucracy, and called for greater autonomy for the teacher, self-government of the schools, including election of principals, the establishment of elected school boards, a new curriculum for the schools, encouragement of diversity (to be sure, within the *unitary* system of education) and a new generation of textbooks. He also endorsed a restructuring of the APN, calling for "a genuinely new academy, with a new charter, new election procedures and, possibly, periodical recall of its members."³⁵

In an interview, Minister Dneprov told me that of the proposals put forward to the CC by the working group, Ligachev's speech reflected most closely the concern to restructure educational governance, for democratization was the major concern of the Party leadership at the time. Other key proposals, including scaling down the official goal of achieving a universal eleven-year mandatory general education (Chapter 11), for making the school a joint state-societal enterprise (see Chapter 9), and for introducing *variativnost'* and *alternativnost'* were either ignored or met with a lukewarm response (the Plenum did endorse the notion of a *bazovaia shkola* or core curriculum, leaving more time for electives, individualized instruction and special-profiling of schools).

Events followed rapidly (see Chapter 8). On March 8, 1988, the three ministry-level structures controlling the schools (the Committee of Vocational-Professional Education, the Ministry of Enlightenment, and the Ministry of Specialized Secondary and Higher Education) were eliminated, or combined into the State Committee of Education, headed by Gennady Iagodin. Initially, Iagodin turned to the APN for help, but then, becoming frustrated, he contacted the group preparing the materials for the Plenum, instructing them to continue preparing a package of reforms and to establish an independent organization. *VNIK-shkola* came into being on June 1, 1988.³⁶

VNIK and the New Program for Education³⁷

Wasting no time, the organizational bureau of the fledgling organization retreated to Lastochki, a Pioneer Camp near Sochi on the Black Sea, for a four-day conference.³⁸ The sessions, or *organizatsionno-deiatel'nostnye igry*, involved one hundred participants interacting in teams for up to fourteen hours a day over four days, in order to develop an ethos and strategy for *VNIK-shkola*, which soon grew from its core of twenty to over two hundred full or part-time members in eighteen so-called laboratories or workshops. When the group returned from Sochi³⁹ on July 26 (during the historic Nineteenth Party Conference) it had prepared "*concept papers (kontseptsii)*" on general education, restructuring the system of educational governance, and on reforming the Academy of Pedagogical Sciences, as well as a Draft Statute for the School. The concept papers were submitted to the Collegium of the State Committee of Education where, despite fierce, hostile, lobbying from the APN, they received tentative approval. Revised editions of all the concept papers were completed by August 25 (see Chapter 9) and published in *Teachers' Gazette*. Over the next half year, *VNIK-shkola* churned out an astonishing variety of documents, ranging from experimental syllabi for all aspects of the curriculum, to proposals for restructuring pre-school education, vocational education, teacher training, special education, as well as conducting numerous sociological surveys of public opinion and other matters related to education. In addition, it set up branches or "experimental laboratories" in Kalinin and Pervomaisk regions in Moscow, in the city of Urai in Tiumen region, in Krasnoiarsk and in Krasnodar region as well as in Sochi.⁴⁰

By now the APN was running scared. *VNIK-shkola* represented the first challenge it had ever faced to its monopoly over the curriculum (although several of the founders of *VNIK-shkola* were themselves in the APN), and criticism of the APN, relentless since 1986, had intensified in 1988.⁴¹ The State Committee of Education had appointed a special commission under First Deputy Minister Vladimir Shadrikov to reorganize the APN. In August, the

APN submitted its own *Concept Papers*. Over the next several months an intense public debate raged in the newspapers⁴². The long-awaited Congress of Educators convened on December 20, 1988 and the outcome, after a protracted debate, was a resounding vote in favor of the *VNIK-shkola* proposals over the APN platform.⁴³

Thus, by early 1989, victory seemed to be at hand for the reform movement. After a bitter struggle the previous year, the bureaucracy's hold over the schools had been shaken and the ministries themselves reorganized; the monopoly of the APN (though not the APN itself) had been smashed, a new teachers' organization established, and a sweeping program of change devised, discussed, and endorsed. As Dneprov frequently observes, all reforms must go through three stages: development, passage and implementation. Now, reformers looked forward to implementing change in short order.

And yet, today, in retrospect, Dneprov labels the period between January, 1989 and July, 1990, one in which reforms were "suspended in the air."

The next year and a half, when the fate of the reforms hung by a thread, were, at first glance, yet another, typical bureaucratic anomaly: the reform is dead, long live the reform! But, the seeming anomaly is but an apparition. Our habit of blaming the bureaucracy is highly superficial. In fact, the bureaucracy is a highly sensitive barometer, instantaneously registering the slightest changes in the political atmosphere. With a political standoff in society, the powers that be made a point of keeping the arrow on the barometer between the readings of "overcast" and "changing" weather.

The chameleon became the symbol of the authorities during the period of perestroika. It reflected perennial vacillation, a stultifying flood of verbiage accompanied by a no less stultifying inertia. The champions of perestroika created merely the semblance of reform, in the realm of education as elsewhere. Half a year transpired before the new Statute on the Schools, adopted by the Congress, was finally passed under enormous pressure from below. The *Concept* approved by this same Congress got lost in the political labyrinth and never saw the light of day. No one even discussed the need to devise a concrete program for promulgating this reform.

In short, the reform was essentially blocked. As a director of a school in Krasnoyarsk said, "the teacher picked up his foot but didn't know where to put it down"; i.e., whether to move forward or march in place. This condition of maddening indecision, with the reform hanging in the balance and teachers uncertain how to proceed, continued for a year and a half, until the new leaders of the Russian Federation committed themselves to an independent and consistent endeavor to implement the reforms.

In this period there were in fact some significant victories. One was confirmation by the State Committee for Education of four provisional statutes: for the secondary school (essentially embodying the key notions in *Concept Paper*), vocational education, the secondary specialized school, and higher education.⁴⁴ The Creative Teachers' Union held its first conference.⁴⁵ Iagodin created a National Council of Education and local elected school boards to allow more public input as well as local autonomy.⁴⁶ But the reform movement lost its most articulate voice when early in 1989 *Teachers' Gazette* was turned into a weekly, removed from the Russian Ministry of Education and turned over to the Central Committee, and Matveev was forced out as editor (he died in October that year). Elections to the Presidium of the APN produced mixed results, and reorganization of that institution was successfully blocked.⁴⁷ Indeed, when the first Congress of People's Deputies met, the APN was given *ex officio* several seats. The fledgling Creative Teachers' Union soon foundered. The National Council of Education, first convened on March 16, 1988, turned out to be a highly conservative organization. It pointedly ignored the *Concept Paper* endorsed at the Congress; this key document was approved only in December, 1989, and then five months later by the Collegium of the State Committee of Education (Chapter 8). The fate of *VNIK-shkola* itself hung in the balance. Established as an ad hoc committee, it initially had virtually no permanent staff, and almost all of the prominent psychologists, sociologists, historians, philosophers and teachers who contributed to its extraordinary efforts did so on a voluntary basis, outside their regular working hours. *VNIK-shkola* was given an additional lease on life early in 1989,⁴⁸ but its long term prospects remained murky.

As always, the fate of educational reform was closely linked to the general political and economic changes, or lack of them, in the country; from this perspective, the period beginning early 1989 was indeed one of increasing polarization and drift (Chapter 10). The stunning disintegration of the monopoly of political power exerted by the Communist Party and central government was accompanied by the failure of the 1987 economic reforms to take root and the growing revolt of the country's borderlands. Russia too, which those on the periphery of the country see as the *tsentr*, proclaimed its virtual independence in early 1990. As Boris Yeltsin came to power and the new Russian Parliament began to act, a new era began. It was now, in July, 1990 that Edward Dneprov was appointed Minister of Education of the Russian Federation by Prime Minister Silaev. The opposition had come to power.

By this time, the group around Dneprov had developed a "platform" of ten central goals--five concerning the "external affairs" of the school, and five concerning "internal" affairs (Chapter 12). These oft-repeated principles include, in the first group: democratization (promotion of personal autonomy, self-government, and cooperative practices); an end to the state monopoly over schooling, decentralization of administrative practices; multiplicity, variability,

and alternativnost' (legitimization of alternative forms of schooling); regionalization (the right, indeed obligation, of each region to devise and implement its own program of educational growth; the right to national self-determination in education (roughly, "multi-culturalism"); openness (the internationalization of education, depoliticization and deideologization of the school, as well as integration into the world educational system). In general, the ambition (described in Chapter 8) was to convert the schools from exclusively state-run or state-dominated institutions to partnerships involving parents, students, the community and officialdom.

As for the "internal" principles, they are: humanization (a child-centered education, in opposition to the prevailing "childless" pedagogy in which the teacher and lesson are central); differentiation (by inclination, interest, and ability); lifelong education; and finally, a developmental education (emphasizing inquiry and activation). The unifying principle was that of *operezhenie*: the school should be in advance of society; and the classroom should be in "advance" of the child in that it should provide a challenging environment facilitating growth.

The Opposition in Power⁴⁹

But Dneprov has had to struggle to advance this agenda of reform. Since his initial appointment as Minister of Education, he has had to run the confirmation gauntlet two additional times. In addition, as Dneprov pointed out in a speech in Sochi in September, 1991, the kind of reforms in education he envisioned were bound to fail unless changes took place simultaneously in the legal system, property rights, and the political process. For that reason, and in order to increase the relative weight of the Ministry of Education in the political system, Dneprov has devoted much of his energy to the political struggle at the top. His critics, nevertheless, have bitterly attacked him for neglecting the school in favor of "Big Politics" and, by implication, for pursuing his own career ambitions.⁵⁰

At the same time, he launched an ambitious, multi-pronged effort to restructure the ministry, to put legislation in place to undergird reform, and to line up financial support for his policies. A broad-based strategy of reform to bring the school system through the period of political and economic transition was presented to the Conference of Educators in March, 1991, where it won approval. Within the ministry, many top advisors were brought in from VNIK, and the ministry itself was restructured (see Chapter 20). Among other noteworthy changes were the establishment of an Institute of Childhood, an Institute for the Study of Nationality Problems in Education (along with a Council on Nationality Education) and the creation of a Council of Rectors of Pedagogical Institutes to oversee a reform of teacher training, as well as a

Sociological Bureau directly under the ministry but with local branches under pedagogical institutes and institutes for inservice training (IUs).⁵¹

In February, 1991, after considerable delay and frustration, seven different statutes on education (temporary statutes on higher education, on general secondary education, on specialized secondary education, on vocational education, on pre-school education, on institutions for orphans and wards of the state, and on extramural education) were approved by the Council of Ministers of the Russian Federation, thereby making these statutes (largely derived from the draft statutes approved by the Congress of Educators in late 1988) binding upon all institutions of government rather than upon institutions of the Ministry of Education alone. And on June 11, 1991, newly elected President Boris Yeltsin declared education a priority sector (Decree Number 1).

But along with these advances, resistance to reform continued, even heightened after Minister Dneprov prohibited pre-military training, political propaganda, or religious instruction in the schools. From Dneprov's perspective, this opposition was formidable indeed:

Opposition to the school reforms did not abate at the political or the societal level; indeed the tempo of opposition increased as implementation began. It was not merely that each concrete step in the direction of reform met with corresponding resistance. Underpinning this reform was the overall activization of those forces determined to undercut the course of reform in Russia in general. These were the same forces which disemboweled the (Shatalin Plan) 500 Days Reform in November, 1990, and two months later provoked military clashes in the Baltic, and yet two months later, put troops on the streets in Moscow. The penultimate and final acts of this scenario are well known: the "(Valentin) Pavlov uprising" in June and the attempted coup in August.

Opposition to school reform in the initial period of implementation was especially visible in two areas: that of demilitarizing the schools and of depoliticizing education. The future military leaders of the coup, Marshall Moiseev and General Varenikov, tried almost literally to wipe off the face of the earth the leadership of the Ministry of Education for its decision to eliminate obligatory military training and its order to remove all weapons from the schools. This seemingly internal issue, raised by the ministry in October, 1990, turned out to be a trial by fire of sorts. Over and over again and in various settings, intimidating generals hurled thunder bolts at the ministry, demanding that the order be rescinded. On three different occasions the question was examined--with different outcomes--by the Council of Ministers of the Russian Federation. It was only in May of 1991 that this august body finally came down resolutely in support of the initiative of the ministry.

And the events were no less dramatic surrounding the decision taken in January, 1991 by the Collegium of the Ministry of Education to depoliticize education and remove political parties from the schools. The leadership of the Russian Communist Party, hand in hand with *Pravda*, with the State Committee of Education of the USSR and the Academy of Pedagogical Sciences of the USSR, did not delay in unleashing a massive campaign against this decision. The ministry was accused of every conceivable mortal sin leading to the ultimate collapse of the school system. More traditional approaches were also brought to bear: threats of summons before the Politburo and exclusion "from the ranks" (of the Party). But such threats no longer held much conviction; the ranks of the faithful had dwindled. Moreover, the ranks of the Russian Communist Party were of the kind from which it was better to keep one's distance.

There were five basic barriers to educational reform during the initial period of implementation. Three represented traditional forces: the party structure, official pedagogy, and the aggrieved old *apparat*. Two were not so traditional: the army leadership and the incipient "shadow economy" in education, hastening to profit by trading in the property and resources of the educational system in the prevailing economic and legal chaos. Twice in one year these forces tried to paralyze the reforms and simultaneously to decapitate the overly independent ministry. And on both occasions, to repeat a phrase employed by *Izvestiia* ("A New Era?"), they managed to prevent the school from entering a new era.

Postscript: After the Coup

On the morning of the ill-fated coup attempt of August 19 (coincidentally, only a day or so after his latest confirmation in office), Minister Dneprov sent a circular to all local offices of education stating unambiguously that the coup was illegal and that the ministry recognized only the authority of the Russian government.⁵² After the failure of the coup, the ministry enjoyed an interval of roughly four months in which it had unprecedented freedom to pursue its agenda: the State Committee of Education was abolished in November, the Academy of Pedagogical Sciences finally disbanded in December, and the belief spread that now, finally, real change could begin. In May, 1992, the minister also won approval for his long-advocated (see Chapter 18) Statute on Non-Government Educational Institutions--essentially a charter for private schools.

But since the end of 1991, optimism has rapidly eroded. The collapse of the economy has exacerbated already severe shortages in the schools. Teachers' wages are no longer sufficient to maintain even the most spartan of existences, and alienation among the rank-and-file has reached threatening proportions, as