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**SOVIET SCHOOL IN 1937  
THE COMMUNITIES OF  
TEACHERS AND STUDENTS IN  
THE FACE OF COMING WAR**

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**SOVIET SCHOOL IN 1937  
THE COMMUNITIES OF TEACHERS AND STUDENTS IN  
THE FACE OF COMING WAR<sup>2</sup>**

This paper is dedicated to the education system in the Soviet Union and school-related issues in the context of the “Great Purge of 1937” - a very symbolic time in the Soviet history that became the climax of the Soviet political repressions but also - a time of the successful completion of the second five-year plan of economic development and other great soviet achievements. The intended research is aimed to clarify how all these events were reflected within the school communities, in what way they influenced the belief system, civil position and general trends in behavior of the senior students, who in the coming years would be bound to become the backbone of a war generation. At the same time, it was the period of the most important decisions within the country’s education system aimed at its participation in society consolidation and thorough preparations of the young generation to clash against some very strong foes. This work reveals the practical consequences of the campaign against a “pedological perversion” within Soviet education system and the process of the teacher selection which stimulated school’s development to be in line with the given ideological directions.

JEL Classification: Z

Keywords: Great Purge of 1937, school communities, Soviet education system, educational institutions, pedological perversion, teachers

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## **Problem statement**

The year of 1937 has not yet been in the limelight of research in the history of Soviet school in spite of large amounts of special literature dedicated to the Soviet society of the Stalin's time and school at various stages of its development. The article is intended to fill this hiatus. Why the year 1937 is at the center of attention?

It was surely a turning point both for school communities and for the country as a whole. On the one hand, this year was a peak of the Great Purge marked by such events as the second political trial of the so-called "parallel anti-Soviet Trotskyist center," by the case of the so-called "Trotskyist opposition" in the Workers' and Peasants' Red Army. On the other hand, it was marked by a successful fulfilment of the second five-year plan, by non-stop flights to North America, by the Arctic exploration and other achievements which enhanced the belief in the limitless possibilities of the Soviet State. These completely opposing events lead us to a number of questions: how could the excesses of mass repressions have coexisted in the minds of young people with the enthusiasm about achievements? How could this time of troubles have raised the best generation of Soviet people who sacrificed themselves defending their motherland during the World War II? Why the excesses of the unruly repression machine which affected the lives of many teenagers did not lead to the downfall of their creed? The answer to these questions should be sought in the structure, organization and mechanisms of school system constituting the principal interface between society and young citizens of the country. Besides, the year of 1937 which encompasses two academic years of 1936/1937 and 1937/1938 respectively, is singled out because of the significant changes in school work initiated by the party and the government decisions.

**The subject matter of this paper** is school activities of the historical period mentioned, with special emphasis on its innovations, as well as on a certain number of those engaged in teaching and educating, their relationship with the student body subject to being "formatted" according to the State's desire and, along with practices and results, having their effects upon the young generation's political dispositions.

**The methodological principles** underlying this study are, on the one hand, the structural and functional theories postulating the rising generation and the process of maturing as an object of a socializing influence from families, teachers and peer groups aimed at the internalizing common values "within a personal ego."<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, the constructivist theories which describe children and adolescents as an individual and creative social age group capable of

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<sup>3</sup> Parsons T. *The Social System*. Ed. by B.S. Turner. (London, 1991).

empowering the facts of social reality with their own meanings and even amending the culture of the world of adults.<sup>4</sup>

To solve the specific problems stated, the following **methodological tools** were used: systematic-structural, comparative-historical ones, method of grouping and classification. **The document base** included, firstly, materials of Komsomol committees (Moscow Region Committee, Moscow City Committee, Central Committee): reports and memos of Komsomol organizers, information summaries, minutes of meetings of secretariats and Komsomol committee bureaus, stenographs of meetings kept in funds of RGASPI and TGAM. These documents are mostly the results of the Komsomol monitoring of school life; they include vast materials regarding all important events at schools, mindsets and behavior of school communities as well as the problem areas of education which Komsomol was striving to take under its control. Secondly, guidelines and procedures of Narkompros (People's Commissariat for Education) to inferior agencies, stenographs of conferences, reports made by educators and education authorities, memos and letters of educators and parents being kept in funds of GARF and RAO. These materials can help track down practical implementation of the Communist party and Government guidelines in school education, the searches and finds in it as well as mistakes and failures. Thirdly, memoir sources, which can help to evaluate through the prism of individual perception and from a historical perspective the quality of school work.

## **New Developments in the Organization of Teaching and Teaching Staff**

The period under discussion is marked by the party and government directives aimed at the unification of secondary education and providing equal knowledge for all pupils. The measures taken to consolidate Soviet people or, using the phraseology of the day, strengthen their moral and political unity with a war looming over, significantly changed the character of teacher's work.

The Decree of the Central Committee of the Communist Party and the Council of People's Commissars dated 9<sup>th</sup> April 1936, announced a salary rise for all teachers with the salary rate depending on education, years of work and being a recipient of a newly instituted title of a Meritorious Teacher. All these changes were met by the teacher community with elation. As early as the next day, however, education authorities came down on the teachers with the news of a mandatory staff evaluation set to be completed by August 1, 1938. By mid-summer 1937, Peoples' Commissariat for Education reported about the interim results of this campaign in the republic. Of 291,125 teachers, only 35, 3 percent of the evaluated were fully certified and

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<sup>4</sup> Corsaro W.A. *The sociology of childhood*. (New York, 2005).

recommended for the job of a teacher. Fifty-two and a half percent (146,125 people) were admitted to conduct classes with necessary qualifying exams to be passed (depending on the institution - technical college or an institute) before August 1, 1938. Six point seven percent were dismissed due to professional inaptitude.<sup>5</sup> Speaking about the dismissed teachers, People's Commissar for Education Andrey Bubnov pointed to their blatant ignorance, consisting in lack of knowledge of basics of geography, physics and national literature.<sup>6</sup> The shield on the career path of such types undoubtedly rendered a great service to school.

A few older teachers kept aloof from the life of the country. In the process of the broad-scale inspection, unreliable members were also identified, for example, a teacher who used to serve in the ranks of the Kolchak army.<sup>7</sup> By the canons of social selection, these educators were definitely unfit for working with Soviet students. At the same time, the evaluation mirrored another trend: a socially alien background of clergy, nobles, and ex-government officials was no longer a sticking point for those seeking a teacher's position – unless there were some aggravating circumstances. In view of the revolutionary educational reform, the criterion of efficiency became the determining factor in the assessment of teaching work at schools. At the same time, their effectiveness was interpreted in terms of the teacher's ability - regardless of their social background - to work with dysfunctional teenagers.

These guidelines for teachers' work were outlined in the decree of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of July 4, 1936 "On the pedagogical distortions in the system of People's Commissariat for Education." Denouncing pedagogy as an anti-scholarly and harmful bourgeois contraption "taking roots in the racist theory" led to some far-reaching consequences. First, the majority of students previously assigned to special and supplementary schools on the basis of pedagogical evaluation, were re-routed into regular schools. Although the precise data are absent, the size of this reshuffle in the country can be illustrated by the information with reference to urban areas. According to Ludmila Dubrovina, director of Moscow's City Department for People's Education (GORONO), pedagogical assessment qualified nearly half of students with the lowest grades as mentally retarded and thus earmarked for schools for mentally challenged pupils. The latter were labeled "problem children," "retarded," "oligophrenics," "imbecile," "subnormal," "socially neglected" or "pedagogically neglected." According to education authorities, total inspection of this category of students conducted from the summer up to mid-September of 1936, demonstrated that these diagnoses were contrived – most children surveyed by education committees turned out to be normal and even gifted. They were to be transferred to

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<sup>5</sup> Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Rossiiskoy Federatsii (further GARF). f. 2306, op.69. d. 2285. l. 46.

<sup>6</sup> GARF. f. 2306, op.69. d. 2293. l.59-60.

<sup>7</sup> Tsentralnyi Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Moskvyy (further TGAM). f. 528, op.1. d.362. l.12-13

ordinary mass schools, only if to a grade lower of their ages which, according to Dubrovina, “was a clear proof of guilt of education authorities before these children whose growth was artificially held back.”<sup>8</sup>

This transfer of students and closure of schools for children with special needs continued during two years. While at the beginning of the 1936/1937 academic year, there were fifty-eight such schools, by its end there remained only twenty-two. By 1938/1939, there were only 16 remedial schools and one at a children’s orphanage - these were the only ones to be at the disposal of 23 administrative districts of the country’s capital. December of 1936 saw the abolition of schools for psychoneurotic children. Only a small group of 60 children cautiously termed by GORONO as ones who “systematically violated discipline at school and disrupted classes” was assigned to a special school on Shchipok Street.<sup>9</sup> A similar drain of school students from remedial schools in 1936/1937 could be seen in Leningrad and in the Leningrad region: out of 12185 students, 10144 were transferred to regular schools compared to a handful of 150 pupils admitted to a school for children with special needs. Echoing the director of Moscow’s GORONO, Mikhail Aleksinsky, the head of Leningrad’s educational authority, argued absolute normality of the transferred children, which was confirmed by the results of their academic performance in 1936/1937.<sup>10</sup>

Previously existing so-called “strong,” “weak” and “subnormal” classes (the latter consisted of students deemed by pedologists as bordering between normal and mentally challenged ones) in comprehensive schools were abolished. Chronically underachieving children, children repeating a course two or three times were considered to be a concession to the discredited pedological theory of the “fatalistic determination” of these phenomena by biological and social factors, and thus declared to be “counter-revolutionary”.<sup>11</sup> Educational authorities made it clear that teachers in the future could not explain poor academic performance by the fact that they got some defective human material in their hands.<sup>12</sup> They proposed a guiding principle stating that each student was capable of learning the program material in full. Moreover, according to their plan, it was school teachers striving for academic achievements through their practical work who were “to deliver a crushing blow to the moods of a limited aptitude for learning which ingrained into the psychology” of school teachers under the influence of pedologists.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> TGAM, f. 528, op.1. d. 352. l.9.

<sup>9</sup> TGAM, f.528, op.1. d.676. l.11,13,20

<sup>10</sup> GARF. f. 2306, op.69. d. 2291. l. 23.

<sup>11</sup> GARF. f. 2306, op.70. d.2587. l. 1; GARF. f. 2306, op.69. d. 2286. l. 35

<sup>12</sup> TGAM, f. 528, op.1. d. 352. l.2.

<sup>13</sup> TGAM, f.528, op.1. d. 391.l.22.

According to Bubnov, the experience of 10265 teachers from 18 regions and districts of the Russian Federation whose students demonstrated absolute academic progress during the academic year of 1936/1937, attested to the feasibility of eradicating such phenomena as repeating academic courses and poor academic performance of a number of adolescents.<sup>14</sup> Citing the example of these teachers, he gave a directive to all teachers not only to conduct meaningful and well-thought lessons, but also investigate the causes of poor academic work of each student and to organize individual after-class tutorials aimed at both overcoming students' backlogs and "awakening of a belief in their own abilities as well as confidence in the success of their class work."<sup>15</sup> Keeping in mind the idea of equal possibilities for children to get quality education, the Council of People's Commissars ordered in 1937 the Commissariat for Education to abolish the so-called exemplary schools for gifted children turning them into regular comprehensive schools accessible for all. Similarly, the work of out-of-school educational centers, first of all, district and city "houses of pioneers and schoolchildren" was to be changed. The previous goal of engaging gifted children into societies and groups was denounced at the conference of Moscow education authorities as "a kind of pedology, if from the other end." From that moment on, supplementary education facilities were to reach out all categories of children, and first of all, dysfunctional.<sup>16</sup>

Even if we assume that in the frenzy of denouncing pedology and reshuffling the composition of remedial schools, there were no excesses, and that regular comprehensive schools in addition to repeaters received normal, if underachieving children, one has to admit that teachers were faced with a significantly increased workload. By pushing the pendulum towards overall responsibility of teachers for the mastering of the curriculum by all students without exception, the state in effect dictated the objective of excellence in pedagogy.

In fairness, one should say that the state gave an adequate number of tools to those willing to develop their skills. In view of a shortage of qualified teachers – by January 1, 1937 only 19, 8 percent of all teachers in the Russian Federation<sup>17</sup> held degrees from higher education institutions – new teacher training colleges were established. In 1937, the Russian Federation had 111 teacher training institutes with a student body of over 50 thousand as well as 415 teacher colleges with 130 thousand students. Those who dropped out of this scheme due to overwork were offered crash courses for teachers.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> GARF. f.2306, op.69. d.2285. l. 40.

<sup>15</sup> GARF. f. 2306, op.70. d. 2587. l.5.

<sup>16</sup> TGAM. f.528, op.1. d.676. l.22-23.

<sup>17</sup> GARF. f. 2306, op.70.d.2593.l.76.

<sup>18</sup> GARF. f. 2306, op.69. d. 2285. l. 47.

In Moscow the House of Teachers on Pushechnaya Street was turned into a center for pedagogical excellence. Besides, in every district of the capital there were seminars on the methodology of teaching.<sup>19</sup> Similar work on vocational training and personnel development, if on a lesser scale, was carried out in other cities of the country.

Quite literally one can say that almost all teaching community was engaged in continuous education. This fact, however, in no way diminished the reputation of teachers in the eyes of their pupils. On the contrary, as the Soviet historian Abram Vakser, then a school student in the city of Omsk, recalls, their teacher of physics who at the same time was a graduate correspondence student of a teacher training institute, was not only respected, but admired by her students.<sup>20</sup> Advanced education, however, was not a guarantee of successful teachers' work – steadily high achievements resulted from empathy and complete psychological contact with the class and, considering its mixed composition, from the teacher's ability to reach out to every adolescent, particularly, a troubled one. In any case, it was within the scope of abilities of only those who were ready, without being overly emotional and without masked affection, to take care of the children. No wonder that the whole generation of people remember pre-war schools as islands of trust and joy, of an exciting exploration of the world and of oneself in the world, while teachers were seen as understanding mentors, at times even closer than parents.<sup>21</sup>

Patient and meticulous work with every pupil not only rendered human dimension to school rules and regulations, but indirectly formed some general background for the perception of the social and political system into which school was integrated. Let us assume that the positive balance of impressions which shaped the image of the state for the majority of teenagers was mostly connected with the everyday work of the teacher rather than the state's ideological machine. It is through the prism of teacher's personality and by way of teacher's presenting the system of values and ideological objectives of the political regime, that the latter assumed a convincing power. In this respect, one cannot but admit the reasoning of one of school teachers in post-war Moscow: "Our school is the first scene where our children come in contact with the state. The fact that children are loved at home is one thing; quite a different thing is that some strange man or woman begins to love them – this leaves an unforgettable impression on the

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<sup>19</sup> TGAM. f. 528, op.1. d. 352. l.16.

<sup>20</sup> Vakser A.Z. *Zhizn, liudi, epokha*. (SPb. 2013). 79.

<sup>21</sup> Anikin A. *Urok chesti*// Literaturnaya Rossiya. 2010. № 8. 26 fevralia; Brilliantova R.A. *Vospominaniya o shkole*// <http://du.nios.ru/school-22/>; Vologin A.G. *Krutiye povoroty. Vospominaniya*. (Shadrinsk, 2003); *Vospominaniya o klassnom rukovoditele, uchitele geografii V.M. Moskovsokom*//<http://sch163.narod.ru/history/before/mosk.htm>; Golubovich I.V. *Rodom iz 25 obratsovoi. Vospominaniya "odesskoi" moskvichki*. DNK. Informatsionno-analiticheskii zhurnal. 2006. №4; Imchuk N.K. *Odin na vsekh. Avtobiograficheskaya povest*. (M., 2011); Nikolayev V. *Sovetskii litsei.: Otechestvennye zapiski*. 2002. №2; Kanasheva F. *O dovoyennoi shkole. 1937*. // <http://www.proza.ru/2008/01/17/408>.



child.”<sup>22</sup> This relationship with school teachers and later, on leaving school, with the state was outlined by Vadim Shefner in his autobiographical novel “Sister of Sadness.” In the orphanage where he spent his childhood and later in the technical school he had teachers who “did their best to make us, little crooks and slackers, into what at least cannot be called unworthy people”. The writer says that this positive experience developed into an ability in later life, particularly during the war, to treat “without biased animosity and dislike” those who were made by the state to be his commanders and bosses.<sup>23</sup> Let us emphasize another corollary of teachers’ work: in the second half of the 1930’s, probably for the first time in the history of school work, an important step was made from the principle of formal and legal equality in accessibility of education toward actual equality in education. The meaning and logic of this transition was in the difficult but genuine overcoming of the limitations imposed by personality traits, social environment, and the preceding negative baggage. Whether this idea was realized or not, people who went through school system, acquired the most important social and psychological resources for future adaptation to the all-encompassing fight for survival and for exiting from a series of gross losses in the first two war years.

### **Komsomol organizers**

We cannot rule out the fact that the changes in the school system could have remained just a wishful thinking on behalf of the state, but for the Komsomol activists who zealously set to work. From 1935, Komsomol organizers who directly reported to Komsomol authorities were active in most of schools. Some personal documents from the archives can help to sketch up a generalized portrait of such functionaries. Typically, they were 20 to 30 years old with high school or incomplete higher education. Their parents were factory workers, office workers or poor peasants; they had some work experience in industry or in Komsomol bureaucratic apparatus. They were not associated with the teaching personnel or school administration and were just independent watchers and chroniclers of all events however significant or insignificant they might be. Quite often, they were harsh critics of school work.

It was Komsomol that initiated ideological campaigns and bashings which shook teacher community and people’s education authorities. In this connection, Moscow and Moscow region can clearly exemplify the origins of the conflict between education and Komsomol bureaucracy.

First of all, Komsomol decided to unify the directives in the field of school work aimed at the struggle with child homelessness and child neglect, both having been outlined in the decree of the Council of People’s Commissars of the USSR and Central Committee of the Communist

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<sup>22</sup> TGAM. f. 910, op.1, d. 21. l.43.

<sup>23</sup> Shefner V. *Sestra pechali*. ( M., 2015). 190.

Party of May 31, 1935. Accordingly, in January 1937 Moscow Komsomol authorities conducted their own random inspection of some socially disadvantaged youngsters. Its results discredited many education bodies and law enforcement agencies: nearly 2100 dysfunctional adolescents expelled from schools in 1936 and, at best, placed in technical schools at factories or in some classes preparing for factory work, did not follow correction path – the number of cases of disorderly conduct among this category of teenagers did not decrease.

The root of the evil, according to Komsomol organizers, was in the withdrawal of schools from educating in general and from attempts to reform children prone to delinquency in particular. School directors wanted to get rid of such children who later found themselves in the grips of the street.<sup>24</sup> Komsomol organization saw the solution of the problem in its greater contribution to the education process, and in the hotspots at that – orphanages, in the so-called children’s detention rooms at police stations, in the branches of Children’s Inspection, the latter was to be set up as a unit of District Councils for People’s Education. Komsomol activists were ready to monitor all children expelled from schools for poor academic performance and registered with the police for disorderly behavior – they had plans to involve them in the education process.<sup>25</sup>

Active invasion of schools complicated by the collaboration of Komsomol with the police alarmed Dubrovina, the head of Moscow’s education authority, in earnest. Counter to this, she put forward an idea of purging educational institutions from those who were unfit for education.<sup>26</sup> It is easy to understand the principal cause of this alarm which in fact was the burden of hard-to-deal with children and chronic low-graders who were “protected” by Komsomol activists. This category of children not only spoilt the statistics of academic performance but also made schools ever-present in the criminal reports. However, the staunch stance of Komsomol on this issue made the retreat of educational authorities of the city impossible. The new round of Komsomol’s fight for “Education for all” was marked by the activists’ attention to supplementary education. The decision of Moscow’s City Committee of Komsomol dated April 5, 1937 about the work of Central Moscow’s House of Pioneers echoed the campaign against pedological distortions. It accused teachers and director Panshin of placing stakes on gifted children. Komsomol demanded that pedagogical work should be changed in the interests of all children without exception and primarily those who had already been at odds with law and ethics. For the latter, different activity groups could become not only the best alternative to “street education”, but also the best environment of social rehabilitation.<sup>27</sup> This plan of changing

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<sup>24</sup> TGAM.f.p-635. d.153. l. 45-47.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. l. 1-2, 15-16.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. l.56.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. l.130-131.

priorities could hardly be met with any enthusiasm of out-of-school teachers. But the ideological message of Komsomol's decision left them with no option. The meeting of the officials of district departments for people's education chaired by Dubrovina rubberstamped it.<sup>28</sup>

Komsomol was ahead of education authorities in posing other questions such as abuse of power by teachers, bullying and unjustified fault-finding which occasionally led victimized children to suicides or suicidal attempts. Komsomol brought to light cases of neglect on behalf of school teachers who turned a blind eye to poverty which led some children to begging and panhandling; Komsomol activists also highlighted some cases of criminal neglect of school administrations and law-enforcement agencies which overlooked the formation of groups of juvenile delinquents.<sup>29</sup>

Komsomol not only revealed shortcomings and defects in teachers' work who would rather silence down for the sake of professional reputation and professional solidarity. In some cases faulty teachers were forced to resign, while in other instances they were put on public trials. For example, on 24 January, 1937 there was a tragic incident in the town of Troitsk near Moscow where two adolescents were killed and seven were injured because of a rude and irresponsible director of the local club. Komsomol reacted promptly, and as soon as February 1 the perpetrator was standing an open exemplary trial and was severely punished.<sup>30</sup> Publicity, founding of fulminations and proposals, ability to walk the talk and walk initiatives was the reason for a profound Komsomol's influence in the sphere of education. Structurally and functionally, this influence can be seen as intensification of functions, feebly generated by teacher body. First, this was a formation of a catalog of malfunctions in teaching and education, which forced educational authorities to amend them. Second, this was a disposal of come-and-go people or those who were alien to the teaching profession.

The arousing role of Komsomol was supplemented by its own contribution to the work with schoolchildren. During 1936-1937, in response to the call of Voroshilov, the Commissar for Defense, Komsomol activists organized aviation design clubs and competitions at schools to bring up young "conquerors of the skies."<sup>31</sup> The scale of this project was only commensurate with an organization as powerful and encompassing as Komsomol. In summer, Komsomol activists were no less enthusiastic about helping to organize exciting and interesting vacations of children in pioneer camps and in urban children centers. If Komsomol activities in 1937 had not overstepped the boundaries of what was mentioned, they would have had all chances to be cited

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<sup>28</sup> TGAM. f.528, op.1. d. 676. l.22-23.

<sup>29</sup> TGAM. f. p. - 635. d. 177. l.21, 23; d. 153. l.45-47; GARF. f. 2306, op.69. d. 2296.l. 46, 49.

<sup>30</sup> TGAM. f. p- 635, op.1. d. 177. l.8.

<sup>31</sup> TGAM. f. p- 635.op.1. d.159. l. 1a-3. TGAM. f. p.- 635, op.1. d.149. l.14

in the history of school pedagogy as its useful instrument implementing some important tasks which made the Soviet school one of the best in the world.

The problem, however, was that Komsomol also participated in the cleansing of schools from “ideological turncoats,” “saboteurs,” and “enemies of the people.” To be fair, one should note that this mission was not an initiative of rank-and-file Komsomol members, but it was imposed on them from above. The signal for attack was in the pep talk of Alexander Kosarev, a secretary of the Central Committee of Komsomol, before school Komsomol organizers, fresh out from Moscow school of propagandists in the winter of 1937. He said, “Remember that school is only the beginning of your growth. Relentlessly struggle with the enemies of the Party and people!”<sup>32</sup> However different was each Komsomol organizer’s personal opinion regarding these tasks, the Komsomol conveyor belt started moving at full pelt. Komsomol organizers were meticulously writing down teachers’ remarks which demonstrated their misunderstanding of the Party line, and then lambasted them for the deviation from it. Quite often, this resulted in the dismissal of a teacher or a trial.

The initial classification of childrens’ anti-Soviet escapades was defined in the memorandum prepared in 1937 for Ilinsky, the secretary of Moscow City Committee of Komsomol. One group included transgressions in which “counter-revolution” cunningly manipulated children, subjecting them to its influence; another group included children’s utterances and acts directed at the subversion against of the authorities and the defamation of achievements of Socialism. As an example of child political deviation induced by the wiliness of adults, one incident can be cited. A six-grader Gresser, excluded from the Mozhaisk school for hooliganism, in a way of a protest brought to school a big hand-made poster which read, “Down with Stalin, long live Fascism!” According to a memo from the Moscow City Committee, the investigation revealed that the acts of that juvenile offender were engineered by a few adults who were later apprehended by NKVD (People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs) and convicted (Article 58).<sup>33</sup> This case is a clear indication of the Komsomol organizer collaborating with NKVD; one can easily assume that the former had tipped off the authorities who in their turn, set off to unearth the pocket of “counter-revolution” among the six-grader’s relatives or acquaintances.

Logic suggests that the same basic principle – submission to adult’s influence – was to be used with regard to the signs of political disloyalty of children of the “purged” parents. Materials, however, indicate that such adolescents were treated by the Soviet legal system on the basis of the presumption of the imputed hostility toward the Soviet state. That is why their words

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<sup>32</sup> TGAM. f. p- 635, op.1. d.149. l.14

<sup>33</sup> TGAM. f. p- 635. d.178. l. 14-15.

and acts were qualified as unaided. For example, in the documents of Moscow's City Committee one can find the name of Kharitonov, a tenth-grader and a son of parents convicted and exiled for Trotskyist beliefs. He was described as a very offish and a very embittered teenager. Thus, the Komsomol organizer in this school was not surprised hearing Kharitonov's opinion of Trotsky as a very "clever and energetic leader."<sup>34</sup> With an increasing number of compromising facts, the law of exiled parents was to be applied to such students.

### **Schoolchildren at the peak of the "Great Purge"**

A great number of reports from Komsomol organizers mirrored the attitude of schoolchildren towards the trials of the so-called "united Trotskyist-Zinoviev center" and "parallel Trotskyist center." In many cases, the reaction of youngsters demonstrated their sympathy with the people on trial. However, Komsomol observers were mostly dumbfounded by the attempts of adolescents to reenact the trials. These were not single examples. In a number of schools in Moscow and nearby towns, children were playing parts of Piatakov, Radek and Sokolnikov, while their leader was given the part of Vishinsky. Even bigger stir was caused by the mock-trials with "participation of Trotsky." A rumor spread in one school about the formation of a local "Trotskyist-Zinoviev band", and a freshly-baked Trotsky started to receive applications, "Please, let me join your Trotskyist band. We will obey and carry out all your orders, comrade Trotsky."<sup>35</sup>

Paradoxical popularity among schoolchildren of those accused at two Moscow trials had some rational foundation. Their endless vilification in the Soviet press, on the radio, at public meetings and workers' conventions as bandits, murderers and criminal scum, shrouded them in the veil of criminal romanticism. The most exploited terminology – "bandit" and "robber" – evoked in child's memory the images of noble robbers, from Robin Hood to Dubrovsky to Grigory Kotovsky exemplified in literature and in the cinema. Almost planetary scale of evils ascribed to "Trotskyist" groups quite naturally egged interest in the all-mighty leader who was managing these groups from abroad. It seems that the image of Trotsky molded by the Soviet propaganda, especially in the children's minds, forestalled the figure of Woland in Bulgakov's novel.

Exponentially growing interest in the "demon of Russian revolution" spread in a few directions. First, a rather numerous cohort of schoolchildren – avid readers – became interested in the books by Trotsky, his portraits and just books mentioning him which were withdrawn from the libraries. Second, there was a kind of bravado about having portraits or books by

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid. I. 100-101

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. I.17,142

Trotsky despite the fact that possession of such literature at home was not safe at all. Third, in a few Moscow schools some planted letters-flyers were found. In these letters, Trotsky was described as “a crystallly clear person, sincerely loving Russian people and infinitely faithful to them.”<sup>36</sup>

While the games of opposition and trials were played by high-schoolchildren, junior students had some other fad – painting swastika or greeting class-mates with the exclamation “Heil Hitler!” Moscow City Committee of Komsomol admitted regretfully that the source of the degenerating influence on children could not be found.<sup>37</sup> In fact, the reason for this interest in Fascist symbols was similar to the keen interest in the fallen figures of opposition. State propaganda’s coverage of them as ones having ties with “Japanese and German Fascism” fueled teenagers’ fascination with the symbols of Nazism which was a form of their emotional protest. Such pranks as a widespread desecration of portraits of Party leaders – piercing their eyes or sling shooting – were also impulsive reactions to the propagandist clichés and opinions imposed on teenagers. Along with “opposition games” and interests taken in its representatives these acts pointed clearly to a reverse result of the ideological influence to which pupils had been exposed to.

### **Clandestine organizations of schoolchildren**

Information of these is fragmentary and can be found in different archival documents such as memos, information bulletins, shorthand notes of conferences. Despite its fragmentariness, it can help reconstruct with greater or lesser approximation underground activities of schoolchildren. In the focus of attention were some groups which demonstrated the features of organizational structure such as membership, a charter or a prescribed model of conduct, a program or at least explicitly defined ends and means, leadership or a leader, rituals and sometimes insignia and practices. Below is the list of such organizations with some brief explanations:

1. “Abrek-zaury” or “The band of Shamil” (the city of Ordzhonikidze) – *a nationalist organization*
2. A band of juvenile delinquents in Tashkent
3. A band of juvenile delinquents from school No 1, the city of Siktivkar
4. A band of juvenile delinquents from the Temnikov school, Mordovia Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid. I.36- 39.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. I.37,40.

5. A band of juvenile delinquents from the town of Lodeinoye Pole, Leningrad Region
6. “Voskresensk Devils” (Voskresensk district of the Moscow region) - *an organization of petty criminals*
7. “Capella” in Kiev – *a friendly association of girls*
8. “Komi” – (a counter-revolutionary organization of young intellectuals) from school No 15 in Irkutsk
9. “An association of fans of natural sciences” from the Khutorskoy settlement of the Chelyabinsk region – *an organization of troublemaking and sexually promiscuous young people*
10. “The League of the Righteous” from school No 86 in Moscow – *an association of critics of school rules and regulations*
11. “The Union of the Valiant” from the town of Postishevo, now Krasnoarmeisk of the Donetsk region – *a friendly circle of girls*
12. “The Union of Fasters” from Chern village of the Tula region - *an organization of troublemaking and sexually promiscuous young people*
13. “The Union of Young Bandits” from Borisovka village of the Kursk region – *an organization with criminal underpinning*
14. “The Union Bureau” with a hand-written magazine “Sadness of the Century” from the town of Roslavl of the Smolensk region – *an association of non-conformists, critics of school rules and demonstratively criminal behavior*
15. “The Union of the Chita Youth” from the outpost Olovyannaya of the Chita region – *Anti-Soviet terrorist organization*
16. Trotskyist organization of school students of the Tashtip region in the Khakassia republic – *an opposition terrorist organization*
17. “The Tushino Thief” from Tushino district of the Moscow region – *an organization of petty criminals*
18. “Ukrainian Social Democratic Party” of schoolchildren from Obolon district of Kiev – *a nationalist organization.*<sup>38</sup>

Let us try to estimate their activities by the scale of delinquency and political oppositionism

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<sup>38</sup> Given in quotation marks are the names of organizations; in other cases – their titles found in the documents. For a detailed description of the organizations see Volkova I.V. *Podpolniye organizatsii shkolnikov v SSSR perioda bolshogo terrora.*// Psikhologiya i pravo. 2015. Tom 5, No 4, 14-25.

**Table 1. Correlation of indicators of delinquency and political oppositionism of juvenile groups**

Delinquency	Political oppositionism		
	High	Medium	Low
High	8;15;16	2;3;4;5;	9;12;13
Medium	18	1;14	6; 17
Low			7;10;11

*Source: RGASPI:f. M-1; TGAM: f.p.-635; GARF: f.2036*

The groups under discussion point to the activity of schoolchildren which did not diminish during the heat of repressions and was not under control of authorities and school administrations. One should note that delinquent behavior and protests of clandestine groups were two sides of one coin. This remark is also applicable to the three groups with a high level of oppositionism to the regime (8, 15, 16) whose methods were bordering on hooliganism (stealing of government property, damaging and destruction of state symbols etc.). Only three groups present an exception (7, 10, 11) – they sprang up as a result of high-school otherwise normal seniors’ dissatisfaction with the tedious and bureaucratized work of Komsomol.

From the documents one can conclude that the most confirmed of these juvenile delinquents were sent to juvenile prisons which were under the supervision of NKVD; the others were let off but monitored by the police, teachers, Komsomol and Pioneer activists. Members of the Trotskyist group from Khakassia and adult leaders of the “Union of the Chita youth” were apprehended.

Even at the peak of the “Great Terror”, the Soviet school pupils did not constitute a completely voiceless mass, “zombified” by the propaganda. However the fact of a tiny proportion of youngsters involved with these organizations as well as the differential approach of punitive agencies toward their punishment suggests some boundaries within which the search for and prosecution of politically deviant teenagers was carried out.

### **Interinstitutional conflict at the highest point: teachers vs Komsomol organizers**

By the summer of 1937, it was evident that the amount of Komsomol’s claim to a political control within the field of education had grown. In Moscow alone, Komsomol leaders in



early June wanted to charge leaders of people's education with allowing "to weed the body of school directors and school collectives with the subjects alien to the working class." Starting from the new academic year of 1937/1938, the City Committee demanded that district Komsomol committees should take the study of the Constitution and history of the USSR under their intense control.<sup>39</sup>

However, the expected massacre at schools did not happen. Unlike other categories of Komsomol members – students, factory and office workers – cases against Komsomol members at school compared to the avalanche of case files in the archives of Moscow City Committee of Komsomol are nearly absent. The fact that political persecutions almost sidestepped school seniors can be supported by memoirs. For example, according to Shikheyeva-Gaister, by the end of 1937, twenty-five of her classmates, i.e. three quarters of her class at the prestigious school No 19 on Sofiiskaya embankment were children whose parents had been arrested. In spite of this, not a single student was expelled from the school, while many of them, including herself, the daughter of the repressed, joined Komsomol.<sup>40</sup> Despite the fact that this remark cannot be fully applied to teachers, one should emphasize that the teacher body suffered less compared to other professional communities. According to Yuing, in the rating of repression scale, teacher community was only in the tenth place out of thirteen.<sup>41</sup> And this was despite the fact that the system demanded the same purge of cadres in education as in all other spheres!

The reason for a relatively low repressive interference at schools was, first of all, in the backsliding actions adopted by teacher community. As early as 1936/1937, the desire of Komsomol to take the work with low graders and dysfunctional teenagers under its full control, forced teachers to be up in arms. In the ensuing battle, when the functional security of schools was at stake, Komsomol activists received a symmetrical answer. The attempt to pressurize schoolchildren – children whose parents were arrested or who allowed themselves an anti-Soviet escapade – could have become tragic; and this tragedy, with teachers' help, could have been ascribed to a Komsomol organizer. This was clearly revealed at the meeting of Moscow City Committee of Komsomol in May 1938: as the teachers of schools No 340 and No 172 put it, Komsomol organizers were responsible for ignoring "unhealthy moods" of two schoolgirls and failed to prevent their suicides.<sup>42</sup> Interestingly, that there are no other similar precedents in the materials of Moscow City Committee. In all probability, this lesson became a cold shower for

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<sup>39</sup> TGAM. f. p- 635, op.1. d.159. l.147- 148.

<sup>40</sup> Shikheyeva-Gaister. *Deti vragov naroda: semeinaya khronika vremyon kulta lichnosti*. (M, 2012). 59, 77.

<sup>41</sup> Yuing T. *Uchitelya epokhi stalinizma: vlast, politika i zhizn shkoli 1930-kh godov*. (M, 2011), 238.

<sup>42</sup> TGAM. f. p- 635, op.1. d.167. l. 6-7.

some excessively zealous Komsomol leaders, too partial to the children who were out of the picture.

Teacher community accumulated a number of methods to do away with the unwanted Komsomol organizer. In 1937/1938 there was an avalanche of cases which clearly indicated the desire of teachers to catch some unsuitable Komsomol organizer red-handed and to give him a good dressing down. At the end of January, the secretariat of Moscow City Committee of Komsomol was hearing a case of a Komsomol leader from school No 181, who inadvertently gave the green light to a wall newspaper with some portraits of “Trotskyist counter-revolutionaries”. It is not difficult to guess who was the tipster. The unfortunate Komsomol organizer was accused of “having lost class vigilance,” dismissed from his post and excluded from the ranks of Komsomol.<sup>43</sup> Sometimes overzealous teachers would lay the blame on Komsomol leaders for financial impropriety which resulted in a formal reprimand and suspension from work.<sup>44</sup> Quite often Komsomol leaders were accused of loose conduct, including sexual abuse of school girls.<sup>45</sup> Sometimes they were accused of leadership mania. One teacher in a school of Kharkiv reported that he read such words in his students’ record-books, “Thanks to the Party, to the government and to our Komsomol organizer for our happy and merry life.”<sup>46</sup>

The peak of the “massacre” of Komsomol organizers coincided with the fall of 1937. To a great extent, it was helped by the directive of the 4<sup>th</sup> Plenum of the Central Committee of Komsomol “On the work of the people’s enemies inside Komsomol” which initiated, as Kosarev put it, a search for “various treacherous spying rascals” within the youth organization. It culminated in the demotion of 51 members and candidate members of the Central Committee of Komsomol and arrest of 13 secretaries of regional and republic Central Committees of Komsomol. This campaign seriously drained the ranks of Moscow City Committee of Komsomol. Seventeen members of it were removed from it branded as “enemies of the people,” twelve – on the allegation of political mistrust, while six secretaries were arrested. On the eve of his arrest, Ilinsky, secretary of Moscow City Committee in charge of education, took his own life.<sup>47</sup> While resignations and repressions at the top level were caused by mutual spying, backstabbing, and tipping by fellow workers, at the grassroots level similar results were achieved with facts collected and brought into play by teachers’ collectives. Absolute superiority of teachers in terms of numbers, education and solidarity enabled not only to neutralize

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<sup>43</sup> TGAM. f. p- 635. d.149. l.45.

<sup>44</sup> Rossiiskiy Gosudarstvennyy Arkhiv Socialno-Politicheskoy Istorii (further RGASPI). f. 17, op.120. d. 237.l.2.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid l.54.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. l.2.

<sup>47</sup> Krivoruchko V K., Tsvetliuk L.S. *Molodyozh, Komsomol, obshchestvo: ot oktyabrskoi revolyutsii do otechestvennoi voini.* (M., 2011). 350-352.

Komsomol's claim to a total ideological control over schools, but to deliver a counter blow. A series of dismissals of blacklisted Komsomol organizers in late 1937 left no doubt that teacher community managed to maintain leading positions in schools. The triumphant goal was scored by a series of voluntary resignations of Komsomol leaders. The decision of the Plenum of Moscow City Komsomol Committee of January 17, 1938 admitted the failure of Komsomol organizers; it stated their "detachment" from "the mass of students" and directed them to organize political panel discussions and different groups in close contact with teachers.<sup>48</sup> Similar events were happening in other regions of the country.

The conflict of Komsomol with teachers with regard to teenagers was to air-cushion the most traumatic and bleak year of the Soviet history. Soviet school as a social institution by the time under discussion had reached maturity that expressed itself in part in the established dynamic balance of its actors. The desire of some of them to disrupt the existing balance of forces immediately triggered reactions aimed at the restoration of the initial *status quo*. This effect was caused by the attempt of Komsomol at first to establish control over teachers in the educational process, and then to engage schools in the process of political purges. These events demonstrated teachers' ability as a key collective player to manage the imposed rules and to regulate the process in the area of their own responsibility. This ability bred the properties of school which distinguished it from other institutions and agencies in 1937: it received a glancing blow, but was not knocked down by the system. And most importantly – it significantly diminished moral losses of the young generation caused by the upheavals in society.

## **“For Motherland, for Communism!”: educating future fighters of World War-II**

It is this slogan popular in the second half of the 1930's that concisely expressed the rationale of ideological and educational work in school. The leading role in this sphere was assigned to the course of civil history. In 1937, a textbook on the history of the USSR from the earliest times was published for an elementary school, edited by Shestakov. It was also the basis for teaching history in the middle and upper classes. Thus, in 1937, the study of history introduced into the school curriculum by the Decree of the Council of People's Commissars of the USSR and the Central Committee of the CPSU (b) of May 16, 1934 was put on a scheduled basis. On the one hand, the new subject was to promote the communist education of students and, on the other hand, it was to foster national and state patriotism of the young and prepare them to confront a strong enemy. This goal was to be achieved by means of an emotional and

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<sup>48</sup> TGAM. f. p- 635, op.1.d.191. l. 3, 6-8.

vivid way of presenting history, thus creating the effect of the presence of students in the events described. The stated requirements applied in the first place to the three main problematic topic units of the course. These were, first, the problems of social servitude (slavery, serfdom, economic bondage of capital) and class struggle. Secondly, the problem of national oppression and the national liberation struggle. And, thirdly, the defence of the motherland and liberty in the wars of the past.

The course of ancient history was almost entirely devoted to the phenomenon of slavery. Methodology experts insisted that all the parts of the lessons should stir up children's burning compassion for the slave's fate and vehement protest against the very institution of slavery. The topic was illustrated by a short dramatical piece, i.e. a short sketch played out at the lesson, and often concluded with a historical performance piece, for example a big play based on the novel "Spartacus" by Giovagnoli. Some assignments given to children by teachers were to make kids understand the feelings of a slave; such tasks were entrusted to students prone to creativity: to mold clay or playdough figurines of a slave bearing a burden, or kneading dough, or carrying a wine vessel.<sup>49</sup>

The topic of serfdom was studied similarly. Serfdom practices at its peak were illustrated with the help of expressive sketches from Russian fiction.<sup>50</sup> During extra-curricular creative classes schoolchildren were taught to live through the material studied and experience the feelings it evoked. These activities included drama, literary and musical recitals, recitation in chorus, and other performances.

The indoctrinated in students' minds and even "lived through" by them, the social states of the slave and of the serf in many respects were extended to the position of peasants and urban proletariat of post-reform Russia, which made all these characters very close, if not equivalent, as they were perceived by schoolchildren. Such phenomenon was determined, first, by the reproduction of the same or similar semantic clichés in their description. Thus, the condition of peasants after the abolition of serfdom was characterized by such definitions as peonage and tyranny, rent service, landlessness and lawlessness. Urban proletariat was defined by such idioms as capitalist slavery, merciless exploitation, deprivation. Second, by the image system of Russian literature and visual art, both castigating capitalist practices of post-reform Russia.<sup>51</sup> The conditions of pre-revolutionary work and life of workers were shown in contrast with the social benefits which were given to them by the Soviet state. In order to highlight the radical changes,

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<sup>49</sup> Arkhiv RAO. f. 15, op.1. d.1153. l.9 ob.

<sup>50</sup> Arkhiv RAO. f. 109, op.1. d.273. l.10

<sup>51</sup> Arkhiv RAO. f. 109, op.1. d.222. l.4-5.

many teachers told their students real tragic life stories of pre-revolutionary workers which evoked “noble wrath and hatred of the exploiters in the hearts of these children.”<sup>52</sup>

Tsar’s policy with regard to the relations between upper and lower classes and other classes of Russian society as well as the treatment of smaller nations in the Russian empire was considered to be a hundred-year long injustice. Silencing the fact of their liberation from mutual destruction and familiarization with a more developed civilization, history program at schools described the fact of inclusion of minor nations into Russia as a regressive phenomenon.<sup>53</sup> Soviet national policy was considered to be an amendment of centuries of injustice and as an epitome of aspirations of these nations. When speaking about the national question as one of the most pressing after Bolsheviks came to power in 1917, teacher asked children, who, in their opinion, could become the first people’s commissar for national affairs. Children would shout interrupting each other: “Stalin, Stalin!”<sup>54</sup>

Well-thought out and emotional narrative of the material about social oppression and injustice, caused a strong emotional feedback from children with characteristic kinaesthetic, motoric and vegetative reactions such as strained muscles, reflexive doubling of fists, paleness of face, pupillary dilation etc. Such expressions of empathy were frequently noted by teachers and other observers who were present in classrooms. With repeated reproduction of the same stimuli (verbal phrases, scenes and images) in other contexts these emotional and bodily reactions would develop into stable dispositions. They were evident when pupils were discussing such topics as foreign enslavement, national humiliation and oppression, and atrocities caused by enemies in our land. In other words, concepts and meanings regarding social problems emotionally charged the perception of outer encroachment on freedom, honor, entirety of the motherland and life of citizens. One should think that categorical denial of slavery, servitude, national and racial segregation of people laid by the school at the level of deep and even automatic reactions in many respects determined, from the onset of the war, fierce denial by the young generation of the goals and ideology of the enemy which were based on the theory of the superiority of the Arian nation and subjugation of the “*untermensch*”.

The ideological and educational work of schools can be viewed with regard to the theory of emotional practices suggested by the cultural researcher Monica Scheer. Her approach is an acquired practice of interaction with the outside world. She uses certain bodily dispositions or, in terms of Bourdieu, habituses which in turn are determined by the social norms and cultural requirements. In other words, the prescribed in this or another scenario emotional stimulus works

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<sup>52</sup> Bushik L. P. *Ocherk razvitiya shkolnogo istoricheskogo obrazovaniya v SSSR.*( M, 1961). 302.

<sup>53</sup> Arkhiv RAO. f. 11, op.1. d.145. l.27 ob.

<sup>54</sup> Arkhiv RAO. f. 24, op.1. d.21. l. 73.

only when meeting an agent, which is ready to accept it.<sup>55</sup> We will take a risk and suggest that without the work described above, mass mobilization of Soviet people, especially those fresh out of school would be problematic.

The first serious test of the results of ideological and political education in Soviet schools was the reaction of teenagers to the civil war in Spain. Spanish events which were presented by the Soviet media as a variant of struggle between “the reds” and “the whites” in 1918-1921, aroused in young people a hope for getting a friend and a Socialist ally in the Pyrenees. These expectation brought about very different displays of sympathy and support – from feverish readings of the war bulletins, fund-raising for Spanish people to numerous individual and group flight of teenagers to Odessa and other ports in the hope of getting to Spain by the sea and join international brigades of the defenders of the republic.<sup>56</sup> The reason for such acute and active perception took roots in the school perusal of world history – its culmination was to be proletarian revolution paving the way to Communist living. While in the official deliberations of the 1930’s the myths of the revolution and Communism was present as some abstract strategic goals (besides, the USSR did not aim at establishing Communist regime in Spain), for the teenagers and adolescents they were guiding vectors in the current social and political life. This message of active help to the fighters in the Pyrenees (viewed, of course, from the angle of establishing the same system as in the USSR) demonstrated the highest efficiency of schools in instilling values of the Soviet system in its pupils.

*By the time described, the school had been a well-tuned societal subsystem. It already possessed certain autonomy and resources enabling to weaken destructive impulses from the outside. On the one hand, this feature made it possible to protect the “childhood territory” from sweeping upheavals, as well as saving the pupils from cognitive dissonance in viewing ideals and reality of the 1930s. On the other hand, it allowed the teaching community to focus its efforts on fulfilling the government's task to establish a school of equal opportunities and prepare students for war.*

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<sup>55</sup> Scheer M. *Are Emotions a Kind of Practice (and Is That What Makes Them Have a History)? A Bourdieuan Approach to Understanding Emotion.* | History and Theory. 2012, May. 193-220.

<sup>56</sup> GARF. f. 2306, op.69. d. 2357. l.68; TGAM. f. 528, op.1. d.504. l.143 ob.

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