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Imagining socialism in the Soviet century

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ABSTRACT
Much of the current conversation about social justice, economic responsibility and individual self-realization is informed by an explicit or implicit comparison between capitalist and socialist modernities. The Soviet Union’s variety of socialism understandably serves as a critical master referent in this conversation. In this regard, a dominant historical narrative that ties the history of Soviet socialism to the Bolshevik origins imposes serious limitation to available depictions of socialism and histories of the twentieth century. This article turns the Bolshevik fundamentals assigned to the Soviet project into a problem of historical analysis and argues that the Soviet experience has more than one normative vision of socialism to offer. The goal is to foreground the divergence of normative conceptions of the socialist society and individual by historicizing the two principal and presently closely identified ideological-educational undertakings: those of the New Man and the ‘New Soviet Person’. By tracing the histories of the two projects, the article shows how the collectivist ethos of the Bolshevism of the 1910–1920s that rejected the ontological differentiation between the individual and his or her social milieu failed to retain its ideological, institutional, and cultural currency even during the 1930s, not to mention throughout the Soviet period.

Introduction
This article questions a longstanding convention, in and outside academia, which allowed scholars, including myself, to conflate in their work such basic cultural categories of modern Russian history as the ‘Bolshevik’ and the ‘Soviet’, or the ‘socialist’. It is in part a matter of stylistic convenience to refer to the 74 years of the Soviet Union’s existence, from its militant proletarian republic to Gorbachev’s half-decade of perestroika, as the ‘Soviet period’. However, when utilized in the analysis of cultural change over the course of the ‘Soviet’ century, this stylistic convenience rests on a body of scholarship that assigns undergirding cultural continuity to
what was in fact a period of social and economic transformation unprecedented in Russian history. In the resultant historical scenario, such grounding concepts of the Soviet ideological and cultural project as the socialist individual and the socialist collective are tied to the Bolshevik origins and enjoy a puzzling degree of independence from their socioeconomic circumstance.

Most recently, for example, scholars working under the rubric of socialist modernity have viewed the Soviet socialist project as a Bolshevik experiment in alternative organization of society and human nature. The concept of ‘speaking Bolshevik’ used by scholars over the last twenty years to study processes of ‘being’ and ‘becoming Soviet’ vividly illustrates the established inter-referentiality of Bolshevik and Soviet cultures of socialism in academic literature.

Coined by Stephen Kotkin in his 1995 Magnetic Mountain, ‘speaking Bolshevik’ pointed to the forceful intervention of the Bolshevik ideology from the 1910s to 1920s into people’s everyday lives in Stalin’s pre-war Russia. Explaining the notion, Kotkin equated the ‘Soviet identification game’, that is, the process of ‘becoming a Soviet worker’, for example, with ‘an adaptation of the Bolshevik language of speaking about oneself’ and its ‘basic tenets’ inspired by the romanticized vision of a proletarian, collectivist character. In the following decades, the ‘speaking Bolshevik’ concept has become an academic lingua franca of the field itself and has generated a new body of scholarship. In it, Soviet people not only ‘speak Bolshevik’ but also ‘master Bolshevik’, ‘think Bolshevik’, ‘gain Bolshevik consciousness’, ‘act Bolshevik’, carry on a ‘constant dialogue with Bolshevism’, and hone their ‘personal Bolshevism’.

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the unfolding history of the concept in all its transfigurations is that it has enabled an impressive list of studies whose authors manage to investigate variations, contradictions, and even change of the Soviet ideological project while upholding the project’s grounding in Bolshevik ‘basic tenets’. For example, in her 2000 innovative study of Stalin’s interwar culture, Karen Petrone found the ‘speaking Bolshevik’ concept (which she already used interchangeably with ‘speaking Soviet’) ‘very useful’ as she examined contradictions of official ideology and ‘multiple’ Soviet identities it produced.

1Here and in the rest of the introduction, italics within quotations are added for emphasis by this author. Stephen Kotkin, Magnetic Mountain. Stalinism as civilization (Berkeley, 1995), 220, also 221–5; on Kotkin’s analytics, see Anna Krylova, ‘Soviet modernity: Stephen Kotkin and the Bolshevik predicament’, Contemporary European History, 23, 2 (2014), 167–92.

The discovered contradictions however did not lead Petrone to questioning the ‘fundamental tenets of Soviet state ideology’ which she defined as encompassing a sequence of codependent imperatives of ‘gaining Bolshevik consciousness and [being] synthesized into the New Soviet Man’. Likewise, in his pioneering work on Soviet subjectivity, Jochen Hellbeck, treated a 1930s diary as ‘a laboratory of the Soviet self’ that, on the one hand, allowed for ‘reshaping and redirecting [of] Bolshevik ideological tenets in the process of their reception’ and, on the other hand, operated within the terrain of the ‘Bolshevik ideal’ of ‘a selfless, collectivist builder of socialism’.3

The most recent development – the transfer of the ‘speaking Bolshevik’ concept into the booming literature on the post-war period – captures the elevation of the term to the status of the field’s comprehensive analytics, pertinent for the Soviet period as a whole. Noteworthy, this transfer has taken place matter-of-factly while scholars using the ‘Bolshevik’ as a shortcut for the essence of the Soviet ideological project do not feel compelled to justify their choice of analytics. Thus, in her 2005 Tear off the Mask, Sheila Fitzpatrick kept the notions of ‘speaking Bolshevik’ and ‘what it meant to be Soviet’ closely identified and offered the following analysis of post-war Soviet society:

By the 1960s what it meant to be ‘Soviet’ was no longer problematic … the society was no longer composed of individuals learning to ‘speak Bolshevik’… the older generation had already learned the language, while the younger – the majority of the population – were native speakers. Indeed, ‘Bolshevik’ was spoken with such fluency that the whole Soviet idiom and persona was becoming a cliché.4

Indeed, to offer justifications each time the notion of ‘speaking Bolshevik’ is invoked to talk about Soviet modernity seems to be redundant thanks to the powerful historical rationalization at the field’s disposal. Arguing that, in the 1930s, the Bolshevik core agenda was objectified into economic and cultural-ideological principles of the Soviet system and that the resultant ‘Bolshevik speaking’ socialism with all its variations, contradictions, and developments stayed within, what David Hoffmann called, the basic ‘parameters’ of ‘one culture unified’, scholars offered a historical justification for the conflated use of the ‘Soviet’, the ‘Bolshevik’, and the ‘socialist’.5 As such, they articulate a sharp departure of the modernity school from the older, neo-traditionalist school of thinking that cast the 1930s as a decade of discontinuities of the Bolshevik project: a Stalinist ‘retreat’ away from proletarian

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4Sheila Fitzpatrick, Tear off the Mask. Identity and imposture in twentieth-century Russia (Princeton, 2005), 25; a detailed discussion of the transfer of Bolshevik ‘tenets’ on the post-war period can be found in Krylova, ‘Soviet modernity’, op. cit., 179–85.
toward preceding – ‘prerevolutionary’ and ‘bourgeois’ – ideological projects and cultural forms.°

My query in this article is into the academic tendency, captured by the liberal deployment of the ‘speaking Bolshevik’ concept, to tie, at the fundamental level, core ideological and cultural parameters of the Soviet socialist project to the Bolshevik origins or ‘basic tenets’. Not a subject of an explicit, critical conversation, the identification of Bolshevik ‘tenets’ with the socialist ideal is not unique to the modernity school. In fact, what the modernity and neo-traditionalist schools of thought have in common is the presupposition that the history of the Soviet Union has only one master narrative of socialism to offer, either fundamentally unbroken or fundamentally disrupted. ‘Fundamental’ is a keyword in this academic convention. It points to an undergirding system of Bolshevik values and modes of thought – a socialist episteme of anti-individualism and collectivism – that supposedly survived the socioeconomic transformation the Soviet Union began to undergo in the 1930s.

In what follows, I propose to turn the fundamentals assigned to the Soviet socialist endeavour into a problem of historical analysis and free them from their fundamental, history-defiant characteristics. My goal is to create a platform for historicizing and rethinking the normative parameters of Soviet modernity and to add a new chapter to the history of imagining and living socialism in the rapidly industrializing Soviet Union.

I argue that instead of over-determining the Soviet cultural project throughout the twentieth century, the anti-individualist and collectivist ethos of the 1920s’ Bolshevism had already begun to lose its ideological and cultural grounds to a markedly non-Bolshevik vision of socialist modernity during the 1930s. As early as the mid-1930s, Soviet society, in the process of industrializing, began speaking more than one – still socialist – language of modernity right at the centre of its political and popular culture. I call the emergent Soviet episteme that did not utilize Bolshevik ‘tenets’ – individualizing, not to be conflated with individualist. Unlike individualist ideologies, an individualizing cultural language of Soviet modernity, examined here, does not position the individual against the social. On the contrary, it posits the individual and the social as being a priori distinct dimensions in a person’s life and offers a way to articulate a relationship (not a ‘merger’, to use the Bolshevik vocabulary) between the two.

I make these grounding categories of modern thought and practice – the individual and the social – key parameters of my analysis. At no point do I frame my argument in abstracted terms of a transition from collectivism to individualism. Both the Bolshevik collectivist ethos and, what I call, the emergent individualizing

°A classic example of neo-traditionalist scholarship, a founding paradigm of Western Sovietology and, today, still a rich source of the field’s interpretive solutions is Vera Dunham, In Stalin’s Time: Middleclass values in Soviet fiction (Cambridge, 1976); another highly influential treatment of cultural change in the 1930s as a turn toward pre-revolutionary terms is Sheila Fitzpatrick’s Ascribing class: the construction of social identity in Soviet Russia,’ Journal of Modern History, 65, 4 (Dec. 1993), 745–70.
episteme encompassed and operated with the notions of the individual and the collective. The differentiation that I seek to demonstrate involves a change in the normative understanding of the *relationship* between the socialist individual and his or her society.\(^7\)

The historical material for this reconceptualization of the Soviet socialist project comes from the decades of the 1920s and 1930s. In particular, the two principle cultural-educational undertakings of the period – those of the New Man and the ‘New Soviet Person’ – serve as my main venues to trace the emergent divergence of normative conceptions of the socialist society and socialist individual before the war. Predictably, academic literature treats the two as synonymous. Such literature is characterized by a striking lack of interest in exploring qualitative differences between the ‘New Man’ – the Bolshevik proletariat-styled, collectivist ideal of the 1900s–1920s – and the ‘New Soviet Person’ – the new discursive creation that first comes into journalistic, political, pedagogical, and popular vocabulary only in the mid-1930s. In my analysis, the ideal of the ‘New Soviet Person’ together with a new set of social, institutional and educational policies constitutes an epistemic departure from basic ‘parameters’ of Bolshevism – not another historical variation around the same core tenets.

I argue that, if champions of the Bolshevik collectivist agenda privileged the ‘collective’ as the condition of possibility of individuality and at times aimed at eliminating the very difference between the ‘individual’ and the ‘social’, the emergent non-Bolshevik alternative – in contrast – posited a new task of learning how to ‘connect’ (i.e. to relate) individual predispositions and goals with the social good. I treat the new development which provided Soviet citizens with a formal language to present individual and social dimensions of their lives as distinct entities, in need of relation but not identification, as the epistemic beginning of a new discourse on the socialist individual and its non-market industrial society. These developments call for a critical re-evaluation of what we mean when we say ‘socialist’ and ‘Soviet’ and what the ‘Soviet’ cultural formation stands for.

The Soviet encounter with socialism, in other words, offers a historian more than one normative script. How was the proletariat-styled paradigm of Bolshevism to address the profound social transformation brought about by the

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\(^7\)The approach here parts with the most recent study of the question of the collective and the individual in Soviet Russia that analyses the problematic through the lens of Bolshevism and Eastern Orthodox practices: Oleg Kharkhordin, *The Collective and the Individual in Russia. A study of practice* (Berkeley, 1999). In it, Kharkhordin excuses the Soviet socialist experiment from practices of individualization which, according to the author, appeared in the Soviet Union only after the 1950s and only in defiance of official Bolshevist-Soviet ideology: Kharkhordin, op. cit., 338–40.

The question of the ‘collective’ and ‘individual’ as interdependent concepts of Soviet ideology has not enjoyed a focused study since Kharkhordin although the notions themselves have been in continuous use, standing for the Bolshevik collective-based agenda of ‘subjectivization’: see Hellbeck, *Revolution, op. cit.* For early research on the concept of the individual, see Raymond A. Bauer’s classic, *The New Man in Soviet Psychology* (Cambridge, 1952); Leopold Haimson, ‘The solitary hero and the Philistines’ in Richard Pipes (ed.), *The Russian Intelligentsia* (New York, 1962); Katerina Clark’s ‘Utopian anthropology as a context for Stalinist literature’ in Robert C. Tucker (ed.), *Stalinism. Essays in historical interpretation* (New York, 1977). The latter, being devoted to the cult of the Stalinist ‘super hero’, has been sometimes wrongly construed as exploring ‘individualistic’ currents in Stalinist ideology. For the most recent study of the problem of the individual, see Anatoly Pinsky, ‘The diaristic form and subjectivity under Khrushchev’, *Slavic Review*, 73, 4 (2014), 805–27.
1930s industrialization, namely, the mass arrival of an urban and professionally differentiated middle class defined by the self-centred and individualizing character of intellectual labour? In the 1930s, this new face of modernity was most vividly objectified in much celebrated school graduates who skipped the ranks of the proletariat and headed directly for university education and middle-class professional careers. It was to describe this generation of youth preparing for white-collar careers that the notion of the ‘new Soviet person’ was first invoked in the mid-1930s press while the term ‘Soviet’ acquired connotations of socialist identity that exceeded those of the Bolshevik ideal. As I will show, at its early stages, the emerging ‘New Soviet Person’ *lingua franca* was a cultural response to the glaring fact that the 1930s industrial assault on Russia’s backwardness brought about a socialist modernity that did not fit, and in fact defied the fundamentals of the Bolshevik script of the New Man.

Although this introduction has so far largely focused on the ideological-discursive layers of interwar socialist imaginaries, my study of the divergent languages of socialist subjectivity does not stay within the cultural realm alone. It is written from the intersection of cultural and social history, connecting the dynamics of cultural, social, and institutional change in the pre-war Soviet Union.8 I explore not only how, in the 1920s and 1930s, the theoretical premises of the New Man and the ‘New Soviet Person’ paradigms were translated into different journalistic languages, habits of public lecturing, party and state decrees and pedagogical theories, but also how the two ideals were institutionalized: that is, they developed along different institutional trajectories that are traced here through the educational and organizational policies of the People’s Commissariat of Enlightenment, the Young Communist League (Komsomol), and the school system itself. Between the 1920s and 1930s, the authority to articulate the socialist ideal and to launch institutional reforms shifted from the Commissariat of Enlightenment and Bolshevik-Marxist pedagogical journals to the Central Party Committee and newly created educational publications that began to develop the formerly non-existent concept of ‘Soviet pedagogy’.

The socio-cultural analysis used here posits a history of the Soviet Union as no longer overdetermined by Bolshevik fundamentals. As such, it allows us not only

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to lift the limiting conceptual repertoire that has been prevalent in depictions of Soviet socialism but also to continue to disrupt the persistent master-narrative of the twentieth century as a radical opposition between socialist and capitalist modernities.9

The 1920s: ‘the collective [as] the best path towards individuality’

Looking for 1920s references to the legendary ‘New Soviet Person’, not to mention discussions and social policies in his or her name, is an unrewarding task. The term ‘Soviet’ itself, in its adjectival form, was ill-equipped to describe the nature and qualities of individuals and social groups living in the territory of the Soviet Union: that is, to signify a collective or individual identity and to perform the role it is best known for in contemporary scholarship. One way to illustrate the naming and describing limitations of this otherwise indispensable term is to draw attention to the fact that, within the mainstream discursive universe of the period, there were ‘Soviet citizens’ but neither ‘Soviet people’ nor individuals with ‘Soviet character’.

The ‘Soviet’ as in the ‘country of the Soviets’, ‘Soviet power’, ‘Soviet Russia’, ‘Soviet Republic’ was a political-administrative term, defining a new principle of governance – the rule of the proletariat via its representative councils – Soviets (sovety).10 It was unsurprisingly ill-equipped to assign any collective identity to the ‘Soviet citizens’ of the 1920s – those class-divided, ethnically diverse, and often antagonistic individuals living on the territory of the Soviet Union and subject to the rule of the Soviets. The ‘Soviet’ also carried a strong international message, promising the rise of new proletarian forms of governance all over the world and invoking the examples of the 1919 Hungarian and Bavarian Soviet Republics.11

In the 1920s press, literature, and everyday language, the term quickly acquired far less majestic connotations: those of malgovernance to account for the cumbersome and inefficient bureaucracy of the proletarian state. In this context, the term rang with negativity. According to Pravda, the following list of administrative realities was known as ‘Soviet’ in the early 1920s: being routinely late for work; irresponsible indifference toward fellow citizens; proliferation of paperwork; bribe-giving and bribe-taking; or ‘in one word’, as Yakov Yakovlev, the Party’s propaganda chief, summed up in a 1922 feature article, ‘our careless-irresponsible-Soviet style’. In Fedor Gladkov’s classic novel of the period, Cement, bureaucrats who populated this ‘Soviet-style’ state machine were derogatively referred to as ‘Soviet workers’.12

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10On V. Lenin’s theorization of the Soviets as the embodiment of the proletarian creativity to offer new forms of governance, see Anna Krylova, ‘Beyond the spontaneity-consciousness paradigm’, Slavic Review, 62, 1 (Spring 2003), 1–23.
11G.E. Zinoviev’s speech at the Second Congress of the Communist Youth International, Pravda, 12 July 1921, 2; also ‘V Berline’, Izvestia, 23 March 1919, 2; ‘Vesti iz Sovetskoi Vengrii’, Izvestia, 25 March 1919, 3.
Still, the most striking feature of the 1920s political and bureaucratic vocabulary was the absence of such seemingly indispensable terms of the socialist lingua franca as ‘Soviet qualities’, ‘Soviet values’, and ‘Soviet principles’. For example, congresses, plenums, and conferences of the Young Communist League (Komsomol) that regularly brought together youth leaders and Party and state dignitaries managed to discuss the revolutionary agenda of this militant, self-identified proletarian youth organization without invoking the ‘Soviet character’ of its members. Such programmatic goals as ‘the rearing of physically and spiritually healthy generation’ infused with a ‘communist worldview’ and ready to ‘defend socialist forms of living’, which were adopted at the 1920 Komsomol Congress, did not warrant invocations of ‘Sovietness’.13

In fact, within the thriving Bolshevik discursive universe of the 1920s and experimentation with non-bourgeois forms of education and living, it was inconceivable to refer to the New Man project as ‘Soviet’. The New Man of the 1920s was of course proletarian. Users of this vibrant and militant discourse demonstrated the authority of the term ‘proletariat’ to set and describe virtually anything in relation to itself. Bolshevik journalists, educators, writers who often served as party and state officials, not to mention the Bolshevik leadership itself, were busy assigning ‘proletarian’ and ‘non-proletarian’ ways of experiencing and knowing the world to the masses. Contributing to the emergent public language, the 1919 Program of the Russian Communist Party, in its section on education divided the Soviet citizens into ‘proletarian’, ‘semi-proletarian’, and ‘non-proletarian’ masses. According to the Program, the new, socialist school was to serve as a ‘conduit of ideological, organizing, and educating influence of the proletariat on semi-proletarian and non-proletarian layers of labouring masses’.14

Over the course of the 1920s, the Bolshevik-Marxist rationale as to why the New Man had to have a proletarian profile was compressed into an easily reproducible master narrative that one encounters in press, pedagogical literature, and public lectures. A staple account acknowledged that the proletariat might, at first, appear to be a paradoxical social formation. How could a class born amidst exploitative labour routines of capitalism be a negation of the capitalist system and a bridge into a socialist future identified with collectivist values? Writing in 1921 for the first issue of a Marxist pedagogical journal, On the Road to the New School, Nadezhda Krupskaya, a leading educational theorist and one of the principal administrative pillars of the People’s Commissariat of Enlightenment explained that the answer lay

13Programma Rossiiskogo kommunisticheskogo soiuza molodezhi (Moscow, 1920), 4; see also, A. Kosarev’s Responses to N. Bukharin’s and N. Chaplin’s Reports, VIII Vsesoiuznyi s’ezd VLKSM, 5–16 Maia 1928 goda (Moscow, 1928), 216, 218.

14Programma Rossiiskoi Kommunisticheskoi Partii bolshevikov (Moscow, 1919), punkt 12; see also Nikolai Chaplin’s Report to the VIII Komsomol Congress, VIII Vsesoiuznyi s’ezd, op. cit., 70.
with the presumed ‘collectivizing’ power of industrial labour which ‘condition[ed] a habit of collective action, [and] collective life’ among workers.\footnote{The journal was published by the State Academic Council and the Society of Marxist Teachers. N.K. Krupskaia, ‘Obschestvennoe vospitanie’ [Na putiakh k novoi shkole, 1 (1922)] in N.K. Krupskaia, O Kommunisticheskom vospitanii (Moscow, 1956), 114; also speeches by P.L. Lebedev-Poliansky, E.P. Khersonskaia and F.I. Kalinin at the First All-Russia Conference of Cultural-Enlightenment Organizations, September 1918, in P.I. Lebedev-Poliansky (ed.), Protokoly pervoi vserossiiskoi konferentsii kulturno-prosvetitelnikh organizatsii, 15–20 Oktiabira 1918 g. (Moscow, 1918), 19, 68, 85.}

Translating the theory into an educational policy, the Commissariat of Enlightenment issued in 1918 two founding documents on the new United Labour School – the nationwide cradle of the future collectivist generation.\footnote{‘Polozhenie ob Edinoi trudovoi Shkole Rossiiskoi Sotsialisticheskoi Federvtvoi Sovetskoi Respublike’, Izvestiia, 16 Oct. 1918, 5–6; ‘Osnovnye printsipy Edinoi Trudovoi Shkoly’, from the State Educational Committee, written by A. Lunacharsky, Izvestiia, 16 Oct. 1918, 6.} Indebted to American and European educational theory and the progressive education reform movement of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the outlines of proposed polytechnic education carried the unmistakable stamp of Bolshevik-Marxist pedagogy.\footnote{For the defining works from the period accessing Western and Russian education theory, see N.K. Krupskaia, Narodnoe obrazovanie i demokratiiia (Kommunist, 1919); Lisa A. Kirschenbaum, Small Comrades. Revolutionizing childhood in Soviet Russia, 1917–1932 (New York, 2001), 86, 105.}

Both documents relied on the notion of the ‘school commune’ and the ‘school collective’, to be forged by productive labour. The document under the signature of Commissar of Enlightenment Lunacharsky provided a theoretical grounding for the vision. It offered elaborate scenarios of the demolition of artificial walls between the school and the collective-forming life of the industrial proletariat. In it, teenagers laboured in actual working-class collectives, developed their sensibilities of ‘collectivism’ and also grasped the organizational logics of relevant branches of knowledge and production, becoming \textit{de facto} worker-engineers. ‘Recalling Marx’s words about turning child factory labour from being a curse into a source of healthy, purposeful, and active knowledge, the new socialist school’, Lunacharsky promised, ‘will take pupils to factories and plants, railroads and mines. … They will be going there not on excursion, not to have a look, but to labour’. This way, Lunachasky explained, the ‘collectivizing force [of industrial labour] that has soldered and forged the unity of the contemporary proletariat’ would be brought into the educational process and would ‘plant into every child’s soul … a social aptitude to feel oneself, with one’s whole heart, as a solidarity particle of the great whole’.\footnote{‘Osnovnye printsipy’, op. cit.}  

Although this collectivist worldview has long become a primary and often self-sufficient characteristic of Bolshevism in scholarly literature, the Bolshevik theory of socialist upbringing did not veto the notion of ‘individuality’.\footnote{See note 8 above.} From the heights of Bolshevik-Marxist philosophizing, the ideal of the New Man as a ‘collectivist’ with ‘individuality’ was, by no means, an oxymoron. The two notions were in fact intricately interdependent where the ‘individual’ served as the ultimate destination...
of the socialist project and the ‘collective’ as its means and precondition. This construct that simultaneously asserted ‘individuality’ and refused to posit it as something unconditionally there, without and prior to the collective, proved to be one of the least developed and most confusing statutes of Bolshevism.

At the 1918 First All-Russia Conference of Proletarian Culture Organizations, one could witness the kind of confusion the notion tended to create. Delegates from local proletarian organizations exemplified the common difficulty to make sense of the notions of socialist individuality and much criticized ‘bourgeois individualism’. They used the two terms interchangeably and believed them to be opposed to the collectivist ideal. When one of the most accomplished Marxists of his generation and unofficial leader of the Proletarian Culture movement, Aleksandr Bogdanov attempted to clarify the issue, he turned out not to have a clear answer. Having assured the confused delegates that ‘in reality, collectivism is the best path toward individuality’, Bogdanov had nothing else to add to this succinct and highly abstracted declaration.20

The difficulties of Bogdanov and others in explicating the individualizing dimension of the collectivist project pointed to a serious conceptual gap in the Bolshevik theory of the New Man. Having explicitly rejected the ‘individualist theory of the child’ that treated children, in the manner of John Dewey’s theorizations, as depositories of innate predispositions and individuality, leading Bolshevik intellectuals did not explain how exactly the collective was to produce the individual.21 Instead, the Bolshevik theory about the New Man’s individuality was mired in metaphors which terminated the story at moments of an individual’s ‘merger with’ or ‘dissolution in’ a working-class collective.

Relying on metaphors where theory fell short proved paramount for the operation of Bolshevik political culture. For example, the tireless propagandist Nadezhda Krupskaaia utilized the full repertoire of Bolshevik figurative language. In her public lectures and publications, she routinely treated her audiences to images of the New Man as a socialist ‘individuality’ (lichnost) that ‘merged with’ the collective. Her other favourite figures of speech which she used at the 1924 Komsomol Congress, called upon her listeners to visualize a ‘synthesis (sliianie) of individual and collective interests’. This way, she effectively collapsed collective and individual aspirations into an undifferentiated identity-synthesis and erased the very ontological difference between the subject and its social milieu.22

In the 1920s, the plans for the new labour school to become a cradle of the first post-revolutionary generation of young collectivists remained largely the property

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22 Krupskaaia, ‘Obshchestvennoe vospitanie’, op. cit., 115; N.K. Krupskaaia, ‘Rech na VI sezde RLKSM 12 July 1924’ in N.K. Krupskaaia, O Kommunisticheskom vospitanii (Moscow, 1956), 130. Also, for popular use of such metaphors by rank-and-file activists, see speeches by I.I. Nikitin, delegate from the Petrograd Proletkult; S.S. Krivtsov, delegate of the Organizational Bureau of the Conference at the First Proletkult Congress in 1918, in Protokoly pervoi, op. cit., 25, 61, 90; Chaplin, VIII Vsesoiuznyi sezd, op. cit.
of the Bolshevik discursive universe. The Commissariat of Enlightenment, a chronically under-funded institution in a backward county with no industrial base to rely on, spent the first post-revolutionary decade making endless compromises and constantly revising its radical educational plans.23

The most vicious critic of the perpetual failure to transform the national school system into an actual proletarian, polytechnic institution was the Komsomol, which, in accordance with its founding documents, conducted itself as an affirmative action organization of working-class youth and poor peasants. Although vicious, the gist of the Komsomol’s critique was not controversial. The Commissariat of Enlightenment agreed that the United Labour School of the 1920s, which working-class teenagers could not even afford, was neither proletarian nor polytechnic.24

The educational institution that the Komsomol leadership deemed worthy of state funding was the slowly growing system of factory-based schooling (FZU). Directly integrated into production and offering working-class teenagers general education and professional training without separating them from their proletarian collectives, the FZU schools were endorsed by all Komsomol Congresses of the 1920 and existed largely thanks to the Komsomol’s patronage. Letters, reports, and bulletins exchanged between the Komsomol Central Committee, its district, city, and regional cells and various industrial commissariats document the organization’s educational priorities: overseeing FZU curricula, lobbying for students’ decent wages, even monitoring prices at FZU and factory canteens.25

The years of the Stalinist Industrialization that abruptly ended the first post-revolutionary decade in 1928 promised to finally create the necessary material base for the nationwide development of proletarian, polytechnic education. The realization of the Bolshevik-Marxist vision seemed to become a question of concrete planning. Between 1928 and 1932, the Commissariat of Enlightenment and Marxist pedagogical journals celebrated the imminent ‘demolition of the school walls’ and, as one editorial in Communist Enlightenment put it in February 1931 – the school’s final entrance into ‘the centre stage in the struggle for the New Man’.26 The Komsomol organization, led by Aleksander Kosarev since 1929, pushed for the mass expansion of the FZU model. During the high day of the


26 Usilim borbu za politekhnicnii, Kommunisticheskie prosveshchenie, 3–5 (1931), 8; also N.K. Krupskaiia’s speech at the First Congress on Polytechnic Education in Na putiakh k novoi shkole, 8–9 (1930), 77; A.S. Bubnov’s report to the Second Party Meeting on People’s Education, 26 April 1930, Na putiakh k novoi shkole, 6 (1930), 10–16.
FZU campaign when enrolment numbers increased just in 1930 from 73,000 to 473,000, Kosarev’s Central Committee celebrated what appeared to be a definitive beginning of a qualitatively different system of national education. The Party’s support for the FZU campaign at the 1930 Party Congress also reinforced the Komosomol’s expectations for the FZU model to become the main educational venue of the first socialist state.27

During this period, the public discourse on the New Man underwent a notable contraction. Privileging visions of the ‘complete erasure of difference between the personal and the collective’, journalists, educators, and party and Komosomol workers simplified the New Man ideal. The conversation about the emergent generation of ‘collectivist’ youth was no longer burdened with questions of socialist individuality. This trend was vividly captured in the media and the industrial novel of the time which presented a socialist hero as someone happily dissolved in the collectivist momentum of industrial construction. Semen Nariniani, a Komosomol journalist covering proletarian and peasant issues produced one such hero: Aleksandr Linkov, son of a steel founder, a steel founder himself, a Komosomol member, and a student of the ‘Hammer and Sickle’ Factory School.28 On all accounts, Linkov was a New Man. His biography captured the New Man’s desired affiliation with working-class origins and, even more importantly, consistent belonging to different micro and macro collectives: a proletarian family, the steel industry, a foundry worker crew, a proletarian youth organization, and a factory school. What the biography symptomatically left out was Linkov’s individuality. There was nothing innate or unique to Linkov that he owned regardless of his place in numerous collectives. In the early 1930s, the illustrated magazine Ogonek offered numerous visualizations of this aggrandized vision of the collective. For example, one photograph from 1931 depicts a Komosomol meeting at the Moscow Brake Plant. Filling up a small room, the Komosomol group projects tight internal unity and a shared purpose while featuring no one in particular except the collective itself (see Figure 1). Celebrating the seemingly complete triumph of the 1920s Bolshevik vision of socialist modernity, heroes like Linkov and their collectives soon collided with the social realities of a modernizing Russia.29

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29 Nariniani, op. cit.
The 1930s: in search of a new language of socialism

The history of the ‘New Soviet Person’ – an ideological project that parted ways with the Bolshevik tradition – does not begin until the mid-1930s. Its impetus resided in the Stalinist industrialization which commenced the half–a-century-long transformation of the Soviet Union's societal landscape. The emergent prominence of the multi-faceted figure of the middle-class specialist growing at a rate surpassing that of workers – increasing from 11 million in 1941 to 35 million in 1983 – constituted one of the most consequential social dynamics. Already before the war, the needs of the industrial society under construction threw into sharp relief the categorical importance of socio-professional groups whose educational and working routines had little in common with the Bolshevik, proletariat-styled vision of industrial modernity. In the 1930s, the discussion of this non-proletarian way of living was centred around its earliest, disconcerting incarnation: the first post-revolutionary generation, emerging from the rapidly expanding school system and entering a society characterized by the 1936 Soviet Constitution as ‘socialist’. The problem with young people whose numbers grew at a record speed from 12 million in 1931 to 32 million in 1940 was that, despite the seemingly unstoppable polytechnic momentum of the late 1920s and early

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Figure 1. ‘A Komsomol meeting of efficiency enthusiasts at the Moscow Brake Plant’, Ogonek, 4 (392), 10 Feb. 1931, 5. With permission from Ogonek/Kommersant.

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30Lewin, The Gorbachev, op. cit., 46; on the making of the professional middle-class into a mass class, see Lewin’s chs 3 and 4.
1930s, they ended up never leaving the ‘four walls’ of their classrooms. Nor did their educational and professional priorities necessarily include plans of joining a proletarian collective. In no-one’s most wishful dreams, in other words, could these young people born and raised under the Soviet rule claim to embody the ‘New Man’ ideal.31

The fate of the ‘New Man’ project was sealed by the 1930s decrees on education that overturned key principles of the 1920s polytechnic ideal moulded after the proletarian, labouring collective. The headquarters for formulating the new national policy on education had moved to the Party Central Committee. Addressing the catastrophic shortage and poor preparedness of managerial, technical, and professional cadres, the Party leadership turned to more traditional and cost-effective forms of schooling; classroom-based competitive and rigorously academic education, presided over by the teacher, was brought back. Programmes in mathematics, physics, biology, chemistry, history, and geography were systematized and expanded at the expense of labour instruction.32 In 1937, the little that was still left of 1920s polytechnic aspirations – the token once-a-week labour class – was removed from the school curriculum of the first socialist country of the world! This way, the most powerful message as to where the new educational priorities lay was delivered.33

As a result of the new direction, the Party’s earlier commitment to proletarian-polytechnic education, still stated in its Program, was effectively reneged on. In academic literature, this turn towards classroom-based, book-centred, and discipline-reinforcing education has long been a subject of a critical commentary that left unexamined the qualitative reconfiguration of the very notion of the individual and his or her relationship to the collective that informed the policy-shifting decrees.34 Having articulated an education principle without relying on Bolshevik-Marxist rationales of the 1920s, the authors of those documents – I.V. Stalin being their most relentless editor – began feeling their way toward a new official language that no longer collapsed the notions of the socialist collective and socialist individuality.35

32Between 1931 and 1937, the Party Central Committee and the Council of People’s Commissars issued nine decrees, among them: the September 1931 Decree on Primary and Secondary Schools; the August 1932 Decree on School Curricula and Regime in Primary and Secondary Schools; the February 1933 Decree on Textbooks for Primary and Secondary Schools; the May 1934 Decree on the Structure of Primary and Secondary Schools of the USSR; the May 1934 Decree on the Teaching of Civic History in the Schools of the USSR; the September 1935 Decree on the Structure of Learning and Rules of Conduct in Primary, Incomplete Secondary, and Secondary Schools in Pravda, see: 5 Sep. 1931, 1; 28 August 1932, 1; 16 May 1934, 1; 4 Sep. 1935, 1; 5 July 1936, 1.
The discursive dissonance that the early 1930s educational rulings introduced into the mainstream celebration of socialism was staggering. The 1932 Decree on the Structure and Curriculum in Primary and Secondary Schools published in all central newspapers is a case in point. Most striking were the document’s silences. There was no mention of the school as a ‘conduit of ideological, organizing, and educating influence of the proletariat on semi-proletarian and non-proletarian layers of labouring masses’ – a routine quotation in documents on education before 1932. There were no references to the New Man as the principle ideal of the epoch. Polytechnic education, still mentioned, was the last item on the Decree’s agenda. The school’s mission to step outside its walls and to merge with the proletarian collective now entailed ‘excursions … to the electric station, factory, collective farm.’ Specifically rejected by the Commissariat of Enlightenment in its 1918 founding documents, this excursion-based approach *de facto* turned the working class and its factory into a sightseeing trip for school teenagers.36

The new agenda of the socialist school now consisted of simply ‘providing children with actual, lasting, and systematic knowledge of the fundamentals of sciences, factual knowledge, habits of correct speech, writing.’ Stating that the school’s core mission was to prepare ‘well-educated people’ for technical and higher education, the decree not only clearly indicated its intent to turn the school into an expedient launching ground for badly needed, middle-class careers. Indeed, the language of ‘actual, lasting, and systematic knowledge’ and ‘well-educated people’ unburdened with class imperatives also signalled a paramount ideological development: the possibility of discussing socialist education without relying on the class category as the primary marker of socialist subjectivity. As if this was not enough, the accompanying criticism of routine disregard of ‘individual learning needs’ of students was paired with demands for ‘individual and systematic attention to progress of each pupil.’ As a result, the document posited the figure of an individual child with his or her needs and peculiarities as being discernible from – that is, existing parallel to and prior – the collective. The perspective on education that had been theorized out of existence for over a decade was, as a result, reintroduced.37

Having removed the Bolshevik-Marxist *lingua franca* from its educational documents and flagged the anything but unproblematic concept of ‘individual’, the Party Central Committee undoubtedly disrupted the Bolshevik master narrative. However, for the time being, it did not possess a comparable story to offer in its place to describe the socialist modernity that was to emerge out of the reformed school. In its educational decrees, the Central Committee posed more disconcerting questions than ready-to-use answers. That is, if the New Man project was neither any longer relevant nor realizable for a good portion of the ‘first, truly

36’Postanovlenie TsK VKP(b) ob uchebnoi programme i rezhime v nachalnoi i srednei shkole, ot 25 Avgusta 1932 g,’ *Pravda*, 28 Aug. 1932, 1.
37ibid.
socialist generation’, what new ideal packaged in what discursive system was there to fill in the cultural void in the master narrative of socialism?

In the early 1930s, there was not even an immediately apparent term to address those young representatives of industrial socialism. In fact, the first half of the decade was spent groping for a word, a concept that could describe the youth who witnessed the 1930s grand industrial effort from within the walls of Soviet schools. Unable to fit these young people into a proletarian profile, journalists writing for such colossuses of official press as the Party’s Pravda, the Young Communist League’s all-union Komsomolskaia Pravda, and Izvestiia – the mouthpiece of the Soviet government – initially resorted to uncommitted and vague terminology. In Pravda and Izvestiia editorials, in particular, which usually offered concise explications of complex dilemmas of the day, school children and school graduates were discussed under abstract rubrics of the ‘young generation of the Soviet Union’, the ‘generation of a country building socialism’, the ‘generation of literate and cultured people’, or simply ‘our children’.38

Prominent pedagogical and polytechnic journals were in no position to offer help in this quest. Committed to 1920s educational objectives, their editors and contributors tried to negotiate a compromise with the new course. Between 1933 and 1935, a prospect of a compromise was unambiguously discouraged when key Marxist pedagogical journals including On the Road to the New School ceased publication.39

During the pre-war decade, the literary profession did not offer much help either with figuring out how to address the first generation of the land of socialism’s school youth. The main literary event of the 1930s, the 1934 Congress of Soviet Writers that announced the creation of the Union of Soviet Writers spoke the Bolshevik lingua franca without fail. Some orators ‘spoke Bolshevik’ masterfully and others, like Isaac Babel, spoke it well enough to declare the goal of their gathering as helping writers to ‘follow the leading [proletarian] class’ in its construction of socialism.40 At the Congress, the ‘Soviet’ was used synonymously with ‘proletarian’, invoking the proletariat’s world-revolutionary mission. Or, as Aleksei Stetsky, the head of the Department of Culture and Propaganda of the Party Central Committee, succinctly explained: ‘To become a Soviet writer [means] to come to the proletariat’. Following this logic, world-renowned proletarian writer and chairman of the Congress Maxim Gorky, in his opening speech, called for the creation of ‘soviets-proletarian literature’ that would seek to capture the making of the New Man as ‘organized by labour processes’ and ‘growing only under the conditions of collective labour’.41

39 Among the discontinued journals were the Commissariat of Enlightenment’s Pobotnik prosveshchenia [The Worker of Enlightenment] and Za politekhnikheskuu shkolu [For the Polytechnic School], the Polytechnic Institute’s Polytekhnikhesko obuchenie v shkole [Polytechnic Education at School], see Holmes, ‘Magic’, op. cit., 556–60.
41 Aleksei Stetsky’s speech, Pravda, 1 Sep. 1934, 4; Maxim Gorky’s Opening Speech, Pravda, 19 Aug. 1934, 3–4; also, speeches by writer Leonid Leonov, Pravda, 22 Aug. 1934, 3; writer and party administrator Vladimir Stavsky, Pravda, 1 Sep. 1934; party administrator Pavel Yudin, Pravda, 4 Sep. 1934.
Predictably, the initial job of building a new discursive paradigm to address school youth fell on journalists who, struggling with the limitations of the Bolshevik lingua franca, were charged with reporting on the reformed school on a daily basis. In the mid-1930s, they finally began calling the school generation of the country of socialism ‘Soviet’ and assigned them the formerly unknown identity of ‘New Soviet People’. By doing so, as I show below, they drastically expanded the connotations of the terms ‘Soviet’ and ‘socialist’ and embarked on a long journey of writing a new master narrative of socialist modernity, attending to the complexities of its emergent social and professional structures.

For the first time, ‘Soviet’ as a signifier for school youth separated from the proletarian world of production and, at the same time, a term synonymous with socialism was tried out in a Komsomolskaia Pravda poll of teenagers from the Soviet Union and France. As editors of Komsomolskaia Pravda explained, eleven school children of each country, ‘coming from similar social backgrounds’ and all between eleven and fifteen years of age, were asked about their life goals. Published and discussed between November 1934 and January 1935, this well-prepared propagandistic project, to be further developed in Pravda in May 1935, treated ‘Soviet schoolchildren’ as the incarnation of socialism and, as such, counterpoised them to capitalist youth.42

However, the counter-examples turned out to have something in common. Betraying no defensive intonations and to the accompaniment of journalists’ proud admiration – ‘Just look at them!’ – the ‘Soviet children’ reported dreams of professional ambition that did not carry a trace of the ‘proletarian’ ideal as a concept or a life goal. The majority (eight out of eleven) saw their ‘Soviet’ futures unfold in institutions of higher education and careers as engineer-inventors, pilots, coaches, doctors, writers, actresses, and ballet dancers.43

Wishing for middle-class careers and, even more importantly, failing to attribute any special significance to working-class career choices marked a crucial development in the 1930s mainstream discourse on socialist modernity. As this first survey already captures, ‘Soviet children’ of socialism and their journalists had little use for the familiar Bolshevik-Marxist discourse on class that used ‘class’ as the core signifier of one’s identity and ‘proletariat’ – as the ultimate measuring rod of an individual’s socio-historical value. Implicit in their answers to the question about future occupation, there was a different – ‘Soviet’ – notion of ‘class’ that carried strong functionalist and thus markedly non-Marxist undertones. No class or occupational group, doing its share in the complex social division of labour, represented an ideal type to be imitated by all. Consequently, it was education,

42 ‘15 voprosov sovetskim detiam’, Komsomolskaia pravda, 29 Nov. 1934, 5; also ‘Deti otvechaiut vzroslym. Anketa frantsuskogo zhurnala “Russie d’aujourd’hui”, Pravda, 6 May 1935, 6.
culture, skills, and professional choices that constituted social capital and bestowed status and value.44

Perhaps the best way to illustrate the fact that a novel discourse on socialist identity was entering the mainstream of official culture and that the Bolshevik-Marxist discourse on ‘class’ was losing its former militant monopoly is to note that the two Soviet working-class schoolchildren who participated in the survey and who modestly wanted to become metal turners were no longer singled out or praised as ideal specimens of new humanity either by the journalists or the readers who subsequently wrote to the newspapers about the poll.45 Less than three months after the monumental ode to the proletariat at the Congress of Soviet Writers, Komsomolskaia Pravda, followed by Pravda and Izvestiia, featured teenage students for whom becoming a turner was no longer a statement of one’s human essence but an occupational choice.

Party and state officials welcomed the reinvention of the term ‘Soviet’ and the invention of ‘Soviet youth’ identity, these badly needed solutions to the signifying problem. In the summer of 1935, Party leaders tried out the concept of ‘Soviet youth’ during an unprecedented government reception of the first graduating class of the ten-year school in the Column Hall of the House of the Soviets. In its coverage of the reception of quintessentially classroom youth heading for more classroom learning in institutions of higher education, Pravda editorials coined the social identity of the new ‘Soviet person’. The newspaper called upon its readers to ‘have a look at the Soviet youth, at the Soviet children; these ‘true new people … inoculated with qualities of the Soviet person’.46

Alexander Kosarev, representing the Komsomol organization he had led since 1929, disrupted the reception’s spirit of adoration. He devoted his supposedly celebratory speech to stating what, in the opinion of his organization, the new ‘Soviet’ hero lacked. In a proletarian lingua franca hardly appropriate for the event, he disputed the de-proletarianization of the socialist project that the school graduates epitomized. He asked his audience:

And what about the factory?! Do you know what an amazing school it is? No, you don’t. I advise you, I advise you from the depth of my heart, to go through this school. You are young, you are not in a hurry, and you have lots of time to enroll in a university. A portion of you must come to the factory, to learn the wisdom of life there, to fathom proletarian discipline.47

In 1935, Kosarev’s speech, largely omitted from Pravda, was not yet a nostalgic lamentation.48 It related Komsomol leaders’ and rank-and-file activists’

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44The argument here is about plurality of class discourses in mid- and late-1930s Stalinist culture. It parts with two influential accounts that posit the 1930s ‘class’ discourse as either ‘deemphasized’ but still situated within the Bolshevik tradition or replaced with the pre-revolutionary category of ‘estate’; see respectively, Hoffmann, ‘Was there a “Great Retreat”’, op. cit., and Fitzpatrick, ‘Ascribing class’, op. cit.


46Pokolenie velikogo budushchego, Pravda, 29 June 1935, 1; also, ‘Pervye vypuskniki desiatiletki’, Pravda, 2 June 1935, 6; ‘Nasha shkola okonchila desiatiletku’, Izvestiia, 30 May 1935, 4; ‘Prazdnik vypusnikov’, Izvestiia, 2 June 1935, 1.

47Vchera v Kolonnom zale; Komsomolskaia pravda, 2 June 1935, 1.

48See ‘Pervye vypuskniki’, op. cit.
uncoordinated but steadfast commitment to the proletarian origins of their organization and resistance to the novel faces and meanings of socialist modernity.

Until 1936, school graduates had been effectively prevented from joining the Komsomol, constituting less than 6.5% of the organization's membership. The Komsomol's obstruction of the unavoidable change in its social composition and proletarian profile became a public issue in 1936. The Party Central Committee imposed on the Komsomol a dramatic reworking of its founding documents and institutional practices, still saturated with Bolshevik-proletarian ideals and metaphors. Stalin painstakingly monitored the de facto reform of the Komsomol organization. As archival documents show, in early 1936, he hand-edited a draft of the new Membership Rules of the Young Communist League written by Aleksandr Kosarev and his Central Committee. In his editorial corrections, he consistently crossed out the Marxist vocabulary and proletarian metaphors that Kosarev copied from the old rules. Stalin wrote ‘nonaffiliated’ in place of ‘proletarian’ and ‘labouring’ in place of ‘class conscious’.

Two months later, at the Tenth Komsomol Congress that gathered to adopt the new Membership Rules, Stalin referred to those ‘labouring’ young people who now epitomized the new face of the Komsomol and the Soviet Union’s future as ‘Soviet’. Having wiped the Bolshevik language out of Komsomol documents and opened its ranks to all ‘Soviet’ young people regardless of social origin, Stalin conclusively updated the social profile of the organization from being a self-acclaimed proletarian organization to becoming an organization of ‘Soviet youth’. The master narrative of socialist modernity that accompanied the transformation changed too. No longer was joining the Komsomol organization tantamount to ‘coming to the proletariat’. Instead, foreshadowing the kind of revisions to be applied gradually to the Soviet state’s founding documents over the next thirty years, the Komsomol organization was to remake itself in the image of the ‘New Soviet Person’. The question that came to occupy the rest of the decade was what exactly the new identity entailed for thinking about socialist individuality and collectivity.

The personalized socialist self of the ‘New Soviet Person’

In the mid-1930s, a substantial amount of ideological work was in store for the Komsomol organization, journalists, and educational theorists before young people lacking in the proletarian-class profile and named ‘Soviet’ had their new and ‘Soviet’ socialist identity institutionalized and articulated. After the Congress, the Komsomol became a different organization in less than half a decade. Its social composition, ideological-educational priorities, institutional routines and interactions with the Soviet school changed dramatically, to acquire the

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50 ‘Ustav VlKSM’, draft, RGASPI, fond 1, opis 23, delo 1157, 64.
51 ‘Da zdravstvuet sovetskaia molodezh!’ Komsomolskaia pravda, 22 April 1936, 1.
contours of its post-war operations. The Great Purges undoubtedly facilitated this process of institutional reorientation by physically removing Komsomol, state, and professional elites of the 1920s that had created, popularized, and enforced the Bolshevik-Marxist script of socialist modernity. Between 1937 and 1938, Kosarev and his Central Committee were eliminated. The new leadership’s immediate task consisted of bringing school and white-collar youth into the ranks of the Komsomol organization. By 1939, the number of school-based Komsomol members increased almost six times and reached 1,500,000. The change of the Komsomol’s day-to-day activities was equally impressive. The new Central Committee now made it its business to conduct careful surveys of grade inflation in Soviet schools and monitor students’ time devoted to study. Collected data on new Soviet people was reported to the Party Central Committee. The Komsomol line toward FZU education underwent a corresponding change. No longer were FZU schools, steadily losing hours devoted to general education, treated as a training base for new humanity. In a FZU school, working-class youth became skilled workers, not ‘new people’.53

Changing one’s organizational and institutional routines called for a new ideological language. An institution in transition, the Komsomol was aided by the mainstream press and its flagship newspapers, Pravda, Izvestiia, and Komsomolskaia Pravda, in finding the words to engage the reformed school and the new, Soviet face of socialist modernity. New newspaper rubrics appeared that featured young journalists who made the school their expert topic; teachers who discussed new pedagogical approaches to the ‘New Soviet People’; and party and educational theorists who explicated differences between the 1920s and 1930s pedagogical theories. Schoolchildren and school graduates themselves, this army of new Komsomol recruits that was changing the organization’s culture from within, were also accorded multiple opportunities to explicate their personal and professional aspirations via surveys, autobiographical essays, and diaries reprinted by newspapers. By the end of the decade, the press amassed a huge archive, to be explored below, of school-based documentary articles, investigation reports, sketches, short stories, and teenagers’ personal narratives.54 Together with the ‘new Soviet person’, there thus also appeared a new Soviet journalist, a new Soviet teacher, and a new Soviet educator-theorist heeding ideological demands of the


53See the Central Committee’s recommendations, surveys, and communications with the Party Central Committee, RGASPI: ‘Zamechaniia TkK VLKSM k proektu ustava srednee khkoly RSFSR, 11 April 1938’, fond 1, opis 23, delo 1315, 2–9; ‘O zagruzhennosti dnia uchashchikhsia ucheboi i obshchestvennoi rabotoi, 10 November 1940’ [surveys of Moscow and Tula secondary schools], delo 1423, 67–69; ‘O nauchnykh sorevnovaniakh sredi shkolnikov, 13 September 1940’, delo 1427, 32–36; ‘Dokladnaiia zapiska sekretariu TsK VKP(b) A. A. Zhdanovu, 23 May 1941’, delo 1470, 89–97.

moment and building together, concept by concept, trope by trope, a new master narrative of socialist subjectivity.

The story that emerged out of this collective effort brought back the components of the turn of the century progressive education reform movement that, throughout the 1920s, had been explicitly rejected as a starting premise for Marxist pedagogy: namely, the child’s innate interiority with rudiments of individuality, as being objectively there and distinct from his or her social milieu. In striking contrast with the proletarian-socialist biography of the 1920s, life stories of Soviet teenagers in the mainstream press started with accounts of searching for inborn peculiarities or, in the new language of the period, ‘innate gifts’, ‘predispositions’, and ‘nature-given abilities’. ‘Nature’ played a crucial role in narratives by and about Soviet young people, challenging ‘class’ as the organizing centre of socialist identity. It handed out gifts, enabling or disqualifying, regardless of class belonging and served as an individualizing mechanism of the human predicament.\(^{55}\) In their autobiographical essays that Pravda reprinted in 1935, Soviet teenage students, for example, chose to narrate their lives as gradual discoveries – sometimes effortless and exciting, sometimes frustrating and torturous – of what gifts nature had in store for them. In a manner typical of his contemporaries, Vitalii Moskalev, the seventeen-year-old son of an accountant, organized his autobiographical essay like a journal of self-exploration, closely observing the manifestations and progress of his innate ‘inclinations’ since the age of thirteen:

> I have felt love toward nature since childhood. At the age of 13, my inclinations towards natural sciences, mainly biology, geology, and astronomy, manifested themselves. … My interest in natural sciences grew gradually. At the age of 15, it reached a high point and acquired a more concrete form: I focused my studies on biology. Since the age of 16, I have felt a strong striving toward research and scientific work. Because of it, I felt compelled to apply to a circle of young biologists at the Zoo. … After the graduation I intend to apply to the biology department of the Moscow State University.\(^{56}\)

The new biography, predictably, made little use of the previous decade’s familiar tropes of ‘transformation’ of the self by means of the collective. In it, the individual with his or her nature-given difference, with or without the collective, seemed to constitute a new starting point in the socialist journey toward self-realization. Weaving together tropes of innate ‘inclinations’ and self-discovery, the New Soviet Person story unequivocally foregrounded the notion of human nature as existing before class and presented individual difference as a given and unavoidable.

By following the teenagers into schools, Soviet journalists launched an investigation of this new territory of socialism that empowered young people like Moskalev. Journalist and writer Lev Kassil who covered the topic for Izvestiia marvelled at the display of professional ambition and intellectual confidence by

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\(^{56}\)Essay by Vitalii Moskalev, Pravda, 9 May 1935, 2; also, under the ‘Shkola okonchena, – chto dalshe?’ rubric, see autobiographical essays by Vasilii Mironov and Nikolai Mikhailov, op. cit.
his young interlocutors. The role models they picked exemplified new forms of self-fashioning. As early as 1935, Kassil reported that Soviet teenagers – crossing class lines, historical epochs, and national borders – wanted to paint like Russian pre-revolutionary painters, to write novels like French novelists, and to become the best and prize-winning mathematicians and physicists of the world. How was one to realize such remarkable goals? A careful management of time opportune dividing into ‘personal’ (lichnoe vremia), ‘school’, and ‘leisure’ time was the answer. According to teenagers, the notion of differentiated time that posited the ‘personal’ as a distinct dimension of one’s life under socialism was taught at school.  

Before long, journalists began to formulate new questions about the psychological price of Soviet teenagers’ ambition. A leading expert on youth issues at Komsomolskaia pravda, young journalist Elena Kononenko was among the first to draw attention to the flipside of the modern preoccupation with one’s nature-assured individual self: pervasive anxiety among the recently designated Soviet people. Many children, noted Kononenko, feared that their search for an innate gift would not yield a desirable outcome. To her, worrying about one’s ‘mediocrity’, ‘stupidity’, and ‘talentlessness’ appeared so rampant among Soviet schoolchildren that she turned a meeting with a teenager paralyzed by ‘disappointment in himself’ and suffering from depression into a regular plot of her 1936–37 essays. Though it is difficult, given the limits of our academic interpretive paradigms, to account for a young Soviet person obsessed with his or her self to the degree of depression, such young people exemplify the cultural power of the emergent discourse of the New Soviet Person to turn its master-referent – the Soviet school teenager – into a prisoner of its imperatives. 

Either empowering or debilitating, the imperative for having a nature-given, unique, and personalized socialist self entailed a far-reaching reconfiguration of the relationship of the socialist individual to the collective. How were these new Soviet people to navigate between the demands of their individual inclinations and the needs of the collective good? As more reports, surveys, and questionnaires from the school grounds appeared, it became apparent that a new ritual of pledging one’s investment in the collective or what was now more often referred to as the ‘social good’ was in the making. Utilizing new figures of speech, young people proudly stated that they did not want to ‘live only for themselves’. Yet in this socially-minded vision, Soviet youth did not claim the intention of becoming one with the collective either. Their language was different. They wanted to be ‘useful’ (byt’ poleznym) to society; they were prepared to ‘pay their debt’ back to the Party and society for the time they had spent on individual development; they felt ‘responsibility to the collective’. 

59 See school teenagers’ essays and letters: Nikolai Mikhailov, Pravda, 9 May, 1935, 2; ten graduates of Moscow school #5 of the Proletarsky district, Komsomolskaia pravda, 1 June 1935, 2; V.N. Buianov, Komsomolskaia pravda, 1 January 1935, 4; ‘Iz shkoly – v zhizni’, Pravda, 10 June 1937, 1.
The very possibility of voicing one's relationship to the collective in terms of ‘usefulness,’ ‘debt’ and ‘responsibility’ constituted, I argue, a marked development of the public conversation about socialism. In a society where, less than a decade previously, the dictum of the collectivist man was often understood as a synthesis of personal and collective aspirations (that is, an erasure of difference between the two) while the possibility of ‘individuality’ was preconditioned on the vague notion of one’s ‘merger’ with the collective, an imperative to be ‘socially useful’ without the imperative of ‘deriving’ one’s self from the collective proposed a relationship between the socialist individual and his social milieu that parted with the radical philosophical underpinnings of the Bolshevik-Marxist agenda. The notion of ‘being socially useful’ no longer implied that the personal and the collective (or the social) were, in the best-case scenario, identifiable or merge-able, nor that the personal was a derivative of the collective.

A dynamic site of construction of the new socialist language and personality, the reformed school was of course not the sole maker of the New Soviet Person vision. Nor were the journalists covering the Soviet classroom, disseminating and developing its new languages and values. By the end of the decade, the discipline of pedagogy began to play a critical role. In particular, the new journal, Soviet pedagogy that, in January 1937, crowned the Party’s educational initiatives of the decade stood at the centre of thriving theoretical production. The two pillars of the emergent theoretical edifice which retained their centrality in Soviet pedagogical literature for the rest of the Soviet period were the imperative of ‘individual approach’ and the re-imagination of the school collective as a ‘differentiated group’ encompassing, in the language of one Pravda editorial, the diversity of children’s ‘[nature-given] abilities, character, and [levels] of development.’

In other words, the discursive gap between the 1920s pedagogical theory and the late 1930s theorizations was stunning, akin to the discursive break in Party educational decrees. Criticizing 1920s pedagogical thought for imposing the ‘reign of depersonalization’ and ‘over-estimating the value of productive labour’, new theorists from the ranks of the academically accomplished but publically unknown scholars such as professors N.K. Goncharov (deputy chief-editor of Soviet Pedagogy), E.N. Medynskii, N.A. Petrov, and Ia.B. Reznik now articulated the method of ‘individual approach’ as the main mechanism ‘for uncovering students’ innate abilities [sposobnosti] and developing their well-rounded personalities [lichnosti].’ In accordance with it, the mighty ideal of the New Man the ‘collectivist’ was no longer a stated goal. Echoing surveys of school teenagers and newspaper coverage of the New Soviet people generation, the stress was put...
on the child's ‘individuality’ (lichnost) not as a post-condition but, as one teacher explained his understanding of the concept, as the child's ‘inner-world’ to ‘be taken into consideration’ and ‘aided’ by the instructor. In the centre of Soviet pedagogical work, confirmed Reznik, there stood the student whose ‘individual difference would be wrong to ignore’ and whose ‘intellectual abilities … will, character, emotion predispositions are to be studied’ throughout the school years.63

The notion of the ‘collective’, too, underwent a serious modification. The emergent Soviet pedagogy did not need the Bolshevik-Marxist elaborate theory of the proletarian collective. Yet it did not banish the category of the ‘collective’ as a constitutive experience in the making of the socialist, well-rounded individual. The notion was imaginatively re-theorized as a 'differentiated group'. ‘In class’, M.D. Osiptsev, director of one Moscow school explained the new pedagogical principle, ‘one strives to instruct not some average student that does not exist in nature but to address a concrete, differentiated group of students’. If a socialist collective was akin to a differentiated group then socialist individuals formed collectives while retaining their individual differences.

The earliest visual representations of such differentiated collectives of socialism can be found in Pravda in May and June of 1935 when the newspaper covered the first graduates of the ten-year school. For example, one such photograph captures ‘A’ students of Moscow school #12 who form a loose group as they face the camera. It is in fact their faces with their irreducible individuality that make the photograph and stand for the students' different intellectual and professional aspirations described in the caption. The photograph's very composition, in other words, underscores a novel meaning of the collective on the scale of a modern socialist society that depends on the recognition and realization of individual differences (see Figure 2.)

At the school level, teachers translated these new ideals into an everyday language of instruction. In their essays to professional journals, they described their innovative methodological approaches that asked students to participate in ‘collective-based’ forms of studying as well as develop habits of what was called ‘self-reliant work’. Outlining different combinations and rotations of ‘collective-based’ and ‘self-reliant’ classroom study, teachers recorded how they created regular opportunities for their students to enter collective routines, exit them, and focus on their individual assignments and work on their own.64

Such profound revisions of rudiments of socialist ideology did not marginalize the political currency of such well-established values of socialist upbringing as, to cite Medynskii, a ‘Communist worldview’, the ‘Bolshevik character’, ‘deep devotion

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to the cause of the working class and its advanced squad, the Communist Party’ – in or outside the classroom. On the surface, it might indeed appear that nothing fundamental had changed. But underneath those manifest pronouncements made on behalf of the New Soviet Person, everything was changed. In fact, those pronouncements acquired a new meaning because the underlying building blocks of socialist subjectivity that sustained them – the class, the individual, the collective – acquired new connotations and acknowledged a differentiation between an individual and his or her social milieu.

The romance with the proletariat of the previous decade was not, strictly speaking, erased from this emergent cultural formation. School children studied the history of the proletarian movement and the Great October Revolution, visited factories along with movie theatres, museums, and skating rinks. The 1920s proletarian ideal was in the process of becoming akin to a sightseeing trip, a museum piece, a homework assignment to be visited, consumed, prepared, and, until 1937, practised once a week, but not to be lived.

**Conclusion**

The cultural terrain of the pre-war Soviet Union with which this article concludes is a messy one: as it should be, since culture is a messy site, especially at times of accelerated social transformation. In this account, the Soviet society speaks

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65Medynsky, op. cit., 34–35.
more than one language of socialism and is caught up in an anything but unified process: a conceptual crisis of one cultural paradigm – the Bolshevik one – and an uneven and drawn-out articulation of another – the New Soviet Person. The resultant histories of the New Man and New Soviet Person cultural projects thus deprive ‘socialism’ in its Soviet context of its fundamental connotations and turn the pivotal term of modern Russian history – ‘Soviet’ – into a historical question.

As a result, I do not posit the 1930s as a Bolshevik/post-Bolshevik divide. Rather, I argue that the decade of the 1930s constituted launching grounds not only for a profound social transformation but also, necessarily, for an epistemic shift in Soviet people’s normative expectations of socialism that took half a century to unfold. At no point should the ‘shift’ metaphor be read literally, that is, as a sudden replacement of the New Man ideal with the New Soviet Person project. The stress here is placed on the emergent plurality, troubling to such contemporaries as Kosarev, of the ways an individual could imagine his or her relationship to the socialist construction in the 1930s Soviet Union. Thanks to it, the Soviet Union’s socialist experiment is rescued from the straitjacket of the Marxist-Bolshevik romance with the proletarian ‘collective’ posited as a precondition of the ill-defined and under-theorized socialist individual. The emergent socialist subjectivity articulated and decreed around the notion of the New Soviet Person offers an example of an individualizing discursive practice that reconfigured the very meanings of the socialist individual and the collective and postulated the individual as a distinct entity in relation to his or her social milieu. No longer can a scholar presume that an invocation of the individual in the realms of the 1930s Soviet educational reforms, journalism, youth policies, and Soviet pedagogy has to imply an a priori subversive practice, incompatible with Soviet notions of collectivity and social mindedness.

Furthermore, the reconceptualization of the cultural dynamics of the 1930s that has been proposed here allows historians to begin drawing meaningful connections between the epistemic developments analysed above and the concurrent reorientations within the realms of Soviet law, trade, and consumption, namely, the codification of Soviet citizens’ right to ‘personal property’ under socialism and the recognition of socialist consumption as an ‘individualizing experience’.66 It also offers a new historical viewpoint for furthering our understanding of post-war cultural phenomena: Soviet citizens’ peculiar skill to assign critical value to individual self-realization and autonomy while managing a socially minded outlook, as several scholars working on Soviet literature, journalism, and personal narratives have noted. So far, these findings have figured in academic literature as historical orphans – largely unaccounted developments, loosely attributed to liberating influences of the Second World War, the 1950s to 1960s De-Stalinization

policies, or to the inherent resistance of human nature.\footnote{Pinsky, op. cit.; Huxtable Simon, ‘In search of the Soviet reader: the Kosygin reforms, sociology, and changing concepts of Soviet society, 1964–1970’, Cahiers du monde russe, 54 (2013/3), 623–42; E.Yu. Zubkova, Obshchestvo i reformy, 1945–1964 (Moscow, 1993); Haimson, op. cit.} What the history of the ‘New Soviet Person’ as a post-Bolshevik script suggests, however, is that ‘culture’ did not wait for Stalin to die and that post-war cultural languages have their roots in the pre-war decade of the 1930s. It also introduces vital historical complexity into current academic and popular debates about social justice, economic responsibility and individual self-realization – debates that have invariably been informed by an explicit or implicit comparison between socialist and capitalist systems.

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