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EDUCATION AS DISCIPLINE: POWER, IDEOLOGY, AND THE SOVIET SCHOOL SYSTEM, 1917–1939

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Abstract

This article examines the transformation of the Soviet education system between 1917 and 1939, focusing on its role as a mechanism of disciplinary power and ideological consolidation. Drawing on archival materials, policy documents, and pedagogical texts, the study employs a qualitative historical-comparative methodology to analyze how educational reforms translated Marxist-Leninist ideology into everyday schooling practices. The theoretical framework integrates Michel Foucault's concept of disciplinary power with Antonio Gramsci's notion of cultural hegemony and Pierre Bourdieu's theory of symbolic power. The findings demonstrate that Soviet education functioned not merely as a tool of knowledge transmission but as a central institution for producing political conformity, legitimizing authority, and shaping the "new Soviet person." By situating Soviet schooling within broader debates on authoritarian governance, the article contributes to comparative research on education as a strategic site of power in both historical and contemporary contexts.

Key words

Soviet education, Marxist-Leninist theory, ideological control, Stalinism, power and discipline, educational policy.

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1. Introduction

In the modern world, education systems are often used by political regimes as instruments of social control and ideological influence, a dynamic that was particularly pronounced in revolutionary and Stalinist Soviet Russia. In authoritarian contexts, educational policy serves not only to disseminate knowledge but also to legitimize regimes, construct political narratives, and shape civic behavior.

The study of the Soviet education system is important not only for understanding Soviet history, but also for analyzing the dynamics of education in

modern authoritarian and hybrid regimes. The Soviet model played a significant role in training skilled professionals, promoting social mobility, and reinforcing the ideological hegemony of the regime. The analysis of this system offers valuable insight into the dual role of education, as a means of individual development and as an instrument of political discipline. Furthermore, it invites comparative reflection on contemporary regimes like China, North Korea, and Venezuela, where education remains a key vehicle for political socialization. Even in democratic societies, education can become a contested arena for ideological interpretation, particularly in curriculum design, civic education, and historical narratives.

The study of Soviet education has attracted substantial scholarly attention, particularly as it relates to the interplay between ideology, social mobility, and political control. Foundational works by Sheila Fitzpatrick, Larry Holmes, and Ben Eklof have elucidated the complex function of education in the USSR. Fitzpatrick's *Education and Social Mobility in the Soviet Union 1921–1934* situates education within broader state objectives, linking Stalinist policies to efforts in industrial expansion and class restructuring. Holmes, in *The Kremlin and the Schoolhouse* [KP1.1], foregrounds the political motivations underlying early Soviet educational reforms, while Eklof's exploration of rural schooling highlights the social and pedagogical challenges faced during the pre-revolutionary and early Soviet periods. [KP2.1] Early Soviet educational reforms are often described as a radical departure from pre-revolutionary models, particularly in relation to class mobility and access to schooling (Fitzpatrick, 2002).

This literature review also addresses the broader comparative literature on authoritarian regimes and education, drawing on contemporary analyses of education in China, North Korea, and Venezuela. These comparative insights highlight persistent patterns of ideological manipulation and the use of educational structures as tools of statecraft, reinforcing the relevance of the Soviet model to present-day political sociology and education policy research.

Where prior studies have predominantly emphasized historical and policy-oriented dimensions, this article contributes a novel analytical perspective by integrating Foucauldian theory with Soviet historiography. It thereby expands the conceptual lens through which education in authoritarian regimes can be understood as both a developmental strategy and a disciplinary regime.

Conceptually, the article approaches education not merely as a policy domain but as a key institutional site where power, knowledge, and subjectivity intersect. While existing scholarship has extensively examined Soviet educational reforms as instruments of ideological control, this article shifts the analytical focus to education as a site of knowledge production and circulation. Rather than treating schooling merely as a political apparatus, it conceptualizes Soviet education as a disciplinary epistemic regime in which knowledge itself was reorganized, hierarchized, and legitimized.

This article examines the development of the Soviet education system from the revolutionary period to the consolidation of Stalinism, with a particular focus on its transformation from a medium of knowledge transmission into a tool of political indoctrination and social control. Central research

questions include: What theoretical foundations underpinned Soviet educational policy? How did education function as an instrument of state control and ideological dissemination? What were the consequences of Stalinist reforms for social mobility, industrial development, and the formation of the so-called "new Soviet person"?

The analysis draws on Michel Foucault's (1975) theory of disciplinary power, which conceptualizes education as a key mechanism of surveillance, normalization, and the internalization of control. In this framework, power is not only repressive but also productive; it operates through institutions such as schools to construct subjectivity and reproduce dominant ideologies. Through practices like classification, monitoring, and ritualized activities, educational institutions shape individuals to conform to prevailing norms and expectations.

This article builds upon existing scholarship on Soviet education and authoritarian regimes but diverges by applying Foucauldian analysis more systematically to the Soviet case. It argues that the education system institutionalized state power by cultivating ideologically conditioned subjects aligned with the political and industrial goals of the regime. Moreover, it situates these developments within broader socio-economic transformations, offering a multidimensional perspective on how education functioned as a strategic site for state-building and political conformity.

Contemporary research on authoritarian regimes further suggests that similar educational strategies continue to play a central role in sustaining political control, making the Soviet case not only historically significant but also relevant to current debates on power, ideology, and education. Foucault's concept of disciplinary power is employed here not as a general metaphor for control, but as an analytical tool to examine how routines of schooling, timetables, examinations, standardized curricula, and teacher supervision produced normalized conduct within Soviet classrooms. These micro-practices reveal how political authority operated through the internalization of discipline rather than through coercion alone (Shearer, 2009).

Gramsci's notion of cultural hegemony allows the analysis to move beyond repression and examine how educational institutions functioned as sites where consent was manufactured. Soviet schooling did not merely transmit ideology; it framed Party values as common sense, embedding them within pedagogical norms and narratives of social progress (Willimott, 2017). Finally, Bourdieu's concept of symbolic power is used to analyze how educational credentials, linguistic norms, and cultural capital legitimized Soviet authority while marginalizing

alternative forms of knowledge (Bourdieu, 1991). This triangulated framework enables a relational reading of Soviet education as both a disciplinary apparatus and a hegemonic project.

Recent historiography on Soviet education has increasingly moved beyond institutional narratives toward the study of classroom practices, knowledge circulation, and everyday experiences of students and teachers (Fitzpatrick, 2002; Ewing, 2003; Holmes, 2016). While earlier scholarship emphasized the rupture between progressive experimentation in the 1920s and ideological consolidation under Stalin, more recent studies have questioned the rigidity of this dichotomy, highlighting continuities in political pedagogies and disciplinary practices across periods.

This article builds on these debates by arguing that the transition of the 1930s should not be understood solely as a shift from pedagogical freedom to repression, but as a reconfiguration of disciplinary techniques that were already embedded in revolutionary educational projects. In doing so, it contributes to current discussions on the continuity and transformation of power within Soviet institutions of knowledge.

Rather than offering a descriptive overview of Soviet educational reforms, this article intervenes in the historiography of early Soviet schooling by examining education as a site where disciplinary power, cultural hegemony, and symbolic authority were actively negotiated rather than mechanically imposed. By reading pedagogical reforms, curricular standardization, and teacher training policies through a combined Foucauldian–Gramscian–Bourdieuian framework, the article shifts the focus from institutional change alone to the production of compliant subjects and the internalization of ideological norms within everyday educational practices.

2. Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, historical-comparative methodology, combining archival research with theoretical interpretation. The central aim is to trace how Soviet education evolved from an experimental and partly decentralized system in the 1920s into a rigid, standardized, and politically subordinated institution under Stalin during the 1930s.

The analysis draws on archival materials from Soviet educational authorities, including policy directives, teachers' guidelines, and curricular frameworks issued by Narkompros during the 1920s and 1930s. These documents are read alongside pedagogical journals and Party resolutions in order

to trace how ideological objectives were translated into everyday educational practices. The empirical foundation of the research consists of a wide range of primary sources produced between 1917 and 1939.

These include official decrees, constitutions, Party resolutions, and education codes, such as the 1918 Decree on Education, the 1919 Code of Soviet Education, and the 1931 curriculum resolutions, alongside the 1936 Stalin Constitution. Speeches of Party leaders, pedagogical manuals, and youth organization handbooks, particularly those of the Young Pioneers and Komsomol, are also examined in order to capture the intersection of policy, ideology, and everyday educational practice. These documents are interpreted not only as formal regulations but as political texts that reveal how the Soviet state envisioned and enforced its project of social transformation. This legal codification transformed education into a standardized and compulsory institutional framework, enabling systematic regulation of pedagogical practices and ideological content.

The identification of themes and interpretive categories is informed by the theoretical framework, allowing concepts such as discipline, hegemony, and symbolic power to guide the reading of archival texts rather than being applied retrospectively. The analysis proceeds by close reading and thematic interpretation of these materials. Rather than treating the documents as neutral reflections of policy, they are approached as instruments of power and as sites where ideology, knowledge, and authority converged. Recurring themes such as polytechnical education, secularization, centralization, indoctrination, and youth mobilization are identified and traced across the period.

Special attention is given to the comparison between the experimental reforms of the 1920s, which emphasized progressive pedagogical methods and labor-oriented curricula, and the Stalinist turn of the 1930s, which imposed uniformity, ideological control, and strict disciplinary structures. This diachronic comparison makes it possible to highlight both continuities and ruptures within the same regime.

The interpretation of findings is guided by a theoretical framework that draws on three complementary perspectives. Michel Foucault's concept of disciplinary power illuminates how schools functioned as mechanisms of normalization and surveillance, shaping compliant bodies and minds. Antonio Gramsci's notion of cultural hegemony explains how Marxist-Leninist ideology was presented as scientific and self-evident, thereby reducing the need for overt coercion. Pierre

Bourdieu's theory of symbolic power is employed to show how educational institutions legitimized certain forms of knowledge while marginalizing alternative worldviews, reinforcing political hierarchy through what he terms symbolic violence. Taken together, these frameworks provide a multidimensional lens through which the Soviet school can be understood as both a developmental and coercive apparatus.

Although the study is centered on the Soviet Union, it also incorporates a limited comparative perspective. References to contemporary authoritarian regimes, most notably China and North Korea, demonstrate the enduring legacy of Soviet educational strategies in contexts where curricula, youth organizations, and civic instruction continue to serve as tools of ideological consolidation.

The chosen timeframe of 1917 to 1939 is crucial for understanding the transformation of Soviet schooling. It covers both the initial post-revolutionary years, marked by pedagogical experimentation and Western influence, and the Stalinist era, characterized by centralization and indoctrination. This temporal scope allows for the analysis of education as a dynamic field shaped by competing visions of socialism and by the growing demands of industrialization and political control.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of the study. The analysis relies primarily on textual and archival sources and does not include systematic quantitative data such as enrollment statistics or literacy rates beyond what is reported in official documents. Moreover, while comparative references are made, a full cross-national analysis lies beyond the scope of this article and remains a promising direction for future research.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Transforming Education: From Tsarist Legacies to Soviet Ideological Control

The analysis identifies three core mechanisms through which the Soviet education system operated as a technology of power: institutional discipline, ideological normalization, and symbolic legitimation. These mechanisms structured both educational governance and the production of politically compliant subjects.

This section first outlines the key empirical findings derived from archival documents, policy texts, and educational regulations, and subsequently interprets these findings through a Foucauldian–Gramscian–Bourdieuian analytical framework. By combining empirical analysis with theoretical interpretation, the section demonstrates how Soviet

education functioned as both a disciplinary institution and a mechanism of ideological consolidation.

The contribution of this article lies in reconceptualizing Soviet education not merely as an instrument of ideological transmission but as a disciplinary epistemic regime in which knowledge itself was reorganized, hierarchized, and legitimized. By integrating Foucauldian, Gramscian, and Bourdieusian perspectives, the study demonstrates how education functioned simultaneously as a site of consent production, behavioral normalization, and symbolic domination.

The results of this study indicate that Soviet education between 1917 and 1939 operated through three interrelated mechanisms: institutional discipline, ideological normalization, and symbolic legitimation of power. First, schools functioned as disciplinary institutions that normalized behavior through surveillance, routines, and hierarchical authority. Second, curricula and pedagogical practices embedded Marxist-Leninist ideology as common sense, reducing the need for overt coercion. Third, educational credentials and symbolic hierarchies legitimized state power by defining acceptable knowledge and marginalizing alternative worldviews.

Archival evidence indicates that pre-revolutionary mass illiteracy functioned as a structural condition that enabled the Soviet state to monopolize early knowledge formation. The absence of entrenched educational traditions allowed ideological content to be embedded at the foundational stages of literacy acquisition, transforming mass education into a primary mechanism of disciplinary normalization. The findings of this study indicate that this structural illiteracy constituted not merely a social deficit but a strategic opportunity for the Soviet state to institutionalize ideological discipline through schooling. In conditions where large segments of the population lacked prior educational frameworks, the state was able to monopolize knowledge production, define legitimate forms of literacy, and embed Marxist-Leninist ideology at the foundational level of learning. From a Foucauldian perspective, mass literacy campaigns functioned simultaneously as emancipatory projects and as mechanisms of normalization, enabling the internalization of political authority through standardized curricula and pedagogical routines.

The new Soviet government immediately undertook measures to consolidate power and restructure society, aiming to preserve existing social institutions while simultaneously “communizing” them. Two major policy directions, anti-religious campaigns and the restructuring of family life, had

direct implications for education. Atheism was declared integral to Soviet ideology, and the decree of January 23, 1918, "On the Separation of the Church from the State and the School from the Church," nationalized all religious property and removed religious influence from schools (Council of People's Commissars of the RSFSR, 1918, art. 26). The secularization of education and the promotion of Marxist-Leninist values became central to the regime's project of social transformation.

Marxist philosophy, although underdeveloped in practical educational terms, provided the ideological foundation for constructing a class-conscious school system. Lenin and the early Soviet leadership viewed education as essential for socio-political and economic modernization, as well as for consolidating political authority across the multiethnic Russian Empire (Lauglo, 1988; Dewitt, 1968; Ubiria, 2015). To achieve rapid industrialization, the regime emphasized the education of the masses and the preparation of individuals capable of participating actively in state administration and socialist production (Lenin, 1957).

A key pedagogical innovation was the integration of "mental" and "manual" labor, rooted in Marxist thought, which Lenin operationalized through polytechnical education. This approach combined academic study with practical labor, enabling students to acquire both theoretical knowledge and hands-on skills relevant to industrial and agricultural production. By the early 1930s, the principle of "socially useful labor" had become central to primary and secondary curricula, fostering not only practical competence but also communist values and collective responsibility.

The early Soviet educational system also pursued the eradication of illiteracy among adults and children, including minority populations historically disadvantaged under Tsarist policies. Educational programs for non-Russian groups were delivered in native languages, while Russian became a second compulsory language, facilitating both literacy and political indoctrination. Analysis of archival materials held at RGASPI suggests that the 1919 Code of Soviet Education codified these principles by institutionalizing state responsibility for education and defining schools as instruments for the promotion of social equality, the abolition of class distinctions, and the cultivation of loyalty to the Soviet state (Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History, 1919). Education was explicitly political: it served to transmit knowledge while simultaneously establishing ideological control and shaping social behavior in accordance with Marxist-Leninist objectives.

3.2. 1920s and Experiments in the Education System

The experimental teaching methods demonstrate in the Soviet education system aimed to democratize the education system and use individual pedagogical approaches. The openly declared goal of the Soviet government, the universalization of education, in some cases implied the use of more open and inclusive methods. The findings demonstrate that early Soviet pedagogical openness to Western progressive education functioned less as a commitment to pedagogical pluralism than as a transitional strategy for legitimizing state authority. Archival materials suggest that while Deweyan methods were selectively adopted, their implementation remained subordinated to ideological supervision, revealing an early synthesis of pedagogical experimentation and political control rather than genuine educational autonomy.

Accordingly, the 1920s are truly considered a period of innovation in the Soviet Union, when significant changes took place in the education system. At this time, the "progressive education" model was widely spread, the aim of which was to create a system that included more practical and active approaches. This model was actively established, especially when Anatoly Lunacharsky was appointed head of the People's Commissariat of Education. In 1918, the State Commission for Education, under the leadership of Lunacharsky and Lepeshinsky, developed a document on the principles of building a new school (Fitzpatrick, 2002).

They supported innovative changes that considered education in a socio-economic context and contributed to the spread of socialist ideals. The "progressive education" model implied that learning should be more practical, tailored to the real needs of society and the interests of the working class. Teachers were not only supposed to be transmitters of knowledge and information, but also participants in lessons, motivating students to be actively involved and work in groups. This approach gained great popularity because it reflected the fundamental principles of socialist society, such as collectivism and social responsibility. Accordingly, it responded to the political and social demands of the time, such as the rapid industrialization of society, anti-religious and proletarian-cultural ideals.

Thus, in the post-revolutionary period of the 1920s, the People's Commissariat of Education developed a strategy aimed at promoting a comprehensive labor-oriented educational model, which largely reflected the need to create a new socialist generation. This policy also envisaged

significant changes in educational design and the educational framework itself (Kerr, 1997). For example, the teaching process paid more attention to students' work on practical projects, rather than performing the usual "training and repetition" activities. Accordingly, the teacher was also given a new function as a facilitator, who tried to motivate and engage children in this type of school. By this time, a large number of new experimental education institutions had begun to be established in the Soviet Union, working closely with the American psychologist and innovative educator John Dewey and his associates. Overall, the pedagogical principles of comprehensive, work-oriented learning and development experienced a notable upsurge in the USSR.

Accordingly, the 1920s were considered a period of bold pedagogical experiments for the Soviet school (Holmes, 1973, p. 347). Progressive methods included project-based learning, physical education, and craft work, inspired by Western models. However, their implementation remained politically constrained. John Dewey expressed his support for the reforms that the Soviet government carried out during this period and believed that the new Soviet system sought to be more inclusive and flexible, which was also consistent with its federal educational principles. Rather than relying solely on coercion, these reforms sought to reshape moral and cultural authority, reflecting an early attempt to establish ideological leadership through education in Gramscian terms. For example, he supported the idea of «workers' schools,» where children would not only study classical scientific disciplines, but also pay significant attention to the formation of practical and labor skills, since the education system should serve not only individual development, but also social and collective responsibility. Although John Dewey recognized the Soviet regime's attempts to introduce new approaches to the education system, he maintained a harsh critical attitude and noted that despite the existing efforts, the education system was still politically strictly centralized and controlled. Accordingly, it served political thinking and was intended to serve its stability, instead of protecting free, democratic processes[KP3.1].

Although the reformers of the Soviet education system were stimulated by the ideas of Western educators, they knew that education should be a kind of tool for them, which should be actively used in the service of building a socialist society. Soviet reformers recognized that they should adopt the best Western approaches, but first of all they should create an education system that would serve Marxist-Leninist concepts: socialist principles, class equality, collectivism and work for the construction of a socialist society.

3.3. Vocational training of the working class in the period of revolutionary transition

During the 1920s, schools were fully subordinate to «collectives» composed of teachers, students, and staff, which strictly controlled educational policy. However, from the 1930s, educational management shifted to a unified system, where in each Union republic, before the general administrative reorganization, education was already controlled by the Commissariats of Education. With the return to authoritarianism and traditionalism, control became even more strictly centralized, with official Moscow and the Communist Party strengthening control over the curriculum, teaching methods, and academic staff.

Educational policy in the Soviet Union was planned from the center by commissariats in the various union and autonomous republics. The Central Planning Commission, which planned the economy for the entire Soviet Union, had a cultural department that created a general education plan and included such items as the number of new schools, the type of schools, the number of new teachers, new libraries, etc. (Fitzpatrick, 2002). The Planning Commission also discussed and decided on funding policies, with each republic's education system financed from the central budget. The republican commissariats of education, within the framework of the general plan, were responsible for the management of the allocated funds and the administration of education.

All citizens over the age of sixteen were given the right to enroll in universities, regardless of their level of formal education. Given the imposition of Marxist-Leninist doctrines on the university curriculum, the level of student quality dropped noticeably. In addition, after the integration of Marxist-Leninist doctrines into the university curriculum, the overall quality of students decreased. As a result, the availability of well-trained administrative and scientific personnel decreased. When enrolling in universities, the origin of a citizen was more important than the skills of a particular student, which was especially felt at a time when children from working-class families received privileges regardless of their education.

The findings further reveal that Soviet education operated as a mechanism of symbolic power by regulating access to social mobility through credentials and institutional recognition. Educational qualifications did not merely certify knowledge but functioned as markers of political reliability and ideological conformity. In this sense, schooling legitimized new Soviet elites while marginalizing alternative forms of cultural capital, reinforcing political hierarchy through symbolic means rather than direct coercion.

After the revolution, two new types of educational systems were soon established to meet the needs of the workforce in terms of vocational training: the Factory Apprentice Schools (FZU) and the RABFAK[KP4.1], which were two important educational and vocational institutions aimed at educating the working class and improving their professional qualifications (Holmes, 1973, p. 349). Institutions such as RABFAK and Factory Schools were created to accelerate proletarian education and provide vocational skills to workers, aligning educational goals with industrial planning.

Through this institution, the government tried to provide them with secondary education so that they could continue their studies at a higher educational level and actively participate in public activities. Initially, education at the institution was conducted in preparation for teaching at high schools and universities, but they also helped the children of workers receive a better education, which the Soviet Union needed for the development of its economy. The analysis reveals that institutions such as RABFAK and FZU functioned as mechanisms of symbolic selection rather than neutral channels of upward mobility. Educational access was conditioned not primarily by academic competence but by class origin and political reliability, reinforcing Bourdieu's notion of symbolic power through credential-based legitimation. In the 1920s and early 1930s, in order to quickly overcome the technological deficit and bring the intellectual achievements of the proletarians up to the changed state, these schools were in great demand and their graduates made up half of the students admitted to universities. However, since the 1930s, the government's approaches significantly changed, and a more structured education system was formed instead of workers' faculties. Accordingly, workers' faculties almost completely lost their significance and were abolished.

3.4. Transformation of educational policy in the Stalin era (1930s), ideological indoctrination and education

After Joseph Stalin came to power in the Soviet Union, a rapid reform of Soviet schools and the education system began. From its inception, the Soviet state had sought to create a centralized educational system that would be based on Marxist principles and educate new Soviet citizens with communist ideals. It was only after Stalin consolidated control over the party apparatus and decided to push for industrialization and collectivization at all costs that Soviet education returned to its features of uniformity, rigidity, and authoritarianism. During Stalin's time, these processes reached a completely new scale, and, like

many other areas, they came under strict totalitarian control.

Analysis of the activities of the news agency RIA Novosti in historical retrospect and modern practice proves that the status of an information agency does not oblige this Russian media source to adhere to news standards, providing consumers with verified, accurate, objective and unbiased information.

After the Soviet government approved initial reforms in the field of education, private schools and gymnasiums suddenly lost their influence and were replaced by state-run primary and secondary schools. Accordingly, a state-controlled, "unified school" system was established, which served common communist principles and emphasized the traditional three Rs components of reading, writing, and arithmetic, as well as ideological indoctrination. In the 1930s, a system of "ten-year schools" was established, according to which all children from 7 to 17 years of age were to receive education (Ubiria, 2015). In 1931, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks) adopted a resolution "On Primary and Secondary Schools" and issued instructions for a radical change in educational work in schools (Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, 1931). It was determined that secondary education should be free, compulsory and accessible to all. Since 1933, unified school textbooks were introduced in all subjects. Discipline became an important tool of school education. Pioneer and Komsomol organizations were involved in the struggle for order and discipline in schools. Secondary school was defined as the main institutional channel for entering higher education. In the 1930s, as the country entered the industrial age, the dynamics of pedagogical experimentation and creativity weakened, and Soviet education largely returned to more rigid and standardized models. The connection to "real life" was achieved not through project-based teaching methods, but through a detailed curriculum that primarily emphasized the importance and need for science, mathematics, and engineering. These changes were accompanied by a significant expansion of the higher education system.

Stalin's decision to rapidly industrialize, from the 1930s onwards, shaped not only the new system of Soviet education, but also other Soviet institutions, which from then on had to adapt to the totalitarian system. The introduction of the First Five-Year Plan at the end of 1928 and the rise of Stalinism should be considered the beginning of a new era in Soviet education. The unprecedented demand motivated by industrialization and technological progress led to the need for highly qualified technical, scientific and engineering personnel. This need was expressed with particular severity by Stalin in his speech before the First All-Union Conference of Managers (February 4,

1931): “We are fifty or a hundred years behind the advanced countries. We must make good this distance in ten years. Either we do it, or we shall go under,” said Joseph Stalin in his speech at the First All-Union Conference of Socialist Industrial Workers on February 4, 1931. Accordingly, Soviet education had to be dedicated to this very challenge (Stalin, 1931, as published in Works, 1954). National need and party control dominated the educational system, which determined its orientation.

In 1931, the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks) once again recognized that experimental methods in schools did not provide students with sufficient general education, and therefore did not prepare future students for technical schools and universities. In September 1931, the Central Committee proposed that the leading educational bodies urgently carry out the “scientific-Marxist development of programs.” Accordingly, already in the 1931/1932 academic year, the People’s Commissariats of Education of the Union Republics created educational programs based on subject teaching. In 1932, the Soviet education leadership condemned the team-laboratory method, and later the polytechnic schools were completely liquidated. “Labor training” as a separate subject was allocated only one hour a week. The freed-up time in the junior and middle grades was now used to study Russian and mathematics, while a new subject, “The Constitution of the USSR,” was added to the senior grades (Holmes, 1973).

Thus, the 1920s marked the end of the experimental era, when the Soviet education system traditionally sought to use preliminary, progressive methods and the «project method.» During this period, the main focus was on innovative forms of teaching that violated old systems, but could not meet the requirements of an industrial and totalitarian society. Eventually, these «experiments» were replaced by a new, more systematized approach. Particular attention was paid to the development of mental discipline in the teaching process and in the behavior of students, which was associated with the strict control that the authorities exercised in this area. These changes significantly determined the role of the teacher in society, since his profession enjoyed high prestige and authority, which significantly increased their social status. So, the educational reforms that began in the 1920s ultimately led to the establishment of a more conservative and disciplined system, which was already based not only on social experiments, but also on strict discipline tailored to the social and political system.

Indoctrination in communist ideology was an integral component of every Soviet student’s general education. This was openly endorsed by communist

officials and clearly reflected in course materials. As Leon Trotsky articulated, the moral framework of the Soviet system was defined by revolutionary utility: actions were deemed moral if they served the revolution, and immoral if they hindered it. Since the party leaders “scientifically knew what was useful for the revolution and what was harmful to it, they were the bearers of the “highest morality,” embodying the highest authority in science and ethics (Morin, 1995, p. 43). This statement clearly fits the indoctrination characteristics of the Soviet education system, where the goal of education was not only to transfer knowledge, but also to be at the service of a specific ideology. Every detail that taught young people to adhere to communist values and principles was considered “morally correct,” while any dissenting opinion or ideology that did not coincide with these goals and that hindered the construction of a communist society was fixed as “immoral.” This morality was widespread, and therefore no schoolchild or university student could escape party indoctrination. “We must raise a new army of pedagogical personnel who must be closely connected with the party and with his ideas, which must be imbued with his spirit, who must attract the working masses, fill them with the spirit of communism,” said Lenin, noting that communist training meant tireless efforts in the interests of the common cause and that communist ethics and morality are based on the struggle to destroy the old system of exploitation and to consolidate communism (Lenin, 1920).

Schools were not just a means of spreading propaganda, but a number of educational techniques were developed to implement it. It was for this purpose that the so-called “Agitprop” (Committee for Agitation and Propaganda), a Soviet party body that implemented an agitation and propaganda policy, was created. This organization was an instrument that controlled the mass media, the education system, culture and art. This committee controlled the publicist media, mass art, films and music, which former US Senator William Benton called the most amazing psychological manipulation in history. The goal of the Communist Party was to use the curriculum in every possible way to exert ideological influence on the schoolchildren’s consciousness. The process of communist moral education was extremely complex, involving and affecting all students, all subjects, and the entire student body (Ross, 1960).

For the successful implementation of the process of shaping the «new person» (*homo sovieticus*), intensive ideological indoctrination of children and youth was essential, encompassing all spheres of social life. This process was carried out both in schools and in youth organizations established after

the revolution, all of which were carefully controlled by the communist authorities.

The Soviet youth organizations such as Little Octobrists, Pioneers, and Komsomol formed a gradual path of ideological training from early childhood to Party membership. The Lenin All-Union Pioneer Organization, referred to as the “mass children’s organization,” was established in the USSR following the decision of the Second Congress of the Young Leninist Komsomol. On May 19, 1922, it adopted the resolution «On the Children’s Movement.» Until 1924, the organization was known as «Spartak», and after Lenin’s death, it was renamed in his honor. The organization was overseen by the Central Committee of the Komsomol (RKSM, 1922). Youth organizations operated as extensions of the educational disciplinary regime, integrating ideological training into extracurricular and leisure spaces. The findings indicate that this expansion of pedagogical control beyond the classroom intensified the internalization of political norms and normalized loyalty through routine participation rather than overt coercion.

Given its members’ age (9–14 years old) and the scale of its reach, the Pioneer Organization played a key role in shaping the “new Soviet person.” As stated on the first page of the Pioneer Movement Handbook, it was a «mass communist organization of children» aimed at preparing them to be “fearless, brave, and cheerful fighters for communism.” The handbook served as a practical guideline for Pioneer leaders and teachers, offering pedagogical strategies for instilling socialist values and developing communist consciousness in children (Pioneer, 1930, No. 31/32).

When presenting the programmatic assumptions of the Pioneer Organization, it is important to focus on its close connection with the Komsomol. The main task of the Komsomol was “active support for the Bolshevik Party and the Soviet government, in the continuous development and strengthening of our school, in the consistent raising of the level of education of students, in the education of youth and in the ideological formation of working youth.” One of the most important tasks of the Komsomol was to lead and supervise the activities of the Pioneer Organization. The goal of these organizations was defined as: “to organize, unite, educate and prepare the masses to fight for the interests of the proletariat based on Lenin’s thought” (ibid).

Thus, the pioneer organization also represented an extremely important ideological instrument of the existing system, membership in which was initially voluntary, although with the strengthening of the Stalinist version of the Soviet state, its membership and participation in its activities became increasingly mandatory. The communist authorities of Bolshevik

Russia included millions of girls and boys in the system of ideological formation of the younger generation. Youth organizations such as the Young Pioneers and the Komsomol were given considerable attention, their activities were strictly controlled and officially financed. These changes reflected not only the more complex features of the process of political education, but also a more structured and organized model of the upbringing of young people by society.

Since the beginning, Soviet education was strongly politicized, with political and ideological education playing a significant role in the education system. The Marxist theory that underpinned Soviet education rejected religion as an element of human moral and social development, and did not recognize the family as the main partner in raising children. In this process, public schools were the main instrument that spread this ideology and ensured the education of children. Ideological indoctrination included the teaching of ideologically biased subjects such as history, social studies, literature, geography, and science, as well as mandatory extracurricular activities associated with communist youth organizations. Thus, the system exercised ideological control over all aspects of school life, including political activities.

The 1936 Constitution of the Soviet Union, adopted during this period, can be considered an important stage in the history of the development of the Soviet education system (Soviet Union, 1936). In universities, the teaching of disciplines such as: historical materialism, the history of proletarian revolutions, the history of the party, and the foundations of Leninism became mandatory. Serious attention was paid to the establishment of the Stalinist version of history. In 1935, a school history textbook was created with the direct participation of Stalin. This subject was assigned a key function in the ideological education of students (Fitzpatrick, 1979, pp. 232–233).

The 1936 Constitution, known as the «Stalinist Constitution», was important at the time when the Soviet government established the principles of compulsory and free education in the field of education, which was reflected in Article 121 of the Constitution: «The state ensures learning, education accessible to all, exemption from legal entities and other social groups. In order to achieve the goals set by the Soviet state, the state is obliged to give all citizens the right to receive education.» This article reflected the principle of the Soviet Union that all citizens should have equal opportunities to complete their education, of course, taking into account party ideology and Soviet reforms. The 1936 Constitution also noted that the education system should be politically correct and contribute to the spread of communist ideals.

Special attention was paid to social science as a combined study of history, economics, and geography. The integration of such disciplines was intended to spread the Marxist worldview among young people through the means of social sciences. However, with the rise of Stalinism, Marxist teaching became more formal and monolithic. Thus, already in the first half of the 1930s, through a systematic purge, the old intelligentsia was replaced by a new Soviet intelligentsia. Thanks to educational policies, new Soviet elites were recruited from the working class and peasantry and took the place of the old ones.

Despite the experiments, the Soviet educational system had made significant progress by 1930. Drawing on past experience, the system continued to maintain political stability in the country, taking into account socialist principles and communist ideology (Lauglo, 1988). Soviet educators gained a lot of valuable experience from the experiments of the 1920s, made changes, and developed a model of education that served party ideals in response to political pressure and economic needs. The decree of September 5, 1931, strengthened the authority of school administration and teachers, and tightened the curriculum, aiming to increase discipline and academic excellence, which became the main features of the system.

The analysis demonstrates that the Stalinist turn of the 1930s constituted not a rupture but a structural intensification of disciplinary practices already embedded within early Soviet educational reforms, transforming pedagogical experimentation into a centralized technology of political normalization. While early Soviet reforms emphasized flexibility, labor-oriented learning, and pedagogical innovation, these elements were progressively subordinated to the imperatives of political control, industrial mobilization, and ideological uniformity. As a result, education evolved from an experimental space of socialist pedagogy into a key institutional mechanism for producing political conformity and sustaining authoritarian governance. This evolution partially confirms Fitzpatrick's argument that Soviet education facilitated social mobility, while simultaneously extending her analysis by demonstrating that such mobility was conditioned by disciplinary and symbolic mechanisms of power. Whereas Holmes emphasizes political instrumentalization, the present study shows that ideological control operated less through direct repression than through the normalization of authority within everyday educational practices.

4. Conclusions

The evolution of Soviet education from revolutionary idealism to Stalinist orthodoxy reveals the centrality of schooling as a tool of ideological and political control. Soviet educational centralization also functioned as a spatial strategy, reinforcing center periphery relations across the Union republics. Through an analysis grounded in Foucault's concept of disciplinary power complemented by Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony of symbolic power, this study demonstrates how the Soviet regime employed the education system not only to cultivate literacy and technical skills but to construct compliant socialist subjects. The Soviet school was not simply an educational institution; it was a state apparatus for producing ideological conformity and reinforcing the legitimacy of one-party rule.

The formation and development of the Soviet education system was closely linked to Marxist-Leninist ideology and the process of industrial modernization of the country. After the October Revolution of 1917, the Bolsheviks made education one of the main priorities of state policy, as they saw it as an important tool that would contribute to the formation of a new socialist society and a Soviet citizen.

In the first stage, the experimental approaches to education of the 1920s led to innovations such as «polytechnical education,» which combined book learning with practical work. However, from the 1930s, under Stalin's rule, the education system became more standardized and strictly controlled. The main emphasis was placed on technical and scientific knowledge, which served the rapid industrialization of the country. A special place in Soviet education was occupied by the ideological component – teaching aimed at indoctrinating young people with communist ideas. Despite the fact that large-scale educational reforms made it possible to overcome illiteracy and train professional personnel, the system was strictly politicized.

Ultimately, the Soviet educational model significantly shaped the country's social and economic development. However, it was closely linked to totalitarian control and the cultivation of political obedience. Despite its achievements, Soviet education was less flexible than that of Western countries during the same period, as it paid less attention to critical thinking and the encouragement of individual initiative. This historical analysis may inform current debates on education and authoritarian governance, especially in post-Soviet and other semi-authoritarian contexts where schooling continues to function as a strategic domain of ideological influence. Further research could explore how remnants of this model persist or are

contested in contemporary educational practices across the former Soviet space.

By reframing Soviet education as a dynamic site of disciplinary and hegemonic negotiation, this article contributes to the history of knowledge by demonstrating how educational institutions actively shaped political subjectivities (Hirsch, 2005). Rather than treating schooling as a passive instrument of ideology, the analysis highlights its role in producing consent, normalizing authority, and legitimizing power through everyday practices. This approach opens new avenues for understanding education not

merely as a reflection of political regimes, but as a central arena in the production of modern forms of governance.

This study contributes to political geography and sociology of education by conceptualizing schooling as a spatial and institutional mechanism of power rather than a neutral policy domain. It demonstrates that education operates as a key site where authority, ideology, and subjectivity are produced and normalized, offering a framework applicable to both historical and contemporary authoritarian regimes.

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