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THE “RIGHT TO BE HELPED”:
WELFARE POLICIES AND NOTIONS OF RIGHTS
AT THE MARGINS OF SOVIET SOCIETY, 1917-1950

BY

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DISSERTATION

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Abstract

In this dissertation, I trace the course of ethically founded notions of rights in the Soviet experience from 1917 to 1950, focusing on the “right to be helped” as the entitlement to state assistance felt by four marginalized social groups. Through an analysis of the requests for help written by social activists on behalf of disabled children, blind and deaf adults, single mothers, and political prisoners, I examine the multiple and changing ideas that underlie the defense of this right. I reveal that both the Soviet state authorities and these marginalized social groups tended to reject charity as a form of unwanted condescension. In addition, state organs as well as petitioners applied legal notions of rights arbitrarily and situationally. However, political leaders, social activists, and marginalized citizens themselves engaged in dialogues that ultimately produced a strong, ethically grounded consciousness of rights. What I call “the right to be helped” was a framework of concepts, practices, and feelings that set the terms for what marginalized individuals could imagine and argue in relation to state assistance. As such, the right to be helped fundamentally reflected Soviet understandings of disability, generation, gender, labor merits, and human suffering.

Composed of five thematically and case-study based chapters, this dissertation begins with an analysis of Soviet welfare policies towards unemployed and uninsured citizens. Then, it moves to the ways in which four communities of activists implemented these policies and advocated on behalf of their constituents. Throughout the chapters, I pay attention to the forces that shaped help from below by examining how single individuals formulated, sustained, and contested narratives of help in their everyday lives. Within this structure, I analyze evidence coming from a vast archival body and including the administrative correspondence of key ministries, the printed reports and handwritten notes of medical professionals, the archival documents and journal articles produced by Soviet relief organizations, individual petitions and complaints, memoirs and other autobiographical materials. My methodology involves textual close-reading and analysis of cultural practices, but also relies on institutional history and biography. I focus my attention on the semantic significance of concepts and chart their changing social constructions over time. However, I also go beyond the level of representation by exploring the socio-economic and political everyday conditions in which marginalized citizens articulated their claims.

This dissertation reveals that the state's criteria for approving requests for help were a blend of merits earned through one's services to the collective (productive, military, or reproductive) and some sort of personal hardship (disability, loneliness, poverty, old age, or poor health). Disabled children and adults, unmarried mothers, and even political prisoners were entitled to help either by virtue of having given great effort or for having endured huge sacrifices. In either case, the Soviet state conceived their right to be helped as a form of remuneration. For Soviet marginalized individuals, it was a combination of legality, morality, and patronage that defined their right to be helped. Physically, socially, and politically deviant citizens relied on the power of personal patrons, but they also counted on laws and appealed to a shared ethos. While welfare legislation was set in a mesmerizing range of directives and codes, Soviet morality entailed an ensemble of ideas that – when resources were available – could effectively resonate with the targets of petitions for help. These ideas included evaluations of the performance of one's duties and ideals of humanitarianism vis-à-vis poverty, disease and disability, generation, loneliness, and suffering. In the dialogues between state and non-state actors, all these factors were layered over and filtered through gender and traditional patriarchal visions of the family.

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Glossary and Abbreviations

<i>batrachka</i> (plural <i>batrachki</i>)	hired agricultural laborer
<i>bedniak</i> (plural <i>bedniaki</i>)	poor peasant
<i>byt</i>	everyday life
GAPK	State Archive of the Perm' Province
GARF	State Archive of the Russian Federation
<i>invalid</i> (plural <i>invalidy</i>)	disabled person
<i>kolkhoz</i> (plural <i>kolkhozy</i>)	collective farm
<i>kolkhoznik</i> (plural <i>kolkhozniki</i>)	collective farmer
Koopinsoiuz	All-Russian Union of Invalids' Cooperative Association
<i>kormil'tsa</i> (plural <i>kormil'tsy</i>)	wetnurse
<i>krasnokrestovets</i> (plural <i>krasnokrestovtsy</i>)	member of the Political Red Cross
Narkompros	Commissariat of Education
Narkomsobes	Commissariat of Social Assistance
Narkomtrud	Commissariat of Labor
Narkomzdrav	Commissariat of Health
NEP	New Economic Policy
NKVD	Commissariat of Internal Affairs
Ommlad	Department for the Protection of Motherhood and Infancy
<i>pensioner</i> (plural <i>pensionery</i>)	pensioner, individual unable to work
PermGANI	Perm' State Archive of Contemporary History
PRC	Political Red Cross
Rabkrin	Workers' and Peasants' Inspection
RAO	Archive of the Academy of Education
<i>sovkhos</i> (plural <i>sovkhozy</i>)	state farm
Sovnarkom	Council of People's Commissars
SPON	Section of the Socio-Legal Protection of Minors and Defectives
<i>sredniak</i> (plural <i>sredniaki</i>)	middle or average peasant

<i>trudosposobnost'</i>	ability to perform work
<i>trudoustroistvo</i>	job placement
TsIK	Central Executive Committee
<i>udarnik</i> (plural <i>udarniki</i>)	shock worker
<i>ukaz</i> (plural <i>ukazy</i>)	decree
UPM	educational-industrial workshop
VIKO	Industrial-Consumer Union of Invalids
VOG	All-Russian Society for the Deaf-Mute
VOS	All-Russian Society for the Blind
VTEK	Medical Expert Commission
VTsIK	All-Russian Central Executive Committee
Zhenotdel	Commission for the Improvement of the Work and Life of Women

Introduction

After the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, the new socialist state put decisions about the social protection of suffering classes at the core of its identity and self-legitimation. To distinguish itself from the tsarist Russian government and the capitalist countries, the Soviet Union rejected religious charity and private philanthropy, rather identifying Soviet “help” as both a modern-state project and a paradigm of socialist morality. While the pre-revolutionary *Orthodox Theological Encyclopedic Dictionary* used to define “charity” (*blagotvoritel'nost'*) as “one of the manifestations of Christian love, taking place each time that a person provides beneficence and support to a fellow man in spiritual or bodily need,” the *Great Soviet Encyclopedia* explained that charity was the expression of bourgeois hypocrisy and a religious glossing over the social rule of the exploiting classes. At the same time that charity assumed negative connotations, words such as assistance (*obespechenie*), help (*pomoshch'*), protection (*zashchita*), and care (*zabota*) were positively defined and unfailingly accompanied by the attribute “social” (*sotsialnyi*). This semantics reflected the monopolization of the social sphere at the hands of the state, but also indicated the benign and humanitarian dimension of welfare in the socialist political order.¹

¹ Compare *Polnyi pravoslavnyi bogoslovnyi entsiklopedicheskii slovar'* (Saint Petersburg: Izdatel'stvo P.P. Soikima, 1912-1913), vol. 1, 339 and *Bol'shaia Sovetskaia Entsiklopediia* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennyi Institut “Sovetskaia Entsiklopediia,” 1926-1947), vol. 6, 466-471, vol. 43, 170-171, and vol. 52, 298-302. Scholars have mostly employed the term “welfare” to indicate “an ensemble of public interventions imbricated with the process of modernization, which provide protection in the form of assistance, insurance, and social security by introducing both specific social rights in case of pre-established events and specific duties of financial contribution.” Dorena Caroli, *Histoire de la protection sociale en Union soviétique (1917-1939)* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2010), 21. See also Jen Alber, “Continuities and Change in the Idea of the Welfare State,” *Politics & Society*, 16:4 (1998), 451-468; and M. Ferrera, *Modelli di Solidarietà. Politica e Riforme Sociali nelle Democrazie* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1993), 49. In this dissertation I almost interchangeably use the words “state assistance,” “social protection,” and “social welfare.” As an analytical category, however, I prefer the term help, because it better captures the socio-political as well as the humanitarian and moral dimensions of Soviet social services and interventions.

Soon enough, the double socio-political and moral logic of Soviet help led to a concept and a practice of social protection that were marked by intrinsic tensions. On one hand, state help was hailed as a tool of order, knowledge, and power to control – all discourses that involved a measure of discipline, coercion, and outright violence. On the other hand, help entailed equally powerful discourses and values concerning ethical notions of human dignity and, above all, moral rights. The interplay between control and rights yielded diverse and often contradictory welfare policies. Especially in approaching assistance to certain marginalized social groups – such as the so-called “defective” children, blind and deaf-mute adults, single mothers, and political prisoners – official state figures and welfare workers articulated competing views of what socialist help should be and who was entitled to it. Soviet people, for their part, pushed forward their own ideas about the nature of the help they wished to receive and the grounds of their entitlement.

In this dissertation, I focus on four marginalized social groups and their communities of activists in order to explore a realm of social consciousness and social action that I call the Soviet “right to be helped.” This phrase indicates a network of concepts and practices setting the terms for what could be imagined and argued in relation to state assistance. The right to be helped was a framework that involved intellectual, moral, and emotional commitments, and that shaped human actions in demanding and proving help.² Approaching this concept through a

² The concept of “the right to be helped” is my own. In defining it, I found some references particularly useful. One is Michael Urban’s characterization of discourse as “a set of deep categories authorizing and governing communication.” Michael E. Urban, *Cultures of Power in Post-Communist Russia: An Analysis of Elite Political Discourse* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 1. Another is Ross Chambers’s use of the French terms *imaginaire* and *argumentaire*. As Chambers writes, *imaginaire* “refers to the repertory of items (or images) that define what, for a given individual or collective subjectivity, it is possible to imagine.” *Argumentaire* instead is “that which it is possible to argue.” “Taken together,” Chambers continues, “these two terms describe the idea that there are limits...on what it is possible to think.” Ross Chambers, “Narrative and the Imaginary: A Review of Gilbert Durand’s *The Anthropological Structures of the Imaginary*,” *Narrative*, 9:1 (2001), 100-109, at 100. Finally, Douglas Rogers’s study of ethical dilemmas in rural Russia provides a model for tracking ethical ideas of rights as

study of the dialogues and interactions between marginalized people, social activists, and officialdom, I aim to present the breadth of the sense of entitlement to state assistance in Soviet Russia between the Revolution and the aftermath of the Second World War.³ My work makes clear the stakes that the Soviet state had in managing social rights and help claims – not necessarily as a part of its own original apparatus, but precisely in response to the push marginalized people and their activists made on it. Popular agency, which took shape in the actions of help-oriented organizations and in the writing of individual petitions for help, compelled the state to devise responses to people's incursions. Sometimes marginalized people succeeded in securing their social rights and sometimes they did not. Beyond success or failure, the dynamics animating the right to be helped suggests that the state itself was responsive to marginalized people and put them at the center of its social and political project.

I historicize the right to be helped as an idea and a practice which was sometimes shared by Soviet subjects and their leaders, and at other times turned into a field of political contention. From this perspective, a history of the right to be helped significantly contributes to our understanding of the early Soviet and Stalinist experience. First, it offers a multifaceted picture of how Soviet people related to their political system and its hegemonic discourses. Second, it reveals the degree to which intertwined notions of control and rights shaped the constitution of

they shift over time and interact in different contexts. Douglas Rogers, *The Old Faith and the Russian Land. A Historical Ethnography of Ethics in the Urals* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009).

³ This dissertation gives more space to variations in social status than to possible regional variations. The focus throughout is European Russia. I consider the lives of ethnic Russians and russified migrants west of the Urals. Within this group, I gave preference to cities, towns, and workers' settlements over collective and state farms. The reason for this choice is that *kolkhozy* and *sovkhozy* were not under the jurisdiction of the Commissariat of Social Assistance. Practices of social protection in collective and state farms were managed by an organ called Central Committee of Funds of Public Mutual Help (*Tsentral'nyi komitet kass obshchestvennoi vzaimopomoshchi*), whose records I have not researched for this dissertation.

the Soviet social body and the definition of Soviet exemplary subjectivity.⁴ Ultimately, the strains inherent in the right to be helped allow us to think about Soviet socialism as a more complex and diverse experience than a unilateral focus on social control.

The historical context of Soviet help and its problematic nature

The connection between state assistance towards suffering people and ideas of social rights first emerged in the nineteenth century in the wealthy industrializing countries of Western Europe.⁵ By the end of that century, it also clearly appeared in the Russian liberal thought. Under the influence of Russian philosophy and German political theory as well as specific Bismarckian social security policies, many educated Russians abandoned traditional understandings of help as religious charity and the manifestation of a civic spirit.⁶ Instead, they argued that the legal right to assistance should be granted to every person in need – especially to all children under age fifteen, the physically and mentally incapacitated, the temporarily unemployed, and political prisoners.⁷ At that time, Russian lawyers and sociologists also developed a view of human rights that encompassed a combination of political and economic rights.⁸ B.A. Kistiakovskii, in

⁴ By “subjectivity” I mean the social, political, and ideological apparatuses monitoring one’s social usability and how these apparatuses dialogued with individual agency within one’s Self. I use “identity” instead to indicate one’s life narrative and self-image.

⁵ Gaston Rimlinger, *Welfare Policy and Industrialization in Europe, America, and Russia* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1971).

⁶ See Adele Lindenmeyr, *Poverty Is Not a Vice: Charity, Society, and the State in Imperial Russia* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996) and Hubertus F. Jahn, *Armes Russland Bettler Und Notleidende in Der Russischen Geschichte Vom Mittelalter Bis in Die Gegenwart* (Paderborn: München, 2010). See also Nancy Kollman, *By Honor Bound: State and Society in Early Modern Russia* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1999), 70.

⁷ See Lindenmeyr, 90.

⁸ On turn-of-the-century Russian intellectuals’ views of natural individual rights see Ivanov-Razumnik, *Istoriia Russkoi Obshchestvennoi Mysli* (S.-Peterburg: Tip. M.M. Stasiulevicha, 1914), vols. 1-2. On the defense of human rights from a philosophical point of view see G.M. Hamburg, “Boris Chicherin and Human Dignity in History,” and Randall A. Poole, “Vladimir Solov’ev’s Philosophical Anthropology: Autonomy, Dignity, Perfectability,” in *A History of Russian Philosophy 1830-1930*, eds. G.M. Hamburg and Randall A. Poole (Cambridge, UK ; Cambridge University Press, 2010), respectively 111-130 and 131-149. For a treatment of the relationship between rights and citizenship in Imperial Russia see Yannis Kotsonis, “‘Face-to-Face’: the State, the Individual, and the Citizen in Russian Taxation, 1863-1917,” *Slavic Review* 63 (2004), 221-246; Eric Lohr, “The Ideal Citizen and the Real

particular, argued that human rights are the essential interconnection between definitions of rights and the social, economic, and political structure of a society. Writing in 1909, he viewed the institutionalization of individual liberties and the emergence in Russia of a constitutional government system as the training ground for the eventual development of human rights in a socialist society.⁹

While legal rights constituted an integral part of the liberals' program of political and social transformation, Russian socialists associated help to the needy not so much with the law, but rather with revolutionary plans and radical movements to end suffering and injustice. For Russian Marxists, communism held out the promise of a society in which every citizen might obtain satisfaction of his/her needs beyond empty declarations of rights. They considered it essential for Russia to establish first of all the socio-political conditions that could then lead to the realization and sustainability of rights.¹⁰ Most notably, Vladimir Lenin "lacked a coherent view of rights." As Piers Beirne and Alan Hunt have argued, legal notions "played no positive part in his thinking about the means for securing the interests of the Soviet citizenry," because Lenin regarded individual legal rights "as mere expressions of bourgeois individualism."¹¹

Subject in Late Imperial Russia," *Kritika*, 7:2 (Spring 2006), 173-194; and Jane Burbank, "An Imperial Rights Regime: Law and Citizenship in the Russian Empire," *Kritika*, 7:3 (Summer 2006), 397-431.

⁹ Susan Eva Heuman, "Perspectives on Legal Culture in Pre-revolutionary Russia," in *Revolution in Law: Contributions to the Development of Soviet Legal Theory, 1917-1938*, ed. Piers Beirne (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 1990), 3-16. B.A. Kistiakovskii, "V zashchitu prava: intelligentsia i pravosoznanie," in *Vekhi* (Moscow: Tipo-lit. T-va I.N. Kushnerev i Ko, 1909), translated in *Canadian Slavic Studies* 4 (Spring 1970), 36-59. The Russian philosopher P.I. Novgorodtsev similarly affirmed that only social insurance can guarantee "the right to a worthy existence to all human beings." P.I. Novgorodtsev, *Pravo na dostoinoe chelovecheskoe sushchestvovanie. O prave na sushchestvovanie. Sotsial'no-filosoficheskie etudy* (Saint Petersburg: Izd. M.O. Vol'f, 1911), 3-13.

¹⁰ Nicholas Riasanovsky, *A Parting of Ways: Government and the Educated Public in Russia* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976); Isaiah Berlin, *Russian Thinkers* (New York: Viking Press, 1978); Andrzej Walicki, *A History of Russian Thought from the Enlightenment to Marxism* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1979).

¹¹ Piers Beirne and Alan Hunt, "Lenin, Crime, and Penal Politics, 1917-1924," in *Revolution in Law*, 99-135, at 128, footnote 20. Yet, already at the second congress of the Russian Social-Democratic Workers' Party in 1903, Lenin had advanced the key principles of material assistance to workers which would constitute the foundation of the future Soviet social security legislation. See V.A. Aralov and A.V. Levshin, *Sotsial'noe obespechie v SSSR* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe Izdatel'stvo Politicheskoi Literatury, 1959), 8-9; and V.S. Andreev, *Sotsial'noe*

Russian workers, on their part, picked up both the liberal and socialist strains of thought and often articulated the concept that all human beings share a natural dignity and the right to respect. In the revolutionary years between 1905 and 1917, when workers confronted employers with demands and strikes, they very often insisted on treatment befitting their worth as human beings.¹²

The October Revolution set in motion developments that re-inscribed longstanding issues of economic justice and social equality within a completely new political context. Two questions emerged as particularly problematic. First, given that the socialist state associated help neither with charity (as in religious tradition) nor with the rights of the individual (as in liberal theories), how were then care and respect for human dignity to be understood? In other words, could ideas of assistance go beyond legal right and be rather related to notions of moral rights? Second, who were the carriers of these moral rights? Universal welfare, with its connotation of equality of access to social programs, represented a maximalist variation of state assistance that had a strong ideological appeal for Soviet officialdom. However, the new state was also extremely suspicious of all backward, socially dangerous, and politically disloyal elements among its population. Ironically, while the socialist mission included a message of help to all those in need, it also found ways to depict some social groups as aliens. After the Revolution, a moral language of dignity and rights continued to resonate in Soviet Russia, but it also came to coexist and be mixed with deep hatred for people now classed as “others” (*chuzhie, byvshie, prochie*) and sometimes stigmatized as “enemies” (*vragi*). The concept of the others – i.e. the subjects that

obespechenie v SSSR (sovetskoe pravo sotsial'nogo obespecheniia). Kurs lektsii, temy I-VIII (Moscow: Vses. iurid. zaochnyi in-t. 1969), 8-11.

¹² Mark Steinberg, *Proletarian Imagination: Self, Modernity, and the Sacred in Russia, 1910-1925* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002) and Idem, *Voices of Revolution, 1917* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001). On Russian popular conceptions of social citizenship during the revolutionary years see also Aaron Retish, *Russia's Peasants in Revolution and Civil War. Citizenship, Identity, and the Creation of the Soviet State, 1914-1922* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008), esp. chapter 8.

deviated from the physical, social, and political norm – altered and complicated the idea of universal welfare among the socialist population. It created the dilemma not only of understanding help beyond charity and individual legal rights, but also of deciding whether the others of the socialist state were worthy of any help.

This dissertation explores how these dilemmas troubled the dialogue between Soviet leaders and Soviet subjects in the years between the Revolution of 1917 and the welfare reforms of 1949-1950. Instead of seeing a rupture between the Stalin era and what preceded and followed it, I treat this period as marked by concepts and practices that developed by the mid-1920s and remained rather stable throughout the end of the Second World War. Indeed, while the Revolution of 1917 introduced the Russian people to a completely new system of social assistance, the welfare revisions of 1949 significantly foreshadowed the more thorough reforms that would be undertaken by the post-Stalinist leadership in 1956.¹³ It was not the death of Stalin in 1953 and the consequent change in political leadership, but rather the war that ushered in new ways to engage with the dilemmas of social assistance.

And yet, despite the coherence of the early Soviet and Stalinist experience in ideas and practices of help, the thinking and the actions of both Soviet leaders and Soviet subjects – including the very others who were marginalized by state discourse – occurred against a background of changing social realities, economic criteria, and political considerations. Thus, the years immediately following the Revolution saw an explosion of innovations that directly touched upon the right to be helped. Out of universities, government institutions, and non-state organizations, initiatives sprang for the application of the most modern scientific ideas to the

¹³ Chapter 1 discusses these reforms in more details. The welfare system covering collective farmers remained unaltered until 1964-1965. See also Bernice Q. Madison, *Social Welfare in the Soviet Union* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1968), 75-76.

field of public care. This was a positive phase in which the new workers' state founded by the Bolsheviks was intent on catching up and surpassing the rest of the world in the articulation of its progressive and all-encompassing welfare system. Very soon, however, it became clear that neither the theory of Marxism nor the rhetoric of the Revolution offered a solution to the practical and financial problems of providing support to the numerous unemployed Soviet citizens who fell outside the scope of the social insurance agency. As the ideal goal of equal distribution was dangled before the eyes of the population, the reality of social protection in the early Soviet Union was constrained by economic and political exigencies. Standing in the way of prisoners' rights, for instance, was nothing less than state security. In the case of disabled individuals, social protection was limited by Soviet leaders' desire to maximize production. Especially with the great leap forward into industrialization of 1929, the Soviet state twisted its discourse of help and insisted that all costly activity of the citizenry be subordinated to the economically defined cause of socialist construction. Within a few years, the innovators advocating for "defective" children's rights and the humane treatment of political prisoners were beleaguered and deprived of their budgets. Although a few activists struggled to preserve the rights of blind and deaf-mute people, for most of them the expediency of the first Five-Year-Plan replaced the revolutionary ideals with the goal of labor productivity. Similarly, the advocates of single mothers' rights encouraged all women to mobilize for production and reproduction, often compelling them to accept jobs and pregnancies that they did not want. Later, in the aftermath of the Second World War, the picture of state assistance to marginalized populations changed again. As we will see through the cases of blind people and single mothers, the late 1940s saw the attempt – both among political leaders and social activists – to reintroduce humanitarian

beliefs and re-launch the less coercive mechanisms of help that had characterized the first post-revolutionary decade.¹⁴

Connecting help and rights

Considering how the Soviet state grappled with the dilemmas of state assistance, early studies of Soviet social welfare limited themselves to functioning interpretations of institutions and initiatives, leaving unexplored the mutual influences between welfare policies and the culture of people's everyday life. Although valuing the extensiveness of the Soviet insurance system (especially in comparison with capitalist welfare states), these works tended to read other Stalinist welfare policies as mere rhetoric and stressed the exclusion of non-productive social forces from state-guaranteed benefits and social insurance.¹⁵ More recent literature has moved historians' attention from discriminating policies in the distribution of resources to the introduction of disciplinary measures in all state's attempts to care for various social groups.

¹⁴ Among the many authors who uphold this general periodization of Soviet history see esp. Amir Weiner, *Making Sense of War: The Second World War and the Fate of the Bolshevik Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

¹⁵ Madison, *Social Welfare in the Soviet Union*; Gaston V. Rimlinger, "The Trade Union in Soviet Social Insurance: Historical Development and Present Functions," *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, 14: 3 (April 1961), 397-418; Alastair McAuley, *Economic Welfare in the Soviet Union: Poverty, Living Standards, and Inequality* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1979); Alec Nove, "Social Welfare in the USSR," *Problems of Communism*, 9 (1960), 1-10. More recently, Jeffrey Brooks and Mark Smith have re-proposed the arguments of this early historiography by claiming that only Khrushchev's welfare system made Soviet state assistance truly universal. According to these scholars, it was first under Khrushchev that Soviet citizens' social rights were systematized and given genuine legitimacy. Jeffrey Brooks, *Thank you, Comrade Stalin! Soviet Public Culture from Revolution to Cold War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000) and Mark B. Smith, *Property of Communists: The Urban Housing Program from Stalin to Khrushchev* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2010). Instead, some works devoted to the post-WWII period have located the move to a more universal welfare regime already in the years between 1945 and 1953. See Mark Edele, "Soviet Veterans as an Entitlement Group, 1945-1955," *Slavic Review*, 65:1 (Spring 2006), 111-137; Idem, *Soviet Veterans of the Second World War: A Popular Movement in an Authoritarian Society, 1941-1991* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Donald Filtzer, *Soviet Workers and Late Stalinism: Labor and the Restoration of the Stalinist System after World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Chris Burton, *Medical Welfare during Stalinism. A Study of Doctors and the Soviet Health System*, Ph.D. Dissertation, The University of Chicago, 2000; and Idem, "Soviet Medical Attestation and the Problem of Professionalization under late Stalinism, 1945-1953," *Europe-Asia Studies*, 57: 8 (December 2005), 1211-1229; Greta Bucher, "Struggling to Survive: Soviet Women in the Post-War Years," *Journal of Women's History*, 12:1 (Spring 2000), 137-150; Rebecca Manley, "Where should we resettle the comrades next? The adjudication of housing claims and the construction of the post-war order," in *Late Stalinist Russia: Society between Reconstruction and Reinvention*, ed. Juliane Furst (London: Routledge, 2006), 360-382.

Scholars have shown that Soviet leaders adopted an approach in part based on larger pan-European shifts towards modern disciplining welfare states, in part oriented by its own modernist ideology of raising the consciousness of a backward population, and in part shaped by its extreme defensiveness vis-à-vis deviant elements.¹⁶

Without denying the close connection between care and control in modern state projects (including their coercive and violent aspects), my objective in this dissertation is to unveil the less studied role of official and popular notions of rights in defining socialist state assistance, and to understand how the tension between control and rights variously underpinned Soviet help between 1917 and 1950. In pursuit of this goal, I build on previous research on social welfare and politics of control, but I also put this literature in conversation with other historiographical and methodological traditions, especially with studies of Soviet subjectivity and petitionary culture. Through the integration of these historiographies, I advance my definition of rights as a category of analysis and propose a methodological approach to link it to the category of help.

“Right” is a notoriously vague word with multiple overlapping meanings. Men and women living in Soviet Russia between 1917 and 1950 refrained from precisely outlining their notions of rights (*prava* in Russian). Because of these silences in the articulation of what *pravo*

¹⁶ The theoretical frames of the question of care and control within the process of modernization have been famously set by Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995) and James Scott’s *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998). On the pan-European dimension of control through care see Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); David Hoffmann, “European Modernity and Soviet Socialism,” in *Russian Modernity: Politics, Knowledge, Practices*, eds. David L. Hoffmann and Yannis Kotsonis (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000), 245-260. On the aspiration to enlighten the dark Russian masses and renovate the country see Sarah Badcock’s *Politics and the People in Revolutionary Russia: A Provincial History* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), esp. 129-132; Daniel Beer, *Renovating Russia: The Human Sciences and the Fate of Liberal Modernity, 1880-1930* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008); and David Hoffman, *Cultivating the Masses: Modern State Practices and Soviet Socialism, 1914-1939* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011). On the violent side of social control see Peter Holquist, “To count, to Extract, and to Exterminate. Population Statistics and Population Politics in Late Imperial and Soviet Russia,” in eds. R.G. Suny and T. Martin, *A State of Nations. Empire and Nation-Making in the Age of Lenin and Stalin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 111-144; Idem, “What is so Revolutionary about the Russian Revolution? State Practices and New Style Politics,” in *Russian Modernity*, 87-111.

meant, scholars of legal history have tended to emphasize Soviet people's lack of understanding of the law. Notably, John Hazard contended that "it would have been a rare individual who could have understood his (*sic*) rights or could have had the courage to demand observance of the code."¹⁷ Historians of the Soviet human rights movement have built on this legal literature and located the origins of the defense of rights in the post-Stalinist late 1950s, closely linking rights consciousness to the emerging dissent of those years.¹⁸

By forgoing definitions of formal legal rights, historians Golfo Alexopoulos and Dorena Caroli have shown that both the Soviet state and its citizens recognized rights but identified them differentially depending on an individual's socio-political worth. The main criterion for enjoying full rights was one's engagement in socially useful, productive work. Soviet power established labor as the condition to grant various incentives and confer benefits. It was also the means through which the authorities assessed citizens' rights. In turn, Soviet people expected that those who served the state should correspondingly receive certain concessions and were not afraid to claim protection of their rights. To put it simply, the central duty of all Soviet citizens to work determined their rights, and their labor entitled all working individuals to make demands on the

¹⁷ John Hazard, *Settling Disputes in the USSR. The formative years of legal institutions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960), 411. See also Peter H. Solomon, *Soviet Criminal Justice under Stalin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

¹⁸ The classic bibliography on the Soviet human rights' movements and their connection with dissident movements includes Peter Reddaway, *Uncensored Russia: The Human Rights Movement in the Soviet Union* (London: Cape, 1972); and *Idem*, "Dissident in the Soviet Union," *Problems of Communism*, 32:6 (Nov.-Dec. 1983), 1-15; George Saunders, ed., *Samizdat: Voices of the Soviet Opposition* (New York: Monad Press, 1974); Rudolf L. Tökés, *Dissent in the USSR: Politics, Ideology, and People* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975); Michael Meerson-Aksenov and Boris Shragin, eds., *The Political, Social, and Religious Thought of Russian "Samizdat": An Anthology* (Belmont, Mass.: Nordland Pub. Co., 1977); Marshall Shatz, *Soviet Dissent in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980); Mark Hopkins, *Russia's Underground Press: The Chronicle of Current Events* (New York: Praeger, 1983); Liudmila Alekseeva, *Soviet Dissent: Contemporary Movements for National, Religious, and Human Rights* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1985). Among the most recent treatments of Soviet dissent and its involvement in human rights issues are Philip Boobbyer, *Conscience, Dissent and Reform in Soviet Russia* (London: Routledge, 2005); Anke Stephan, *Von der Küche auf den Roten Platz* (Zürich: Pano, 2005); B. Nathans, *Alexander Volpin and the Origins of the Soviet Human Rights Movement* (Washington: National Council for Eurasian and East European Research, 2006); Marco Clementi, *Storia del dissenso Sovietico (1953-1991)* (Roma: Odradek, 2007); Barbara Walker, "Pollution and Purification in the Moscow Human Rights Networks of the 1960s and 1970s," *Slavic Review*, 68:2 (Summer 2009), 376-395.

state. It was under these provisions, Alexopoulos and Caroli have argued, that Soviet leaders and citizens alike advanced their interpretations and demands for the implementation of what they understood to be their rights. They sometimes linked themselves closely to the letter of the law, while at other times used laws arbitrarily. Because rights were at the same time a privilege, a benefit, and a social entitlement, individuals could pursue them in and outside the courts, through legal as well as non-legal channels. The border between receiving help by right (*po pravu*) or through privilege and networks of patronage (*po blatu*) was rather elastic.¹⁹

Building on this interpretation of rights, in the following chapters I will not use “right” as a narrow legal term, but rather as a signifier standing for an idea, a feeling, and a practice. As such, in my usage this term points to a collective understanding of entitlement at its experiential and practical core. The Soviet right to be helped was a form of consciousness and action, a set of largely non-legal governing considerations that shaped practice and political behavior and that can be exposed by analyzing people’s encounters with extreme poverty and marginalization.²⁰ Indeed, in their efforts to overcome complicated situations of need, Soviet people strove to preserve and affirm a sense of entitlement. Although the historical actors of this dissertation differently drew the boundaries of the domain of rights depending on the contingent

¹⁹ Golfo Alexopoulos, *Stalin’s Outcasts: Aliens, Citizens, and the Soviet State, 1926-1936* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003) and Caroli, *Histoire de la protection sociale en Union soviétique*. This interpretation of Soviet rights emerges also in the following articles: Golfo Alexopoulos, “Soviet Citizenship, More or Less. Rights, Emotions, and States of Civic Belonging,” *Kritika*, 7: 3 (Summer, 2006), 487-528 and Elise Kimmerling, “Civil Rights and Social Policy in Soviet Russia, 1918-1936,” *Russian Review*, 41: 1 (January 1982), 24-46. Discussing suits for alimony and child support, Wendy Goldman argues that higher judicial courts refused to base their decisions on conjugal rights, but instead appealed to the socialist principle of labor. Thus, a woman’s right to property was based on her labor in the household, not on her rights as a spouse. Wendy Z. Goldman, *Women, the State, and Revolution* (Cambridge; New York, New York, USA: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 196-197. Sally Ewing has argued that the division between law and administration, which is central to the Western rule-of-law system, never figured in the Soviet legal system. This scholar has introduced the notion of “administrative-legal ideology.” Sally Ewing, *Social Insurance in Russia and the Soviet Union, 1912-1933: A Study of Legal Form and Administrative Practice*, Ph.D. dissertation, Princeton University, 1984.

²⁰ As James Scott has explained, subsistence is a primary determinant of people’s politics of entitlement and their relationship with the state. James C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1976).

circumstances and the place in which they lived, their choices were determined by some common tendencies – reliance on labor (as previous literature has emphasized), but also on suffering, understandings of gender, and networks of personal patronage. It is in people's orientations and decisions vis-à-vis these categories that I see a distinctive Soviet rights consciousness.

Both the process of granting or denying the right to state assistance and the practice of claiming this right were crafted as evaluations of worthiness. Indeed, Alexopoulos's research on Soviet subjectivity has shown that, since Soviet officials controlled the distribution of material and cultural resources, those who sought recognition from the state had to demonstrate their worthiness in prescribed ways.²¹ By focusing on citizens that deviated from the Soviet norm of fitness and worth in either physical, social, gender, or political terms, this dissertation explores how the unfit of Soviet society depicted themselves as deserving basic protection and justice. I show that a sense of entitlement as integral participatory members of the socialist state, understandings of suffering, and a combination of both were the grounds of marginalized people's right to be helped. Those who could hardly earn rights to material assistance through labor constructed narratives of legitimation by effort or suffering. Gender played a crucial role in

²¹ Alexopoulos, *Stalin's Outcasts*; and Idem, "Portrait of a Con Artist as a Soviet Man," *Slavic Review*, 57:4 (Winter 1998), 774-790. Apart from Alexopoulos, this argument has been advanced by scholars using anthropological and everyday life approaches. See for instance Kate Brown, *A Biography of No Place* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004); Svetlana Boym, *Common Places* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994); Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Jukka Gronow, *Caviar with Champagne: Common Luxury and the Ideals of the Good Life in Stalin's Russia* (Oxford; New York: Berg, 2003). The re-fashioning of the self has been studied by Jochen Hellbeck in his book *Revolution on My Mind: Writing a Diary under Stalin* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006). For works that analyze the internalization of Bolshevik values and practices, but also emphasize people's conscious self-fashioning and role-playing see Sarah Davies, *Popular Opinion in Stalin's Russia: Terror, Propaganda, and Dissent, 1934-1941* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Jeffrey J. Rossman, "The Treikovo Cotton Workers' Strike of April 1932: Class, Gender, and Identity Politics in Stalin's Russia," *Russian Review*, 56:1 (1997), 44-69; Lynne Viola, *Peasant Rebels under Stalin* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Michael S. Gorham, *Speaking in Soviet Tongues: Language Culture and the Politics of Voice in Revolutionary Russia* (DeKalb, Ill.: Northern Illinois University Press, 2003).

creating a balance between service and suffering, since endured hardship was most often cast female and performed effort constructed as male. In any case, marginalized citizens who chose to demand help and the activists who advocated on their behalf told stories that imposed action and thus created a sense of dignity and rights for themselves. Ultimately, they activated concepts that moved them from the disenfranchised status of people marginalized and in need to the position of carriers of the Soviet right to be helped.

In sum, labor, special merits towards the Revolution, and service in the construction of socialism, but also helplessness, desperation, orphanhood, and loneliness were the key categories of the right to be helped. They were the product of reciprocal relationships between state actors, social groups, and individuals; they were the outcome of a bargain in which the state owed the citizens and, when it kept the deal, it compelled the citizens to owe back;²² they were also the result of complex mutual influences between disciplining and emancipating historical forces. This argument complicates the vision of Stalinism as “a culture of the gift,” which implied citizens’ obligation to serve the state because of the latter’s presumed attention to the welfare of the population.²³ Thinking of Stalinism from the perspective of gifting, historians have so far written about the social control of the Stalinist welfare and described citizens’ responses to it as eternal gratitude or tameness. Instead, my concept of the right to be helped and the tension inherent in it between socio-political projects and socialist moralities reveal a more diverse

²² Mark Edele has described the “relationship of reciprocity” and the “bargain” that existed between the war veterans and the state in the 1970s. Edele did recognize a prehistory to the notion of reciprocity that went back to the 1912 laws regulating assistance to servicemen. However, this scholar has applied the idea of reciprocity only to soldiers and their families. Mark Edele, *Soviet Veterans*, 18-20. Vera Dunham saw this reciprocity in the relationship between Stalin and the emerging middle class of the late 1930s. Vera Sandomirsky Dunham, *In Stalin’s Time: Middleclass Values in Soviet Fiction* (Cambridge [Eng.]; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

²³ The vision of Stalinism as culture of the gift has been first proposed by Jeffrey Brooks in the book *Thank you, Comrade Stalin!*

spectrum of discourses, formative sources, and historical actors in real practiced and lived Soviet socialism.

As an idea and a practice, the right to be helped can be best historicized through a multi-methodological approach that combines institutional history and discourse analysis with the study of everyday life. This method facilitates an examination of the conceptual underpinnings of notions of rights without losing sight of the socio-economic and political conditions in which Soviet rights consciousness was articulated. The institutional history of help-oriented organizations and the textual close-reading of their writings explain the right to be helped at the level of legislation and representation; the history of everyday life instead draws attention to the contradictions between the normative ideological context and the practices of Soviet men and women.²⁴ Thus, alongside statutes, directives, regulations, administrative correspondence, and various books and articles on welfare, I analyze unpublished manuscripts, personal letters, and petitions for help. I examine the ideas, vocabularies, and images of help that Soviet people evoked in their writings, but I also explore how petitions were processed by local relief organizations and higher central institutions. The outcomes of individual petitions reveal the actual implementation of official and popular discourses, their strengths and limitations in the practices of everyday life.²⁵ This method considers important arenas of life where verbal acts

²⁴ Two collections of essays on Soviet social politics recently edited by Elena Iarskaia-Smirnova and Pavel Romanov serve as a model for this method as they illuminate how welfare policies were accepted or rejected by ordinary people in their everyday lives. Elena Iarskaia-Smirnova and Pavel Romanov, eds., *Sovetskaia sotsial'naia politika 1920-1930kh godov: ideologiia i povsevednost'* (Moskva: OOO "Variant", 2007) and *Sovetskaia sotsial'naia politika: stsny i deistvuushchie litsa, 1940-1985* (Moscow: OOO "Variant", 2008). See also the classic Russian study by M.V. Firsov, *Antologiia sotsial'noi raboty* (Moscow: Svarog-NVF SPT, 1994). This methodology is grounded in James Scott's theory that social actors manifest their agency through the means at their disposal and first of all through the "metis," i.e. the aggregate of tools to get local and practical knowledge, experience, and judgment.

²⁵ Many works deal with petition analysis. Again, Alexopoulos and Caroli are the closest references because of the nature of the petitions they analyze. The first has examined the petitions through which disenfranchised individuals applied for the re-instatement of their voting rights. The second has looked at the petitions sent by insured workers to the Moscow insurance fund. In addition, I found Miriam Dobson's *Khrushchev's Cold Summer. Gulag Returnees*,

such as petitioning and advocating transformed the non-verbal world of the Soviet people.

Complementing the ideoscape and the narratives of help with the register of practice and the pragmatic results of petitioning and advocating, historians have a better access to the ways in which the right to be helped was experienced by its practitioners.

Historical actors: marginalized people and social activists

Defective children, blind and deaf-mute adults, single mothers, and political prisoners were among the marginalized of Soviet society.²⁶ As unproductive others, these people were often accused of engaging in socially and political aberrant behaviors. Soviet official discourse claimed that they could neither fully participate in the social life of the community nor make positive contributions to the construction of socialism. These people were left at the edge of social and political consciousness and at the border of gender and sexual morality. Since Soviet society was supposed to be oriented towards enthusiasm and optimism, these physical and social misfits were often skipped over in silence. When they were noticed, they were talked about in disparaging ways – as a problem, a sore, an abscess in the otherwise healthy and happy body politic.²⁷ And yet, while the Soviet state hid its unemployed others from a self-congratulatory public consciousness and discriminated against them in the distribution of resources, it rarely completely excluded them.

Crime, and the Fate of Reform after Stalin (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009) to be a useful methodological model of petition analysis.

²⁶ In this dissertation, the term “political prisoner” is shorthand to indicate all Soviet men and women who were arrested with the accusation of having committed a “political” crime. This group was by no means limited to the people who belonged to non-Bolshevik parties and engaged in active political opposition. In chapter 5, I will provide a more detailed discussion of the amorphous category “political prisoner” and how it was employed by state authorities, activists, and prisoners.

²⁷ On the Stalinist cult of happy moods and the cultivation of a language of optimism in the face of obstacles see Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain*; Karen Petrone, *Life has Become More Joyous, Comrades: Celebrations in the Time of Stalin* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2000); David L. Hoffmann, *Stalinist Values: The Cultural Norms of Soviet Modernity, 1917-1941* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003); and Hellbeck, *Revolution on My Mind*.

Indeed, the Soviet right to be helped did not operate by a rigid rule of inclusion or exclusion, but rather by degrees of marginalization. Those deemed physically, socially, and/or politically unfit were subjected to a transformation project and progressively integrated or marginalized as they succeeded or failed to accomplish the necessary transformation. The need to eradicate the problem represented by deviant citizens did not always lead to their excision from the socio-political body. Removal from the body social was the last resort in the early Soviet and Stalinist ethos of assistance, which – I would claim – usually started from the belief in the moral right of all suffering citizens to receive help and the faith in the state’s ability to emancipate deviant unfit subjects, transform them through care, and integrate them back in the collective. It is true that discipline and control were a byproduct of this transformative project, but – in the field of welfare – violent cleansing campaigns were mostly pursued when all the rest failed.

This dissertation shows that help to the four selected groups of Soviet marginalized people coexisted with practices of removal. Special schools for defective children, for instance, were a means to attain the goal of re-education and future re-integration of socially and physically deviant children. A similar task was performed by the workshops for the blind and the deaf-mute as well as the Homes for Mother and Child that hosted single mothers. Even the prison accomplished this function. Inmates could be transformed, molded, and reformed, if placed under the proper tutelage. Theirs was the ultimate redemption and salvation, which turned a non-Soviet person into a Soviet citizen.²⁸ Within this discourse, help to political prisoners

²⁸ Steven Barnes, *Death and Redemption: The Gulag and the Shaping of Soviet Society* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2011). Julie Draskoczy has noticed this process in the autobiographies written by prisoners working at the Belomor Kanal construction site. Julie Draskoczy, “The Put’ of *Perekovka*: Transforming Lives at Stalin’s White Sea-Baltic Canal,” *Russian Review*, 71:1 (January 2012), 30-48. Peter Holquist has observed that the Bolsheviks were less concerned about the guilt of a criminal than about his/her ability to redeem. Only an assessment of incorrigibility subjected the deviant individual to elimination. Peter Holquist, “State Violence as

became conceivable because it entailed not only the promise of reintegration, but also the assertion that each and every deviant individual could become a valuable member of society.

Both Soviet leaders and Soviet subjects imagined the process of transformation into productive citizens and the reintegration into the social body as the outcome of reciprocal obligations. The state welfare system had to provide jobs, education and vocational training, political and cultural stimulation. In addition, it had to be imbued with humanity and scientific rationality: the marginalized were not supposed to be humiliated, oppressed, and locked away forever; nothing should degrade or de-humanize them; nor was there supposed to be any sentimental coddling towards them. On their part, the marginalized were expected to eagerly embrace the hard labor of transforming their deviant selves and building socialism with the rest of the collective. As the following chapters will reveal, however, both parties often transgressed the terms of this bargain. The Homes for Mother and Child unceremoniously forced labor upon the disorderly women who passed through them. The same was true about the facilities for defective children and the workshops for blind and deaf-mute adults. Punishment was readily joined to production in the concentration camps. Marginalized individuals, on their end, did not always show the required enthusiasm for self-transformation through labor and frequently looked for ways to avoid rigid work disciplines.

Thinking in terms of marginalization helps us see the wide spectrum of choices that were available to Soviet leaders and activists in attending to deviant social entities. It facilitates a better understanding of the shifting contours of the early Soviet and Stalinist socio-political boundary, because it conceives that society as a continuum of more or less integrated members

Technique: the Logic of Violence in Soviet Totalitarianism,” in Amir Weiner, ed., *Modernity and Population Management* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 19-45.

(instead of imaging the loyal as living peacefully together as part of the Soviet order and the hostile and untrustworthy as excluded from the body social). Finally, marginalization uncovers a more diverse range of acceptable Soviet subjectivities and reveals that authoritative hegemonic normativity (i.e. the male, healthy, skilled, waged, and industrially productive Soviet exemplary subject) was continually in dialogue with difference and abnormality.²⁹

Translating both the state's policies and the needs of marginalized individuals was a group of historical actors whom I call "activists." These were men and women who operated as liaisons between Soviet marginalized people and higher political or administrative officials. Some activists were employed in the Commissariat of Social Assistance and therefore had to deal with the petitioning marginalized as part of their everyday jobs. Some were doctors, pedagogues, and lawyers, who had professional reasons for the desire to help the marginalized. Others were disabled men and women, who chose to become involved to protect their communities' rights. Although the activists assumed the role of spokespersons for the marginalized, they held official positions and tended to stay within the confines imposed by their status.

The activists were responsible for disseminating and enacting policy, but they also dealt with local communities and often closely resembled the marginalized groups in which they were situated. For this reason, they can rarely be distinguished from their social and cultural surroundings. Activists absorbed, translated, and manipulated both community politics and

²⁹ Lennard Davis has made this argument in relation to able-bodied-ness and disability in the American and Western European context. Lennard J. Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body* (London: Verso, 1995). Lilya Kaganovsky came to the conclusion that disability could become normative in the Soviet Union by looking at the celebration of disabled bodies in fiction books and movies. Lilya Kaganowsky, *How the Soviet Man was (Un)Made: Cultural Fantasy and Male Subjectivity under Stalin* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2008).

official policy. They were forced to play by central *and* community rules. It is by now axiomatic in Soviet history to say that centralism did not operate effectively. The Commissariat of Social Assistance was not immune from this problem: its local sections often failed to manage their employees as instructed from the center; neglected by the state, local social workers just got on with the tasks that they had decided to perform and the pursuits that they had set for themselves. Most of the activists considered for this dissertation worked within the welfare system with mixed results and often worked independently from political controls because the controllers ignored them. Thus, their advocacy on behalf of marginalized citizens throws into relief a series of initiatives that, although channeled, monitored, directed, and controlled by the state, had some spontaneity too. In the chaos and heterogeneity of policy implementation, the activists' pressures and reactions gave rise to variations in how welfare policy was made.³⁰

The activists populating this dissertation possessed hybrid identities and lived within multiple cultures. They were shaped by their environments as well as by their political beliefs. To better understand these historical actors, I decided to take them away from their official capacities and re-insert them in their social contexts. The active members of the All-Russian Societies for the Blind and the Deaf-Mute (*Vserossiiskoe Obshchesto Slepymkh*, hereafter VOS, and *Vserossiiskoe Obshchestvo Glukhonemykh*, hereafter VOG) are a prime example of Soviet activists working for the state and yet remaining disabled people and representing all that stood for disability. The defectologists of the Medico-Pedagogical Station (*Mediko-Pedagogicheskaia Stantsiia*) constituted a community which encompassed medical, psychiatric, and educational professionals: they were distinguished from the state by knowledge and skills, but also

³⁰ Lynne Viola's interpretation of Soviet local officials has been pivotal in articulating my definition of social activist. Lynne Viola, "Introduction," in *Contending with Stalinism. Soviet Power and Popular Resistance in the 1930s*, ed. by Lynne Viola (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2002), 1-16, esp. 12.

fundamentally entangled with it. The doctors and midwives of the Department for the Protection of Motherhood and Infancy (*Otdel Okhrany Maternistva i Mladenchestva*, hereafter Ommlad) often maintained a subculture of care for women's needs which went beyond the state's changing reproduction policies. The members of the Political Red Cross (*Politicheskii Krasnyi Krest*) spoke out against practices of excess in the Soviet camps and prisons, but they always operated by the terms and conventions of the political discourse created by the revolution. All of these activists were caught between personal ethics, professional duties, and demands of state power.

The relationship between these activists and the political leaders and officials with whom they interacted should not be framed in terms of resistance.³¹ The defectologists, the members of VOS and VOG, and the activists of Ommlad did not have the mission to protect marginalized individuals *from* a state that mistreated them, but rather to help them *through* state intervention. As we will see in chapter 5, not even the Political Red Cross ever articulated the defense of prisoners' rights as dissent. Its activists sought to preserve the authority of the law and spoke against illegality without openly criticizing Stalin's policies or waging wars with the Soviet state. In my interpretation, these activists were neither political dissidents walking along a hard, lonely path of struggle with the state, nor its accomplices or its victims. Describing the four selected communities of activists, I strive neither to heroicize them nor to represent them simply as accommodators and adapters. Rather, I see them as people who had been somehow mobilized and transformed by a revolution that created political and personal possibilities for them. Their narratives and practices of help sometimes aimed at disrupting the all-pervasive Soviet power, but at other times sustained it. Through help-oriented organizations, early Soviet and Stalinist

³¹ On the possibilities and limitations of resistance as a category of analysis see Lynne Viola, "Introduction," in *Contending with Stalinism*. In the same collection see also her essay "Popular Resistance in the Stalinist 1930s. Soliloquy of a Devil's Advocate," 17-43. See also Peter Fritzsche, "On the Subjects of Resistance," *Kritika*, 1: 1 (Winter 2000), 147-152.

activists carved out non-oppositional spaces where the regime and the citizens could dialogue and cooperate in defining Soviet socialism and its moral order.

A definite linkage between activism, the protection of rights, and resistance against the socialist state characterized the human rights movement of the late 1950s and 1960s. That was the time when Soviet thinkers began to invoke the human rights idiom of the Universal Declaration of 1948 and activists infused practices of assistance towards prisoners and disabled people with the idea of dissent.³² However, the association between the protection of rights and dissent was not a specific feature of the early Soviet and Stalinist experience. Between 1917 and 1950 most Soviet marginalized individuals and their activists did not emphasize the incompatibility of the socialist state with the respect for rights and human dignity. Most activists encouraged their constituencies to have their lives mobilized, ordered, and planned so that their needs might be satisfied and their rights protected. The marginalized expected the socialist government to introduce a better reality for them, improve their status, and expand their rights. Ultimately, their understanding of Soviet socialism was couched in the language of a moral contract – not the post-WWII idiom of human rights and its implications of resistance, but an earlier Soviet human rights thinking that I call “the right to be helped.”

³² See Walker, “Pollution and Purification,” *Stephan Von der Kuche auf den Roten Platz*, 27-31 and 284-285. Aleksandr Esenin-Vol’pin was among the first Russian intellectuals to adopt the idiom of human rights to prompt social change. See Aleksandr S. Esenin-Vol’pin’s original writings in *Filosofīia; Logika; Poeziia; Zashchita prav cheloveka* (Moscow: Rossiiskii gos. gumanitarnyi universitet, 1998) and Benjamin Nathans’ interpretation in *Alexander Volpin*. An “Action Group to Defend the Rights of the Disabled in the USSR” was founded in May 1978 by a group of Russian activists and dissidents. According to Paul Raymond, this organization was the first to link the protection of disability rights with the idea of dissent. Paul Raymond, “Disability as Dissidence: The Action Group to Defend the Rights of the Disabled in the USSR,” in *The Disabled in the Soviet Union. Past and Present, Theory and Practice*, William O. McCagg and Lewis Siegelbaum eds., (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1989), 235-252. See also Walter Parchomenko, “The Soviet Union’s Hidden Minority,” *America*, 16 April 1983, 296-298.

Outline

The chapters that follow develop along a problem-centered exposition rather than a chronological linear progression. Each of them grapples with an aspect of the articulation of the right to be helped, but also fans out to intersect with issues addressed in other chapters. Chapter 1 examines the nature of official policies and practices of welfare towards individuals who, for various reasons, did not fall under the care of the state's insurance agencies. Here I lay out the institutional grounds on which the Soviet marginalized could base their demands for help. In chapters 2 through 5, I turn to the activists who had to implement the state's policies of assistance to the uninsured and unemployed. Each of these chapters is devoted to one of the mentioned organizations and the assistance they offered to specific social groups. Chapter 2 focuses on the Medico-Pedagogical Station and the educational help it offered to "morally defective" children; chapter 3 studies how VOS and VOG strove to provide help to blind and deaf-mute people by means of employment; chapter 4 assesses Ommlad and its gendered forms of assistance to single mothers; and chapter 5 interprets the Political Red Cross's ambiguous defense of political prisoners' rights. All of these organizations were to various degrees integrated within the state's administrative system. By studying both their management from the top and their effects on the bottom, I strive to understand the forces that shaped the right to be helped from within. Throughout the chapters, I also pay attention to the voices of marginalized individuals themselves and investigate how they made sense of the slogans of Soviet welfare and the practices of its implementation in their everyday lives.

The following multifaceted story of the Soviet right to be helped is offered as a window onto the workings of a system, which – like many other modern state formations – was conceived not only to purge, but also to protect. I tell a story that redraws the picture of Soviet

socialism as both a disciplining and emancipating project. I also suggest a way to understand how marginalized historical actors always contest, shape, and alter understandings of rights. This story, however, painfully reminds us of the real play of power in very unequal relationships. My dissertation is about dialogues which are vertical. It bears witness to the uneven forces that are involved in shaping political and moral orders.

Chapter 1

Social Assistance: The Narkomsobes's Taxonomy of Help

*"All citizens owe their labor to the state and all have the right to the state's social assistance."*¹

While the Department of Social Insurance of the Commissariat of Labor had the ideologically and politically crucial task to protect the social rights of all "working elements," another Soviet institution performed the less prestigious function of catering to the needs of the uninsured. This was the Commissariat of Social Assistance (*Narodnyi Kommissariat Sotsial'nogo Obespecheniia* or Narkomsobes). Through its various divisions and affiliated organizations, this agency provided help to multiple groups of non-working and non-insured people. It effectively expanded Soviet help beyond the restrictive terms of official decrees on social insurance, because it applied the laws drafted for the insured to a much wider range of individuals. In particular, its Pensioning Department provided material support to a vast clientele of so-called "pensioners" (*pensionery*).² Conceptualized as "invalids" (*invalidy*) and "unable to work" (*netrudospobnyye*), the pensioners were an underprivileged social stratum within the work-based polity that the Workers' and Peasants' Dictatorship advocated as its norm. They were second-rank citizens who found themselves in a precarious economic position and were marginalized – both materially and discursively – vis-à-vis the insured workers. And yet, the pensioners were not completely excluded from the purview of Soviet help. By examining the groups of people that were assisted by the Pensioning Department, this chapter investigates why

¹ *Sotsial'noe obespechenie za 5 let (30 apr. 1918 g.-30 apr. 1923 g.)* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Narodnogo Komissariata Sotsial'nogo Obespecheniia, 1923), 10.

² While the English term "pensioners" usually refers to elderly people, in the Soviet Union the word *pensionery* indicated not only the elderly, but more generally all individuals "unable to work." See the entry "*pensiia*" in *Bol'shaia Sovetskaia Entsiklopediia*, vol. 44, 500-502 and the entry "*emeritura i sotsial'noe obespechenie*" in *Entsiklopedicheskii slovar' russkogo bibliograficheskogo institute Granat*, 7th edition (Moscow: Vseknopromsovet-Mosoblpech'soiuz, 1936), vol. 53, 590-623.

the Soviet state imagined itself as having the responsibility to help its non-working uninsured population. Certainly, this help was part of the socio-political project to control those who fell beyond the jurisdiction of the social insurance agency and extract from them whatever labor productivity they might have. However, the disciplining motivation operated in tension with other strains and legitimizing categories, such as the ethics of Soviet socialism and its emancipating and egalitarian dimension. Political control and economic exigencies coexisted with humanitarian welfare as a paradigm of socialist morality.

Scholars studying nineteenth and twentieth century systems of social protection in Western Europe and the United States have identified three basic tendencies in the legitimization of the right to state assistance. The so-called “contractual orientation” considers the right to benefits as something that the beneficiary personally earns, either through the payment of contributions or through the performance of work. A second kind of justification emphasizes status rather than contract. In this case the right to social welfare derives from the right to subsistence and those who depend on their labor for subsistence have a social right to income if their working capacity fails or if no jobs are available for them. A third tendency considers the right to income as a prerequisite of citizenship. In this case all citizens are entitled to protection regardless of how they earn their living.³

To what extent is it possible to understand the early Soviet and Stalinist experience – and the emergence of the world’s first socialist social policy – within this framework? How was the longstanding practice of social help reinvented for Soviet life? And did the Soviet notion of

³ See Rimlinger, *Welfare Policy and Industrialization*, 2-8. See also Richard Titmuss, “The Social Division of Welfare: Some Reflections on the Search for Equity,” in *Essays on “The Welfare State,”* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959); G. Esping-Andersen, *The three worlds of welfare capitalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990); A. Supiot, “L’avenir d’un vieux couple: travail et sécurité sociale,” *Droit social*, 9:10 (1995), 823-831.

rights fit within the spectrum of principles that legitimized social assistance in other societies? Identifying social security for the insured (*sotsial'noe strakhovanie*) as its key welfare system, in theory the Soviet Union rejected the notion of help based on the economic need of the recipient and rather furnished social insurance benefits as a matter of rights earned through contributions/performed work.⁴ However, the fact that Soviet welfare included also social assistance for the uninsured (*sotsial'noe obespechenie*) reveals the inability of the socialist state to make a univocal choice between help as a right distributed in the work place and help based on need and the universal right to subsistence.⁵ David Priestland has contended that “the ‘dialectical’ style of Bolshevik political thought encouraged Bolsheviks to deny the need to make choices between principles in tension with each other, and to argue instead over the balance between them.”⁶ The Soviet welfare regime was oriented both towards the implementation of economic support for its socio-political base *and* towards the provision of social services for its entire population. Various political and institutional agents argued over the relative importance

⁴ The literature on social insurance is vast. Among the most important contributions are Rimlinger, “The Trade Union in Soviet Social Insurance;” Ewing, *Social Insurance in Russia and the Soviet Union, 1912-1933*; and idem, “The Science and Politics of Soviet Insurance Medicine,” in *Health and Society in Revolutionary Russia*, Susan Gross Solomon, ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 69-96; and Caroli, *Histoire de la protection sociale en Union Soviétique*. These authors have explained that the choice to make social security the key Soviet welfare system was motivated by the double intention to dampen discontent among the workers as the Bolsheviks’ most important socio-political base and to stimulate productivity. These works, however, do not discuss the welfare rights of uninsured citizens in the Soviet Union. John Hazard has remarked that the uninsured were protected by the tort suit and argued that law on tort was the exclusive line of protection for uninsured citizens. *Law and Social Change in the USSR* (Toronto: Carswell, 1953), 228- 244 and *The Soviet Legal System: Fundamental Principles and Historical Commentary* (Dobbs Ferry, N.Y.: Published for the Parker School of Foreign and Comparative Law, Columbia University in the City of New York, by Oceana Publications, 1977), 437-38. Hazard’s interpretation was based on a review of statutes on social security and tort claims. Writing well before perestroika and the opening of the archives, Hazard had no access to the inner correspondence and protocols of the Narkomsobes, which are at the core of this chapter and reveal a different picture of assistance to the uninsured.

⁵ With the phrase “social assistance” I translate the Russian *sotsial'noe obespechenie*. In the Soviet Union this expression was sometimes used in a broad sense to indicate the whole system of social and economic measures guaranteeing citizens’ rights to material assistance, medical care, and education. In a narrower sense, this expression indicated the material help provided through state funds to individuals ineligible for insurance. It is in this narrower sense that I mainly use the phrase “social assistance” in this chapter. For an explanation of the broader vs. narrower uses of the phrase *sotsial'noe obespechenie* see Andreev, *Sotsial'noe obespechenie v SSSR*; and the brochure *Sovetskoe pensionnoe obespechenie* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo “Iuridicheskia literatura,” 1966), 8.

⁶ David Priestland, *Stalinism and the Politics of Mobilization. Ideas, Power, and Terror in Inter-war Russia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 38.

of these two principles. As a result, the privileging of one class – i.e. the insured industrial worker – coexisted and competed with the aspiration to achieve equality through distribution of resources.

In this chapter, I will first describe the conceptual and institutional frameworks that undergirded social assistance at its inception between 1917 and 1921. Then, I will present a taxonomy of help deduced from the groups of *pensionery* that were assisted by the Pensioning Department and analyze four key groups: disabled people, family dependents, personal pensioners, and the “others.” These groups reflect degrees of marginalization within Soviet society, but also dramatize the key criteria according to which the state granted help. As a result, we will see that, since Soviet leaders were unable to decide whether eligibility for state help should be based upon work or need, they did not make consistent welfare choices informed by an internally coherent ideology. Several diverse ideas were connected to each other within welfare leaders’ discourse, which sometimes adhered to the productive labor principle and at other times to the minimum subsistence approach. The determination of who had the right to social protection turned out to be rather patchy and unreliable. Whenever benefits could be related to previous contributions, they had a more contractual character. However, Narkomsobes officials often assigned subsidies which were more consistent with the definition of benefits as a right to which all had the same claim. The two discourses of productive labor and need – or suffering – ran parallel one to other, sometimes contradicting and other times re-enforcing each other. Both were central to the Soviet state’s understanding of itself.

Besides the ambiguous coexistence of social security and social assistance in the system of Soviet welfare, the very everyday practical choices of local Narkomsobes administrators and employees show that incongruities trickled down the entire edifice of Soviet help. For instance,

when Narkomsobes activists referred to the categories of “useful work” or “merits/services” to explain the assignation or denial of a pension, they clearly related help to labor contributions – a paradoxical practice in itself given the conception of their clientele as invalids. At the same time, Narkomsobes officials also considered the fact that those who needed help the most were the least able to earn it and frequently evoked the categories of need, disease and disability, loneliness, and suffering as well as traditional constructions of family and gender. The practice of Soviet help did not stand on solid ground precisely because it combined aspects from all these competing legitimizing categories.

The economic conditions in which social assistance was implemented in Soviet Russia between the Revolution and the end of the Second World War constantly changed and added in to the ideological and institutional confusion of Soviet help. The years between 1918 and 1921 were a formative phase in which the new state attempted to invent socialism, determine its politics of entitlement, and put in place categories of social assistance that would continue to resonate in the decades to come.⁷ However, those years were also a turbulent time of war, famine, deurbanization, tremendous flux, and genuine poverty. The categories that emerged at that time would later occur against different economic backgrounds. Indeed, beyond the formulation of principles, shifts in economy between periods of scarcity and times of relative stability conditioned the design and implementation of specific social assistance policies. For instance, the Civil War made certain *pensionery* more significant than others: the group “victims of the counterrevolution” clearly had passing importance, but temporary was also the significance given to the families of red soldiers. Unemployment rates impacted social assistance

⁷ While Madison has identified a tripartite periodization concerning social insurance (including the years 1917-1921, 1922-1928, and 1929-1956), this scholar has argued that in the years between 1921 and 1956 there were no significant changes in the functions of social assistance, which remained the “residual line of defense against economic want” available for those who were either ineligible for or *de facto* uncovered by social insurance. Madison, *Social Welfare in the Soviet Union*, 76.

too. While around 1925 unemployment began to accelerate and urban standards of living correspondingly declined, in 1930 the Soviet Union officially stated that unemployed had been “completely liquidated.”⁸ This change affected definitions of *pensionery*. Indeed, in 1932, within two years from unemployment’s death pronouncement and at the end of the first Five-Year-Plan, the state modified its official classification of disability levels by introducing more rigid criteria to establish people’s handicaps and their access to social assistance. Finally, the Second World War created new kinds of dislocations and enormously changed the social conditions in which social assistance policies were implemented.

Thus, while the key principles of Soviet help – both its disciplining, work-oriented dimension and its egalitarian, need-based approach – emerged in the years between 1917 and 1921 and continued to exist in tension with one another through the end of 1940s, each gained more or less prominence over the other depending on the context in which they were actualized. The definition of an individual’s state of need and the criteria for defining his/her labor contributions changed in connection with the shifting economic, social, and political conditions of the early Soviet and Stalinist experience.

1.1 Conceptual and institutional frameworks at the inception of Soviet help

A mere three days after the Revolution, on November 10, 1917, the Petrograd Military-Revolutionary Committee declared that “the rich classes and their servants will be deprived of the right to receive products.”⁹ The Constitution of July 1918 fulfilled this promise by denying the right to vote to all “non-toiling” social groups and discriminating against them in matters of everyday life. Historian Matthew Rendle has explained that the disenfranchised (*lishentsy*) “were

⁸ *Entsiklopedicheskii slovar’ russkogo bibliograficheskogo institute Granat*, vol. 53, 608.

⁹ Quoted in the anonymous article “Bred sumashedshikh,” *Gazeta dlia Vsekh*, 10 November 1917, 1.

more likely to lose access to jobs, rations, housing, and education.”¹⁰ As the first Commissar of Justice I.Z. Shteinberg put it later from his political exile in Berlin: “only because you are a former bourgeois, you are deprived of the most ordinary, common human rights...”¹¹ While the so-called “exploiting classes,” i.e. “the bourgeois, the priests, the kulaks, and the speculators,” were denied all political, social, and human rights, the post-revolutionary press constantly reminded Soviet readers that “our Soviet Republic has its laws and they are all directed at defending the interests of the poor.” Newspapers and journals encouraged all poor and suffering people to “turn for help to your Soviet regime. It will always come to your help.”¹²

The new socialist state rejected the liberal principles of freedom, equality, and individual liberty. Denying any concept of rights that was independent from the politico-economic relations existing within society, Marxist-Leninist doctrine conceived rights in class terms and recognized only one liberty – “freedom from poverty.”¹³ Because it was based on an analysis of society that centered on the polarization between two classes, this initial discourse fostered a binary opposition between the rich capitalists and the poor proletarians. The former were seen as enemies of the revolution, infringing upon the entitlements of the latter and therefore to be deprived of any right. The poor classes, instead, had emerged from the revolution as the legitimate carriers of rights; they were encouraged to denounce any violation of their entitlements and actively turn for help to the Soviet regime.

¹⁰ Matthew Rendle, *Defenders of the Motherland. The Tsarist Elite in Revolutionary Russia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 202. See also A. Dobkin, “Lishentsy: 1918-1936,” in *Zven'ia: Istoricheskii al'manakh* (Moscow: Progress, Feniks, Atheneum, 1991-1992), vol. 2, 600-628; and T. M. Smirnova, “Byvshie liudi” *Sovetskoi Rossii: Strategii vyzhivaniia i puti integratsii, 1917-1936 gody* (Moscow: “Mir istorii” izdatel'skii dom, 2003). Alexopoulos has revealed that, despite the official denial of access to welfare, the *lishentsy* kept pushing for their human rights and sometimes saw their demands fulfilled. Alexopoulos, *Stalin's Outcast*.

¹¹ I.Z. Shteinberg, *Nravstvennyi oblik revoliutsii*, (Berlin, 1923), 127.

¹² V. Serogorokii, “Kak zashchitit' bednotu?,” *Zvezda* (Perm'), 6 July 1920, 2.

¹³ Nikolai Grigor'evich Aleksandrov, *Sushchnost' prava. K voprosu o suchchnosti istoricheskikh tipov prava* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo iuridicheskoi literatury, 1950).

The provision of help to suffering people was central to the Soviet state's positive self-image vis-à-vis the tsarist regime and the capitalist governments. As historian Juliane Füst put it describing the Soviet attitude towards homeless children, "the care and attention lavished on the weakest members of society was supposed to right the wrongs of the tsarist regime, while at the same time to signal to the capitalist world the moral and social superiority of the Soviet system."¹⁴ Soviet welfare experts always emphasized the socialist state's concern for human life and its care for all needy, deviant, and marginalized others. In a 1919 programmatic article on the notion of help, the Narkomsobes leader Z. Lilina thus commented on the Russian pre-revolutionary and the foreign capitalist welfare systems: "there where the human person was ignored and the yoke of slavery burdened a strong, healthy, able-bodied population of millions of men and women, even less thought and care were given to the poor, the puny and weak, the sick and the children." Instead, she continued, the Soviet Narkomsobes was the place "to which flows all the misery and all the pain of the people." The very nature of help profoundly differed in the Soviet regime and in other political systems: while during the tsarist regime and under capitalism social welfare took the shape of alms, under socialism it had become a state business and was financed exclusively by the state. "Private philanthropy is out of the picture," proudly stated Lilina.¹⁵ And a brochure issued by the Narkomsobes in 1923 echoed:

The essence of social assistance consists in the fact that this form of assistance covers all social groups, extending to all those who need assistance, but at the same time assistance is carried out by the state...As the government earmarks funds for the army, the navy, the school, and the judiciary, so within the system of social assistance the state provides help from state funds to all those who need this help.¹⁶

¹⁴ Juliane Füst, "Between Salvation and Liquidation: Homeless and Vagrant Children and the Reconstruction of Soviet Society," *SEER*, 86:2 (April 2008), 232-258.

¹⁵ Z. Lilina "Deiatel'nost' b. komissariata Sotsial'nogo Obespecheniia Severnoi Kommuny," *Zhurnal narodnogo komissariata sotsial'nogo obespecheniia*, June-July, no. 5-6, 1919, 59-64, at 59 and 64.

¹⁶ *Sotsial'noe obespechenie za 5 let*, 9.

The new Bolshevik regime did not accept any compromise with the charitable movement: it closed down all philanthropic organizations, prohibited the Orthodox Church and any other religious community to engage in charity, and put the entire sphere of social welfare under state control.¹⁷ In place of beneficence, almsgiving, religiously inspired pity, and reliance on the sense of civic duty felt by private individuals, the Soviet government advanced the right of all poor and suffering people to receive material assistance.

Indeed, the Soviet Union made many of its newly established institutions available to the poor and the suffering for demanding assistance as a matter of right. If the primary need of a person seeking help was health care, this individual would be referred to the Commissariat of Health (Narkomzdrav). If the best way to solve a citizen's difficulties was through training and education, he/she was sent to the Commissariat of Education (Narkompros). If the applicant for help was an insured member of the labor force in need of economic assistance, this individual was encouraged to turn to the Commissariat of Labor (Narkomtrud) – especially its Department of Social Insurance and Labor Protection – and, after 1933, to the All-Union Central Committee of Trade Unions. Finally, if an uninsured and unemployed applicant required custodial care or long-term economic assistance, this person was directed to the Narkomsobes. While for the other commissariats the welfare function was one among many others, social assistance was the only *raison d'être* of the Narkomsobes.

The first post-revolutionary incarnation of this welfare organ was called People's Commissariat of Public Philanthropy (*Narodnyi Kommissariat Gosudarstvennogo Prizreniia*). This name was an awkward combination of the new commissariats with a carry-over term from

¹⁷ The decree on the liquidation of all philanthropic societies was issued by the initiative of the first Soviet commissar of social assistance Aleksandra Kollontai. See Andreev, *Sotsial'noe obespechenie v SSSR*, 69-70.

the tsarist time – *prizrenie*. It was quickly abandoned as inappropriate for a socialist society and, on April 30, 1918, changed into People’s Commissariat of Social Assistance. During the turbulent years of the Civil War, this commissariat’s status was repeatedly and unceremoniously changed: initially, it was an independent agency that had republic-wide jurisdiction and was flanked in its social welfare responsibilities by the Department of Social Insurance and the other mentioned commissariats; then, in January 1920, it was turned into a minor bureau within the Commissariat of Labor; finally, in June 1920, it was re-separated from it and given once again autonomous status.¹⁸

These fluctuations in status reflected the state’s difficulty in clearly defining the jurisdictional functions of the Narkomsobes vis-à-vis the Narkomtrud, and their relative importance in the Soviet structure of government. For instance, on March 27, 1919, a directive of the Council of People’s Commissars (Sovnarkom) had identified broad responsibilities for the Narkomsobes:

the defense of abandoned children (younger than 3) and mothers who remained without means of subsistence in consequence of the war, the counter-revolution, natural or social disasters; the defense and assistance of mothers and infants; the assistance of children (older than 3); the assistance of individuals who lost the ability to work during military service as well as the victims of counter-revolution, fires, floods, famines, epidemics, wars, and the abnormal social relations of the capitalist order, such as orphanage, poverty and begging, prostitution, physical and moral defectiveness.¹⁹

¹⁸ The immediate antecedent to the People’s Commissariat of Public Philanthropy was a Ministry of Public Philanthropy (*Ministerstvo Gosudarstvennogo Prizreniia*) which had been introduced in May 1917 by the Provisional Government to manage the social consequences of the First World War. In 1946, the word “ministry” substituted the term “commissariat” throughout the entire governmental structure. See *Sotsial’noe obespechenie za 5 let*, 9; V.A. Aralov and A.V. Levshin, *Sotsial’noe obespechie v SSSR* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe Izdatel’stvo Politicheskoi Literatury, 1959), 10; E. Astrakhan, *Razvitie zakonodatel’sтва o pensiiakh rabochim i sluzhashchim* (Moscow: Iuridicheskaiia Literatura, 1971), 17; Andreev, *Sotsial’noe obespechenie v SSSR*, 70; and Caroli, *Histoire de la protection social en Union sovietique*, 42.

¹⁹ This Sovnarkom directive is quoted in the article “Otchet o deiatel’nosti pensionnogo otdela Narkomsobesa,” *Zhurnal narodnogo komissariata sotsial’nogo obespecheniia*, June-July, no. 5-6, 1919, 55-59, at 58.

At the time of their final separation, however, a decree on the respective purposes of the Narkomtrud and the Narkomsobes stated that the former was to care for the needs of the working class, while the latter would preside over “invalids, peasants, and the indigent.”²⁰ This official demarcation of functions led to a loss of institutional prestige for the Narkomsobes and its practice of social assistance: while the Narkomtrud’s insurance offices were given the pressing political task to make reliable assistance available to the Soviet workers, the Narkomsobes was left with the menial chore to assign meager pensions to the unemployed and uninsured population. In addition, since this organ was formalized only at the Republic level (while the other commissariats were All-Union), the Narkomsobes ended up having fewer resources and less skilled personnel.²¹

In 1921, with the beginning of the New Economic Policy (NEP), the Narkomsobes moved from a unitary system of help to all people who were not covered by the social insurance to a system which included different forms of assistance to different social groups. Peasants became the responsibility of mutual aid societies which helped widows and orphans as well as villagers incapable of working due to old age, disability, sickness, or maternity. Producers’ cooperatives were designed to provide employment to the disabled. These institutions were

²⁰ This decree was quoted in many circular letters to the provincial sections of the Narkomsobes. See, for instance, one to the Perm’ welfare section preserved in the Perm’ State Archive of Contemporary History (Permskii gosudarstvenni arkhiv noveishei istorii, hereafter PermGANI, formerly known as Gosudarstvennyi obshchestvenno-politicheskii arkhiv Permskoi oblasti or GOPAPO), f. 557, o. 1, d. 60, l. 2 and ll. 5-9.

²¹ Madison, *Social Welfare in the Soviet Union*, 80 and Beate Fieseler, “Razvitie gosudarstvennoi pomoshchi invalidam v Rossii ot pozdnei Rossiiskoi imperii do stalinskoii ‘revoliutsii sverkh’,” in *Opyt mirovykh voyn v istorii Rossii. Sbornik statei* (Cheliabinsk: Kamennyi poias, 2007), 49-64, at 53. For a description of these commissariats’ overlapping functions in the 1920s from the perspective of a contemporary see A. I. Vishnevetskii, *Razvitie zakonodatelstva o sotsialnom strakhovanii v Rossii* (Moskva: Voprosy truda, 1926), esp. 92-93. For details on the change of name and jurisdictional status of the Narkomsobes see Astrakhan, *Razvitie zakonodatelstva o pensiiakh*. On the jurisdictional conflicts between the Narkomtrud and the Narkomsobes see esp. Ewing, *Social Insurance in Russia and the Soviet Union*. Other scholars have identified a conflict over the welfare of insured versus uninsured citizens within the Narkozdrav. See Christopher M. Davis, “Economics of Soviet Public Health, 1928-1932,” in *Health and Society in Revolutionary Russia*, Susan Gross Solomon, ed., (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 146-174; Ewing, “The Science and Politics of Soviet Insurance Medicine,” *ibid.*, 69-96; and Neil W. Weissman, “Origins of Soviet Health Administration,” *ibid.*, 97-120.

supervised by the Narkomsobes, but largely developed their own mutual aid programs. A Pensioning Department (*Pensionnyi Otdel* or *Otdel Pensionnogo Obespecheniia*) became responsible for regulating the assignation of “pensions and subsidies” (*pensii i posobiia*) to those citizens who were eligible neither for social insurance nor for mutual aid.²²

Since its very establishment and throughout the following decades, the Pensioning Department office operated in a very chaotic and arbitrary context.²³ Its biggest problem was that it let several separate pensioning systems randomly mushroom and be used by local Narkomsobes sections. These systems differed one from the other by the conditions and sizes of the subsidies they offered and by the order of assignation and payment of these subsidies. Depending on whether an applicant had ever been employed, subsidies could be assigned as a percentage of his/her former income, a percentage of a certain category's maximum income, or a minimum subsistence amount. As a result an individual's pension could vary between 100% of the applicant's former income and less than 10% of any income category.²⁴

Narkomsobes officials gave different interpretations of a pensioning legislation that was complex, unsystematic, and often encumbered with provisions no longer in force. As local Narkomsobes directors often admitted in their reports to Moscow, the employees working in the

²² On the tripartite division of welfare after 1921 see *Sotsial'noe obespechenie za 5 let*, 10-11 and Andreev, *Sotsial'noe obespechenie v SSSR*. The latter book is also a good reference to understand the theoretical distinction between pensions and subsidies. Mutual aid programs for peasants and invalids' cooperatives are outside of the scope of this dissertation. For a brief description of these institutions see Madison, *Social Welfare in the Soviet Union*, 54-56 and 59-60; and Caroli, *Histoire de la protection sociale en Union soviétique*, 107-109. On the invalids' workshops and working colonies see esp. Fieseler, “Razvitie gosudarstvennoi pomoshchi invalidam.”

²³ Among the most vivid descriptions of the inadequate state of the Pensioning Department is an “Akt” drafted by the head of the Solikamsk Narkomsobes section (Perm' province) in January 1920 and preserved in the State archive of the Perm' Province (Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Permskogo kraia, hereafter GAPK), f. 9, o. 1, d. 121, ll. 305-306. For complaints about infringements of the laws on pensioning assistance in later years see the State Archive of the Russian Federation (Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv russkoi federatsii, hereafter GARF), f. 413, o. 1, d. 585, ll. 10-11; d. 456, ll. 77-78; d. 1632, l. 86; and GAPK, f. 1137, o. 1, d. 74, l. 317.

²⁴ GARF, f. 413, o. 4, d. 357, ll. 36-37. See also A.V. Tikhomirov and V.K. Khitev, *Pensii i posobiia* (Moscow: Sovetskoe zakonodatel'stvo, 1931).

commissions for the assignment of pensions had “a very poor knowledge of the pensioning legislation” and made “many mistakes.”²⁵ Inundated with petitions for assistance and at a loss in handling an extremely fragmented and confused pensioning legislation, local Narkomsobes sections sometimes found it easier to apply to their uninsured clients the better advertised and explained rules of the social security. In other words, local officers had significant discretion in determining eligibility and often approved or rejected help to uninsured petitioners following the policies that had been elaborated within the social insurance system.²⁶

This situation characterized the administration of social assistance until the late 1940s, when criticism about widespread illegality and calls for socialist humanism prompted a desire for reform. In December 1949, the Minister of Social Assistance A. Sukhov wrote a “Document on the elaboration of a unitary law on pensioning.” His “Spravka” proposed to assign monetary help according to a unified and simplified system of pensioning assistance. Emphasizing the need to standardize the norms of assistance, the document stated: “the sizes of the pensions for disability, old age, and loss of breadwinner must be established in the same percentage for all the categories of assisted individuals and correspond to the levels so far applied to military personnel and their families.”²⁷ Local Narkomsobes leaders urged their employees to follow the requirements of the new unified pensioning legislation.²⁸ This recommendation, however, led to unfortunate outcomes for many pensioners as around 10,000 individuals were taken off the rosters of the Narkomsobes, the amounts of many pensions were decreased, and many people were moved to

²⁵ GARF, f. 413, o. 1, d. 1632, l. 41 and l. 42. See also Aralov and Levshin, *Sotsial'noe obespechie v SSSR*, 17. Madison has noted that insurance administrators too were quite inconsistent in adhering to official policies. *Social Welfare in the Soviet Union*, 50 and 83.

²⁶ Caroli remarks that local Narkomsobes sections applied the norms foreseen by the social insurance system to people who had been employed in the field of education and to the disabled. The latter often complained about bureaucratic procedures which applied the insurance laws at the disadvantage of the weakest social elements. *Histoire de la protection sociale en Union soviétique*, 118 and 89.

²⁷ See GARF 413, o. 4, d. 357, ll. 33-45 for the complete text of this “Spravka.” The quotation is from l. 43.

²⁸ GARF, f. 413, o. 1, d. 2292, l. 21

less advantageous pensioning categories.²⁹ The systematization of 1949 was the beginning of a process that would lead to the more thorough welfare reforms of the post-Stalin years. In particular, a law on state pensions issued by the Supreme Council of the SSSR on July 14, 1956, would finally provide welfare workers with a much clearer classification of who was entitled to what.³⁰

In sum, between 1921 and 1949, a poorly organized Pensioning Department and various Narkomsobes local sections struggled to deal with the demands for help of all the “poor and suffering” who were not covered by social insurance and could not rely on the mutual aid institutions. It is hard to find reliable official statistics spelling out their number. In the first half of 1920, the total number of pensioners helped by the Narkomsobes was indicated to be a half million people.³¹ After 1921, we can assume that the number of people turning for help to the Pensioning Department continued to be large, since it often included citizens who were *de facto* not covered by social insurance and not assisted by mutual aid institutions. Indeed, even for wage earners and salaried employees it was often difficult to receive regular social insurance benefits. Caroli has calculated that, by the end of the First Five-Year-Plan, the provision of social insurance touched 87% of the Soviet working population, thus leaving a good 13% uncovered. Even in the privileged industrial sectors, Caroli adds, only 30% of the workers “were considered as protected” in 1932. In addition, as Madison has explained, “social insurance benefits were inadequate to meet the minimum needs of even the industrial workers who were covered by

²⁹ GARF, f. 413, o. 1, d. 2292, ll. 21-22 and l. 26.

³⁰ Many books were published in the 1950s and 1960s to describe the new welfare legislation. Among the most clear descriptions is Andreev’s *Sotsial’noe obespechenie v SSSR*, which also describes the reform of the mutual aid institutions for the peasants that was enacted in 1964.

³¹ In October 1918 there were 105,000 people on the roster of the Narkomsobes. See *Sotsial’noe obespechenie za 5 let*, 22; Aralov and Levshin, *Sotsial’noe obespechie v SSSR*, 12; Andreev, *Sotsial’noe obespechenie v SSSR*, 73.

social insurance.” This situation blurred the distinction between insured and uninsured for all practical purposes and swelled the clientele of the Narkomsobes to great proportions.³²

To accomplish its herculean tasks, this organ attempted to break down its vast clientele into a manageable taxonomy of help, a categorization that would clarify not only who concretely carried the right to be helped but also why and in what forms.

1.2 The recipients of social assistance and the reasons for helping them

The Pensioning Department defined all its clients as *pensionery* and then divided them into four major categories (each in turn including various sub-groups):

- pensioners of labor (*pensionery truda*): people who became disabled on the job due to the contraction of occupational diseases or to accidents in the workplace; elderly individuals who could no longer work or had accumulated enough working seniority to stop working; and family members of deceased breadwinners. The pensioners of labor assisted by the Pensioning Department were all individuals who, for one reason or another, were not covered by social insurance;³³
- military pensioners (*voennye pensionery*): people who became disabled on the battlefields and the family members of red soldiers;
- personal pensioners (*personal'nye pensionery*): individuals whose past endeavors had won them

³² Caroli, *Histoire de la protection sociale in Union sovietique*, 141 and 223. Madison, *Social Welfare in the Soviet Union*, 55.

³³ The aged were classified as invalids too. The phrase *invalidy starosti* indicated individuals who were totally or partially unable to work due to old age. Old people were in part recognized as worthy recipients of help through the personal pensions. In 1927 the first old-age pensions were introduced for textile workers only. Then, in 1937, all employed persons became eligible for old-age pensions. See N.A. Semashko, *Pravo na sotsial'noe obespechenie* (Moscow: Iuridicheskoe Izdatel'stvo NKIu Soiuz SSR, 1937), 27-30; Aralov and Levshin, *Sotsial'noe obespechenie v SSSR*, 13; Andreev, *Sotsial'noe obespechenie v SSSR*, 86- 87; Edward Hallet Carr and R.W. Davis (eds.), *Foundations of a Planned Economy 1926-1929* (London: Macmillan, 1969), vol. 1, part II, 606-608; Madison, *Social Welfare in the Soviet Union*, 53 and 57; Caroli, *Histoire de la protection social en Union sovietique*, 113-114 and 145. See also S. Lovell, “Soviet Socialism and the Construction of Old Age,” *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas*, 5/14 (2003), 564-585.

a special entitlement to assistance;

- the “others” (*prochie*): individuals who were born with disabilities (*invalidy detstva*), especially the blind and deaf-mute; those who had acquired disability through some non-work-related and non-military accident (*invalidy sluchaia*); and “all other invalids who are not covered by the laws on social welfare.”³⁴ The *prochie* were also identified by their economic poverty as “those with a low income” (*maloimushchie*) and “those who fell in need” (*pavshie v nuzhdu*). *Prochie* was a catchall category for those people whose economic need derived from social calamities not directly related to productive or military service. They were – quite literally – the left-overs of Soviet social welfare: those who did not fall under the scope of any other welfare regulation; those who could not possibly access labor in any of its forms or temporary dimensions.

This taxonomy did not reflect rigid class identification.³⁵ Rather, the main criterion to identify the recipients of social assistance and subdivide them in groups was their relationship to labor conceived in the broadest possible sense. This was quite paradoxical: while the pensioners were by definition needy unemployed individuals without full capacity to work, their identity as well as their access to welfare rights were always fundamentally related to labor. On one hand, Soviet help included social categories which before the Revolution had to rely on beneficence, begging, or prostitution; on the other hand, the Narkomsobes identified its taxonomy of help on the grounds of performed labor, that is depending on the type of relationship that various social categories had established with the surrounding economic system.

³⁴ Only few Narkomsobes reports cared to spell out the category of *prochie*. Among them see GAPK, f. 1137, o. 1, d. 196, l. 2. See also a decree of the VTsIK and the Sovnarkom acknowledging the obligation to assist the “*prochie*” in *Voprosy Sotsial’nogo Obespecheniia*, no. 9-10, 1926, quoted in Madison, *Social Welfare in the Soviet Union*, 56.

³⁵ This argument is proposed also by Aleksandr Shamigulov in his article “‘Vziat’ vse, da i podelit’...’ Voina i mir v organizatsion sotsial’noi pomoshchi gorodskomu naseleniiu v pervye gody sovetskoi vlasti (po materialam Kazanskoi gubernii),” in *Sovetskaia sotsial’naia politika 1920-kh-1930-kh godov*, 118-144.

Judging from this classification, entitlement to social assistance was grounded in one's past performances or potential for future contributions in the form of productive, military, or reproductive work. It also included help based on need for those who could not possibly relate their identity to labor. This conceptualization turned the right to be helped into a large enough notion and practice to be applied to all Soviet people. However, it also inevitably created hierarchies of entitlement and, although it did not exclude those who could not access labor in the present, it nonetheless fostered their marginalization.

The categories of "personal pensioners" and the "others" clearly reveal how relationships both to labor and to need shaped the state's understanding of its non-working populations' right to be helped, but also brought up clear degrees of marginalization in Soviet society. These two categories stood at the opposite ends of the Narkomobes's taxonomy of help: the personal pensioners were entitled to special help because they had performed contributions so valuable that could not neatly fit into other categories; the "others" were granted a minimal right to subsistence despite the fact that they had never contributed and perhaps would never contribute to the common well-being of the country. The quality of these two categories' relationship to labor found reflection in the quantity of financial help assigned to them: while the personal pensioners were in the most advantageous position among all pensioners, the "others" had to be content with miserly pensions.³⁶ At the same time, while the categories of personal pensioner and invalids of labor or war tended to be approved as a reward to particularly deserving citizens in

³⁶ In 1928, the monthly grant for *prochie* was 5 rubles, while the average monthly wage of a manual worker was 63 rubles. See Madison, *Social Welfare in the Soviet Union*, 57. In 1949, the average monthly pension of an individual classified as "other" in the Tula province was 38 rubles, while a personal pensioner in the same area could receive up to 268 rubles a month. GARF, f. 413, o. 1, d. 1140, l. 37. In the last quarter of 1950 the total number of *prochie* in the Perm' province was 459, while the personal pensioners numbered only 223. Although the category "others" was twice as big as the category "personal pensions," the expenditure for the first group accounted to 26,713 rubles and the money assigned to the second group totaled 55,660 rubles. GAPK, f. 1137, o.1, d. 224, l. 2.

times of acute crisis (such as the Civil War and the immediate post-WWII period), the humble designation as “other” seems to have remained more stable over the years.³⁷

As with any hermeneutic system, these categories were abstractions: no single person represented the perfect expression of any one category, nor were these categories mutually exclusive. In fact, one often found overlap between them. As a result, a person could be entitled to receive a pension on multiple grounds and from various organs. For instance, an applicant could have the right to a pension due both to old age and disability, or he/she could qualify according to the social insurance laws as well as to the other programs of social assistance. In these cases, the pensioner was legally entitled only to one pension.³⁸ However, in the conditions of poverty that plagued many Soviet citizens, we can hardly imagine an applicant sticking to this rule, especially if provided with the chance to combine two miserly pensions. This taxonomy of help seemed to work for the Narkomsobes’s social workers too: its broad and vague categories allowed them to freely – and sometime arbitrarily – include or exclude petitioners.

The indeterminacy of pensioners’ categorization methods demonstrates the constructed nature of the Soviet social assistance typology. To allow for the possibility to construct the pensioners as deserving others, the Narkomsobes administrators developed schemes for translating identities and biographies into social assistance denominations. In the process of looking for the pensioners who deserved help and separate them from those who did not, the

³⁷ According to Madison, during the period between 1921 and 1956 the Narkomsobes remained a constant source of support for the *prochie*. For the other groups instead, welfare officials encouraged their subordinates in the provinces to move the burden of financial support from the Narkomsobes to other help-oriented organizations. *Social Welfare in the Soviet Union*, 60.

³⁸ See the document “Pravila obespecheniia v poriadke sots. strakhovaniia po invalidnosti i po sluchaiu poteri kormil’tsa,” issued by Narkomotrud on July 4, 1928; and “Iz vlecheniia iz polozeniiia o pensiiakh i posobiiah po sotsial’nomu strakhovaniiu,” issued by the VTsIK and the Sovnarkom on February 13, 1930. Both documents are quoted in Tikhomirov and Khitev, *Pensii i posobiia*, 8-9 and 20.

Narkomsobes actually brought these pensioners into being.³⁹ As we will see in the next chapters, specific help-oriented and advocacy organizations would in turn learn to identify their assisted in the new vocabulary of Soviet help and thereby contribute to shape this vocabulary. For now, however, let us remain with the Pensioning Department and consider four key groups of pensioners within its taxonomy of social assistance: disabled people, family dependents, personal pensioners, and the others.

The disabled

Disabled men and women constituted a significant group of pensioners. Disability in the Soviet Union was largely conceived as the loss of labor capacity, as a subtraction of performative power from a body imagined at its full productive potential.⁴⁰ Disabled men, in particular, were viewed as deviations from a gendered norm of physical and also socio-political fitness. For disabled non-working men, to lose working capacity and be unemployed meant to forsake not only the ideal subject position of healthy productive members of the social body, but also the role of breadwinners for their wives and children, thus turning into a heavy burden both for the collective and their families.

One of the first post-revolutionary projects of social assistance to permanently disabled people was drafted in 1921 by the Sovnarkom and remained in force until 1932. It suggested a categorization of disability based on levels of labor incapacity and inability to produce income. It included the following six categories of disability: 1) invalids not able to work for a salary and also needing help for the satisfaction of their everyday needs; 2) invalids unable to perform any

³⁹ A similar claim has been made by Igal Halfin concerning Bolshevik constructions of real proletarians. See esp. his book *From Darkness to Light* (Pittsburgh, Pa.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000).

⁴⁰ This view was not very different from other societies' understanding of the functionality of the human body as it had emerged in the late nineteenth century. See Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy*.

kind of work which would give them a salary, but who did not need any special care from their family members; 3) invalids who must give up their former profession and skilled labor, but who could still gain their bread by performing unskilled, temporary, and easy jobs; 4) persons who must engage in a less qualified, but still skilled labor; 5) persons who must give up their occupation, but could engage in a new one with the same qualification level; 6) persons who could continue to perform their former occupational activity but with decreased productivity.⁴¹

People aspiring to the status of *invalid* were to be examined by medical expert commissions (*vrachebno-trudovye ekspertnye komissii* or VTEK) before any category could be assigned and a pension set. Although avowedly “medical” and part of the Narkomzdrav, these commissions were asked to pay attention to the non-medical factors that determined a person’s degree of disability. Two “social” criteria were particularly important: 1) the etiology of one’s handicap, that is whether the disability arose from employment or military service, was congenital, or caused by an accident occurred outside the job; 2) and its impact on one’s capacity to work. Privilege was given to the forms of disability that had arisen from military or work-related injuries and occupational diseases. For instance, in the case of blindness, local VTEK tended to assign the first group of invalidity only to individuals who had become blind on the job. When disability was not acquired while performing one’s military or productive service to

⁴¹ For the 1921 formulation see “Proekt postanovleniia sovarkoma po sotsial’nomu obespecheniiu trudiashchikhsia pri stoikoi utrate trudosposobnosti,” GARF, f. 413, o. 2, d. 991, ll. 1-2. This six-level classification was confirmed in July 1928 by the Narkomtrud in the document “Pravila obespecheniia v poriadke sots. strakhovaniia po invalidnosti i po sluchaiu poteri kormil’tsa.” Another basic statute on pensions for the permanently disabled was issued by the VTsIK and the Sovnarkom on February 13, 1930, under the title “Iz vlecheniia iz polo zheniia o pensiiakh i posobiiah po sotsial’nomu strakhovaniiu.” A directive of the VTsIK and Sovnarkom passed on June, 23, 1931, under the title “O sotsial’nom strakhovanii” included some additional specifications. These documents are quoted in Tikhomirov and Khitev, *Pensii i posobiia*, 13-14 and 18-19. See also the English translation of a Narkomsobes brochure entitled *A Brief Survey of Social Care in the R.S.F.S.R.*, (Moscow: People’s Commissariat of Social Care of the R.S.F.S.R., 1927), 4; and Andreev, *Sotsial’noe obespechenie v SSSR*, 75-76. Disabled *kolkhozniki* were not considered invalids of work (no matter how they acquired their disability) and could receive assistance only through the funds of mutual help of their *kolkhozy*. See M.V. Verzhblonskii, *Ocherki istorii vrachebno-trudovoi ekspertizy v RSFSR* (Leningrad: LIETIN, 1971), 34; and Hazard, *Law and Social Change in the USSR*, 213-221.

the state, the applicants' working seniority and the type of work he/she used to perform could compensate and still provide them with a set of entitlements. In other words, VTEK experts had to follow a political line in assigning applicants to invalidity categories, and economic expediency affected the establishment of "medical" criteria for determining entitlements.

Ascription to one of the categories of invalidity and assignation of "quotas of help" (i.e. the rates of a person's disability pension) varied in accordance with these circumstances. The right to full state assistance came only with the first category. It included the provision of prosthesis, housing in the institutions of the Narkomsobes, and other forms of "work-related and financial help" (*trudovaia i khoziaistvennaia pomoshch'*). The disabled of the second and third groups received assistance through the workshops and labor colonies of the Narkomsobes and the invalids' cooperatives. All disabled pensioners who refused to be placed in the invalids' homes of the Narkomsobes or rejected job offers from the invalids' cooperatives, immediately lost their right to assistance. The right to a disability pension was not granted to disabled individuals ascribed to the last three groups of invalidity (unless they had acquired their disability on the job and were fully insured). A brochure issued by the Narkomsobes and published in English translation commented that the last three groups "had the right to be assisted to get an occupation."⁴² For all practical purposes, being assigned to categories four through six had no significance for many disabled men and women. Until 1930, although they did not have any right to pensioning assistance as *invalidy*, all disabled people in the last three categories (even the uninsured and the victims of non-work related accidents) could receive help as unemployed when they registered with the labor exchange office (*birzha truda*). However,

⁴² A Brief Survey of Social Care in the RSFSR, 4-5.

with the official liquidation of unemployment in 1930, the laws regulating assistance to able-bodied and disabled unemployed persons ceased to be effective.⁴³

Thus, disability pensions were decided in accordance with loss of labor ability and earning capacity. This approach followed in the German tradition of legislation providing for industrial compensation.⁴⁴ However, this method of evaluation entailed a clear problem: it penalized the man or woman who tried to return to work as against those individuals who deliberately refrained from working. Disabled people were asked to work within their possibilities, but at the same time those who did work were excluded from social protection.⁴⁵ In the Soviet case, this was in blatant contradiction with the discourse of help through employment.

When Soviet policy makers realized this incongruity, they encouraged the VTEK to focus more on the applicant's remaining labor ability and potential for re-training and alternative forms of employment. Especially after 1932, when the classification of disability was reduced from six to three categories and the VTEK were moved from the Narkomzdrav to the Narkomtrud, the main purpose of the experts' examinations became to induce the disabled to seek some sort of

⁴³ See GARF, f. 413, o. 2, d. 1612, l. 54. See also the document "Pravila obespecheniia v poriadke sots. strakhovaniia po invalidnosti i po sluchaiu poteri kormil'tsa," quoted in Tikhomirov and Khitev, *Pensii i posobiia*, 19. See also *Sotsial'noe obespechenie za 5 let*, 31. On social assistance to the unemployed see Zinaida Tettenborn, "Obespechenie bezrabotnykh v burzhuznykh stranakh i v Sovetskoi Rossii," *Voprosy sotsial'nogo obespecheniia*, no. 1, January 1922, 3-6; and "Postanovleniia Soveta Narodnykh Kommissarov ob obespechenii bezrabotnykh," *Voprosy sotsial'nogo obespecheniia*, no. 5-6, October-November 1921, 58-59. Until 1930, according to the legislation on help to the unemployed, the right to state assistance in case of unemployment was granted to all citizens who were registered with the labor exchange office (*birzha truda* or *otdel truda*) and could prove that they were indeed looking for a job and that they did not have any other means of subsistence. Assistance was denied to the unemployed who left their job on their own initiative, who refused the jobs offered by the labor exchange office, who had incomes "on-the-side" (*pobochnye*), and who engaged in trading. See GARF, f. 413, o. 2, d. 1612, l. 4. See also Astrakhan, *Razvitie zakonodatel'stva o pensiiakh rabochim i sluzhashchim*, 39; and Caroli, *Histoire de la protection sociale en Union sovietique*, 99-103 and 182-184.

⁴⁴ This tradition had been introduced by Bismarck in 1884 with the double goal to protect workers from risk and restrain the workers' revolutionary movement. See Caroli, *Histoire de la protection sociale en Union sovietique*, 20 and 36; and F. Girotti, *Welfare state. Storia, modelli e critica* (Roma: Carocci, 1998), 147-182.

⁴⁵ This point has been made by Joanna Bourke in relation to British disabled veterans in the interwar period. Joanna Bourke, *Dismembering the Male. Men's Bodies, Britain and the Great War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 65. See also Caroli, *Histoire de la protection sociale en Union sovietique*, 239.

productive employment.⁴⁶ This re-orientation was a direct result of the changing labor market. Although, the employment of the disabled had always been part of the Soviet social welfare programs, under the conditions of high unemployment of the NEP more accessible invalidity pensions were used to encourage the aged and the infirm to leave the factories. With the pressure of industrialization of the early 1930s, labor shortages began to replace unemployment as the principal labor problem and invalids became a valuable labor pool that the VTEK should not fail to exploit. In addition, the years between 1928 and 1931 were a period of acute shortage in consumer goods. The party leadership sought to minimize the obligations of the Soviet welfare and to supply deficit goods such as grain and housing only to those people whose productive labor served the interests of a rapidly industrializing country.

The 1932 change in the classification of disability signified a reduced ability for Soviet men and women to fit into the nuanced positions foreseen by the former six categories. It meant that in the constant tension between ethics and discipline, between the integrating capacity of socialist labor and the emphasis on productivity, the state had decided to bend the stick towards control. And yet, the reality on ground was much messier than what the Soviet state's regulatory power would have wanted. At the local level, the commissions' evaluations were subject to a high degree of randomness and arbitrariness. For instance, different commissions could give competing assessments of the same applicant or, even more paradoxically, the same applicant could be ascribed to different groups of invalidity by the same commission. The Rostov VTEK was particularly kafkaesque: once, it recognized as fully able-bodied a man who had been assigned the third group of invalidity by the VTEK in Novocherkassk; another time, it assigned

⁴⁶ Madison, *Social Welfare in the Soviet Union*, 81; Caroli, *Histoire de la protection social en Union soviétique*, 149; Aralov and Levshin, *Sotsial'noe obespechie v SSSR*, 46.

two different groups of invalidity to the same man – the first category for his blindness and the third one for his general health.⁴⁷

The Second World War made the process of disability testing even lengthier and more inconvenient than what it used to be. Like before the war, each individual who desired to undergo disability examination through the VTEK commissions needed to have a referral from his/her family doctor. However, under the conditions of war mobilization, to receive a referral a person had to spend entire days in the polyclinic or the doctor's ambulatory. After that, the applicant needed to stay in line to register for examination and often had to go several times to the VTEK offices before being actually seen. This is what happened to a certain Lebedev, who first went to the VTEK offices in the city of Perovo (Moscow province) on April 27, was ordered to come back on July 1, and actually examined only on July 5, 1944.⁴⁸ Besides the disproportionate waiting time, people were sometimes illegally asked to pay a fee for their medical exams. In the Omsk province, the VTEK charged local inhabitants a fee of 15 rubles to undergo the invalidity examination.⁴⁹

Despite the more rigid classification introduced in the 1930s, with the onset of the war the constant tension in matters of social assistance between discipline and disorder saw a definite prevalence of the latter. During the war, many disabled Soviet people successfully refused to undergo examination at all. Resistance to the VTEK was particularly common among men and women who had been ascribed to the third group of invalidity. They rarely showed up at the re-examination appointments, rightfully considering these visits a waste of their time. Indeed, the third category was in all effects a denial of disability because those ascribed to it were not

⁴⁷ GARF, f. 413, o. 1, d. 75, l. 4.

⁴⁸ GARF, f. 413, o. 1, d. 456, l. 71-72. Waiting time to be admitted to examination was around one month in the Ivanovskaia oblast. See GARF, f. 413, o. 1, d. 456, l. 77.

⁴⁹ GARF, f. 413, o. 1, d. 456, l. 77.

entitled to any regular pension and simply recommended to find a job for themselves. The scorn of being denied the right to assistance on grounds of insufficient disability and the fact that it was more advantageous to receive support as unemployed dependents determined the application strategies of many individuals (especially women). As one applicant wrote in 1944, to apply not as disabled but as unemployed dependent allowed her “not to work and be free.”⁵⁰

Unemployed invalids of the first or second category often did not undergo examination through the VTEK because they were afraid to be moved down to a lower category and be forced to work. Again, during the war, people who had been once recognized as disabled took advantage of the new social dislocations to position themselves out of the further surveillance of the state. Many disabled individuals chose whether to subject themselves to regular disability examinations – and when to undergo them – not so much in accordance with the state’s mandate, but rather depending on the circumstances of their private lives. For example, I.M. Alekseev (from the village Pushkino in Moscow province) underwent a VTEK examination in July 1943 and received the third category of invalidity for a period of three months, after which he was supposed to undergo a new examination. However, Alekseev showed up at the Pushkino office of social welfare only one year later, in June 1944. When he was asked why he did not go to the examination when he was supposed to and what he did for a living, Alekseev answered that he worked in his neighbors’ vegetable garden and sold used shoes in the market. These activities allowed him to make enough money to support himself. In June 1944 he had decided to go to the offices of the social welfare because, as he declared, “this free life (*volynka*)” had bored him and now he wanted to have a stable job.⁵¹ Like Alekseev, other disabled men and women asserted the wish to be involved in a professional activity of their own choosing or simply to avoid the

⁵⁰ GARF, f. 413, o. 1, d. 456, l. 72.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

compulsion to work. The unemployed invalid of the third category P.F. Khromov refused to undergo re-examination since he wanted to make a living “by selling my stuff.” As a Narkomsobes officer commented in 1945, “there are members of the party...who have been holding the second group of invalidity for the last two years, but they...trade at the Barashka, the market close to the industrial plant.”⁵² In 1944, the invalid A.P. Burtsev simply declared: “I do not work and will not work.”⁵³

Even when the Soviet disabled did not manage to completely avoid the scrutiny of the social welfare organs, they could still make it very difficult for these state agencies to keep count of them and know their whereabouts. For instance, when asked why they had not been re-examined at the due time, the invalids of the second category I.P. Chizhov and I.A. Dudkin explained that they were travelling, busy visiting a sister in the Smolensk province and a mother-in-law in the Iaroslavl’ province. The invalid of the second category L.G. Fokin delayed his re-examination for a period of five months because – as he declared – he was busy delivering foodstuffs to the neighboring markets. When the VTEK of the Moscow province went to visit the disabled A.M. Turin and A.I. Shustikov in their homes, the two men were not to be found because they had gone to the neighboring village to trade.⁵⁴

In sum, in the 1940s, the mobility of the disabled added to the displacements brought about by the war to disrupt all the disciplining efforts that the Soviet state had put in place in the 1930s. Local welfare sections often lamented that the disabled men and women of their regions

⁵² GARF, f. 413, o.1, d. 585, l. 12.

⁵³ GARF, f. 413, o. 1, d. 456, l. 72.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

“do not settle (*ne osedaiut*),” preferring to freely move around the country.⁵⁵ As a Narkomsobes administrator wrote:

We must put an end to these volatile job-changers (*letuny*), who move not only from one enterprise to the other, but also from one corner of the Soviet Union to the other... They tour tens of cities and walk into tens of organizations setting up scandals of various nature... We must stop those people who move from one boarding home to the other within one province and throughout the Soviet Union, alone or with their entire families.⁵⁶

This administrator’s vehemence in condemning the mobility of the Soviet disabled is a sign that the warring Soviet state had serious problems gluing its disabled population to a fixed place of residence and job position.

Wartime mobility, however, was a mixed blessing. While it played to the advantage of some disabled because it loosened the state’s controls on them, it made others unable to produce the necessary documentation to support their applications for help. For instance, the invalid of war A.P. Lisitsyn turned to the Krasnoural’skii municipal Narkomsobes section with the plea to reinstate his disability pension. In his petition, he declared that he had a heart attack when he was evacuated from the town of Anzhero-Sudzhensk to his new place of residence in the Krasnoural’sk province and accidentally lost his documents. The Krasnoural’skii Narkomsobes investigated the case by writing to the Anzhero-Sudzhenskii section, but the latter replied that Lisitsyn had never been on their pensioning roster. Lisitsyn then indicated other Narkomsobes sections, but all their replies were negative. Lisitsyn was not able to clarify where his pensioning file was held and his application was never approved.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ GARF, f. 413, o.1, d. 585, l. 16. This document is undated, but the context suggests 1943-1944 as plausible dates.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ GARF, f. 413, o. 1, d. 2292, l. 29.

Family dependents

Another significant group of pensioners included dependent individuals (*izhdiventsy*) left without means of subsistence after the death of a breadwinner (*kormilets*). According to official regulations established within the system of social assistance by 1921 and then confirmed in the social security directives of 1928 and 1930, children, siblings, parents, and spouses could qualify as dependents if they were minors, elderly, or otherwise unable to work. Age and working ability notwithstanding, any adult was entitled to help as dependent when he/she was taking care of the minor children or siblings of the deceased breadwinner. The conditions and the “quotas” of this type of social assistance varied based on the causes of a breadwinners’ death: time and again, work-related injuries and occupational diseases were the preferred circumstances. In case the dependent was an adult, assistance was frequently provided by placing the applicant in the Narkomsobes facilities – invalids’ workshops, cooperatives, and working communes. Minor dependents under 16, who became full orphans after the death of the breadwinner, were sent to children’s homes, shelters, and other facilities of either the Narkompros or the Narkomzdrav. A subsidy in nature or in cash could be offered depending on the resources available to the local Narkomsobes section handling the application and only if housing was not already provided.⁵⁸

The implementation of the laws regulating help to family dependents reveals how patriarchal conceptions of family and gender inflected the rules of state assistance and, to a significant extent, re-scaled the premium given to productive work in favor of reproductive

⁵⁸ Pensions in case of death of breadwinner were first established by a decree dated August 28, 1919. See Astrakhan, *Razvitie zakonodatel'stva*, 33. A more definitive formulation of this right was articulated in the document “Proekt postanovleniia sovnrarkoma o sotsial'nom obespechenii chlenov semeist trudiashchikhsia v sluchae smerti kormil'tsa” dated 1921. GARF, f. 413, o. 2, d. 991, l. 7. Later laws did not change the substance of the 1921 act. See for instance, “Pravila obespecheniia v poriadke sots. strakhovaniia po invalidnosti i po sluchaiu poteri kormil'tsa,” issued by the Narkomtrud on July 4, 1928; and “Iz vlecheniia iz polozeniia o pensiiakh i posobiiah po sotsial'nomu strakhovaniu,” issued by the VTsIK and the Sovnarkom on February 13, 1930. Both documents are quoted in Tikhomirov and Khitev, *Pensii i posobiia*, 7 and 28-31. See also Andreev, *Sotsial'noe obespechenie v SSSR*, 75-76; and Hazard *Law and Social Change in the USSR*, 221- 223.

labor. Indeed, despite the neuter gender language of legislation and the rhetoric of women's emancipation under socialism, the Soviet state's ideology attended to a traditional model of the family as the foundational unit of society. In the administration of social assistance, the patriarchal family was a central category, a key factor in determining access to state-controlled goods. Women received state help mainly in their capacity as mothers and, in the case of military families, as red soldiers' wives.⁵⁹ The Pensioning Department was more lenient in assigning a dependent pension when women were affected by "loss of [male] breadwinner" than the other way around. The very formulation "loss of breadwinner" closely echoed the key legitimizing category for Soviet help – "loss of working ability" – indicating that state assistance was to compensate for the deficit of a fundamental good, either a job or a spouse. And yet, the equation between the two values was highly gendered. Indeed, single women busy at raising their offspring were considered unable to work until the children turned 8, but this labor incapacity was never attributed to fathers.

The absence of a breadwinner in the family was often qualified as "loneliness" (*odinochestvo*). This term described an emotion, but it also had economic and social connotations: those who lived alone without kin represented an economically precarious social type, which did not have the same safety net that was available to the other categories of pensioners.⁶⁰ Indeed, "loneliness and poverty" were indicated in a 1923 brochure on the activities of the Narkomsobes as the first factors facilitating the growth of prostitution among "young girls" (followed in third instance by the "lack of working habits").⁶¹ As the causal

⁵⁹ On help to soldiers' female dependents see Fieseler, "Razvitie gosudarstvennoi pomoshchi invalidam v Rossii," 49-64.

⁶⁰ On the relationship between social welfare and kinship see Irina Trotsuk and Alexander Nikulin, "Kinship ties and family support in twentieth-century Russia," in *The Century of Welfare: Eight Countries*, Hannes Grandits, ed. (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 2010), 325-362.

⁶¹ *Sotsial'noe obespechenie za 5 let*, 20.

association between one's celibacy and female prostitution clearly reveals, gender shaped the emotional and socio-economic meanings of "loneliness." Women who were "left alone" (*ostavshiesia odinokie*) by the death of their husbands and the mobilization in the army of their sons seemed to be morally vulnerable and thus have a greater entitlement to help than their male counterparts. Instead, in the case of male applicants "loneliness" was often a reason to deny help. For instance, Vasilii Ivanovich Babich did not have a family to support and lived with his parents; he defied his gender role as male breadwinner and therefore did not qualify as pensioner in the eyes of the authorities.⁶² Other similar cases seem to confirm that single men were less entitled to state help.⁶³

When a dependent demanded compensation for the death of a breadwinner in court, the plaintiff's gender, working abilities, and access to additional means of subsistence were the most significant factors ruling the decisions of Soviet judges. In theory, when women were able to work, they ceased to qualify as needy and the state was not legally responsible for helping them materially. In practice, however, it was quite easy for women to find good reasons for their unemployment. For instance, although a certain P.N. Puchkova was completely able-bodied, she was identified as unable to work, because she had three small children (of 13, 9, and 2 years) and duly assigned a pension for "loss of breadwinner."⁶⁴

As we will see in more detail in chapter 4, the Soviet state showed a marked desire to care for and discipline female dependents throughout the period between 1917 and 1950. When

⁶² GAPK, f. 1137, o. 1, d. 265, l. 96.

⁶³ See for instance the story of Evgenii Dmitrievich Noskov, a single man who lived with his able-bodied mother and whose multiple applications for a personal pension were consistently rejected by the social assistance authorities in Perm'. GAPK, f. 1137, o. 1, d. 265, l. 88. Caroli has argued that "women did not receive the help they hoped for." *Histoire de la protection sociale en Union soviétique*, 193. This claim is supported by Caroli's analysis of women's letters to the social insurance administration and personally to Nadezhda Krupskaja. It must be noticed, however, that in these letters women presented themselves as industrial workers and teachers, not as lonely, helpless, and needy single women.

⁶⁴ GARF, f. 413, o. 1, d. 2292, l. 1.

contingent situations, such as the dislocations of the Second World War, swelled the ranks of single women and unmarried mothers, the aspiration to help and control them turned into a urgent political and social exigency. Thus, in July 1944 the Presidium of the Supreme Council issued a decree “On the strengthening of state help to pregnant women, mothers of many children, and single mothers”. Many women who were denied insurance compensation for loss of breadwinner by local factory committees became able to claim their rights to social assistance by reference to this decree.⁶⁵

Personal pensioners

Personal pensions (*personal'nye pensii*) were assigned to individuals who had distinguished themselves through their special contributions (*zaslugi*) to the country or to their local communities. The idea of giving subsidies to persons with special merits was first mentioned in a Sovnarkom directive dated March 24, 1920. A later directive dated July 16, 1920, identified special contributions as: 1) “the participation in the struggle against the international imperialists and the bourgeois states that had sided with the counter-revolutionary movement;” and 2) “the construction of socialism and party work.” Those who qualified as personal pensioners by these criteria would receive a pension in case they became disabled. Although personal pensioners achieved this status through their personal endeavors, when they died, their privileges could be transferred to their dependents.⁶⁶

At the end of the 1920s and in the early 1930s, the VTsIK and the Sovnarkom issued a series of new directives concerning personal pensions. By that time, the performance of

⁶⁵ See, for instance, the case of a woman called Varvara Vasil'evna Galkina in GARF, f. 9474, o. 5, d. 4064, l. 3 and l. 12.

⁶⁶ “Postanovlenie soveta narodnykh komissarov o pensiiakh litsam, imeiushchim osobyie zaslugi pered Raboche-Krest'ianskoi respublikoi,” *Izvestiia*, 27 July 1920, 5.

productive activities had more weight than participation in the civil war.⁶⁷ However, in the 1940s, military service was again added to “the field of productive and social work,” as local Narkomsobes sections and executive committees granted or denied the “right to a personal pension” depending on the petitioners’ special merits on both accounts.⁶⁸

The story of Vasilii Stepanovich Vinokurov is a textbook case. Involved in communist political circles since 1901, Vinokurov used to distribute illegal political literature and had been arrested by the tsarist police several times. In 1918, he established a Bolshevik party cell comprising 150 people. After having served in the civil war, he worked in the field of leather production until 1929. He began to receive a regular personal pension in 1933 and, in 1948, obtained an increase in his monthly allowance. In formulating the reasons for this rise, the Perm’ section of social assistance referred not only to Vinokurov’s revolutionary services and his difficult material situation, but also to the fact that he was supporting a sick and unemployed wife.⁶⁹ Similarly, the former Red Army soldier and invalid of war Il’ia Ivanovich Galashev was assigned a personal pension in 1940 for his “active participation in the civil war and in the consolidation of Soviet rule.”⁷⁰ Vasilii Ivanovich Muromtsev, former Red Army soldier, red partisan, veteran of the civil war, and old member of the Bolshevik party, was an invalid of the second group who, despite his disability, worked as director of an industry in the Kungurskii district of the Perm’ province. He was assigned a personal pension in 1948 for his merits towards

⁶⁷ The directives regulating personal pensions include: directive of the TsIK and the Sovnarkom “O personal’nykh pensiiakh,” dated 30 May 1928 (*Sobranie zakonov*, 1928, no. 35, item. 315), “Ob izmenenii st. st. 3 i 9 postanovleniia Tsentral’nogo Iсполnitel’nogo Komiteta I Soveta Narodnykh Komissarov Soiuzs SSR ot 30 maia 1928 g. o personal’nykh pensiiakh,” dated 20 November 1929 (*Sobranie zakonov*, 1929, no. 63, item 577), and “Ob izmenenii postanovleniia TsIK I SNK Soiuzs SSR ot 30 maia 1928 goda o pesonal’nykh pensiiakh,” dated 17 November 1933 (*Sobranie zakonov*, 1933, no. 67, item 403).

⁶⁸ See for instance the series of decision preserved in GAPK, f. 1137, o.1, d. 265, ll. 157-162.

⁶⁹ GAPK, f. 1137, o.1, d. 265, ll. 154-156.

⁷⁰ GAPK, f. 1137, o.1, d. 265, ll. 169-172.

the country on the front of the civil and in the field of work as manager of a productive unit.⁷¹ In the same year, however, another ex-serviceman and civil war participant, Ivan Antonovich Pautov, was denied a personal pension because he had not performed any productive activity.⁷²

Sometimes, local Narkomsobes organs and executive committees disagreed on what were to be considered “special merits.” Such was the case of Aleksandr Petrovich Sannikov, who had participated in the Second World War, received three medals for military merits, left the battlefield as an invalid of the first group, and could not find employment anywhere. Reviewing his application in 1948, the Narkomsobes section of the Perm’ province considered Sannikov’s special services at the front and his complete loss of working abilities as sufficient merits for qualifying as personal pensioner. However, the Perm’ executive committee rejected Sannikov’s application and suggested to assign him a pension “on general grounds.”⁷³ Indeed, the executive committees often functioned as gate keepers to the benefits coming with the status of personal pensioner. In the period between January 1947 and December 1948, for instance, the Perm’ executive committee received 150 recommendations for personal pensions from the local Narkomsobes administration, but it approved only half of them.⁷⁴ Local executive committees frequently asked the Narkomsobes sections to double-check all the documents presented with the application and thus delayed or stalled the entire application process.⁷⁵

⁷¹ GAPK, f. 1137, o.1, d. 265, ll. 135-145. For other examples of personal pensions assigned in the Perm’ province in 1948 for distinguished merits in the field of party work and in the construction of Soviet society see f. 1137, o. 1, d. 265, ll. 116-134.

⁷² GAPK, f. 1137, o.1, d. 265, ll. 171-172.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ In the next year, it rejected 26 recommendations out of the 62 advanced by the Perm’ oblast’ commission for the revision of applications for personal pensions. See GAPK, f. 1137, o. 1, d. 265, ll. 1-45 and d. 266, ll. 1-181.

⁷⁵ For instance, it took ten years (from 1938 to 1948) for the former Red Army soldier, partisan, and invalid of war Stepan Petrovich Koriakin to have the Perm’ executive committee recognize his services in the civil war and in the communist party, and assign him a personal pension. GAPK, f. 1137, o.1, d. 265, ll. 154-156.

Because this kind of pension was merit based, it could be easily taken away if the pensioner proved unworthy of it. The most frequent instances of withdrawn personal pensions concerned people condemned by Soviet tribunals. Sentenced and imprisoned individuals lost not only their allowances, but also the possibility to be reinstated in the rank of personal pensioners after release from prison. Such was the story of Aleksandr Vasil'evich Averin, an invalid of the Second World War who was rewarded with medals and a personal pension, but who could never enjoy it because he had been found guilty of unspecified crimes by the military tribunal of the Perm' railways. Upon release from prison, the pensioning sector of the Kirov province reinstated Averin's pension, but when he moved to Perm' to work in a *kolkhoz*, the local Narkomsobes refused Averin any help due to his arrest. Averin was recommended to apply for a pension as invalid of war or to obtain social insurance (since he worked in a *kolkhoz*).⁷⁶ Arrest was sometimes seen as a sign of moral unworthiness. The case of Ipat Aleksandrovich Iakovlev is a good example. This man used to receive a personal pension for his services during the civil war. In 1937 he was arrested and spent five years in prison. Upon release, the revision commission of the Perm' province refused to renew his right to a personal pension not only because he had been arrested, but also because "he turned out to be a morally unstable person."⁷⁷

Besides arrest, the most frequent reasons for rejecting a personal pension were similar to the reasons for denying any other pension. They usually included the applicant's ability to work or the presence in the household of family members who were able to work. For instance, Tat'iana Vasilevna Kuznetsova used to receive a personal pension for the merits of her deceased

⁷⁶ GAPK, f. 1137, o.1, d. 265, l. 146.

⁷⁷ GAPK, f. 1137, o.1, d. 265, l. 13.

husband, but in 1948 she stopped being entitled to it because her two children reached majority of age, became able to work, and could therefore support their mother.⁷⁸

In many respects, Kuznetsova's case was an exception, since – as we have seen in the previous section on family dependents – female gender made it generally easier to receive help. In December 1948, out of 8 applications for personal pensions reviewed by the Perm' executive committee only 1 was accepted and it came from the widow Minna Kolchanova. A housewife without working abilities, Minna used to be supported by her husband. After his death and their son's mobilization into the army, she began to live alone. Considering the merits of her deceased husband towards the country, her "loneliness," and her difficult material condition, the Perm' Narkomsobes petitioned for the assignment of a personal pension to this woman and the local executive committee entitled Kolchakova to a pension of 150 rubles a month.⁷⁹

A good economic situation could be a strong ground for denying personal pensions. In the case of widows, however, a woman's economic condition seemed to have less weight than other parameters, such as the merits of her deceased husband and the presence of many children. Anisiia Vasil'evna Pirozhkova, for instance, was the widow of a personal pensioner and herself an invalid, unable to work and unemployed. She used to be supported by her husband and did not receive any subsidy in her own name. Her son and her daughter lived independently with their own families. Despite the fact that she had a house, a cow, and a vegetable garden, in 1948 Pirozhkova was assigned a personal pension for the services of her deceased husband, her disability, and her "loneliness" as woman-widow.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ GAPK, f. 1137, o. 1, d. 265, ll. 135-136.

⁷⁹ GAPK, f. 1137, o. 1, d. 265, l. 172. For other examples see *ibid.*, ll. 135-145 and GARF, f. 413, o. 2, d. 561, ll. 2-3.

⁸⁰ GAPK, f. 1137, o. 1, d. 265, ll. 154-156.

In short, to have the right to a personal pension, uninsured citizens had above of all to demonstrate special merits related to some kind of labor: revolutionary, party, military, productive, or reproductive. Work in the field of culture, education, medicine, science, and art could be a special merit too, although rarely and only when this kind of labor was “long and sacrificial” (*dolgoletnii i samootverzhenyi*), “creative and Soviet” (*sozidatel'nyi i sovetskii*). Applicants were required to have an unstained past history of military medals and awards for Stakhanovism. “Patriotic feelings” emerged in some documents as another important marker of merit. Finally, to have occupied a leadership positions in the party or in the union was definitely a plus.

Time and again, most of these characteristics were gendered. Merits were imagined as constituting a male applicant, while for women it was above all the conditions of poverty and loneliness that mattered. To put it simply, women were assigned personal pensions for the merits of their husbands or sons. They were relegated to the roles of faithful companions, housewives and mothers living in the refracted light of their men. The self-portrayals that applicants for help sketched in their petitions were consistent with the images of men and women that emerged in the reports of the Narkomsobes. Men demonstrated valor and heroism, and were awarded all sorts of state recognitions; women were first of all sacrificial mothers and as such deserved pity and compassion. Disease and disability were certainly important factors for both men and women, but they seemed to have more weight when the applicant for a personal pension was a woman.

Besides the applicant's services, merits, and gender, the difference in receiving a personal pension was sometimes made by the patronage that either an agency or a specific leader were willing to offer. Scholars have noticed that, in the fields of education, science, literature, and the

arts, the interventions of members of the government and famous cultural personalities constituted a significant factor, often determining the survival of impoverished intelligentsia members.⁸¹ As we will see in chapter 5, however, patronage played a huge role not only in the assignation of merit pensions, but also in helping many men and women accused of political crimes.

Browsing through the Narkomosbes decisions in 1920, we find that in that year of famine the state's organ for social assistance proved quite responsive to the interventions of patrons on behalf of famished artist and scientists. A textbook case is the story of B.N. Shaposhnikov, a professor of the Moscow Institute of Veterinary Medicine who had been sent to the Vladimir province to study parasites and had later died of typhus. Because Shaposhnikov's wife and two children had been left without any support and because Shaposhnikov had died while performing his working duties, the Department of Higher Academic Institutions asked the Narkomsobes to assign a personal pension to his family. The request was approved and this family began to receive a subsidy that was equal to the late Shaposhnikov's salary.⁸² Another time, the Narkompros asked the Narkomsobes to assign the maximum amount of social assistance to the librarian Olga Sergeevna Everts, in view of her lack of any means of subsistence, but also because of her long work seniority and her engagement in social work.⁸³ The Union of Workers of Education and Socialist Culture and the administrations of various single universities also used to intercede for their members and associates, similarly grounding their appeals in Russian

⁸¹ On networks of privilege and patronage among the intelligentsia see Irina Paperno, *Stories of the Soviet Experience. Memoirs, Diaries, Dreams* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), 91-94. See also Barbara Walker, *Maximilian Voloshin and the Russian Literary Circle. Culture and Survival in Revolutionary Times* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005). Caroli explains that the interventions of Nadezhda Krupskaya constituted a significant factor in the assignation of personal pensions to Soviet teachers. *Histoire de la protection sociale en Union soviétique*, 113.

⁸² GARF, f. 413, o. 2, d. 274, l. 6

⁸³ GARF, f. 413, o. 2, d. 274, ll. 42-43.

teachers' long and indefatigable labor, involvement in local schools and social activities, and contributions to "people's education."⁸⁴ In the early 1920s, the Narkompros Commissar Anatolii V. Lunacharskii and the Sovnarkom member Vladimir D. Bonch-Bruевич were generous patrons, frequently intervening on behalf of a wide range of protégées – not only sick and lonely widows, but also the parents of important political leaders and impoverished artists.⁸⁵

The weight of personal patronage as a legitimizing category of social assistance for the Soviet intelligentsia would change in the 1930s. At that time, many of the patrons who used to intercede for personal pensions fell out of grace and ended up in prison. In addition, the country's relative economic stability between the mid-1920s and the outbreak of the Second World War made the distribution of special subsidies such as the personal pensions less necessary. Outside of periods of acute crisis, such as the Civil War and the Second World War, the Narkomsobes Commissar A.N. Vinokurov tended to reject patrons' intercessions by denying the applicants' qualification as personal pensioners, but often arguing for their right to be placed in an invalids' home.⁸⁶

The others

The state of "being in need" (*nuzhdaemost'*) was generally a plus for all pensioners. It was the crucial legitimatizing category for the "others." Indeed, while relationships to labor and family arrangements still mattered, in order to become eligible for state help as "others," Soviet men and women were required to prove above all their destitution. Most petitioners submitted a

⁸⁴ See, among the many others, the letters sent by administration of the Saratov University to the Narkomsobes on behalf of Professor Mikhail Ivanovich Svetukhin (GARF, f. 413, o. 2, d. 274, ll. 52-55) and the interventions of the Union of Workers of Education and Socialist Culture on behalf of the teacher I.T. Denisov (GARF, f. 413, o. 2, d. 274, l. 34 and l. 40).

⁸⁵ See for instance GARF, f. 413, o. 2, d. 274, l. 27, l. 32, l. 112, and l. 118.

⁸⁶ See for instance GARF, f. 413, o. 2, d. 443, l. 15.

statement certified by either the manager of the building in which they lived, the local militia, or the local soviet. In addition, applicants' material situation and the degree of their economic need could be subjected to investigation by the welfare personnel. Narkomsobes investigators were asked to verify scrupulously whether an applicant's condition was indeed poor and whether this person really lacked the clothes and basic goods that he/she claimed to need.⁸⁷

A form entitled "Act of investigation of the level of invalidity, family composition, and economic situation of the citizen applicant" listed the questions that Narkomsobes inspectors were supposed to ask when they visited applicants in their homes. First of all, the inspectors enquired about the working abilities and potential for employment of all the household's members: whether any family member was employed (and their monthly salaries); who among the family members could work but was unemployed at the moment of the inspection; which occupational skills were available to the unemployed family members; whether the applicant was registered at the local office of labor exchange and since when. Then followed a series of questions concerning the family's economic situation: what forms and amounts of state subsidies each family member was already receiving; what were the size and condition of the apartment in which the family was living and how much they paid for rent; whether the applicant had any real estate property or financial means of any other kind.⁸⁸ As we see from these questions, both the applicant as an individual and his/her family were subjected to investigation. Neighbors were sometimes interviewed too in order to check whether the applicant was in truth unemployed and to clarify the specific reasons why he/she was not working.⁸⁹

⁸⁷ See GAPK, f. 9, d. 111, l. 62. On the types of assistance provided to the "others" see Madison, *Social Welfare in the Soviet Union*, 49-62.

⁸⁸ GAPK, f. 9, d. 112, l. 14 and l. 19. The earliest "Act" of this kind that I saw in the archives of the Perm' Narkomsobes was dated 30 September 1919. Most of these acts did not carry any date at all.

⁸⁹ GAPK, f. 9, d. 112, ll. 40-41.

At the bottom of the form was a blank space for the investigators to write their personal comments. Usually, Narkomsobes officers added information on the whereabouts of the applicant and more details on his/her family situation. Sometimes, they used this space to make an explicit argument either in favor or against the applicant. In the formulation of final decisions, much was left to the investigators' discretion and personal assessment. Sometimes, inspectors unceremoniously required that the local Narkomsobes section reject an applicant's petition because he/she lived in a decent apartment or simply because he/she had enough clothes.⁹⁰ Other times, investigators were more inclined to help and used the space at the bottom of the form to emphasize the applicants' most urgent material needs.

Thus, Narkomsobes investigators played a significant role in determining applicants' state of need and controlling their access to state help. As in the case of the VTEK, however, these state agents operated in very chaotic conditions of everyday life and were constantly challenged by people's ability at manipulating the system of care and control. Although the Soviet Union was a modern state invested in enforcing its regulatory apparatuses of control, it rarely fully implemented them. People moved around and escaped the state's investigations. Many inspectors' notes simply stated: "there is no such person living at this address. They left the apartment." Other times, it was the petitioners themselves who took the initiative in demanding that an investigation of their material situation be performed. In their eyes, the visit of a Narkomsobes inspector indicated that their case was (finally) under review. People often

⁹⁰ As an example see GAPK f. 9, o.1, d. 112, l. 30 and l. 33. This is an undated application for help written by a certain Iakim Feodorovich Onianov. His request for a new fur coat was rejected because the investigator had discovered that the Onianov family did not live in need at all. The fur coat, as the investigator wrote, was the only object that this family was lacking!

perceived these visits as the first step towards the provision of the assistance to which they felt entitled.⁹¹

Conclusion

From its very inception, the Soviet state established the principle that every worker has the right to receive state assistance if he/she becomes unable to work. Policy makers built a wide system of social security provisions based on the proposition that freedom from want is a fundamental right of every worker. At the same time, next to a strong social insurance agency, the less prestigious Narkomsobes upheld the right of uninsured citizens to be assigned a pension. This office did not elaborate a well-defined legislation of social assistance to complement the laws of social insurance. However, officers in this agency significantly contributed to shape uninsured citizens' right to be helped every time that they approved or rejected their applications for assistance.

When the Narkomsobes shaped welfare decision-making, ideology interacted with other structural factors, such as the institutional architecture of Soviet politics and the demands of economic development. Single administrators' choices concerning uninsured citizens' right to be helped might have been affected by personal ideological preferences, but they could also be influenced by institutional interests, patronage networks, and the changing requirements of economic development.⁹² Under these conditions, the social insurance position gained supremacy, but the social assistance approach never completely disappeared.

⁹¹ See for instance GAPK f. 9, d. 111, l. 98, l. 114, and l. 120.

⁹² This point has been made also by David Priestland in relation to Stalinist state building and its political demands. Priestland, *Stalinism and the Politics of Mobilization*, 49.

This chapter has also shown that a mixture of care and control underpinned Soviet help to the uninsured. Indeed, social assistance offered the state an apt field for combining protection with discipline at multiple levels of its most marginalized populations' everyday life. As we have seen, Soviet social assistance largely consisted in the identification, computation, systematic surveillance, and imposition of work-discipline over many groups of marginalized citizens. The latter, on its part, looked at the state as a source of both problems and solutions. Both state's agents and marginalized citizens were aware of the twofaced task of social assistance and strove to find a balance between its humanitarian and disciplining impulses. As an administrator pointedly wrote in a letter to the Perm' provincial Narkomsobes section,

On one hand, we need to verify the cases in which...the invalids and the unemployed...are in fact hiding their real incomes, underground jobs, etc. On the other hand, control very rarely achieves any goal apart from having a negative moral significance...When everyone will know and understand that social welfare is the effective and just distribution of goods among all the members of a working family, then nobody will think about taking advantage of the social welfare.⁹³

Besides the core tension inherent in the Soviet right to be helped as a politico-governmental construct, this chapter has revealed that the specific assumptions and conventions legitimizing this right were in themselves marked by ambiguities. Through an analysis of the Narkomsobes's reasons for either sustaining or denying its clients' petitions, I have exposed an often incongruous blend of merits and personal suffering. Unemployed and uninsured people were entitled to help either by virtue of having given great effort or for having endured hardship. The Soviet state conceived their right to be helped as a form of remuneration for service and sacrifice, both of which included the duration, the intensity, and the harshness of the productive, military, and reproductive work performed. Thus, the social security principle of distribution in

⁹³ GAPK, f. r-9, o.1, d. 121, l. 80. This letter is dated February 17, 1920.

accordance to one's productive contributions was embedded in the model of social assistance. At the same time, the Narkomsobes's social warranties were earmarked for those who could not support themselves through labor and were assigned according to their needs. Finally, both labor and need were layered over and filtered through with conceptions of gender and traditional patriarchal visions of the family.

In the next chapters, we will see that the contradictory pressures that molded the Soviet state's welfare policy and philosophy of help affected also understandings of the right to be helped among four specific communities of social activists: the defectologists of the Medico-Pedagogical Station, the members of VOS and VOG, the doctors and social workers of Ommlad, and the activists of the Political Red Cross. We will observe that a clear tension between discipline and ethics variously underpinned the articulation of the right to be helped also in their discourses and practices. In addition, I will discuss how these four groups of activists largely maintained the two fundamental tenets of productive labor and need/suffering that determined entitlement in the eyes of Narkomsobes officials. However, they proposed their own vision of what should have been the respective weight of these two criteria in legitimizing the rights of their assisted. Finally, the case-studies of the next chapters will allow me to analyze how the distribution of social services functioned beyond the assignment of "pensions and subsidies" and what impact the system of social protection had on the education, employment, gender relations, and other aspects in the life of marginalized people.

Chapter 2

Science: The Defectologists' Approach to Children's Rights

A child is an instrument and one must know how to play it...even when the instrument is damaged and sounds wrong.¹

Every child, however serious his defectiveness, shall be given the opportunity to find himself and his place in life.²

Nastia was a “normal” Russian child. Born on April 22, 1906, she grew up surrounded by the love of her parents and two older siblings. Her life was happy and materially comfortable. When she turned seven, however, her parents died and Nastia moved into the house of an aunt. It was at that point that she began to be increasingly different from the other children and appeared to her aunt as “difficult to rear.” “Left completely alone,” – as the girl would later write in an autobiographical poem³ – Nastia was taken to an institution called Medico-Pedagogical Station (*Mediko-Pedagogicheskaiia Stantsiia*). There, Nastia was scrupulously examined: her entire body, past experiences and present behaviors, intellectual development, verbal skills and artistic abilities, moods and wishes, emotions and worries, phobias and interests, her social skills, ethical outlook, and sense of aesthetics – everything was searched for defects. As expected, pathological traits were found. Nastia was diagnosed with “moral defectiveness” and required to join a group of other sixteen “morally defective” boys between the ages of 6 and 14. Some of them were considered exceptionally talented; others were discovered to have a slight mental retardation. All were identified as deviant children in need for help because of their “pathological psyches” and “personality defects.” All were subjected to a process of “rational education” and “medico-

¹ V. P. Kashchenko, “Na pomoshch’ defektivnym detiam,” *Narodnyi Uchitel’*, no. 33-34, December 1918, 3-6, at 4.

² I. Smirnov, “Sovremennye pedagogicheskie techeniia v Rossii,” *Sibirskii Pedagogicheskii Zhurnal*, 3 (1923), 21-39, at 38-39.

³ Nastia’s poem “Ran’she i teper’,” in the Archive of the Russian Academy of Education (Nauchnyi Arkhiv Rossiiskoi Akademii Obrazovaniia, hereafter RAO), f. 113, o. 1, d. 295, ll. 26-27.

pedagogical correction” that would have ultimately re-integrated them in Soviet society.⁴ This chapter tells the story of the early Soviet professionals and social activists who wrote scientific constructions of child defectiveness and used them to advocate for marginalized children’s access to social services and integration within the Soviet social body. My goal is to understand the role of pedagogical science as a type of knowledge informing the notion of the right to be helped and nurturing the tension between control and emancipation that was at its core.

In the years between the opening of the Medico-Pedagogical Station in 1918 and its dismantlement in the mid-1930s, the science of defectology contributed to shaping many of the motives and considerations behind Soviet help that I have discussed in the previous chapter – its disciplining impulse as well as the moral ideas of rights and human dignity inherent in it, the focus on labor as well as the attention to suffering and need. Indeed, the diagnosis of defectiveness was essential to processes of control. At the same time, through a construction of problematic children as defective (instead of criminal or degenerate), Soviet defectologists were able to entitle this marginalized population to state help. In contrast to other forms of expertise and scientific knowledge, early Soviet defectology largely constituted a source of optimism, which allowed its practitioners to argue for defective children’s corrigibility and re-integration in the collective. As such, this science allowed activists to advance claims about marginalized children’s right to be helped not only as a disciplinary practice, but also as an objective social value grounded in scientific laws and in the morality of the socialist state.

⁴ RAO, f. 113, d. 295, ll. 1-31. Nastia was diagnosed with *psikhrasteniia*, a deviation of the psyche that was subsumed under the larger category of moral defectiveness. All the dwellers of the Medico-Pedagogical Station were defined either as “psychopathic” or as “neuropathic” children. See RAO, f. 113, d. 150, l. 6. For an official description of “the behavior and pedagogical peculiarities” of morally defective children see the entry “Paedology of exceptional childhood,” in A.G. Kalashnikov and M.S. Epshtein, eds., *Pedagogicheskaiia entsiklopediia* (Moscow: Rabotnik prosveshcheniia, 1927), 191-214, at 203-206.

Childhood is a shifting social construct: its meanings have been variously crafted by different groups of adults in different historical periods and its representations have impinged on different treatments accorded to children.⁵ Particularly troubling for modern states at the turn of the nineteenth century was the issue of how to represent and handle children who deviated from “the norm” of social conduct.⁶ Historian Daniel Beer has discussed how, since the 1880s and throughout the 1920s, Western European and Russian doctors, psychologists, and pedagogues perceived youth both as the potential host of deformation and as the necessary basis for social renewal. The unstable times and especially the whirlwind of political novelties and utopias of the early twentieth century were believed to affect the fragile bodies and shaky psyches of the younger generation. In Russia, an ever increasing number of orphaned children and socially derailed teenagers led professionals and experts to elaborate biomedical theories of deviance which emphasized the destabilizing, destructive, and even contagious properties of individual youths. Drawing on international studies of criminal anthropology and evolutionary biology as well as on experiments to establish the physiological foundations of behavior, a powerful discourse of degeneration (*vyrozhdenie*) articulated a biologized vision of children in modern societies. This vision, Beer has argued, “survived the upheavals of 1917 and went on to shape the Soviet regime’s program of social transformation.” Degeneration framed the project of Soviet modernity in terms of cleansing. It translated into harsh forms of control, essentially promoting coercive rehabilitation, the isolation of socially dangerous minors, and their excision from the

⁵ Catriona Kelly, *Children’s World: Growing up in Russia 1890–1991* (New Haven [Conn.]; London: Yale University Press, 2007).

⁶ The idea of “the norm” came into consciousness in the late nineteenth century through the efforts of statisticians. It brought with it the concept of the extreme or deviant. Eugenists used these ideas to construct normal and deviant bodies. Freud built on the notion of “the norm” to create the concept of normal sexuality and contrast it with the perverse, abnormal, pathological, and criminal. These constructions were applied both to adults and children. See Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy*.

body social. Ultimately, the calls of biomedical professionals to exclude degenerate individuals “lent...a theoretical sanction to the burgeoning Soviet gulag.”⁷

Alongside the degenerative model and its impulse to expel and purge, Russian and international attitudes to behaviorally difficult children included also the urge to save and reclaim non-conforming youths for society. Although Beer has emphasized experts’ ordering desires and coercive choices, this scholar has also recognized that “the sciences were...genuinely emancipatory in their aspiration” and that professionals often “labored under an acute sense of responsibility for the downtrodden and downcast in their society.”⁸ Juliane Fürst has studied the two competing impulses to save and expel in state attitudes towards vagrant children in the post-WWII period, identifying the origins of these two discourses in legal and ideological development of the late 1930s.⁹ In this chapter, I reveal that these discourses had been animating professionals’ approaches towards difficult children since at least the 1910s, one prevailing over the other in connection with changing socio-political realities.

Indeed, in the 1910s and 1920s, various countries saw an idiom of child defectiveness run parallel to that of degeneration and offer activists and parents alike an alternative way to articulate the notion of child deviation from the accepted norm. In this discourse, “defective” was

⁷ Beer, *Renovating Russia*, 3 and 199. For the association between degeneration, insanity, and crime in the late nineteenth century see also Louise McReynolds, “Witnessing for the Defense: The Adversarial Court and Narratives of Criminal Behavior in Nineteenth Century Russia,” *Slavic Review* 69:3 (Fall 2010), 620-644. On the sense of crisis and anxiety that accompanied Russian liberal practitioners of the human sciences see Laura Engelstein, *The Keys to Happiness: Sex and the Search for Modernity in Fin-de-Siecle Russia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992); Irina Paperno, *Suicide as a Cultural Institution in Dostoevsky’s Russia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996); and Susan Morrissey, *Suicide and the Body Politic in Imperial Russia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). On Soviet explorations of the motifs of corruption and loss of innocence among children see Eric Naiman, *Sex in Public: The Incarnation of Early Soviet Ideology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997) and Anne E. Gorsuch, *Youth in Revolutionary Russia: Enthusiasts, Bohemians, Delinquents* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2000). On the pan-European dimension of the fear of degeneration see Daniel Pick, *Faces of Degeneration: A European Disorder c. 1848-1919* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

⁸ Beer, *Renovating Russia*, 7 and 19.

⁹ Fürst, “Between Salvation and Liquidation.”

any child who diverged from a supposed average either in physiological, intellectual, or sociological terms. This construct combined bodily disability, mental incapacity, and social vulnerability under the rubric of defectiveness, presented children's non-conformity as a pathology, connected this representation with ideas of social neglect, and appealed to save defective children through medical and educational non-coercive methods. In particular, this discourse – and the advocacy that it generated – strove to decriminalize children in precarious social conditions by reversing the logic of crime and punishment as well as that of degeneration and expulsion. The stress on neglect entailed that these children deserved not punitive systems, but care and control in greater doses than their normal peers. On a practical level, this approach encouraged the establishment of special schools, shelters, and various forms of guardianship. Conceptually, it shifted the blame from the children and placed the duty of re-education on the larger social and political body to which they belonged.¹⁰

In pre-revolutionary Russia, the idiom of child defectiveness was actively promoted by a group of scientists who called themselves “paedologists” or “defectologists.” Unlike the scientists supporting the degenerative model, the defectologists argued for the possibility to avert

¹⁰ In Budapest, in the early 1910s, Professor Paul Ranschburg taught courses for the preparation of specialists working with defective children. See the article “Kursy eksperimental'noi psikhologii v Budapeshte,” in *Voprosy pedagogicheskoi patologii v sem'e i shkole*, A.B. Vladimirkii, A. Orshanskii, and G. Fal'bork (eds.) (St. Petersburg: Shkola i zhizn', 1912), vol. 1, 160. German professionals articulated the aspiration to have a formal discipline called *Heilpädagogik* and a unified net of facilities for all defective children in a series of congresses that took place in Munich in 1922, 1924, 1926. See Erwin Lesch, *Bericht über den dritten Kongreß für Heilpädagogik in München 2. - 4. August 1926* (Berlin: Springer, 1927). In the mid-1920s, the Italian pedagogue and activist G. Ferreri published several articles on child defectiveness in the journal *L'Infanzia Anormale. Bollettino dell'Assistenza Medico-Pedagogica dei Fanciulli Anormali*. In the United States, best-selling authors Sophonisba Preston Breckinridge and Edith Abbott conceived all orphaned, abandoned, and criminal children as being in a state of “moral danger” because they were “neglected.” Sophonisba Preston Breckinridge and Edith Abbott *The Delinquent Child and the Home* (New York: Survey Associates, 1916). For a contemporary discussion of the terminology used in the Anglophone context see Leta S. Hollingworth, *The Psychology of Subnormal Children* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1920), esp. 38-39. On the scope and use of the category “defective” in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries see Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy*, 31 and 37. For an exploration of the discourse of defect in the early modern world see Helen Deutsch and Felicity Nussbaum, eds., *“Defects”: Engendering the Modern Body* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000). For a review of advocacy movements on behalf of defective children in various Western European countries see N.N. Malofeev, *Spetsial'noe obrazovanie v meniaiushchemsia mire. Evropa* (Moscow: “Prosveshchenie”, 2009).

the dangers of degeneration and harness children's energy for the sake of society by uniting medical and pedagogical knowledge into one discipline. Under their pressure, the Russian educated public of the early twentieth century engaged in reflections over children's rights and – like public opinion in other countries – asked the tsarist government to reform its old legislation on education, health care, and children's welfare. However, the efforts of Russian pre-revolutionary activists were often frustrated by the imperial government's unwillingness to sustain reform movements concerning public health and education. Although the defectologists' scientific expertise gave some prestige to the discourse of defectiveness, these professionals lacked the necessary institutional supports to gain relevance and put their knowledge into action.¹¹

After the October Revolution, concerned activists campaigned with the new authorities for the creation of a state organ that would provide social assistance to the growing population of juvenile delinquents and waifs with personality problems, whom they collectively called “moral defectives.” Following the pre-revolutionary usage, this phrase continued to indicate a volatile and extremely varied group drawn from orphaned, abandoned, and runaway children fleeing from their parents as well as mentally disturbed youngsters. After 1917, however, the idiom of

¹¹ The terms *defektivnost'* and *defektologiia* were proposed for the first time in 1912 by the child psychologist V.P. Kashchenko and quickly accepted by many distinguished specialists of the time. See V.P. Kashchenko, “Obshchestvo, shkola i defektivnye deti,” in *Defektivnye deti i shkola*, V.P. Kashchenko ed. (Moscow: Knigoizdatel'stvo K.I. Tikhomirova, 1912), 1-11. On pre-revolutionary paedology and defectology see Andy Byford, “Turning Pedagogy into a Science: Teachers and Psychologists in Late Imperial Russia (1897-1917),” *Osiris*, 23 (2008), 50-81; and Idem, “Professional Cross-Dressing: Doctors in Education in Late Imperial Russia (1881-1917),” *The Russian Review*, 65:4 (October 2006), 586-616; William O. McCagg, “The Origins of Defectology,” in *The Disabled in the Soviet Union. Past and Present, Theory and Practice*, William O. McCagg and Lewis Siegelbaum eds., (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1989), 39-62. For a history of activism on behalf of disabled children in pre-revolutionary Russia see N.N. Malofeev, *Spetsial'noe obrazovanie v meniaiushchemsia mire. Rossiia* (Moscow: “Prosveshchenie”, 2010). For instances of public engagement with this issue in the months before the Revolution see the articles “Deti prestupniki,” *Ezhednevnaia Gazeta-kopeika*, 14 February 1917, 3; and “Ot prestuplenia k prestupleniiu,” *Ezhednevnaia Gazeta-kopeika*, 27 February 1917, 3. Kelly explains that an inquiry commission on defective children (alongside with commissions on motherhood and infancy, social aid to normal children, and child offenders) had been set up within the Ministry of Public Assistance only in May 1917. The Provisional Government did not have enough time in office to begin serious work in this field. Kelly, *Children's World*, 195.

defectiveness was used both by the new social workers employed in the state's commissariats and the old experts in defectology. The former adopted it together with general notions of socialist humanitarianism and coupled it with specters of disorder and economic collapse (if the state would have not intervened to help defective children). The defectologists, instead, continued to rely on the exact knowledge of their science, married it to the specific moral and socio-political project of new socialist state, and gave an optimistic spin to their demands for state help to morally defective children. Through their claims of scientific legitimacy, the post-revolutionary defectologists managed to make their advocacy particularly relevant and appealing to the new socialist state's political aspirations and concerns.¹²

The defectologists's scientific discourse entailed two components, both of which resonated with official understandings of the right to be helped. First, these experts constructed child defectiveness as "insufficiency" or "lack" (*nedostatochnost*) and thereby identified children with deviant behaviors as suffering individuals in a state of need. Second, they invoked the rehabilitative powers of science to prove the corrigibility of these children and their potential for future contributions. In other words, dysfunctional children were not beyond help. To the contrary, their social dangerousness and economic uselessness could be corrected and even prevented. With this two-step construction, the defectologists inscribed help to Soviet

¹² Comprehensive studies of Soviet homeless children which include discussions of help to morally defectives are Alan M. Ball, *And Now My Soul is Hardened: Abandoned Children in Soviet Russia, 1918–1930* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); Dorena Caroli, *L'enfance abandonnée et délinquante dans la Russie soviétique (1917–1937)* (Paris; Budapest; Torino: l'Harmattan, Corlet impr., 2004); Kelly, *Children's World*, esp. chapter 6; and Madison, *Social Welfare in the Soviet Union*. Concerning the number of morally defective children, Goldman has written that, by 1922, there were an estimated 7.5 million homeless children who required immediate shelter, food, and medical attention. However, no statistics officially counted the number of morally defectives among the homeless in the 1920s. Goldman, *Women, the State, and Revolution*, 59–60. Most works on Soviet defectology focus on the scientific contributions of single defectologists to Soviet developmental psychology. See for instance Jaan Valsiner, *Developmental Psychology in the Soviet Union* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988). Among the few works examining the defectologists' social activism see McCagg, "The Origins of Defectology" and Jane E. Knox and Alex Kozulin, "The Vygotskian Tradition in Soviet Psychological Study of Deaf Children," in *The Disabled in the Soviet Union*, 63–84.

marginalized children within the state's project: they proved that rational education was the best vehicle for a transformation of the individual that would benefit the whole collectivity.¹³ Their diagnosis of defectiveness and their cure for it echoed the key legitimizing categories of state help – the need/suffering of the individual and the labor/contributions for the sake of the collective – and combined them in a seamless discourse.

The defectologists' approach was certainly part of broader pedagogical trends targeted at the transformation of recalcitrant children. Inspired by Western progressive educators, many Soviet pedagogues of the 1920s designed rehabilitative models that integrated instruction with experience and that incorporated socialist ideology regarding the value of work.¹⁴ Most famously, under the motto "man must be changed," the Soviet educator Anton Makarenko stressed the benefits of manual labor and the importance of order and discipline in imbuing homeless and delinquent children with the values of the Soviet project.¹⁵ However, more than other educational experts, the defectologists strove to use "rational education" to foster not only the transformative and disciplining, but also the integrative and emancipating dimension of the right to be helped. They stubbornly rejected any form of isolation, exclusion, and violent punishment by empirically showing Soviet help's integrative abilities. Their medico-pedagogical correction of defective children could not have included the strong destruction component of Makarenko's methods, because defectology revealed that children's self was not qualitatively

¹³ The history and the significance of the relationship of the individual to the collective in Russia are explored in detail by Oleg Kharkhordin in the book *The Collective and the Individual in Russia: A Study of Practices* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1999). Yannis Kotsonis has shown how the Soviet regime drew on science and rationality as legitimizing frameworks for its transformative project. Kotsonis, "Introduction: A Modern Paradox – Subject and Citizen in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Russia," in *Russian Modernity*, 1-16.

¹⁴ See Kelly, *Children's World*, esp. chapters 5 and 6. Larry E. Holmes, *The Kremlin and the Schoolhouse. Reforming Education in Soviet Russia, 1917-1931* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991); Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Education and Social Mobility in the Soviet Union, 1921-1934* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979). For a discussion of Soviet understandings of labor as pedagogical tool see Madison, *Social Welfare in the Soviet Union*.

¹⁵ James Bowen, *Soviet Education: Anton Makarenko and the Years of Experiment* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1962).

bad but only “lacking.” The defectologists loudly argued that, no matter how complex the child’s psyche was, their science could help him/her without “dragging him forcefully by the ears until he fits into the norm.”¹⁶ Reliance on science allowed the defectologists to combine the goal of social fitness and usefulness for the collective with a deep-seated care for the psychological aspects of the children’s existence. Indeed, they often mentioned joy as a correction tool and personal happiness as the outcome of education through labor. In their view, scientific expertise could function only in dynamic relation with a sympathetic approach. Their rational re-education (*perevospitanie*) injected not only a positivist, but also a positive emphasis into the wide-spread Soviet process of re-forging.¹⁷

In the following pages, I will first analyze defectology’s construction of child defectiveness in the writings of a leading defectologist of the time, Dr. Vsevolod P. Kashchenko. Then, I will examine how defectology’s scientific and humane approach was implemented in the Medico-Pedagogical Station. Finally, I will assess the officialdom’s attitude towards defectology’s diagnostic and curative interventions and how it changed in the years between the Revolution and the systematization of Soviet special education in the mid-1930s. Kashchenko was not the only Soviet defectologist and the Medico-Pedagogical Station was not the only facility for Soviet defective children. They have been selected for this chapter because they represent ideal embodiments of Soviet defectology and as such crystallize the tensions present in this scientific approach to the notion of the right to be helped.¹⁸ Not only do they illuminate the

¹⁶ V. P. Kashchenko, “Na pomoshch’ defektivnym detiam,” 4. See also V. P. Kashchenko and G.V. Murashev, “Pedologiya iskluchitel’nogo detstva,” in A.G. Kalashnikov and M.S. Epshtein, eds., *Pedagogicheskaya entsiklopediya* (Moscow: Rabotnik prosveshcheniya, 1927), 191-214, at 194.

¹⁷ For a discussion of the violent destructive component embedded in the prefix *pere-* and the notion of *perevospitanie* see Julie S. Draskoczy, *A Body of Work: Building Self and Society at Stalin’s White Sea-Baltic Canal* (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 2010).

¹⁸ The question of the effectiveness of defectology’s approach is not addressed in this chapter. Alan Ball and Catriona Kelly have highlighted the difference between real life in children’s homes and the model facilities

tension between the two legitimizing principles of need/suffering and labor, but they also reveal the drive to build socialist help both on rational *and* humane grounds.

2.1 The scientific construction of individual suffering and potential for the collective

In 1919, the Narkomsobes inspector Sofia Kopelianskaia wrote a letter to her superiors in which she advocated for the provision of state help to “those who really need it.” These, continued Kopelianskaia, were “THE HELPLESS” – a group that she broke down in the following categories: the elderly, the sick and the wounded, pregnant women, and, above all, neglected defective children.¹⁹ Kopelianskaia picked the latter as the focus of her activism and deluged the Narkomsobes with a series of reports that identified child neglect as the number one factor creating a mass of Soviet defective children – “antisocial and criminal minors; intellectual defectives; and physical defectives.”²⁰ Child neglect, Kopelianskaia wrote in an emotional language, was a “nightmarish social plague” that killed Soviet children and “every killed child is a mute reproach, a dark stain on the conscience of those in power.”²¹

Kopelianskaia’s conclusion was clear: “the socialist government cannot sit with its arms folded.”²² As she accusingly reminded the Narkomsobes’s leaders to whom she addressed her reports,

a lot has been said and written about the fact the children are the future... the builders of the new life... the carries of the new ideas and the beauty of the nation, etc. etc. But, in fact, if we look at what has been concretely done for the children, we find little consolation....Everything is on the paper, but in the meantime children’s state of neglect is growing, the cadres of children-beggars, children-prostitutes, children-speculators, and

described in guides for orphanage workers, propaganda leaflets, and works of art. See Ball, *And Now My Soul is Hardened* and Kelly, *Children’s World*.

¹⁹ GARF, f. 413, o. 2, d. 327, l. 22.

²⁰ GARF, f. 413, o. 2, d. 327, l. 23.

²¹ GARF, f. 413, o. 2, d. 327, l. 26.

²² GARF, f. 413, o. 2, d. 327, l. 8.

children-criminals are growing at a nightmarish speed...It is clear that we cannot go on like this.²³

Defective boys and girls, continued Kopelianskaia, should be entitled to the provision of a form of help that ought to be “social, planned, and indispensable.”

Social, because the state itself provides this help. Planned, because the socialist state cannot reconcile itself with the idea of random private philanthropy ... And indispensable help, because in a properly organized state there cannot be and should not be parasitism. The working principle must be a duty for everybody.²⁴

According to this Narkomsobes inspector, charity underscored an understanding of help as a privilege granted to a few children. Instead, help offered through the state organ of social assistance would extend to the totality of Soviet children. As we have seen in the previous chapter, the rejection of religious beneficence and private philanthropy in favor of social assistance as a socialist right was a tenet of the new government. In 1919, at the First All-Russian Congress for the Protection of Childhood, none other than Lenin's sister Anna I. Ul'ianova-Elizarova opened this large meeting of pedagogues and social activists by saying that Soviet help to neglected defective children was no longer charity, but “the right of every child.”²⁵ The Narkomsobes inspector Kopelianskaia called for a “magna charta libertarum” including all questions of children's rights.²⁶ In reality, as Catriona Kelly has written, “discussions of children's rights had a limited impact upon actual legislation, which defined children's rights more or less exclusively within the family.”²⁷ While the Soviet Union had a Code on Marriage and the Family, it never developed a Code of Children's Rights. Legislation was scattered in

²³ GARF, f. 413, o. 2, d. 327, l. 22.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ “Pervyi vserossiiskii s'ezd po okhrane detstva,” *Zhurnal narodnogo komissariata sotsial'nogo obespecheniia*, June-July, no. 5-6, 1919, 38-50.

²⁶ GARF, f. 413, o. 2, d. 327, l. 23.

²⁷ Kelly, *Children's World*, 65.

family law codes, labor protection codes, and civil and criminal codes. Kopelianskaia's official charter of children's rights was never written.

In the conditions of extreme shortage that characterized the Soviet Union in 1919, when thousands of children were starving on the streets and in emergency institutions that lacked the most basic provisions, the idealistic enterprise of helping morally defective children through state assistance at a national level clashed with a harsh economic reality.²⁸ Kopelianskaia was well aware of this, but still attempted to legitimize state help to this marginalized population by playing on the young state's fears of social disorder and economic collapse. As she wrote,

saving children from a criminal career is a double economic saving: we avoid future expenses for the maintenance of adult criminals and places of imprisonment, and we give the state citizens ready to work instead of spongers and parasites... The more children we save, the more children receive vocational education, the less there will be parasites, purulent outgrowths on the body of the state, future criminals, less expenses for maintaining prisons and courts, and less unutilized human energy.²⁹

The peril of a future population of ignorant adults and the consequent regress of the entire nation was dangled in face of Soviet authorities by other activists too. Towards the end of the Civil War, the author of an anonymous letter to the Narkomsobes complained that many buildings assigned to defective children immediately after the Revolution had been taken over by local military organs. This situation was not uncommon. Alan Ball has explained that "in many regions military authorities commandeered buildings in use or intended as juvenile facilities – and sometimes proved reluctant to surrender the structures... after hostilities had ceased."³⁰ If the situation remained like that after the war, the petitioning activist averred, defective children

²⁸ On the economic devastation that accompanied the civil war period and how it undermined various educational programs see Holmes, *The Kremlin and the Schoolhouse* and Goldman, *Women, the State, and Revolution*.

²⁹ GARF, f. 413, o. 2, d. 327, l. 8 and l. 22.

³⁰ Ball, *And Now My Soul is Hardened*, 98.

will grow in ignorance and slow down the state's development. On the contrary, a child who is introduced in the school system in time turns into a citizen able not only to support himself autonomously, but also to be useful to the state.³¹

The social necessity to help defective children did not go amiss to the defectologist Vsevolod Petrovich Kashchenko.³² He joined the chorus of activists' voices in explaining the state's obligations towards its marginalized minor population and emphasized that "without the help of the socialist state, no child can receive those rights which must be granted for his correct upbringing and education."³³ However, speaking and writing as a scientist, he introduced a dimension that was escaping the attention of other activists and worried citizens – the scientific possibility to correct the shortcomings and incorrect traits of neglected difficult children.

Indeed, some educators considered homeless children with personality problems and psychopathic disorders as depraved to an extent that precluded any prospect of rehabilitation and integration into Soviet society. Those who were entrusted with the task of placing minor delinquents on the road to recovery were often impatient with defective children's parasitical lack of productivity and expressed doubt that these problematic children would have ever been able to change their ways.³⁴ Countering these hesitations, Kashchenko and other defectologists argued that, since heredity was not decisive and social conditions carried great weight in the formation of "insufficient personalities," the society that had generated moral defectiveness in its children had also the ability and the duty to cure it.³⁵ As Kashchenko put it, "child defectiveness

³¹ GARF, f. 2306, o. 1, d. 432, l. 3. For other letters like this see RAO, f. 113, d. 101, l. 1 and l. 9.

³² On Kashchenko see the introductory essay by Leonid Golovanov, "Dostoinyi primer zhizni i tvorchestva," in V.P. Kashchenko, *Pedagogicheskaiia korrektsiia: ispravlenie nedostatkov kharaktera u detei i podrostkov* (Moscow: Academia, 2000), 17-41.

³³ V.P. Kashchenko and G.V. Murashev, *Iskliuchitel'nye deti. Ikh izuchenie i vospitanie* (Moscow: Rabotnik Proveshcheniia, 1926), 44.

³⁴ Ball, *And Now My Soul is Hardened*, 83; Goldman, *Women, the State, and Revolution*, 90-91.

³⁵ Kashchenko, *Defektivnye deti i shkola*, 7; and Idem, *Nervnost' i defektivnost' v doskol'nom i shkol'nom vozrastakh. Okhrana dushevnogo zdorov'ia detei. Posobie dlia roditelei i pedagogov* (Moscow: Tipografiia Vseross. Tsentral'n. Soveta Profess. Soiuzov, 1919), 19-20. See also G.V. Murashev, "Evoliutsiia idei Shkoly-Sanatorii i Mediko-Pedagogicheskoi Stantsii," in V.P. Kashchenko, ed., *Problemy izucheniia i vospitaniia rebenka* (Moscow:

is first of all a social vice...and the struggle against it must be based on encompassing social interventions.”³⁶ The correction of defectiveness, averred the defectologists, was possible through measures of pedagogical nature.

Like Kopelianskaia, Kashchenko was keen on demonstrating the political and economic advantage for the socialist state in engaging “the war against defectiveness” as if it were “a war against a national tragedy.” Yet, more than his fellow activist from the Narkomsobes, Kashchenko insisted on the positive outcome for the Soviet state of “a war that could be won.”³⁷ Always relating individual suffering to the welfare of the entire collective, the defectologist warned the state that a citizen with “a crippled will and unbalanced emotions” did not fit with the interests of Soviet society because this individual “slow[ed] down the construction of socialist life.” Thus, the “underdeveloped” child had to become “fully-fledged;” the “heavy ballast” had to turn into a citizen “able to work.”³⁸ In a 1926 book co-authored with the defectologist G.V. Murashev, Kashchenko used an industrial imagery to remind the Soviet state of its duty to correct defective children:

When in the factory’s yard a worker notices some unused material or parts of a machine abandoned there to waste, the day after we read in the newspaper about the need to call the careless administration to account for it. Can we remain silent when it is our precious reservoir of fighters and builders of communism to perish?³⁹

Kashchenko compared the failure to fix defective children to committing one of the worst economic crimes in the Soviet Union. This similitude allowed him to frame the issue of help to defective children as a priority economic task:

Moskovskoe Aktsionernoe Izdatel’skoe Obshchestvo, 1926), 123-174, at 131; and V.P. Kashchenko and G.V. Murashev, “Pedologiya iskluchitel’nogo detstva,” 192.

³⁶ Kashchenko and Murashev, *Iskluchitel’nye deti*, 5.

³⁷ Kashchenko, “K bor’be s detskoi defektivnost’iu,” *Izvestiia*, 3 December 1921, 3.

³⁸ RAO, f. 113, d. 128, l. 1.

³⁹ Kashchenko and Murashev, *Iskluchitel’nye deti*, 9.

Picture this scene: the tools of a blacksmith or a sewing machine or a bicycle are thrown out in the street and get rusted under the rain. All these objects seem to us so necessary, so valuable, that we would not walk by indifferently. But what if a child is neglected? The mechanism of his brain seems unusable...and we just walk by....But this because we don't know the value of these mechanisms...we are unable to use them correctly and advantageously...Thus, even if you see in the child only the most perfect machine, then it is purely for the economically correct usage of this machine that we must know it...We cannot throw in the wind what represents great value.⁴⁰

Kashchenko and other Soviet defectologists proved defective children's perfectibility and their potential worth for the Soviet state by elaborating a scientific approach that first diagnosed the causes of children's individual suffering and then proposed a cure to enhance their potential usefulness for the collective. These two scientific corollaries had a greater purchase with the Soviet state than Narkomosbes's vague taxonomies of help because they offered finite categories as a viable method to deal with the thorny question of the social rights of marginalized populations. Since the defectologists' construction was allegedly derived from scientific principles, they could frame their assessment of deviant children as rational, i.e. logical and dispassionate, judgment. The defectologist turned difficult children from a problem of law and order into a scientific issue, from the object of police attention into the terrain of scientific inquiries and medico-pedagogical interventions. Through this scientific discourse, they advanced powerful arguments about difficult children's entitlement to social services on par with all the other Soviet children. Ultimately, they proposed an order in which pedagogues and doctors were a scientific "avant-garde" teaching "to respect children's rights."⁴¹

The defectologists located the genesis of children's defects in a finely interwoven net of what they called "socio-pathological" and "bio-pathological" causes. "If we look back, we see that since the beginning of the war the bio-pathological and socio-pathological conditions of life

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 10-11.

⁴¹ Kashchenko, "Na pomoshch' defektivnym detiam," 5.

have become more complex,” said Kashchenko in 1923 at the organizational meeting of a Society for the Study and Liquidation of Child Defectiveness and Neglect.⁴² It was these bio-social pathological conditions that had caused an exponential growth of juvenile crime, subversive conduct among children, and child defectiveness of various types. Anti-social forms of defectiveness, averred Kashchenko, had become particularly widespread because the tragedies that accompanied the war (mobilization, death, exile, famine, poverty, and ethnic hatred) had left a heavy imprint on children’s fragile bodies and minds.⁴³

Kashchenko believed that the social milieu (*sreda*) had a huge significance in the formation of children’s personality, exerting multiple influences on their bodies as well as psyches. “The influence of heritage,” argued Kashchenko, “is not unique and not unconditional.” The transmission of certain diseases and dysfunctions to one’s offspring was not an absolute truth for the defectologists – in fact, sick parents could have healthy children. The tendencies and predispositions set up by nature were subjected to a complex re-working under the influence of the family, the first teachers, the friends, and the school in general. Urban conditions and broken families were taken to have a deadly impact on children. Parents’ mistakes – such as the creation of a suffocating family atmosphere, abrupt changes, and swings of mood – destroyed the correct functioning of children’s nervous system and produced fertile ground for the development of all sorts of defects. Finally, the lack of light in the house, humidity, and dirt – “both the physical and the moral one” – had a huge negative impact on children’s growth. In Kashchenko’s view, these

⁴² “Protokol organizatsionnogo sobraniia obshchestva izucheniia i bor’by s detskoi defektivnost’iu i besprizornost’iu ot 29-go avgusta 1923 g.,” in RAO, f. 139, d. 238, ll. 1-6. Kashchenko was not the only expert of his time who conflated biology and sociology. See Beer, *Renovating Russia*, 200; Madison, *Social Welfare in the Soviet Union*, 26.

⁴³ Kashchenko and Murashev, *Iskliuchitel’nye deti*, 43. In Kashchenko’s opinion the growth of child defectiveness was not a unique Russian problem, but rather a pan-European and even “global” phenomenon. See RAO, f. 139, d. 238, l. 1. For Kashchenko’s discussion of defectiveness in Germany see K. “Bor’ba s detskoi defektivnost’iu v Germanii i u nas,” *Narodnoe prosveshchenie*, no. 8, 1923, 42-44.

sociological influences had a determining weight. From them “depends whether the sick genes (*bolezennnye zachatki*) that the child received from his progenitors will become stronger and develop further” or, conversely, whether a child born “without the burden of heritage” will develop defectiveness. Indeed, Kaschenko went so far to argue that defectiveness, as the presence of “sick or incorrect traits,” frequently owed its origin exclusively to nurture.⁴⁴

The defectologists’ method for diagnosing moral defectiveness did account for physiological factors such as the circumstances of the child’s conception (whether he/she had been conceived by a couple in love or sexually incompatible partners; under conditions of drunkenness or narcosis, etc.), pregnancy (the psychic and physical conditions of the mother, her eventual use of narcotics, her hygienic standards and nutritional habits, her muscular and intellectual activities), delivery and the first days of life (whether the child was full term, the care the child received immediately after birth, the nutrition in the first days of life and the psychic and physical mood of the woman who was breast-feeding the child). However, these variables were always defined as “biologically-mediated socio-economic conditions.”⁴⁵

Thus, Kashchenko emphasized first of all the role of sociological elements in determining defectiveness and assigned only a secondary role to biological factors. He rejected both the views of the Italian geneticist Cesare Lombroso on the in-born character of criminality and Russian theories that rooted a-normality in heredity and associated it with degeneration.

⁴⁴ These quotations appear both in Kashchenko’s essay “Sotsial’nyi profil’,” in *Problemy izucheniia i vospitaniia rebenka*, 47-57, at 47-48 and in the book he co-authored with S.N. Kriukov, *Vospitanie-obuchenie trudnykh detei* (Moscow: Graficheskoe zavedeniia 'Drukar', sine data), 5. The concept was expressed already in his 1912 essay “Obshchestvo, shkola i defektivnye deti” and in the article “Na pomoshch’ defektivnym detiam,” 4-5. For a discussion of the widespread equation in late tsarist and early Soviet culture between “nervousness” and psychological disorders see Frances Lee Bernstein, *The Dictatorship of Sex: Life-Style Advice for the Soviet Masses* (DeKalb, Ill.: Northern Illinois University Press, 2007), 82-89 and Susan K. Morrissey, “The Economy of Nerves: Health, Commercial Culture, and the Self in Late Imperial Russia,” *Slavic Review*, 69:3 (Fall 2010), 645-675.

⁴⁵ Kashchenko, “Sotsial’nyi profil’,” 48; *Iskliuchitel’nye deti*, 29-48; and “Pedologiya iskliuchitel’nogo detstva,” 194-196.

Although Kashchenko admitted that “anomalies of the personality and perverted tendencies and inclinations” could be partially related to biological factors and as such constituted a “pre-disposition” to criminality, he preferred to see moral defectiveness as a “social insufficiency” which could be compensated.⁴⁶ This was the hypothesis that animated his whole defectological approach and that he strove to test through pedograms and other experiments.

Kashchenko had been arguing for the meaning of social factors in the development of children’s defects since 1912 when he published his first significant work and the first Russian textbooks on defectology, *Defective Children and The School* (*Defektivnye deti i shkola*). However, in his later monographs *Nervousness and Defectiveness* (*Nervnost’ i defektivnost’*, published in 1919) and *Exceptional Children. Their Study and Education* (*Iskliuchitel’nye deti. Ikh izuchenie i vospitanie*, co-authored with Murashev and published in 1926), Kashchenko explicitly related the social conditions determining children’s moral defects to theories of class. In particular, he located the foundation of moral defectiveness in a society that was not harmonically organized in class terms. According to him, both the proletarian and the bourgeois classes could be characterized by features that, although at the opposite extremes, increased the percentage of defective children. “Not only tsar Hunger creates a sick and defective child. He is helped by tsarina Luxury.”⁴⁷ Among the proletariat, these traits were hunger, abandonment, and neglect. Among the bourgeoisie, they were satiety, spoiling, and a “monstrous education.” The street, with all its temptations and bad influences, marked the path of an escalating process of moral defectiveness that touched upon all social classes. “The accuser’s bench,” wrote Kashchenko, “is the destiny of the bourgeois child who was brought up in what seemed to be

⁴⁶ Kashchenko, “Obshchestvo, shkola i defektivnye deti,” 2.

⁴⁷ Kashchenko and Murashev, *Iskliuchitel’nye deti*, 40.

the best material and spiritual conditions.”⁴⁸ The suffering of Soviet defective children derived from “the socio-economic order of a bourgeois society in which the poor worker writhed and suffocated.”⁴⁹ Kashchenko had seen cases of juvenile hooliganism, feeble-mindedness, and pediatric psychopathology in both classes. This application of Marx to the discipline of defectology entitled defective children from all classes to Soviet help, because it identified all of them as suffering victims of the old social order. As we will see, this discourse would cease to be appealing to the Soviet officialdom when the latter proclaimed to have erased all traces of the past but problematic children were still roaming in the Soviet streets.

To make the most effective claims of scientific legitimacy, Kashchenko insisted that the study of the social factors causing child defectiveness needed to have not simply a qualitative, but above all a quantitative character. Only then it would have been possible to find scientific laws regulating the relationship between “socio-economic conditions” and “types of psychophysical constitution.” As we can see in Figure 1, a “social profile” in the form of a graphic table offered a rule for the numeric calculation of the children’s development. The instruction on how to use the “social profile” stated:

after a thoughtful and careful ranking of the social factors, insert their numeric value in the grid of coordinates. Mark a point in the middle of the line corresponding to the value. Connect with a line the resulting series of points. The sum of numeric values of the social factors ... must be divided by 23 (i.e. the number of factors). The result will be the average level of social conditions in the development of the child under study.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Kashchenko, *Nervnost' i defektivnost'*, 5.

⁴⁹ Kashchenko and Murashev, *Iskliuchitel'nye deti*, 40.

⁵⁰ Kashchenko, “Sotsial'nyi profil’,” 57.



Figure 1: The social profile of Alik S. Source: Kashchenko and Murashev, *Iskliuchitel'nye deti*, 49.

Soviet defectologists of the 1920s and 1930s highly praised Kashchenko's social profile as a rigorous, complete, and objective method in the experimental study of children's moral defectiveness.⁵¹ Some doctors complemented it with other types of experimental examination. For instance, the Soviet defectologist V.A. Artemov revamped a test elaborated by A.F. Lazurskii in the 1910s and known as "natural experiment."⁵² A.M. Schubert proposed his own method to perform tests on the level of defective children's intellectual development.⁵³ G. V. Murashev suggested a program to investigate defective children's "social behavior" by gathering

⁵¹ It served as prototype for a series of "social profiles" developed by other defectologists. See Iu. V. Eremin and I.L. Stychinskii, *Izuchenie sovremennogo detstva i iunoshestva: sbornik* (Saratov: s.n., 1927); M.M. Shershen', "Pedologicheskoe obsledovanie rabochei sredy. Sotsial'no-diagnosticheskii profil'," in *Novoe v defektologii. Das Neue in der Defektologie*, A.S. Griboedov, ed., (Leningrad: gosud. Psiko-nevrologich. akad. s Gos. refelksologich. ist-tom po izucheniiu mozga im. V.M. Bekhterova, tip. "Sovetskii Pechatnik," 1928), vol. 1, 116-165; and N.A. Kononov, *Umstvenno-otstalye deti. Uchebnoe posobie dlia pedagogicheskikh tekhnikumov i vysshikh pedagogicheskikh uchebnykh zavedenii* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe Uchebno-Pedagogicheskoe Izdatel'stvo, 1933).

⁵² See V.A. Artemev, "Estestvennyi eksperiment i ego primenenie k detiam, ukloniavshchimsia v svoem povedenii ot normy", in *Problemy izucheniia i vospitaniia rebenka*, 58-90. After 1927 Artemev managed an Experimental Psychological Laboratory within the Medico-Pedagogical Clinic. The Laboratory's goal was the experimental study of children's behavior. It had four cabinets devoted to the study of how children re-produced visual and audio stimuli, their "emotional reactions and associations," their "motoric reactions," and their "entire behavior." All the cabinets were provided with the most modern machines and tools.

⁵³ See A.M. Shubert, *Metricheskaia skala Bine i Simona. Posobie dlia issledovaniia ustvennoi odarennosti, sostavlennoe po redaktsii 1911 goda* (Moscow: Tip. 'Poligraficheskoe Iskusstvo', 1923).

and analyzing their “collective reactions.”⁵⁴ E.V. Gur'ianov elaborated an empirical method to pin down children's defects in reading, writing, doing mathematical calculations, and performing various types of manual work.⁵⁵

The experimental study of child defectiveness matched with the Soviet emphasis on planning, reporting, and controlling. Indeed, the Soviet “passport state” must have liked a method that gave each child a “pedogram,” i.e. a document that made children’s personality traits and inherited features immediately legible to the educator and to the state as well.⁵⁶ Legibility and surveillance, however, were not the exclusive goals of defectology. The scientific collection of experimental data and their presentation to the authorities and the general public had the purpose to shape understandings of defective children as suffering individuals in need of help.⁵⁷

Kashchenko even devised a scientific formula to define the defective child’s self ($I = S+R+P$, where I stood for *individuum*, S for *stimulus*, R for reaction, and P for production)⁵⁸ and stated that “before setting any demand on the child, the pedagogue should know precisely – as a

⁵⁴ See G.V. Murashev, "Programma izucheniia zhizni detskogo kollektiva" and "Karta ucheta povedeniia detskogo kollektiva" in *Problemy izucheniia i vospitaniia rebenka*, 7-40 and 41-46. Murashev’s methods were officially adopted in the Medico-Pedagogical Station in the scholastic year 1924-1925.

⁵⁵ See RAO, f. 113, d. 146, ll. 5-6 and RAO, f. 139, d. 227, ll. 1-2.

⁵⁶ The pedogram had been invented by the defectologists V.V. Bunak and S.N. Kriukov in collaboration with Kashchenko. See RAO, f. 113, d. 152, l. 4; d. 149, ll. 7-9 and d. 146, l. 9. Kashchenko’s personal archive includes many examples of pedograms. Among the most complete is Alik Levin’s pedogram preserved in RAO, f. 113, d. 147, ll. 16-21.

⁵⁷ Pedograms, doctors’ journals, social profiles, notes on heritage, measurements of school performances, psychological tests, descriptions of physical development, x-ray images, and the results of chemical-bacteriological analysis were exhibited to the visiting public in a Museum of Child Defectiveness that was opened by the Medico-Pedagogical Station at the end of 1919. See G.V. Murashev, "Evolutsiia idei Shkoly-Sanatorii i Mediko-Pedagogicheskoi Stantsii," 152-153. See also RAO, f. 113, d. 141, ll. 23-28 and f. 139, d. 234, list unnumbered. The targeted visitors of the museum were pedagogues, doctors, and students of defectology, but also “simple workers,” as Kashchenko wrote in a note on the Museum’s methods of work. See RAO, f. 113, d. 141, ll. 25-28.

⁵⁸ *Iskliuchitel'nye deti*, 28.

doctor knows a diagnosed disease – that each child taken by himself is an *individuum*.”⁵⁹ As

Kashchenko and Murashev explained in their contribution to the *Pedagogical Encyclopedia*:

As much as it is impossible to cure a sick person without having determined his disease and without having established a precise diagnosis, so it is impossible to straighten and correct the insufficiencies of an exceptional child, if we do not study the nature of his deviation from the norm, if we do not give a faithful assessment of the personality of the given individual child.⁶⁰

The child’s person (*detskaia lichnost’*) became defined by identificatory physical and moral qualities that could be measured. Like other scientists all over the world, Russian defectologists believed that deviance from the norm could be identified.⁶¹ However, Kashchenko and his colleagues did not criminalize child deviance. For them, to reveal the social, psychic, and physical traits of non-conforming children was the first step in constructing their individual state of suffering and need, and thereby “the most rational means” to legitimize medico-pedagogical help on their behalf.⁶²

If certain social circumstances could pre-condition mishaps in children’s personality, then a different social environment would have been able to correct their defects. As Kashchenko argued,

if an abnormal, monstrous environment cripples the child, creates unsuccessful and nervous children, moral monsters and so on, then a healthy one – one that is adapted to the peculiarities of the child and that is willing to take *him* into account – cures him and can re-educate him.⁶³

A physically and psychically healthy environment led children to becoming healthy in their bodies and minds. Kashchenko insisted that positive influences “washed away” the hereditary

⁵⁹ Kashchenko, “Na pomoshch’ defektivnym detiam,” 3-4.

⁶⁰ “Pedologiya iskliuchitel’nogo detstva,” 207.

⁶¹ See Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy*, 32. Byford explains that an approach of laboratory experimentation towards abnormal children ruled also in German universities, while personality tests were being pioneered in France and the United States. Byford, “Turning Pedagogy into a Science.”

⁶² RAO, f. 139, d. 265, l. 4.

⁶³ Kashchenko and Kriukov, *Vospitanie-obuchenie trudnykh detei*, 10.

defects.⁶⁴ They “rationally uprooted the undesirable results of inheritance,” echoed the journalist M. Ballas.⁶⁵ This rational extirpation of children’s defects was attempted in the Medico-Pedagogical Station, a model facility where the most engaged Soviet defectologists of the 1920s and 1930s strove to create a “healthy” environment and implement a non-coercive pedagogy that would have transformed both children’s bodies and their psyches.

2.2 The implementation of rational and humane help to defective children

The three major state organs involved in the provision of social welfare – the Narkomsobes, Narkompros, and Narkomzdrav – readily embraced the defectological approach and its conceptualization of children with subversive behaviors as suffering and re-educable individuals rather than irreversible criminal personalities. After a state decree mandated that all former private institutions for deaf, blind, retarded, mentally disabled, and morally deviant children be included in a large public system of defectological education, each commissariat pressed claims to administer the newly nationalized institutions. In 1918, the Sovnarkom put the care for all needy Soviet youths in the hands of the Narkomsobes. However, Narkompros and Narkomzdrav lobbied for a greater share of responsibility in this area. In the fall of 1919, the Sovnarkom issued a series of decrees that attempted to spell out the domain of each agency. Narkomzdrav (especially its School-Sanitary Department) was made responsible for physically and mentally handicapped children who required constant medical care; Narkompros (through its section for the Socio-Legal Protection of Minors and Defectives, or SPON) dealt with “normal” orphans as well as with all categories of defective, difficult, and law-breaking children; Narkomsobes (as usual the last wheel of the cart) ran an unspecified variety of facilities. As this

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ RAO, f. 139, d. 265, ll. 11-12.

assignment of duties reveals, defectological education for moral defectives was generally the responsibility of the Narkompros, but, in 1922, the Narkomzdrav assigned itself the right to operate “curative educational colonies for morally defective children” if the latter happened to suffer from a physical ailment of some kind.⁶⁶

The Medico-Pedagogical Station began to operate in 1918 amid the commissariats’ wrangling and, after January 1919, fell under the aegis of an interdepartmental organ called Council for the Protection of Childhood.⁶⁷ Although the Medico-Pedagogical Station had inherited the territory, the buildings, the furniture, and even the personnel of a former private institute called School-Sanatorium for Nervous Children, official propaganda presented it as “a completely new institution” – an experimental model home fully sponsored by the Soviet state. Instead of the two-story house with a few small bedrooms that had constituted the pre-revolutionary School-Sanatorium, by the end of a massive restoration in the fall of 1919, the Medico-Pedagogical Station presented itself as a system of nine pavilions, a museum of child defectiveness, and a building hosting a medico-pedagogical consultation for outpatient services.

⁶⁶ Kelly, *Children’s World*, 197; Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Commissariat of Enlightenment. Soviet Organization of Education and the Arts under Lunacharsky October 1917-1921* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 227-229; Ball, *And Now My Soul is Hardened*, 88-90. See also the entry “Vseobshchee obiazatel’noe obuchenie anomal’nykh detei,” in *Defektologicheskii slovar’* (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo “Pedagogika,” 1970), 56-57. A booklet published in 1918 by the Narkomzdrav reveals how the defectological approach was completely accepted by this commissariat. *Vrach v edinoi trudovoi shkole* (Moscow: Narodnyi komissariat zdavookhraneniia, 1918). In 1918-1919, the question of child defectiveness received sustained attention at conferences organized by the Narkomzdrav and Narkomsobes. See A.G. Basova and S.F. Egorov, *Istoriia surdopedagogiki* (Moscow: Prosveshchenie, 1984), 189.

⁶⁷ In January 1919 the Sovnarkom decreed the formation of an interdepartmental agency called Council for the Protection of Childhood. It was headed by a representative from the Narkompros, but also included members from the Narkomsobes, Narkomzdrav, Narkomtrud, the Commissariat of Food Supply, War, Justice, and the Workers’ Inspection. Its task was to coordinate the work of individual agencies to improve the supply of food and other social services to Soviet needy youths. In January 1921, the Presidium of the VTsIK replaced the Council for the Protection of Children with another inter-agency body, the Commission for the Betterment of the Lives of Children (*Detkomissiia*). This organ was headed by the secret police’s leader Felix Dzerzhinskii and included representatives from the Cheka, Narkompros, Narkomzdrav, the Commissariats of Food Supply, the Workers’ Inspection, and the Central Trade Union Council. See Goldman, *Women, the State, and Revolution*, 65-67; Madison, *Social Welfare in the Soviet Union*, 39; Kelly, *Children’s World*, 197; Fitzpatrick, *The Commissariat of Enlightenment*, 230-236; and Ball, *And Now My Soul is Hardened*, 90-91.

The Medico-Pedagogical Station was no longer a common foster home for “nervous” children and a site of bourgeois private philanthropy. It was a laboratory of scientific research and rational pedagogical work, in which help to morally defective children had a scientific and humane character, and science was married to the state’s purpose of correcting its deviant minor population.⁶⁸

Indeed, scientific examination marked children’s lives in the Medico-Pedagogical Station from their first admission as morally defective individuals to their release as corrected, socially useful members of the collective. All children were subjected to an initial diagnostic visit of medical and psychological nature that determined to which pavilion they should be assigned. From then on, they were constantly and systematically examined. All sorts of observations on their psychic life, anthropometrical measurements, interviews with their parents, and pedagogical remarks were daily registered in the child’s personal journal.⁶⁹ Each year a new photograph was taken (both front and profile) and added to the child’s file. Every change in the child’s development was carefully recorded. A final report on his/her “psycho-physical personality” and

⁶⁸ See Murashev, “Evolutsiia idei Shkoly-Sanatoriia i Mediko-Pedagogicheski Stantsii;” and Idem, “Otchet Otdela Okhrany Detstva s 1 ianvaria 1919 goda,” *Zhurnal narodnogo komissariata sotsial’nogo obespecheniia*, June-July, no. 5-6, 1919, 51-55. See also GARF, f. 413, o. 2, d. 330, ll. 33-34 and ll. 66-67; and d. 332, ll. 39-40 and ll. 43-44. RAO, f. 113, d. 150, l. 6; d. 148, l. 1; and d. 150, l. 6. Kashchenko had worked in the School-Sanatorium between 1908 and 1917. The very first name of the newly nationalized facility for defective children was Home for the Study of the Child (*Dom Izucheniia Rebenka*). The sources consulted for this dissertation do not illuminate the specific role played by Kashchenko in the transformation of the private School-Sanatorium into a state-owned institution. In his unpublished “Autobiography,” Kashchenko wrote that he passed over the School-Sanatorium to Narkompros “by my own initiative” (RAO, f. 139, d. 260, l. 3). Kashchenko was officially assigned to the position of director in April 1919 by the Moscow city section of the Narkomsobes. A meeting of the Collegium of Narkomosbes on October 19, 1919 recognized Kashchenko as “irreplaceable specialist,” raised his salary, and demanded that Kashchenko would never be moved from this position. GARF, f. 413, o. 2, d. 330, l. 101 and l. 119. In the management of this institution, Kashchenko could count on two aids: V.I. Orlov, who helped him with the pedagogical work, and V.S. Kharlamov, who dealt with administrative issues. The teacher-secretary V.P. Ditinenko wrote “characteristics” of the children based on the journals compiled by the educators V.S. Vinkler, A.V. Neiman, Z.N. Tikhomirova, T.K. Buinevich, T.P. Barysheva, and E.A. Boreisho. The doctor P.V. Azanchevskaia took care of the children’s medical problems. The technical personnel included a cook, a laundress, a seamstress, a nanny, and a janitor. Most of the employees lived in an independent wing attached to the main building which could host up to 25 persons. By October 1919, the staff included 18 people. See GARF, f. 413, o. 2, d. 330, ll. 66-67; and d. 332, ll. 39-44.

⁶⁹ A “Brief plan for the investigation of defective pupils” directed educators’ attention to 28 key factors to be considered in determining the child’s intellectual and personality-related defects. RAO, f. 139, d. 225, ll. 1-2.

“socio-professional suitability” was compiled when the child left the Medico-Pedagogical Station. This report went either to the parents or to the facility to which the child was further assigned. The gaze into the children’s worlds continued even after release since the defectologists often attempted to keep in touch with their former students.⁷⁰

The children’s everyday regime in the Medico-Pedagogical Station is another clear example of defectology’s controlling and disciplining dimension. The defectologists insisted on implementing a “rational and hygienic sanatorium regime,” which entailed a “precisely elaborated system of therapeutic-pedagogical measures.”⁷¹ The typical day started at 9 in the morning. The children woke up, washed themselves, and cleaned their rooms; then, they drank tea and, until 10, stayed under the care of an educator. Afterwards the children were passed on to the head teacher, who read with them and carried out “conversations.” At 2 o’clock in the afternoon the children had lunch and then spent the rest of the day in the courtyard, resting and playing under the control of an educator. In the evenings, from 6 to 8 pm, they worked again with a teacher. At 8 they had dinner and at 9 went to sleep.⁷² Unbalanced, nervous children with unstable natures were believed to receive crucial help from an unchanged order of daily activities.

The children worked in the Station’s workshops and in its vegetable and flower gardens; they played games, worked-out, participated in storytelling and reading activities, went for excursions, watched performances, attended art and music classes, and took singing lessons.⁷³ The defectologists assigned great importance to physical education, since they believed that by

⁷⁰ RAO, f. 113, d. 152, l. 6.

⁷¹ RAO, f. 113, d. 150, l. 7 and l. 9.

⁷² GARF, f. 413, o. 2, d. 330, ll. 18-19; ll. 39-40; and l. 46. RAO, f. 113, d. 150, l. 12; and d. 149, ll. 1-11. See also Murashev, “Evoliutsiia idei Shkoly-Sanatoriia i Mediko-Pedagogicheskoi Stantsii,” 135.

⁷³ GARF, f. 413, o. 2, d. 330, l. 127.

educating the movements they cultivated the children's intellect and emotions as well.⁷⁴ Over-tiredness, however, was considered even more harmful for defective children than for normal ones. For this reason, their physical work was not supposed to be grueling. To the contrary, rest and sleep were essential: after lunch the children took a nap and the duration of the night sleep was longer than that of normal children of the same age group. The relative proportion of work-time and free-time was precisely measured and strict control was applied to the balance between intellectual and muscular activities. Prolonged sleep, the alternation of work and rest, open-air play for 4-5 hours a day, physical exercise, sufficient space in the lodgings, extra-caloric nutrition (by the standards of the time) – all this was part of what the defectologists called “physical and psychic hygiene.” It facilitated the development of children's nervous system by acting on it almost as a chemical formula that changed the pernicious influences of the “unhygienic” surrounding environment.⁷⁵

Children's nervous health could be significantly upset by bad sexual habits. The defectologists strove to avert them in all possible ways. Strict vigilance, “frank talks” about sex, a healthy regime, cleanliness, psychological therapy, and even comfortable clothes were all methods with which the staff of the Medico-Pedagogical Station “fought against abnormalities” in the realm of children's sexuality.⁷⁶ For instance, one boy was brought to Kashchenko's special school because he showed interest only in sexual matters:

No matter what he looked at, with whom he talked or on which topic, everywhere he strove to see the sexual act and always wanted to talk about the sexual act. In addition, all his drawings and the objects that he made with clay were obscene...

⁷⁴ Many documents in Kashchenko's archive describe the games and physical exercises practiced in the Medico-Pedagogical Station. See, among the others, RAO, f. 113, d. 150, ll. 13-14.

⁷⁵ RAO, f. 113, d. 150, l. 8.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

The defectologists “sublimated” the boy’s sexual impulses into intellectual interests by giving him books about the life of animals and plants.⁷⁷ Another child was diagnosed as defective because he had shown a “premature development of sexual instincts” and was “cured” by turning his attention to theater (the child was asked to create the setting for Pushkin’s play *Boris Godunov* with decorations and representations of all the play’s characters). In a third recorded case, a child’s “deformed development of sexual emotions” was corrected by directing his interest to religious themes. Initially, the boy was asked to copy old icons and create small models of churches. However, in the growing anti-religious environment of the 1920s, religious subjects were not a good alternative to sexual anomalies and the child’s art was further shifted towards love for animals and interest in natural sciences.⁷⁸

All activities inside and outside of the classroom employed a combination of pedagogical, psycho-neurological, and plainly bodily interventions that the defectologists called “complex” or “combined” method (*kompleksnyi metod*).⁷⁹ This pedagogical approach was the means for a re-education and correction that transformed the motoric apparatus, the senses, the speech, the intellect, the aesthetic taste, and – most importantly – the social orientation of the child. It “made the behavior of the child normal and straightened it in social terms.”⁸⁰ As such, the complex method perfectly fulfilled the professed goals of defectology as the science of help to defective children: to correct their shortcomings and turn them into socially fit subjects.⁸¹

This description of the Medico-Pedagogical Station uncovers the invasiveness of the defectologists’ approach. Yet, we should consider that the life of children diagnosed as moral

⁷⁷ Smirnov, “Sovremennye pedagogicheskie tekhnii v Rossii,” 38-39.

⁷⁸ RAO, f. 113, d. 141, l. 6.

⁷⁹ Murashev, “Evoliutsiia idei Shkoly-Sanatoriia i Mediko-Pedagogicheskoi Stantsii,” 142.

⁸⁰ RAO, f. 113, d. 128, l. 2.

⁸¹ RAO, f. 113, d. 150, l. 12 and l. 14. See also Kashchenko and Murashev, *Iskliuchitel’nye deti*, 7.

defectives was not so grim in comparison with that of many other children who lived on the street or were arrested and ended up in labor colonies and regular orphanages. In addition, the intrusiveness of defectologists' diagnostic and educational methods and the disciplining thrust of their ultimate goals operated in dynamic relation with their integrating and humanitarian aspirations as Soviet activists. The defectologists insisted that no child was to be locked up in a punitive institution. The facilities for defective children should have turned neither into prisons nor into factories, but remained *children's* homes, that is relief institutions with didactic-educational purposes. Kashchenko and his colleagues were horrified by the use of isolation rooms (*kartser*) and other prison-like "unfounded and cruel" forms of punishments, which they defined as "monstrous anti-pedagogical educational measures."⁸²

Contemporary admirers of defectology praised this discipline for having "the marvelous simplicity of an authentically scientific thought," in which accurate observations combine with attention and love towards difficult children.⁸³ Kashchenko himself wrote that "there is no education without heart, without love and care for the child."⁸⁴ The personnel working in homes for defective children were not supposed to be guards (*nadzirатели*), but teachers with "extraordinary energy and love for their job." Kashchenko conceived the profession of educating children as "a special form of social service." At the same time, the "most ardent desire to help" was powerless by itself and each pedagogue needed to be familiar with the main principles of defectology.⁸⁵ To deliver this concept, Kashchenko used a similitude:

one can feel the music very well, but not knowing the technique, he is unable to produce the sounds, even if whole symphonies resounded in his ears. The child is the instrument

⁸² RAO, f. 113, d. 101, l. 9.

⁸³ B.S. Shikhman, "Defektivnye deti," *Gudok*, 29 July 1927, 4.

⁸⁴ Kashchenko and Murashev, *Iskliuchitel'nye deti*, 15.

⁸⁵ Descriptions of the ideal pedagogue are frequent in Kashchenko's printed works and unpublished manuscripts. These quotations are from RAO, f. 113, d. 101, l. 5 and l. 9.

and one must know how to play it...even when the instrument is damaged and sounds wrong.⁸⁶

In other words, a heartfelt, loving attitude towards the defective children was very important, but it could lead to the correction of their defects and their re-birth to a new, socially useful life only when combined with scientific knowledge. Defectology was believed to offer the scientific conditions for raising and educating difficult children and making them fit for socialist life.

Indeed, the defectologists adamantly rejected defective children's isolation from life, because their stated goal was to connect non-conforming youths to the new socialist society and allow them to take direct part in it. To achieve this goal, the defectologists gave their assisted some basic education and taught them working skills. Thus, while the facilities for defective children were not to turn into factories "where the children cease to be children and become the soulless gears of a huge mechanism," labor education was still considered very important.⁸⁷ Not only vocational training allowed the acquisition of a profession, which would have given these children the possibility to have an income upon leaving the Medico-Pedagogical Station, but labor was also the only possible antidote against social marginalization. As Kashchenko wrote, through labor "abnormal children cease to be invalids, are joined to the socially useful and creative labor of the Soviet people building the communist society."⁸⁸ State facilities for defective children were not supposed to be dens where spiritually de-moralized children dissipated the financial means assigned to them. To the contrary, these facilities were an

⁸⁶ Kashchenko, "Na pomoshch' defektivnym detiam," 4.

⁸⁷ RAO, f. 113, d. 101, l. 9.

⁸⁸ RAO, f. 113, d. 97, l. 1. Adaptation to regular social life and profitable job placement were not unique agendas of the Soviet socio-political context. For instance, they were the stated goals of Italian defectologists. See the article by G. Ferreri, "La dichiarazione di Ginevra," *L'Infanzia Anormale. Bollettino dell'Assistenza Medico-Pedagogica dei fanciulli anormali*, 18: 2 (May 1925), 25-27. In the archive of the Soviet defectologist Kh.S. Zamskii, I came across some handwritten notes with quotations from Ferreri's article. This reveals that the key ideas of defectology were travelling across borders and the Soviet specialists were in conversation with foreign luminaries in the field. See RAO, f. 113, d. 337b, ll. 1-10.

investment in future young citizens, who were being educated in the spirit of “conscious work, respect for themselves and the other, faith in the future and in their strong, young energies.”⁸⁹

The defectologists’ attempt to combine labor with self-confidence and other positive emotions was certainly directed at creating productive subjects who would have enjoyed the hard work of building communism.⁹⁰ However, their constant desire to inspire “creative joy” in otherwise apathetic young people reveals an attention to these children’s well-being that cannot be completely subsumed under productivist motives. Kashchenko once argued: “children’s joy and laughter are so precious that any child institution should encourage and protect them like the pupil of the eye.”⁹¹ The defectologists looked for didactic materials that might catch the children’s interests and put a lot of effort in providing children with diverse experiences, believing that the joy that the children would thus feel could improve their whole psyche.⁹²

Although the defectologists were not always successful in inspiring creative joy in the children they assisted, their approach seemed effective in shaping an ideal of future happiness. The defective girl Nastia, for instance, did not like the Medico-Pedagogical Station and rather projected the achievement of happiness in a future of integration through labor. As she wrote in a poem,

Yes, I must suffer for a long time
Still 6 years have to go by
And the heart will resound with joy
When their end will come.

Then I will go to my dear town
To be a teacher there

⁸⁹ RAO, f. 113, d. 101, l. 2.

⁹⁰ RAO, f. 113, d. 150, l. 14. In chapter 3, we will see the outcomes of this attempt on the blind and deaf-mute adult Soviet populations.

⁹¹ RAO, f. 113, d. 150, l. 14.

⁹² V.P. Kashchenko, ed., *Putem Tvorchestva* (Moscow: Knigoizdatel'stvo “Tsustran”, 1922), 4.

And there with all my energy
I will love Varia and Irochka.

I will work a lot there
And eat the bread of my labor
Then the scolds of a sick soul
I will no longer fear.⁹³

Nastia's dream was to go back to her hometown, find a job, and enjoy the love of her siblings. Working and loving her family, Nastia would have entered into the normal life that – she was made to believe – everybody else was living around her. She would no longer have felt remorse for her defective morality. As it turned out, Nastia was a successful student and, upon completion of her re-education, she found a job in a library.⁹⁴

While the defectologists acknowledged that their charges were difficult, they also watched keenly for signs of their better nature. For instance, after admitting “a boy with a very bad heritage” who “did not show interest for absolutely anything and did not want to engage in any activity,” the defectologists observed and studied him for some months. One day, during a visit to a museum, they noticed that the child had an interest for hieroglyphics. The defectologists built their didactics around this first manifestation of interest. Soon, the apathy and indifference that characterized the child at his admission into the school disappeared and within some years “the boy turned into a talented historian.”⁹⁵ The defectologist I. Kiselev explained that, in the Soviet establishments for defective children, the correction of individual personalities

⁹³ Nastia's poem “Grustnye dumy” is preserved in RAO, f. 113, o. 1, d. 295, l. 26. The poem is undated. Nastia's lyrical composition is very similar to the lyrics of a song sung by the waifs living in a home for young offenders in Grigorii Belykh and Leonid Panteleev's famous novel *Republic of Shkid* (1926): “Our path is long, our path is hard,/We'll need to labor every hour/To win through in the end, To win through in the end.” Quoted in Kelly, *Children's World*, 200.

⁹⁴ See RAO, f. 113, d. 295, l. 31.

⁹⁵ Smirnov, “Sovremennye pedagogicheskie tehnicii v Rossii,” 38-39.

did not happen by “ironing out” children’s distinguishing traits, but rather by looking for ways to make individual characteristics perform useful work for the collective.⁹⁶

One of defectology’s most difficult and important objectives was to combine the idea of individualized medico-pedagogical help with the requirement to forge members of a communist society. To achieve this goal, they strove to inspire “feelings of social belonging (*obshchestvennost’*) and comradely solidarity” in allegedly anti-social children.⁹⁷ Cultivating a sense of collectivity was closely related to correcting the individual, since the morally defective child was first of all a person with “deformed social conditions” which, in turn, were easier to rectify through the collective. For this reason, the defectologists claimed that the individualization of education did not hinder the development of collective habits in the children. Kashchenko wrote that, “the personality [of each child] and the principle of individualization must be taken into account alongside with the development of the social ideal.”⁹⁸ In a rationally organized and scrupulously planned community, each defective child could find “the best field to work on the defective forms of his behavior.”⁹⁹ As we have seen, everything in the Medico-Pedagogical Station, from the pavilion living arrangement to classroom work and recreational activities, was oriented at making individual defective children socially fit.

It was defectology’s scientific approach, Kashchenko and his colleagues argued, that facilitated the emergence of “social emotions” without denying the individual.¹⁰⁰ Their scientifically-grounded use of art was a primary example. Kashchenko argued that music, dance, and theater “capture all of us and compel us to experience collective emotions;” they “draw people together and make them closer, like the members of one family;” they “put them in

⁹⁶ I. Kiselev, “Detskie Uchrezhdeniia,” *Narodnoe Prosveshchenie*, no. 7, 1923, 85-98.

⁹⁷ Kashchenko and Murashev, *Vospitanie-obuchenie trudnykh detei*, 42.

⁹⁸ Kashchenko, “Na pomoshch’ defektivnym detiam,” 3.

⁹⁹ RAO, f. 113, d. 144, l. 19.

¹⁰⁰ RAO, f. 113, d. 150, l. 14.

unison.” Strong collective experiences such as singing or reciting poems together constituted the base for bringing the individual closer to the collective. In the defectologists’ correctional pedagogy, art education was not supposed to cultivate “passive aesthetes,” but rather raise full-fledged members of the communist society and “fighters for its ideals.” Kashchenko praised all artistic processes as the manifestations of children’s creativity and taste. They were valuable because they gave space to individual vocation, but at the same time provided children’s labor with social significance. When art was closely related with the commonly shared everyday components of children’s lives, it could prevent defective children from developing feelings of unworthiness and traumas that would have estranged them from the larger social body.¹⁰¹

Time and again, the ultimate goal was not to exclude social degenerates, but to adapt and integrate problematic personalities to the socialist living environment. The re-education of the individual defective child happened through the collective and for the sake of both the individual and the collective. To help defective children meant to make them fit for what these activists imagined to be a “normal” Soviet life.

2.3 Defectology’s successes and failures in the 1920s and 1930s

Throughout the 1920s, the defectological approach to help to defective children enjoyed great success. The First All-Russian Congress for the Struggle against Child Defectiveness, Delinquency and Homelessness (*Pervyi Vserossiiskii S’ezd o Detskoi Defektivnosti, Prestupnosti i Besprizornosti*), which met from 24 June to 2 July 1920 under the leadership of A.B. Lunacharskii and Maxim Gorky, supported the new centralized system for educating all

¹⁰¹ RAO, f. 113, d. 144, ll. 7-10 and d. 150, ll. 15-17. On art as a method to educate defective children see N. A. Rybnikov, *Detskie risunki i ikh izuchenie* (Moscow: Gos. Izd., 1926). The defectologists’ theories on art matched with the educational trends articulated by Nadezhda Krupskaya. See N.K. Krupskaya and I.S. Eventov, *Ob iskusstve i literature. Stat’i, pis’m, vyskazaniia* (Leningrad: Iskusstvo, 1963) and V.V. Shinkarenko, *Planirovanie v kommunisticheskoi vospitanii: pedagogicheskii kontseptsii N.K. Krupskoi* (Moscow: Pedagogika, 1988).

categories of defective children.¹⁰² In September 1921, the Narkompros organized another All-Russian Conference for the Struggle against Child Defectiveness, which discussed how to develop the web of defectological educational institutions. In addition, it issued a program for preparing future cadres of defectologists and for the publication of specific methodological literature.¹⁰³

Kashchenko was entrusted to form specialists in defectology and nominated rector of the Pedagogical Institute for Child Defectiveness, which by the academic year 1923-1924 counted 540 enrolled students and which would train generations of Soviet defectologists in the decades to come.¹⁰⁴ Another similar institute was organized in Leningrad by A.S. Griboedov under the name of Pedagogical Institute of Social Education of Normal and Defective Children. Later a Medico-Pedagogical Department based on defectology's principles was opened in the University of Kiev by the defectologists Shneerson and Vladimirovskii.¹⁰⁵ On the model of the Moscow's Pedagogical Institute, a subsection of the Narkompros called Children's Social Inspectorate set up shorter training courses involving the study of child psychology, psychopathology, and criminology as well as practical work with abandoned and delinquent children.¹⁰⁶ Delegations of teachers from the Povol'zhe region, Kuban', Viatka, and Kiev visited the Medico-Pedagogical Station and its museum throughout the 1920s. These included pedagogues working in regular

¹⁰² McCagg, "The Origins of Defectology," 41. See also the transcripts of the congress *Detskaia defektivnost', prestupnst', i besprizornost'. Po materialam I-go vserossiiskogo s'ezda 1920 g.* (Moscow: Gosizdat, 1922).

¹⁰³ G.N. Batov-Piasetskii, *Istoriia bucheniia slaboslyshannykh detei v Rossii* (Moscow: MTsF, 2002), 46.

Specialized conferences on defective childhood continued to take place throughout the 1920s; questions of defectology were also examined at general pedagogical conferences and at the 1924 All-Union Congress for the Socio-Legal Protection of Minors. See Madison, *Social Welfare in the Soviet Union*, 39.

¹⁰⁴ V.P. Kashchenko, "Ocherk deiatel'nosti Pedagogicheskogo Instituta Detskoi Defektivnosti s 1920 g. po 1924 g.," in *Problemy izucheniia i vospitaniia rebenka*, 175-194, and GARF, f. 413, o. 2, d. 330, l. 127. An article in *Izvestiia* advertised the new Institute. See V.P. Kashchenko, "K bor'be s detskoi defektivnost'iu," *Izvestiia*, 3 December 1921, 3. Despite many changes in name and academic affiliation, the Moscow Institute continued to operate throughout the Soviet period and is still active to our days.

¹⁰⁵ Konovalov, *Umstvenno-otstalye deti*, 16.

¹⁰⁶ Kelly, *Children's World*, 198.

daycares and schools as well as the professionals working in collectors for minor criminals, pioneer homes, and labor colonies.¹⁰⁷ Apart from those who visited the museum, pedagogical experts and activists working in various parts of the Soviet Union could familiarize themselves with defectological approaches in the pages of the journals *Questions of Defectology* (*Voprosy defektologii*) and *Pedology* (*Pedologiya*), which were published between 1928 and 1932. The curriculum proposed by the defectologists in Moscow was adopted by auxiliary schools, colonies for morally defective children, special schools for blind and deaf-mute children, and even the isolation wards of some psychic hospitals throughout the country. In the Urals, for instance, a certain Doctor Zhan Genrikovich Putnin opened a Psycho-Neurological School Sanatorium that operated on Kashchenko's defectological principles.¹⁰⁸ Various Soviet organizations included work on behalf of defective children among their activities: the well-known society Children's Friend (*Drug Detei*) and the less famous League for the Struggle against Child Defectiveness in Baku are two examples. In 1927, the methods and results of Soviet help to children deviating from the norm were showcased abroad as Kashchenko participated in an exhibition on work-oriented education in Copenhagen.¹⁰⁹

In the mid-1920s, defectology was in such good standing with the state authorities that the defectologists launched some new initiatives to help Soviet defective children. For instance, the medico-pedagogical consultation, whose building had been built already in the fall of 1919, began to offer regular outpatient service in 1925-1926.¹¹⁰ In addition, in 1926, the defectologists

¹⁰⁷ RAO, f. 113, d. 141, l. 31. See also the visitors' book preserved in RAO, f. 139, d. 234.

¹⁰⁸ See various materials in GAPK, f. 132, o. 1, d. 257 and d. 137.

¹⁰⁹ RAO, f. 113, d. 143, l. 8 and RAO, f. 139, d. 234, list unnumbered

¹¹⁰ In 1925-1926 the Consultation reviewed 226 cases. 29% of these children were returned to their parents and relatives, while the rest was placed in various special institutions. A breakdown of their class composition included 57% children of workers, 34% children of clerks, 5% children of peasants, 4% orphans. The breakdown of the forms of defectiveness of the admitted children included 38% mentally-retarded, 28% neuropathic and psychopathic, 10% epileptics, 10% socially neglected, 7% mentally retarded and psychopathic at the same time, 5% with defects in

established a summer camp for defective children in Pushkino, a village in the Moscow hinterland. This summer camp was a site in which enjoyable activities such as playing outdoor games, going for long walks, swimming, rowing a boat, working in the vegetable or fruit garden, and cultivating flowers were proposed as appropriate correctional measures with a “scientific foundation.”¹¹¹ It was also a space where summer educational work was imbued with the social goal of serving the rural population. By having defective children read aloud to illiterate peasants and help rural nannies take care of small children, the defectologists became implicated in the Soviet government’s massive campaign to transform Russian backward peasants. Defective children left the Medico-Pedagogical Station and went into Soviet society to perform work in it and for it.¹¹²

All these initiatives received official approval and encouragement. In 1926, after a particularly well-attended and successful conference, some Soviet officials in the audience defined defectological help as “extremely valuable and useful.”¹¹³ In the same year, an official inspection confirmed that “the Medico-Pedagogical Station conducts an extraordinarily valuable and needed work” which “matches with the principles of the Soviet school.”¹¹⁴

In the early 1930s, however, the Medico-Pedagogical Station and other medico-pedagogical model institutions which had been proudly marshaled in the 1920s were dismantled

speech abilities, and 2% who were simply “physically exhausted.” In 1925 Kashchenko used the Consultation to conduct a 2-day workshop on mental backwardness. A longer practical seminar took place from October 1926 to January 1927. RAO, f. 113, d. 146, ll. 1-4; and d. 143, ll. 3-7.

¹¹¹ RAO, f. 113, d. 144, l. 5.

¹¹² RAO, f. 113, d. 144, ll. 1-6. E. Thomas Ewing has described how, in the 1930s, teachers in regular elementary and secondary schools became involved in the transformation of peasants into socialist collective farmers. Thomas Ewing, *The Teachers of Stalinism. Policy, Practice, and Power in Soviet Schools of the 1930s* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002).

¹¹³ “Protokol obshchestvennoi uchetnoi konferentsii mediko-pedagogicheskoi stantsii narkomprosa 24-go maia 1926 g.” RAO, f. 139, d. 233, ll. 1-2.

¹¹⁴ RAO, f. 113, d. 143, ll. 1-2.

and absorbed within a more centralized system of special education.¹¹⁵ Indeed, following a 1931 decree “On the introduction of general mandatory elementary education for physically defective, mentally retarded, and children suffering from speech defects,” the Narkompros decided to take steps to build a better organized net of institutions for defective children.¹¹⁶ A so-called “Second five-year plan on child defectiveness,” dated June 19, 1932, aimed at “rationalizing” the upbringing and education of defective children.¹¹⁷ A directive of the Sovnarkom and the Central Committee of the Communist Party dated May 31, 1935, brought about a realignment of functions and a new division of responsibilities among the organs concerned with child welfare. Specifically, children’s homes for “normal” as well as “difficult-to-raise” (but without criminal convictions) were identified as the charge of the Narkompros; special homes for children needing prolonged medical therapy were put under the direction of the Narkomzdrav; isolation homes, working colonies, and points of reception for law-breakers were to be managed by the Commissariat of Internal Affairs (NKVD); finally, a net of institutions for physically defective children as well as minors with serious mental retardations but still able to perform some manual work was established under direction of the Narkomsobes.¹¹⁸

The Medico-Pedagogical Station had never represented a mass organization integrated in the larger system of Soviet special education. As a model institution, it had set an important precedent, but, with the passing of time, it was difficult for this institution to stand the ground against the pressures of a centralizing state. The mentioned decrees and directives created an avenue for absorbing the help offered by the Medico-Pedagogical Station into the state

¹¹⁵ Kelly, *Children’s World*, 220.

¹¹⁶ Batov-Piasetskii, 52; and McCagg, “The Origins of Defectology,” 54.

¹¹⁷ RAO, f. 113, d. 84, ll. 1-4.

¹¹⁸ Madison, *Social Welfare in the Soviet Union*, 39 and Kelly, *Children’s World*, 221. This division of duties remained in place until the end of the Soviet Union. Madison and Kelly remark that practical problems in the division of labor among these commissariats (and later ministries) remained endemic.

bureaucracy. The reorganization that they prompted greatly centralized Soviet help. Elizabeth Waters has argued that, “when the country, with Stalin at the helm, plunged towards industrialization, all professional groups, including the doctors, lost status and social influence.” According to this scholar, most alliances made between professionals and the party in the 1920s did not survive the first five-year-plan.¹¹⁹ Other historians have shown that, by 1936, many volunteer societies, such as the Children’s Friend, were closed down and a strong institutionalization wave was washing away all islands of more autonomous activities.¹²⁰ As we will see in other chapters, in the field of state assistance this centralization led to the closure of a semi-institutionalized organization like the Political Red Cross, while it bolstered groups, such as the All-Russian Societies for the Blind (VOS) and the Deaf-Mute (VOG), that were more coherently integrated in the mechanism of Soviet governance.

In addition, against the background of this institutional reorganization, the discipline of defectology became the target of a conceptual re-assessment. Many scholars have remarked that, from 1930 onwards, Soviet authorities began to show growing resentment against defectologists and paedologists.¹²¹ Soviet ideologues in the field of pedagogy denounced the Medico-Pedagogical Station for producing an overtly negative appraisal of the Soviet minor population.¹²² On July 4, 1936, the Party resolution “On the Paedological Distortions in the System of National Education” castigated the defectologists for conducting “false experiments”

¹¹⁹ Elizabeth Waters, “The Modernization of Russian Motherhood, 1917-1937,” *Soviet Studies*, 44: 1 (1992), 123-135, at 124.

¹²⁰ A.P. Kupaigorodskaja, ed., *Dobrovol’nye obshchestva v Petrograde-Leningrade v 1917-1937 gg. Sbornik statei* (Leningrad: Nauka, 1989). On the closing of Children’s Friend see Kelly, *Children’s World*, 196.

¹²¹ In particular, E. Thomas Ewing, “Restoring Teachers to Their Rights: Soviet Education and the 1936 Denunciation of Pedology,” *History of Education Quarterly*, 41:4 (Winter 2001), 471-493. See also Madison, *Social Welfare in the Soviet Union*, 27; Kelly, *Children’s World*, 221-222.

¹²² See the document “Proekt zakliucheniia nauchno-issledovatel’skoi sektiis mezhduvedomstvennoi komissii po obsledovaniuu raboty i obshchego sostoiianiia medico-pedagogicheskoi stantsii narkomprosa,” in RAO, f. 139, d. 232, ll. 1-6.

and “an endless amount of investigations” with the deplorable goal of finding a maximum number of pathological dysfunctions in the Soviet children, their parents, and their social environment. The defectologists were accused of looking for excuses to offer special help to completely normal children who were only undisciplined and showed temporary learning difficulties.¹²³

Theorizations of individual child defectiveness as the effect of a defective environment were necessarily meditations on the broader social context in which Soviet children were growing and, as such, could generate subtle indictments of that context.¹²⁴ While this approach was admissible throughout the 1920s (when the country was still believed to suffer from the tsarist heritage and the defectologists’ professional skills were crucial in healing the civil war damage in the first generation of Soviet children¹²⁵), by the mid-1930s the Stalinist social order could no longer be identified as a scientifically proved cause of child defectiveness. The unfortunate existence of children damaged by the environment in which they lived contradicted the official claim to a happy Soviet childhood. The pressing ideological need to keep up the appearance of an ideal childhood against the background of the mid-1930s purges ensured an approach that hold individuals rather than the system responsible for deviant behaviors and left little room for the integrating practices of defectology.

¹²³ See RAO, f. 139, d. 2332, ll. 1-6; d. 256, l. 1; d. 265, l. 11; and RAO, f. 113, d. 88, l. 4; d. 89, ll. 2-11. The complete text of this directive is also quoted in Nikolai Kurek, *Istoriia likvidatsii pedologii i psikhotehniki* (Saint Petersburg: Aleteia, 2004), 293-299. The archival record does not indicate that Kashchenko’s position was in jeopardy. He was never subjected to political repression, personally denounced or denigrated. To the contrary, he made an impressive career and received official recognition for his achievements. He died of natural causes in Moscow on November 30, 1943.

¹²⁴ Julie Brown has theorized the blurring of scientific analysis and political commentary in her study of Russian psychiatric writings between 1905 and 1913. See her article “Revolution and Psychosis: The Mixing of Science and Politics in Russian Psychiatric Medicine, 1905-13,” *The Russian Review*, 46 (1987), 283-302.

¹²⁵ Kashchenko and Murashev could express this critique in quite official places, such as the 1927 *Pedagogical Encyclopedia*, for which they wrote the entry “Paedology of exceptional childhood.” *Pedagogicheskaiia entsiklopediia*, 192.

Although early defectological theories remained fundamentally unchanged and continued to be supported by some activists and professionals,¹²⁶ in the mid-1930s new state policies encouraged holding minor recidivists and waifs with personality problems responsible for their antisocial acts. A rougher-handed approach to juvenile disobedience and delinquency was evident in the 1935 edicts that made children as young as twelve fully responsible for any criminal act, briefly introduced the death penalty for under-age offenders, abolished the Commissions on the Affairs of Minors, transferred complete responsibility for minor criminals to the Procuracy and the courts, and placed all labor colonies and reception points under the jurisdiction of the NKVD. These laws resulted in a wave of arrests and trials among Soviet teenagers.¹²⁷ Juliane Frst has commented that this approach was “determined to eradicate the juvenile problem through spatial separation rather than to solve it through policies of integration.” Thus, in the mid-1930s, the trend to exclude social misfits won out in the treatment accorded to young marginalized members of Soviet society and, according to Frst, would continue to provide strong competition to the “narrative of salvation” in the post-war period.¹²⁸

Conclusion

In this chapter, I discussed how Soviet defectologists of the 1920s contributed to shaping marginalized children’s right to be helped. Through an analysis of their theoretical writings and their practices of rational education, I have explored the fundamental tensions that animated

¹²⁶ For instance, in 1940, two leaders of the Department for Children’s Homes of the Narkomosbes, A.P. Grachev and K.S. Zubrilin, continued to advocate for the use of defectology in approaching various types of difficult children. See GARF, f. 413, d. 10, ll. 41-45; and d. 107, l. 29 and ll. 53-54. Peter Solomon has written that some judges found ways of responding to the needs of juvenile criminals by applying socio-educational measures instead of conviction and punishment. These legal officials attempted to handle juvenile offenders in a sensible manner, cushioning the impact of harsh criminal sanctions. Solomon, *Soviet Criminal Justice Under Stalin*, 205-209. Kelly agrees that professional jurists continued to be convinced of the need for sensitivity and special expertise in cases involving difficult children. *Children’s World*, 232.

¹²⁷ See Madison, *Social Welfare in the Soviet Union*, 27; Goldman, *Women, the State, and Revolution*, 322-324; Caroli, *L’enfance*, 285-288; and Kelly, *Children’s World*, 230-234.

¹²⁸ Frst, “Between Salvation and Liquidation,” 250.

these activists' drive to help problematic children by integrating them in the Soviet "big loving and hardworking family."¹²⁹ I have argued that the defectologists' scientific construction of defective childhood both as a form of individual suffering and as a potential resource for the state opened a space for reclaiming marginalized children *into* the collective and *for* the collective. This pedagogical science entitled children to protection and help from the state, while also subordinating their interests and needs to those of the larger Soviet socio-political body.

The approach favored by Soviet defectologists vis-à-vis troublesome, non-conforming children was based on a progressive and humanist tradition of pedagogy which had deep roots in the pre-revolutionary times. It was very successful between 1918 and the mid-1930s because its conceptualization of help as something resembling science coalesced with the Soviet state's desire to handle social questions with a rationalized and secularized, but also humane approach that was in keeping with its socialist moral values and its socio-political goals. The premise that child defectiveness was determined by social as well as biological factors and that both could be measured through empirical scientific methods made it possible to intervene and correct the children, transforming both their individuality and their social existence. In addition, defectologists' social activism combined firm roots in a supposedly rational, systematic, and science-based knowledge with a direct involvement in the economic growth of the country. Finally, defectological science not only revealed the materialist explanations for the emergence of defectiveness, but also offered a humane model to deal with deviant children. Under these conditions, defectology appeared as a practical technology that could be harnessed for human betterment and social progress. To its practitioners as well as to the officialdom, it seemed a suitable form of intervention aimed not simply at defending the well-being of deviant children,

¹²⁹ RAO, f. 113, d. 101, l. 3.

but also at sustaining the interests of the Soviet state. As Kashchenko once wrote reversing the directionality of help, defectology “could be of big help to the state.”¹³⁰

The defectologists’ scientific definition of child defectiveness as “lack” contributed to shaping the state’s notion of help to its marginalized populations as an inextricable combination of care and control. This definition encouraged viewing deviant members of the social body as suffering individuals in a state of need, but it also imposed societal restrictions on them. Indeed, as Kashchenko’s theoretical writings implied and as we saw in the practice of the Medico-Pedagogical Station, the type of help implemented to compensate children’s “lack” was a rather invasive form of disciplining and re-making. The cure to defectiveness, which in the defectologists’ vision was to be implemented “freely and creatively,”¹³¹ lost much of its ideal spontaneity and joyfulness as it was pursued for the purposes of normalizing children and fitting them into society.

In the next chapters, we will see how other activists constructed the right to be helped of marginalized adult populations who showed forms of deviation and “lack” in physical, gender, or political terms. They all engaged with similar issues of discipline and emancipation, but proposed to solve them in different ways. VOS and VOG did not appeal to science, but rather to a conceptualization of disabled peoples’ labor as a path to integration and happiness. Ommlad promoted science largely as a masculine force offering moral criteria by which Soviet single women were to be gauged and helped. The Political Red Cross attempted to rely on law to articulate dispassionate judgments of individuals lacking political fitness, but also largely fell back on patronage and socialist morality to sustain their right to a humane treatment.

¹³⁰ RAO, f. 139, d. 238, l. 3.

¹³¹ RAO, f. 113, d. 150, l. 10.

Chapter 3

Labor:

VOS's and VOG's Advocacy for the Rights of Blind and Deaf-Mute People

*“Without hearing and speaking
Forgotten we could have stayed forever.
But...the Soviet state finds a job for every poor fellow.”¹*

Nastia once composed a poem about a blind musician. She wrote that, “fighting for the happiness of other people,” this man “had forgotten his own unhappiness and suffering.” He had also proved that “the blind lot is not inferior to the seeing folks.” In the poem written in July 1921 by a “morally defective” teenager going through a process of re-education, work for the well-being of the collectivity appeared as the means to overcome the unhappiness caused by disability. It was also the best way to demonstrate equality with the healthy members of the collective.² In this chapter, I will discuss how the disabled activists staffing the All-Russian Societies for the Blind (*Vserossiiskoe Obshchestvo Slepokh*, hereafter VOS) and the Deaf-Mute (*Vserossiiskoe Obshchestvo Glukhonemykh*, hereafter VOG) indeed considered work as a concrete instrument of transformation from helplessness to fitness and the key legitimizing category of their right to be helped in this process. I will also trace how their notion of labor as a locus of integration and a path to happiness changed in the years between the October

¹ Kollektiv glukhonemykh tipogr., “Luchi,” in *Pervomaiskii sdvig. Odnodnevnaia gazeta, vypushchennaia 1 maia 1924 rabochimi tipografii i proizvodstvennykh masterskikh, sluzhashchimi i uchashchimisia Arnol'do-Tret'iakovskogo Instituta glukhonemykh M.O.N.O.*, 1 May 1924, 1.

² “I-e stikhotvorenie na zakaz /Na slepogo muzykanta Korolenko,” dated 17 July 1921, preserved in RAO, f. 113, o. 1, d. 295, l. 29. The image of blind musicians bringing happiness to their fellow citizens was celebrated not only in 1921 in the lyrical outpourings of the defective girl Nastia, but, more famously, in 1942 in the verses of the Soviet poet Aleksei Surkov. In the poem “Pesnia o slepom baianiste,” Surkov fixed the memory Misha Popov, a graduate from a school for blind children who, armed with his bayan, contributed to the war effort by lifting the spirits of Red soldiers fighting at the front. A. Surkov, “Pesnia o slepom baianiste,” in *Stikhotvoreniia, Poemy, Pesni, Perevody*, vol. 2 (Moscow: “Khudozhestvennaia Literatura”, 1974) 234-239.

Revolution and the aftermath of the Second World War.³

Analyzing the relationship between the right to work and the right to state assistance in the context of blindness and deafness, I address two key themes. The first is the meaning of the socialist culture of labor for non-able-bodied people. The second is the strain between the disabled's desire for integration through work and the state's disciplinary compulsion to productive labor. These two themes are inextricably linked since the Soviet culture of labor increasingly turned productivity into the prime goal of the entire Soviet socio-political body and this productionism created the context for a deep and abiding tension between ideals of help and notions of labor fitness, personal value and social capital. Competing interpretations of the disabled's right to be helped through labor were played out when official rehabilitation philosophies articulated this notion, disabled activists re-elaborated and altered it in their advocacy, and disabled individuals expected or rejected it in their everyday lives. Juxtaposing the discourse analysis of activists' writings and congress debates to the examination of the personal experiences of some blind and deaf-mute individuals, in this chapter I reveal a fundamental contradiction inherent in the Soviet right to be helped through labor. Namely, that the idealized, loudly advertised, and much desired participation in joyful, enabling, and transformative labor was disjointed from a problematic reality of unemployment and popular prejudices against blind and deaf-mute people.

As a large body of scholarship has shown, labor was "a central category of self-

³ The term "activist" is used in this chapter to describe the disabled individuals who were active in the formal administrative structures that developed on behalf of the Soviet blind and the deaf-mute after 1917. It is intended to exclude the blind and deaf-mute who did not participated in local administration or leadership. Concerning terminology, I use "deaf-mute" instead of simply deaf to reflect the Soviet usage. Indeed, in the Soviet context, the change in terminology from "deaf-muteness" to "deafness" happened only after 1948. The definition "deaf-mute" disappeared from the name of VOG in 1959. See Claire Shaw, *Deaf in the USSR: "Defect" and the New Soviet Person, 1917-1991* (PhD Dissertation, School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University College London, 2010), 164.

identification” for Soviet workers, while “unemployment challenged the very core of [their] identity.”⁴ Able-bodied, non-marginalized citizens – such as male workers in the major cities of the Soviet Union – tended to recognize the salience of work, because it was in and through the workplace communities that they obtained the means and opportunities for a full social life. At the same time, as labor historian Diane Koenker has argued, Soviet workers clearly claimed the right to choose what form their social life should take: while the official model of labor relations was above all committed to production, workers altered this model to address a more consumerist vision of socialism that included entertainment and leisure as well as production.⁵

Like the male urban workers richly investigated by social historians, the less studied Soviet blind and deaf-mute also participated in the articulation of a socialist culture of labor both through their discursive interventions and their everyday practices.⁶ In particular, those among them who chose to be actively involved in VOS and VOG vigorously engaged in elaborating and promoting their own vision of labor and socialist work culture. Similarly to many unionized workers, the disabled activists of VOS and VOG altered the official model of labor and challenged its narrow productivist bias in order to voice their needs. As non-able-bodied and marginalized individuals, they specifically engaged labor to articulate an enabling, participatory, and integrative vision of socialism.

⁴ Diane P. Koenker, *Republic of Labor. Russian Printers and Soviet Socialism, 1918-1930* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 194-195. Many other scholars have discussed Soviet workers’ identity in relation to cultures of labor. For a classic treatment see Lewis H. Siegelbaum, *Stakhanovism and the Politics of Productivity in the USSR, 1935-1941* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

⁵ Koenker, *Republic of Labor*.

⁶ Among the few scholarly works written in English on the Soviet blind and deaf-mute are the collection of essays edited by Lewis Siegelbaum and William O. McCagg *The Disabled in the Soviet Union: Past and Present, Theory and Practice* (Pittsburgh, Pa.: University of Pittsburgh, 1989) and Claire Shaw’s recent PhD dissertation *Deaf in the USSR*. An overview of the Soviet legislation governing all disabled individuals can be found in Bernice Madison’s essay “Programs for the Disabled in the USSR,” in *The Disabled in the Soviet Union*, 167-198. More work has been done on the expectations of war invalids after WWII – although nothing specifically on the blind and deaf-mute. See for instance, Beate Fieseler, “The Bitter Legacy of the ‘Great Patriotic War’: Red Army Disabled Soldiers under Late Stalinism,” in *Late Stalinist Russia*, 46-61; and Mark Edele, *Soviet Veterans*.

In general terms, the socialist right to work meant that, once an adult man or woman had acquired certain occupational skills, a job had to be offered to him/her – and this was the state’s duty. In the cases of marginalized populations such as deviant children, disabled adults, and single mother, the official conceptualization of work as a right combined with that of work as therapeutic tool. This combination applied even to political prisoners, who were given the “right” to transform themselves through labor in the Gulag camps.⁷ In any case, work therapy required determining how to help a deviant member of society reintegrate into the collective. It must also be said that the intention to return society’s marginals to productive labor was not a unique Soviet aspiration. For instance, the British state deemed “curative work” necessary for all disabled ex-servicemen after the First World War and the Germans promoted *Arbeitstherapie* for all categories of disabled individuals.⁸ One of the central ideas in the Soviet work-oriented welfare method, however, was that labor satisfied the disabled’s own urge to participate in the country’s development and made social integration the best path to personal happiness.⁹

Official discourses and policies did not explain how disabled people’s integration into the collective was to take place concretely. Bernice Madison has written that work therapy “assumed that once the disabled person was sufficiently healed to work and had been taught the skills for a specific job, other things would take care of themselves.”¹⁰ The vagueness of official definitions of job placement (*trudoustroistvo*) as a form of help on behalf of the disabled deprived VOS and VOG activists both of a blueprint for emancipation and of concrete state support in realizing their integrative and participatory vision of socialism. At the same time, grappling with these

⁷ Stephen Kotkin has written that “convicts were required to work not merely to make good their ‘debt’ to society but above all to be able to rejoin that society as transformed individuals.” *Magnetic Mountain*, 202. For an extensive discussion of this topic see Barnes, *Death and Redemption*.

⁸ See Bourke, *Dismembering the Male*, 55; and Deborah Cohen, *The War Come Home: Disabled Veterans in Britain and Germany, 1914-1939* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

⁹ See Madison, *Social Welfare in the Soviet Union*, 141-142.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 186.

ambiguities, VOS and VOG disabled activists could propose their own rehabilitation philosophy and emancipatory program.

The social integration desired by VOS and VOG activists was to be achieved not only through the elimination of illiteracy and the spreading of primary and secondary school education, but, even more effectively, through vocational training and employment. Indeed, the key goal of Soviet adult disability rehabilitation was to increase the disabled's ability to carry out work (*trudosposobnost'*). As Lennard Davis has remarked, the compulsion "to perform successfully in order not to be viewed as disabled" had emerged among the disabled communities of many industrializing countries already in the nineteenth century, when the standards for quantifying the human body were related to the standardized movements demanded by factory work.¹¹ In the Soviet Union, the mandate to learn a trade that produced an income derived from the Marxist-Leninist approach which saw poverty as an oppressive reality and labor as a means to express the most valuable traits of Man's personality. As a result of incremented working abilities, the blind and deaf-mute would no longer be the dependent invalids of the tsarist era. Nor would they be the lonely, ignorant, and helpless victims of capitalist social relationships. Rather, they would become the active participants of joyful socialist labor, the fully-fledged builders of the new society and its radiant life. For the activists of VOS and VOG, labor was the best way out of the social impasse of blindness and deafness, that is the condition of being forgotten and left behind.¹²

In their struggle for integration, VOS and VOG disabled activists did not see the condition for inclusion in the possession of physical abilities, but rather in the will to overcome

¹¹ Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy*, 10.

¹² See the poem quoted in the epigraph to this chapter. Kollektiv glukhonemykh tipogr., "Luchi."

their disability, acquire working capacities, and thereby support themselves independently through work. Claire Shaw has argued that “deaf people wrote themselves into the Soviet narrative of ‘overcoming’, challenging their ‘defect’ by seeking to demonstrate that their capabilities matched...those of the hearing.”¹³ Keith Livers has similarly suggested that Soviet disability was ultimately understood as a positive stimulus to self-development.¹⁴ Engagement in socially useful labor and the subordination of one’s individual desires to the collective good were key values of Soviet socialism. Blind and deaf-mute activists held the state to these values, pushing it to assess their fitness for membership not against their suffering disabled bodies, but vis-à-vis their efforts to surmount invalidism and be useful to the Soviet community. In this respect, for the disabled activists of VOS and VOG the suffering coming from disability could have never become the ground for special privileges. Quite to the contrary, need and suffering represented a challenge that could be faced and vanquished with the necessary state support.

This approach led disabled activists to consistently emphasize effort/labor contributions over need/suffering in legitimizing their right to be helped. However, the meaning that they assigned to labor as a key ground for state help and as a concrete tool to achieve integration changed in connection with the shifting discourses and policies adopted by the Soviet state between 1917 and 1950. In the following pages, I will trace changes by focusing on three moments – the years between the emergence of a Soviet disability advocacy and the administrative consolidation of VOS and VOG in the mid-1920s; the occurrence of a discursive shift in the late 1920s-early 1930s in connection with the onset of the Stalinist industrialization; and the reconstitution of disability advocacy after the wreckage of the Second World War.

¹³ Shaw, *Deaf in the USSR*, 16.

¹⁴ Keith A. Livers, *Constructing the Stalinist body: fictional representations of corporeality in the Stalinist 1930s* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2004). For a discussion of this topic at the hands of canonical texts and movies of Soviet socialist realism see Kaganovsky, *How the Soviet Man was (Un)Made*.

Throughout these three periods, Soviet disabled activists strove to demonstrate their social capital in terms of their fitness and general capability within the symbolic framework of socialist labor. Since the first years after the Revolution, the blind and the deaf-mute portrayed themselves as capable to overcome their disability and work alongside the able-bodied Soviet masses. Caught in the production drive of the 1930s, embattled activists particularly stressed their constituencies' place in the factories because these were the epicenters of Soviet economic life. However, at the peak of industrialization, the drive to inclusion in the country's working life became an aspiration bordering on total mobilization for the sake of the collective and a rather de-humanizing melding into it. Only after the Second World War, disabled activists rescaled the productivist cult of labor and promoted a discourse that took into account the price of the suffering endured by disabled veterans and the value of achieving not only productivity, but also human dignity through labor.

Focusing on the discursive and policy changes shaping the connection between help and labor in the context of disability, this chapter shows that the disabled's right to be helped was formed as a relational process. It was a social construct forged in webs of interrelations between the policymakers of the Narkomsobes, the disabled activists of VOS and VOG, and – as I show in the last section of this chapter – the blind and deaf-mute individuals who refused to belong to these official organizations.

My argument in this chapter is based on numbers that are difficult to verify because there are no reliable statistical data on the extent of blindness and deafness in the Soviet Union. Specific statistics on the number of deaf-mute and blind individuals in Russia were separately compiled in the 1920 and 1926 censuses. For the following years, however, the censuses had no

separate section for the computation of these categories of the Soviet population.¹⁵ The official count of the Russian deaf-mute given at the Second All-Russian Congress of the Deaf-Mute in January 1929 was 73, 000.¹⁶ The unofficial statistics compiled in 1928 by the defctologist N. Lagovskii calculated a total of 145,119 deaf-mute individuals in the Russian Republic only. According to the data presented by the Narkomzdraz, in 1923 there were 472.000 blind people in the whole Soviet Union. Some unverified statistical data suggested a total of 800,000 blind.¹⁷ Only around 7,000 deaf-mute and 8,800 blind were members of VOG and VOS in 1926. By August 1951, VOG membership had risen to 61,000, while VOS membership reached 45,874 in January 1950. These numbers corresponded to around 66% and 60% of the supposed overall Soviet deaf-mute and blind populations.¹⁸

Aware of the risks entailed in lumping together heterogeneous groups, I still believe that there are strong reasons for considering blind and deaf-mute activists together as a case study illuminating a fundamental aspect of the Soviet right to be helped. First, Russian adult disability rehabilitation was imbued by a holistic tradition.¹⁹ Second, the institutions of VOS and VOG acted on behalf of their respective constituencies in very similar ways and, over time, developed a similar relationship with the state. Third, the story of how the Soviet blind and deaf-mute were placed on the job market is characterized by a similar pattern of ebbs and flows for both groups. More importantly, the Soviet blind and deaf-mute shared common interests and used a common language to express their claims to help. At the same time, whenever possible, I will be explicit about some distinctions between the two types of disability and the advocacy performed by the

¹⁵ *Itogi perepisi naseleniia 1920 g.* (Moscow: Izdanie TsSU, 1928) and *Vsesoiuznaia perepis' naseleniia 1926 goda* (Moscow: Izdanie TsSU Soiuza SSR, 1928).

¹⁶ GARF, f. 511, o. 1, d. 13, l. 1.

¹⁷ GARF, f. 422, o. 1, d. 12, l. 2.

¹⁸ For data on VOS membership see GARF, f. 422, o. 1, d. 12, l. 2; f. 413, o.1, d. 1480, l. 2 and d. 1754, ll. 1-16. Statistical data on VOG membership are reported by Shaw in various sections of her dissertation *Deaf in the USSR*.

¹⁹ McCagg, "The Origins of Defectology."

two organizations.

3.1 Disability advocacy between 1917 and 1928

An active advocacy movement among Russian blind and deaf-mute people emerged only after the Revolution of February 1917. In the months following this event, two groups of disabled activists (respectively called Union of the Blind and Union of the Deaf-Mute) sought to harness the revolutionary potential of the moment by advocating for the legal emancipation of their constituencies. Early organizers protested against a law that imposed legal guardianship over adults with physical impairments – as though they were minors or insane persons – and campaigned for the endowment of full civil and political rights (*polnopravie*) and the recognition of the disabled's juridical equality with the able-bodied (*ravnopravie*). In this initial legal flare-up, the juridical status of the blind and deaf-mute almost exclusively occupied the attention of Russian disability advocacy.²⁰

Following the October Revolution and the constitutional conferral of equal legal rights to people with disabilities in July 1918, the administrative status of the two Unions underwent some important changes. They gradually ceased to be independent forums for the articulation of their constituencies' requests to the state and became more integrated in the Soviet administrative system. Already at the Second Congress of the Deaf-Mute in October 1920, the majority of delegates suggested to pass the organization's leadership over to the state. In that venue, the future chairman of VOG, Pavel Alekseevich Savel'ev, argued that the Union of the Deaf-Mute was impotent and unable to advance the defense of an uncultured constituency in any effective

²⁰ For a discussion of the pre-1917 system of tutelage over people with disabilities see Shaw, *Deaf in the USSR*, 16, 41-42, and 46-50. For an example of early protests against the tsarist legislation see A. Udal', "Pravavoe polozenie glukhonemykh v Rossii," in GARF, f. 511, o. 1, d. 1, ll. 179-187. One of the clearest articulations of disability advocacy in the liberal language of full civil and political rights occurred at the First Congress of the Deaf-Mute which took place in Moscow in July 1917. See GARF, f. 511, o.1, d. 1.

way. Therefore, continued Savel'ev, the organization should be closer to the state apparatus and include in its leadership able-bodied representatives from the Narkomsobes, Narkompros, Narkomzdrav, and NKVD.²¹ The activist Sergei Ivanovich Sokolov went so far as to recommend that the functions of the Union be completely absorbed into other state organs. In his opinion, there was no point in creating a "parallel private apparatus," since "the state is stronger than the Union and does everything for the deaf-mute."²²

Within a few years from these statements, both Unions became All-Russian Societies, were endowed with officially approved statutes, and included in the system of invalid producers' cooperatives (VOS in 1923 and VOG in 1926). The Societies were administratively incorporated within the Narkomsobes, under whose leadership and control they kept operating throughout the Soviet period. The subsequent institutional history of both associations would be characterized by a tension between the disabled activists' partial control of their own interests and the state's drive to run their decisions past the organs of central planning and fully integrate their workshops within the organizations of the able-bodied.²³

As the state took into its hands the provision of welfare services more firmly, blind and deaf-mute activists were denied the ability to organize themselves in independent groups.

²¹ GARF, f. 511, o.1, d. 3, l. 75.

²² GARF, f. 511, o. 1, d. 3, l. 80.

²³ Disabled advocacy did not make it to the All-Union level. VOS and VOG congresses were often attended by delegates from Ukraine, Georgia, the Northern Caucasus, Ossetiia, Ingushetiia, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Belorussia, and Bashkiriia. The Societies that were later established in the other Soviet Republics were modeled upon the All-Russian ones. For a collection of VOS's official documents see *Ot s'ezda k s'ezdu* (Moscow: Vserossiiskoe Obshchestvo Slepikh, 1989). For the biographies of the most active VOS members and a collection of their memoirs see Marat Biriuchkov, "Vserossiiskomu Obshchestvu Slepikh – 80!" *Shkol'nyi vestnik*, 4 (2006), 20-42. See also E. Ageev, "V nogu so zriachimi!," *Nasha zhizn'*, 4 (2000), 2-4 and 12-13; and A.Ia. Neumyvakin, "Istoricheskie vekhi VOS (k 85-letiiu)," at http://www.vos.org.ru/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1160:2010-03-17-10-25-03&catid=46:c-gr-arhivpub&Itemid=157 (last accessed on January 5, 2011). For VOG see V.G. Ushakov, *Vserossiiskoe Obshchestvo Glukhikh: istoriia, razvitie, perspektivy* (Leningrad: Leningradskii vosstanovitel'nyi tsentr VOG, 1985) and V.A. Palennyi, *Istoriia Vserossiiskogo Obshchestva Glukhikh* (Moscow: Vserossiiskoe obshchestvo glukhikh, 2007).

However, giving up autonomy and being consolidated within the structures of Soviet governance had some positive sides too. Indeed, in the years between 1918 and 1928, the two Societies strengthened their institutional standing and acquired enough legitimacy to enter an intense dialogue with the state's ideological apparatus.²⁴ Interacting with Narkomsobes leaders and policymakers from a position of insiders, VOS and VOG activists were able to advance their own conceptual framework for sustaining the disabled's right to be helped and for shaping the meaning of labor as this right's fundamental legitimizing category.

Two key concepts underpinned the activists' vision of the right to be helped and the role of labor in it: the denial of their members' helplessness and invalidism; and the real possibility for them to overcome the darkness of disability. The combination of these two principles allowed VOS and VOG activists to move the blind and deaf-mute out of the domain of charity and into the project of care and control that framed the Soviet approach to its marginalized populations. VOS and VOG adamantly rejected any form of beneficence based either on Christian compassion or secular humanism and expressed pronounced intolerance towards the disabled who asked for it. Disabled activists strove to define their institutionalized communities against beggars, street musicians, fortune-tellers, and postcard-sellers. While these were "invalids" living off alms, the active members of VOS and VOG were the worthy recipients of state assistance. Additionally, disabled activists claimed that the blind and the deaf-mute needed state care, but not tutelage: they would help themselves through labor and become productive members of society if the state provided support by guaranteeing their right to work and giving them jobs. According to this logic, the reception of state help was conceived as a right, which did not

²⁴ A similar periodization in the history of deaf disability advocacy is proposed by Clare Shaw. This scholar describes the years between 1917 and 1926 as a period of "experimentation...in establishing how the deaf were to function within the new ideological framework of self and society promoted by the Bolsheviks." Shaw, *Deaf in the USSR*, 51.

contrast with notions of independence. Unlike charity, the provision of state assistance did not deny the disabled's ability to work and be integral members of Soviet society. Rather, Soviet help was the necessary condition to fully realize one's abilities and become integrated.

Let us consider how the activists denied their constituencies' helplessness and constructed their ability to overcome darkness. As we will see, these interrelated discourses constituted the fundamental basis in the initial period of Soviet disability advocacy for building a notion of the right to be helped as the right to work.

The denial of helplessness and the overcoming of darkness

After the October Revolution, Soviet activists focused most of their energies on rejecting philanthropy because, in their view, it cut off any right for the blind and deaf-mute and doomed them to a hopeless, inescapable idleness. Especially in their narratives of how help was dispensed to the disabled before 1917, the activists described the pre-revolutionary blind and deaf-mute as individuals living in a prison of darkness and miserly using begging as the only way to support their unhappy existence.²⁵ In the opening speech at the First Congress of VOS in April 1925, an activist named Popov said:

the old order isolated the blind, threw a piece of bread at him, and put him on church charity (*paperti*). Some were isolated, doomed by lack of education and people's prejudices. Others were excluded from life by the imperialist and civil wars, which closed them up into hospitals and shelters.²⁶

As the future Chairman of VOS, Vasilii Andreevich Medvedev, put it in a letter to the society for the blind of the German socialist party in Berlin,

the old imperial Russia blocked all paths and ways to the blind, condemning them to

²⁵ One of the most vivid descriptions of this is in S.S. Golovin, *Sovremennaiia postanovka sotsial'noi pomoshchi slepym* (Moskva: Izdatel'stvo T-va "V.V. Dumnov, nasl. Br. Salaevykh", 1924).

²⁶ Quoted in *Ot s'ezda k s'ezdu*, 15-16.

begging and a dark life...in front, to the right, and to the left stayed only enemies: the state, the Church, a reactionary 'public opinion', and unwanted patrons.²⁷

The image of the roadblocks surrounding the blind and leaving open for them only the path going backwards emphasized that the blind were not only the victims of disease and poverty, but also of a political system that deprived them of any possibility to be mobile and advance forwards. Under these circumstances, continued the activists' argument, the common lot of the disabled could be nothing else than poverty, ignorance, and isolation from the other full-fledged members of society. VOS and VOG activists imagined the disabled of the past as desperately crying: "accept us as people."²⁸ In their opinion, the greatest need of the blind and deaf-mute was to feel a close spiritual link with those surrounding them.

Since VOS and VOG aimed at achieving mutual awareness and acceptance between the world of the able-bodied and that of the disabled, they agitated against any form of help that would have excluded their constituencies from the Soviet collectivity and tore them apart from the healthy body social. This is the main reason why they rejected not only Christian compassion, but also the Enlightenment principle of humanism, namely, because the private initiatives of single individuals could have never turned into a substantial advocacy for the rights and duties of blind and deaf-mute people.

In light of this desire for integration, it might seem paradoxical that VOS and VOG activists frequently related disability to lack of culture (*nekul'turnost'*). As a VOS member said in 1925, "blindness prevails in the uncultured layers of our society."²⁹ In fact, associating disability with *nekul'turnost'* allowed these activists to re-imagine blindness and deafness as

²⁷ GARF, f. 413, o.1, d. 1480, ll. 53-56.

²⁸ Golovin, *Sovremennaiia postanovka sotsial'noi pomoshchi slepym*, 13.

²⁹ GARF, f. 422, o. 1, d. 10, l. 21.

forms of backwardness that could be surmounted.³⁰ In the first phase of disability advocacy, VOS and VOG activists wanted first of all to move their lot out of the dead end in which it had been so far imagined to be. Their main aspiration was to integrate the blind and deaf-mute into the Soviet world of culture and knowledge. Agitating for education, they often qualified this service as a state's duty towards "the dark ones," a form of help that matched with the state's project of re-educating its uncultured masses. As such, it was mandated by nothing else than the state's communist and revolutionary political orientation.

The letter that the activist Georgii Iosifovich Grinberg wrote to Vladimir Lenin in August 1920 is a clear example of this type of discourse. Grinberg informed the leader of the new Soviet state about the "very dark and illiterate" conditions of the Russian deaf-mute population. Referring to Lenin's campaign against analphabetism, Grinberg complained that "no one talks...about liquidating illiteracy among the deaf-mute." He proposed to raise "the question of the deaf-mute" at Sovnarkom and TsIK meetings. His formulation – "the question of the deaf-mute" – echoed other hot issues of the time, for instance the "woman question" or the "peasant question." This construction emphasized the darkness of the Russian deaf-mute and made them into problems, i.e. the objects of a "question" whose resolution would ultimately benefit the larger collectivity. Presenting himself as "a communist," Grinberg linked his political orientation to the duty to "dedicate all my energy and knowledge to the deaf-mute people." He concluded the letter by arguing that "the Revolution" required him to take up activist responsibilities.³¹

³⁰ On Soviet understanding of *kul'turnost'* and backwardness see Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989) and Michael David-Fox, *Revolution of the Mind: Higher Learning among the Bolsheviks, 1918-1929* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997). For a more recent definition of Soviet *kul'turnost'* see Hoffmann's *Stalinist Values*, 16; and Vadim Volkov, "The Concept of *Kul'turnost'*: Notes on the Stalinist Civilization Process," in *Stalinism: New Directions*, Sheila Fitzpatrick ed. (London: Routledge, 1999), 210-230.

³¹ GARF, f. 2306, d. 383, o. 1, l. 29.

Both the deaf-mute and the blind were portrayed as waiting for the light of knowledge and labor. For instance, appearing as ignorant, engaged in irrational activities, and fundamentally unable to express themselves because all their senses were somehow shut down, the visually impaired had only “a mute reproach in their blind eyes.”³² This reprimand was directed at the able-bodied, well-educated, and employed members of the collective. It was a reminder of their duty to help the disabled by offering them vocational training and a job. In a 1924 poem entitled “Rays of Light” (*Luchi*), a group of deaf-mute typography workers identified a certain “comrade Pavlov,” the manager of their workshop, as the provider of the help that they had long been seeking. Thanks to the work that comrade Pavlov had organized for them, “a ray of light” was starting to illuminate their “underground corner,” which until then had been “far away from enlightened life.” The authors of this poem represented themselves as living in a “forgotten” space: they recognized their ignorance and their distance from the rest of society, but they also insisted that they were “thirsty for light.”³³ Indeed, VOS and VOG activists felt that they had to convince the able-bodied that the disabled, although dark and silent, greatly aspired to knowledge and could indeed have access to the life of culture and work that was supposedly led by the rest of the country. As Konstantin I. Baranov said at the Congress of the Deaf-Mute in the summer of 1917, “the mind of the deaf-mute, with the passion of fire, strives forward.”³⁴ Aspiring with all their energies to see the light and seeking it above of all in labor, the authors of the poem “Rays of Light” expressed optimism concerning their future emancipation from the oppression of inborn defects (*defekty ot rozhden'a /ne budut tiagostny vpolne*).³⁵ As the activist

³² Golovin, *Sovremennaiia postanovka sotsial'noi pomoshchi slepym*, 3.

³³ Kollektiv glukhonemykh tipogr., “Luchi,” 1. The image of “bright rays” was used often by activists advocating on behalf of the deaf-mute. See for instance P.P. Pochapin, “Ispolzovanie truda glukhonemykh v promyshlennosti i v sel'skom khoziaistve,” *Zhizn' glukhonemykh*, no. 7-8, 1 April 1928, 3.

³⁴ GARF, f. 511, o. 1, d. 1, l. 123.

³⁵ Kollektiv glukhonemykh tipogr., “Luchi,” 1.

Popov said in his speech at the First Congress of VOS in April 1925, “there is no physical dawn for us, but there is another one – the light of labor, the light of communism.”³⁶

In 1928, the Narkompros inspector Pavel Pavlovich Pochapin (himself a man with speech impediments) lamented that those who did not know the deaf-mute looked at them as inferior, unfit, and essentially unable to perform professional or social functions. “Of course,” argued Pochapin,

deafness is a hindering circumstance and it can indeed seem a defect in the performance of some functions...But in reality, deafness is not only a neutral circumstance, but even a positive quality. For instance....the deaf-mute have a greater talent for graphic arts...³⁷

In addition, continued Pochapin, the deaf-mute could better focus their attention. Although they “still need to work on themselves, they can achieve a high level of intellectual development.” In other words, the backwardness of the deaf-mute was not denied, but cast as surmountable. As Pochapin put it, “the deaf-mute are able to develop and reduce the distance between them and the normal people.”³⁸

Active members of VOS and VOG insisted on the real possibility to establish closer contacts between the disabled and the able-bodied. In a 1924 open letter to her “dear comrades,” an able-bodied woman-worker and VOG activist explained that speechlessness and deafness did not hinder “the ardent heart of a worker” from beating under the shirts of the deaf-mute laboring by her side on the shop floor. The disabled colleagues, averred this woman, “perform their work silently and do not react to what happens around them;” but, “if you look closer, then you see how life pulsates in them: a silent life, but nonetheless filled with social interests...” In this portrayal, the working ability of the deaf-mute is not lower than that of the able-bodied. It is true

³⁶ Quoted in *Ot s'ezda k s'ezdu*, 15-16.

³⁷ Pochapin, “Ispolzovanie truda glukhonemykh,” 3.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

that the deaf-mute's introversion is an obstacle to closer contact between them and the able-bodied, but this woman strongly criticizes the comrades who "work side by side with [the deaf-mute] without knowing and understanding them."³⁹

Disabled activists wanted to correct people's misunderstandings about the working abilities of the physically handicapped and erase the false identification of blindness and deafness with weakness of intellect. Ultimately, however, this change in popular attitudes did not happen by intervening on the able-bodied and eradicating their prejudices, but rather by normalizing the disabled. It was never the able-bodied who came to share the life of the blind and deaf-mute, but the disabled who were "brought closer to the normal fellow citizens" through schooling and the acquisition of working skills.⁴⁰ The pedagogue Fedor Andreevich Rau argued that education made the disabled "human in the full sense of this word and closer to the community" of able-bodied people.⁴¹ Two of the "Five Wishes" articulated by the chairman of VOG P.A. Savel'ev (writing under the pseudonym of Boris Volgin) were

to give not only literacy, but also a professional qualification, and thus turn the deaf-mute into industrial workers...and to create conditions of work in which the labor of the deaf-mute would be completely employed and there could be mutual understanding between the deaf-mute and the hearing workers.⁴²

Normalization (turning into industrial workers) and integration (equal employment opportunities) did not contradict each other in this discourse, but rather functioned in dynamic tension. As the activist Pochapin wrote in a leaflet opposing the isolation of the deaf-mute from

³⁹ Goldber, "Dorogie Tovarishchi," *Pervomaiskii sdvig*, 1 May 1924, 1. An article entitled "The enigma of silence" brought home the same message. A.M. "Zagadka molchaniia," *Zhizn' glukhonemykh*, no. 7-8, 1 April 1928, 2. See also Savel'ev's speech at the Second All-Russian Congress of the Deaf-Mute in January 1929 in GARF, f. 511, o. 1, d. 13, l. 1.

⁴⁰ This statement was attributed to Fedor Rau in an article written by his wife Natalia Rau, "U glukhonemykh doshkol'nikov," *Pervomaiskii sdvig*, 1 May 1924, 2.

⁴¹ RAO, f. 113, d. 337, l. 4.

⁴² Boris Volgin, "Piat' pozhelanii (K dokladu Narkomsobesa na sessii VTsIK'a)," *Zhizn' glukhonemykh*, no. 7-8, 1 April 1928, 1.

the rest of society, “we cannot tear off from normal life a great number of people who could enter the family of workers on common grounds.”⁴³ Thus, the activists’ program included both an emancipatory integrative component and a disciplining normalizing side. Both were to happen through labor.

Incongruous as it might sound, the Soviet disabled needed help, but were not helpless. While until the October Revolution, the press had portrayed the disabled as aggrieved and ill-starred (*obizhennye*),⁴⁴ after 1917 the main idea was that the disabled, although still in a state of darkness, in fact had the potential to contribute to the socialist state as much as the able-bodied. VOS and VOG activists realized that if the disabled were to appear as helpless, lingering behind, and lost vis-à-vis the fast pace of change, they would have evoked only feelings of pity or scorn for their wretchedness. The Soviet disabled were always already asked to “be in step with” (*v nogu*) and “in the same ranks as” (*v riadu*) the able-bodied. They had to “walk at a pace with the able-bodied along the path to reinforce the achievements of the October,”⁴⁵ “return to the world (*sreda*) of the able-bodied,” “be on the same level with all the others,” “be on par” (*naravne*) and at times even “higher” than the able-bodied.⁴⁶ Commenting on how the blind should appear in theatrical plays, an activist said: “The blind should not appear as helpless or improbable (*nepravdopodobnyi*). To the contrary he should fuse into the real reality surrounding him.”⁴⁷

In sum, between 1917 and 1928, Soviet activism on behalf of disabled people had an integrative *and* disciplinary thrust. The discourse of darkness generally portrayed the blind and

⁴³ Pochapin, “Ispolzovanie truda glukhonemykh,” 3.

⁴⁴ See for instance the anonymous article “Slepye” in *Gazeta dlia vsekh*, 1 June 1917, 4.

⁴⁵ This specific quotation is from a petition to the Sovnarkom and the TsIK submitted by the Presidium of VOS in the fall of 1925. GARF, f. 422, o. 1, d. 12, l. 19.

⁴⁶ I came across variations of these slogans in almost all the texts drafted by Soviet activists between 1920 and 1950. *In step with the seeing* (*V nogu so zraichimi*) was the title of one of the two official periodical publications of VOS. The other was *The Life of the Blind* (*Zhizn slepykh*).

⁴⁷ GARF, f. 422, o. 1, d. 10, l. 21.

deaf-mute as below the norm of the able-bodied worker and thereby legitimized normalization (even humanization, in Fedor Rau's words). In this respect, Daniel Beer correctly argues that "the discourse of social *ozdorovlenie*...was unavoidably and irreducibly disciplinary."⁴⁸ At the same time, the activists' attempt to normalize also carried within itself an enabling, emancipating, and integrating thrust. This was the paradox of a form of help that was conceived both as discipline and integration.

Help as trudoustroistvo

By the mid-1920s, when both VOS and VOG had consolidated their administrative standing under the aegis of the Narkomsobes, most disabled activists articulated a conceptualization of help as job placement. This notion closely resembled the official pronouncements of their umbrella institution. As we have seen in chapter 1, the Narkomsobes considered the involvement of the disabled in the labor market as the best welfare policy for this specific category of *pensionery*. However, we should not assume that VOS and VOG simply internalized the officially sponsored culture of labor. Rather, in the years between 1917 and 1928, help as *trudoustroistvo* emerged as a social construct forged through mutually constitutive interactions between the state social assistance agency and the activists of VOS and VOG.

Already at the First Congress of the Deaf-Mute in July 1917, the activist Smirnova had introduced the term "work-oriented help" (*trudovaia pomoshch'*). According to this activist, labor occupied a "dominating position" because "every man has to worry about his daily bread" and because "work-oriented help is the ardent desire of the majority." To have a profession – freely chosen, intellectually stimulating and creative, but also socially useful – was seen already

⁴⁸ Beer, *Renovating Russia*, 26.

in the summer of 1917 as a significant component to satisfy the material and spiritual interests of the disabled.⁴⁹

The official statutes drafted by VOS and VOG in the mid-1920s echoed Smirnova's words by indicating "material welfare through labor" (*trudovaia material'naia obespechennost'*) as the primary goal of the two Societies.⁵⁰ This phrase meant the improvement of the life of the disabled not by means of philanthropy, but through the acquisition of accessible trades and employment in productive activities.⁵¹ At the Second Plenum of VOS in August 1925, when the representatives of the Workers' and Peasants' Inspection (Rabkrin) suggested the blind activists to adopt the slogan "Not pity for the blind, but work,"⁵² the activist Afinogenov readily added: "Let's advance the question of the blind along the tracks of labor."⁵³ The most radical activists went so far as to completely exclude any other form of assistance. For instance, one of the "theses" pronounced at the Meeting of the Deaf-Mute of 1926 read:

Material help from the state to the deaf-mute can be directed only at their job placement and must take the form of assignments of credits and subsidies to the cooperatives...Taking into consideration the possibility of complete assistance through employment, there should not be any support in the form of pensions or placement in the facilities of social welfare.

This activist further defined job placement as "the only rational form of assistance" to the disabled.⁵⁴

Extreme as it might sound, this stance was in fact nothing else than the radicalization of a belief long held by the disabled activists – namely, that the blind and the deaf-mute should not be looked upon as invalids, subjects of charity, or passive recipients of the state's payoffs, but as

⁴⁹GARF, f. 511, o. 1, d. 1, ll. 193-194. See also GARF, f. 511, d. 1, o. 1, l. 71 and f. 422, d. 1, o. 1, ll. 1-7.

⁵⁰ GARF, f. 422, o. 1, d. 10, l. 15.

⁵¹ GARF, f. 422, o. 1, d. 12, l. 9.

⁵² GARF, f. 422, o. 1, d. 10, l. 11.

⁵³ GARF, f. 422, o. 1, d. 10, l. 10.

⁵⁴ GARF, f. 511, o. 1, d. 8, ll. 23-24.

active and integrated members of the Soviet collective. Disabled activists certainly became more aware of the importance that the state attributed to work-oriented welfare when their organizations were subsumed under the Narkomsobes. Yet, their definition of work as “the first means of struggle against begging” reveals a mutual complicity in the construction of help as *trudoustroistvo*.⁵⁵

One of the most coherent and thorough articulations of the relation between help and labor (as it was conceived by Soviet disabled activists in the mid-1920s) was given in 1924 by the activist and expert in ophthalmology Sergei Selivanovich Golovin. His book *The Contemporary State of Social Help to the Blind* emphasized the key role of labor in legitimizing and realizing the disabled’s right to be helped.⁵⁶ Yet, this book praised labor not only for its “material outcomes,” but also for “the spiritual and moral achievements” that it made possible for the Soviet blind. As we will see in the next sections, the non-economic, moral dimension of the relationship between help and labor would get lost in the 1930s and re-emerge only after the Second World War.

In line with the defectological approach that was widespread among Russian pedagogical and medical specialists of the 1920s, Golovin conceived adult blindness as a social disease treatable by science. He grounded help to the blind in defectology because this new pedagogical science permitted the study of both the psychology and the physical peculiarities of grown-up blind people. Furthermore, defectology facilitated the elaboration of a didactic program that

⁵⁵ This phrase was used by an activist called Galvin in an undated document preserved in GARF, f. 422, o. 1, d. 10, l. 8. It appears almost verbatim in a letter written on October 21, 1923, by the Chairman of VOS B.P. Mavromati and addressed to the Sovnarkom. GARF, f. 422, o. 1, d. 2, l. 1.

⁵⁶ Golovin, *Sovremennaiia postanovka sotsial'noi pomoshchi slepym*. Sergei Selivanovich Golovin (1866-1931) had been advocating for *trudoustroistvo* as a means to endow the blind with rights already in his 1910 book *O slepote v Rossii* (Odessa: Tip. Tekhnik, 1910). For a brief biography of Golovin see Biriuchkov, “Vserossiiskomu Obshchestvu Slepym – 80!”

combined educational and practical goals. According to Golovin, schools and other facilities for the blind should perform a set of complex functions, which included the provision of university education as well as the teaching of trades and the involvement in industrial work. In addition to this standard defectological view of the time, Golovin argued that the state institutions for the blind should support the spiritual interests of this population, while also functioning as employers or job placement agency for them.⁵⁷

Golovin saw a model for this type of institution in the German facilities for the blind that he had visited during a research trip in the fall of 1923. Indeed, German schools for adult blind people not only offered an education of the same quality as that provided in regular state schools, but also taught a larger range of trades. For instance, in agrarian schools for the blind, practical and theoretical curricula had the goal to enable the students to run an autonomous agricultural enterprise of small dimensions and thereby “to lead a comfortable life.” Promoting the German model, Golovin argued that university education and the study of foreign languages should be made accessible to the Soviet blind because this type of education would provide them with additional professional skills.⁵⁸ In sum, in Golovin’s discourse, education and appropriate forms of labor were the preferred methods to help the blind.

Golovin devoted a relatively large section of his booklet to celebrating the initiative developed in Berlin by Paul H. Perls. The promoter of an approach to disability called *Arbeitstherapie* (or therapy through work), Perls had organized a special production department for the blind in the factories of the German industrial giant Siemens.⁵⁹ Golovin was enthusiastic

⁵⁷ Golovin, *Sovremennaiia postanovka sotsial’noi pomoshchi slepym*, 4.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 14.

⁵⁹ See Paul H. Perls, *Wiederertüchtigung schwerbeschädigter Kriegsteilnehmer in der Werkstatt: Arbeitstherapie* (Berlin: Springer, 1917). The book was very popular and underwent several editions throughout the 1920s. When Golovin was writing his booklet in 1924, Perls’s book was coming out in its fifth edition.

about Perls's experiment. Not coincidentally, all the illustrations in his book were pictures of Perls's department for the blind in the facilities of Siemens. They showed blind men who, "like the healthy ones," sat at industrial machines and performed "fruitful work."⁶⁰



Figure 2: The blind man operating this threading machine had also an amputated hand. Source: Golovin, *Sovremennaia postanovka sotsial'noi pomoshchi slepym*, 19.



Figure 3: The left hand of this blind man had been amputated at the wrist; on the right hand, four fingers were "deformed." Despite all this, he was able to work at an automated threading machine. Source: Golovin, *Sovremennaia postanovka sotsial'noi pomoshchi slepym*, 22.

After the necessary training and the installation of safety devices that would prevent accidents, access to the most complex industrial machines appeared as a real possibility for the blind and maimed workers of these photographs. Emphasizing the "agility, precision, and determination" with which the blind operated these "complex and even frightening machines,"

⁶⁰ Golovin, *Sovremennaia postanovka sotsial'noi pomoshchi slepym*, 17.

Golovin attributed to the blind the most important qualities of the modern industrial worker.⁶¹ This activist used industrial work as a criterion to equalize the blind with the able-bodied and even aggrandize them in comparison with all those who were frightened by the complexity of modern industrial technology. To put it simply, to master technology meant to overcome backwardness.⁶²

The experience of Paul Perls confirmed that work had an extremely positive influence on the blind from a material as well as from a moral point of view. Again, the captions to some illustrations drove home the classic message *mens sana in corpore sano* – when the muscles develop, both the physical and mental health of the person will improve. Through work the mood of the blind improved significantly; they felt more peaceful, more energetic, and even physically stronger than they felt when they did not work.⁶³ In addition, Golovin argued that work had to be industrial rather than artisanal. This expert subscribed to the prejudice that employment in artisan workshops did not give the blind any material security because it took up all their waking time but gave them only a miserable income. In contrast to artisanal work, industrial labor was “happier and healthier.” As Golovin put it,

the blind feels that he reaches perfection in his work, that he acquires equal worth as the able-bodied, ... that he will always be offered a job that will feed him and be useful to other people as well.⁶⁴

While “nothing demoralizes and discourages the blind more than the forced state of doing-nothing,” having an industrial job made the blind confident that they were appreciated and gave

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁶² This argument would be later articulated also by the Chairman of VOG Savel'ev at the Third All-Russian Congress of the Deaf-Mute in 1931. See GARF, f. 511, o. 1, d. 18, l. 32.

⁶³ Golovin, *Sovremenniaia postanovka sotsil'noi pomoshchi slepym*, 19.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.

them energy.⁶⁵

Golovin was also careful to explain the material advantages that would come to the industries employing the blind: after having acquired the proper skills, the blind gave the same “impeccable output” as the able-bodied and their work did not cause any losses to the factory. To the contrary, the blind could produce even more than the able-bodied because their very disabilities shielded them from the visual distractions of the external world and allowed them to focus more intensively on their work.⁶⁶

Applying Bolshevik jargon to Siemens’s department for the blind, Golovin wrote that this was a place where “fairytales had come true” and “the impossible had turned into reality.”⁶⁷ Although Soviet discourse contended that only the socialist state could give the necessary supports to allow the disabled to escape from the grip of private charity, Perls’s initiative showed that help through work was a pan-European trend. Perls’s motto was “Work, not compassion” (*Arbeit, nicht Mitleid*). And Golovin echoed, “in a cultured state, the blind don’t need charity, but work.”⁶⁸

In the industrial fairytales told by Soviet disability activists in the 1920s, the feelings of the disabled still occupied an important place. Tellingly, Golovin’s text was imbued with an inner tension concerning the idea of compassion. On one hand, “compassion, which evokes only charity, has become an offense for cultured people.” On the other hand, “compassion and understanding are necessary as the impulse for active, resolute love.”⁶⁹ Labor appeared as the instrument to cut the connection between compassion and charity without severing that between

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

compassion and love. For Golovin, this “ardent, resolute love to the human person” had to pervade both the idea and the practice of help to the disabled; it had to penetrate all the measures of labor safety and care for the blind.⁷⁰ Not very differently from Kashchenko, who defined the Medico-Pedagogical Station as a “hardworking and loving family,” Golovin saw Perls’s factory as “a home of work and love,” a space where the disabled found a place in life.⁷¹ As we will see in the next section, the coexistence of work and love in the lives of the Soviet blind and deaf-mute would undergo significant conceptual and practical changes with the onset of the Stalinist industrialization, when full working capacity ended up constituting the essential feature that made the disabled into integral members of the Soviet working family.

3.2 Discursive and policy shifts in the disability advocacy of the 1930s

In a 1935 article entitled “The deaf-mute are socially full-fledged people,” VOG activist G.A. Iusfin raised the following provocative question: “Just because a person has lost an organ like the sense of hearing or vision, is he less than a person?”⁷² In one form or the other, this problem had been raised and pondered by Soviet disabled activists since the Revolution. However, over the years, the activists’ response to this question had undergone a significant discursive shift. In the 1920s, disabled activists had lobbied for integration and respectability, arguing for the ability of their constituencies to develop intellectually and demanding general education together with access to remunerated work. By the late 1920s-early 1930s, we see an almost exclusive emphasis on vocational training and productive occupational skills. Integration came to mean above all the chance to perform one’s allotted duty as builder of socialism on equal footing with the able-bodied.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁷² Dr. G.A. Iusfin, “Glukhonemye sotsial’no polnotsenny,” *Beregi Slukh*, 25 December 1935, 2.

These changes are clearly reflected in how Iusfin used the term *polnotsennyi* in the title and the text of his article. *Polnotsennyi* is the opposite of *defektivnyi*. While the latter adjective indicates a lack or defect, the former signifies a completeness of value or fitness. *Polnotsennost'* was one of the key aspirations of disability advocacy throughout the early Soviet and Stalinist experience. After 1928, however, its semantic field definitely shrank from a broad sense of full-fledged-ness and worthiness to the idea of usefulness for the construction of socialism. To have complete value (*polno-tsennost'*) was increasingly equated with having full working abilities (*polnaia trudosposobnost'*). In the productivist climate of the 1930s, these could be acquired only by fulfilling output quotas in the Soviet factories.⁷³

This discursive shift critically impacted the disabled activists' self-image. However, it did not simply originate internally, but rather in dialogue with the ever changing conditions of Soviet ideology and everyday life. The years between 1929 and 1935 were the time when the Soviet state set the foundations of its socialist economy. This was the period of the so-called "construction of socialism," which demanded the involvement of every social group, the blind and the deaf-mute included. In response to this Zeitgeist, the resolutions and directives officially approved at VOG's Second and Third All-Russian Congress (in January 1929 and November 1931) and at VOS's Fourth and Fifth All-Russian Congress (in June 1930 and in September 1932) explicitly articulated the Societies' goal as the integration of the blind and deaf-mute into the task of socialist construction, their transformation into qualified personnel for the state industry, their organization into compact productive brigades, and their involvement in socialist

⁷³ Besides Iusfin's article, this discursive shift clearly emerges in the anonymous article "Cherez shkolu i trud vosstanovim sotsial'nuiu polnotsennost' glukhonemykh," *Beregi Slukh*, 25 December 1935, 3. For later elaborations see V. Solov'ev, "Trudovoe obuchenie v shkolakh dlia glukhonemykh," *Biulleten' stengazety "Nash prizyv"*, no. 7, June 1940, 4; K.V. Kozlova, "O vospitatel'noi rabote," *ibid.*, 4; and A. Orlov, "Prikaz po Moskovskomu gorodskomu institutu glukhnemykh," *ibid.*, 2.

competition.⁷⁴ This was the productive life that the rest of the country was allegedly living.

The new productivist emphasis in the discourse of help through labor restructured the Societies' advocacy and relief work in practical ways too. VOS and VOG had tried to organize separate workshops for their constituencies first independently (in 1926-1927) and then within the Industrial-Consumer Union of Invalids, or VIKO (in 1928-1930). Both attempts had been rather feeble and soon proved unsuccessful. In particular, the transfer of VOS and VOG workshops to VIKO had led to the bankruptcy and closure of many enterprises. Subsequently, in the early 1930s, the two organizations re-opened their own workshops, but this time they strove to give a more rigid and formal structure to the disabled's vocational training and employment. The resulting so-called "educational-industrial" or "training and industrial" workshops (*uchebno-proizvodstvennye masterskie*, or UPMs) were supposed to have a homogeneous cohort of students, implement specific curricular plans, respect deadlines, and offer adequate stipends. In these workshops, blind and deaf-mute adults were to receive enough training in performing technical work and operating special machines to eventually make the transition to state enterprises.

In fact, the general scarcity of material resources of basic necessity, the objective lack of financial means at the disposal of local administrators, and the latter's frequent unwillingness to implement official resolutions shattered the very foundations of the state's ideology of work-oriented welfare and the activists' discourse of help through labor. When supervisory agencies such as Rabkrin audited the provincial technical schools and workshops for the disabled, they discovered a rather nasty reality.

⁷⁴ For VOG's congresses see the transcripts preserved in GARF, f. 511, o. 1, d. 13 and d. 18. For VOS's congresses see the documents published in *Ot s'ezda k s'ezdu* and *Rezoliutsii i postanovleniia V Vserossiiskogo s'ezda slepykh sostoiavshchegosia 25-30 sentiabria 1932 g.* (Arkhangel'sk: Tipografiia n. 1, 1933).

The trade school for the blind in the village of Verkhnie Mulli in the Perm' province is a telling example. If we have to believe the account written by a Rabkrin inspector who visited this trade school in 1933, the vocational education offered in this facility was "completely unsatisfactory." Due to the lack of specialized housing, the school could not admit enough students. Instructors, teachers, and administrators mismanaged the school by stifling socialist competition and keeping the production output at inadmissibly low levels. In addition, they made illegal use of the school's resources to obtain personal gains: the instructors appropriated and hoarded the material belonging to the school and used its machinery to produce items to sell to private clients; the teaching personnel increased their wages at will; and the director Beliakov, who was well known for his drinking problems, simply embezzled school money. Since the school accountant, the *lishenets* Bushkonets, did not keep any proper accounts, the school's overblown production costs were unverifiable. More seriously, the students felt isolated from the social and political life of the country and from the most important issues of the day.⁷⁵ The Verkhnie Mulli's inspection report provides a rather representative picture of the chaotic conditions of VOS and VOG trade schools and UPMs.

In the mid-1930s, the recognition that VOS and VOG were unable to implement help to the disabled independently combined with a general change in the status of all Soviet organizations. As we saw in the case of the Medico-Pedagogical Station, this was a time when all semi-independent agencies were either forced to dissolve or asked to join the state apparatus in a relationship of clearer subordination.⁷⁶ In line with this trend, around 1935 all the educational and productive enterprises of VOS and VOG were moved under the direct control of the

⁷⁵ GAPK, f. 130, o. 1, d. 48.

⁷⁶ Shaw describes some attempts in the mid-1930s to downsize VOG and transfer deaf service to the trade unions. Shaw, *Deaf in the USSR*, 107-117.

Narkomsobes, which managed them through a special department called Administration of Productive Enterprises (*Upravlenie Proizvodstvennymi Predpriiatiiami*). Initially, this passage marked the beginning of renewed efforts to improve disabled adults' education. Soon, however, a new jurisdictional move motivated by production exigencies at a time of labor shortage set the system of disabled's workshops in shambles again. At the end of 1937, the Sovnarkom decided to move the disabled's productive enterprises away from the Narkomsobes and into the Commissariats of Local and Light Industry.

Following this transfer, several directives specified the quotas to be filled by five economic agencies in the hiring of disabled citizens. These were the People's Commissariats of Local, Light, and Textile Industry, the All-Union Council of Producers' Cooperatives, and the All-Russian Union of Disabled Persons' Cooperative Association (Koopinsoiuz). However, the hiring of disabled workers in state industry did not always proceed on an equal basis with that of the able-bodied. For instance, contrary to the recommended quotas, in 1940 "no more than 25% of the employable blind" were actually employed.⁷⁷ While the Koopinsoiuz did hire a certain number of disabled persons, the other economic organs systematically disregarded the employment plans. In spite of the directives' encouragement to respect the occupational profiles and skills of the disabled in setting output quotas and levels of compensation, soon after the 1937 transfer, disabled workers started to be replaced by physically unimpaired ones.

Provincial VOS and VOG sections loudly complained about the wasted labor force of the disabled. The local administrators of the mentioned economic organs defended themselves by

⁷⁷ V. Dmitriev, "Puti trudoustroistva slepykh," *Sotsial'noe Obespechenie*, no. 2, 1940, 31-32, at 31. Some archival documents report even more troubling statistics, testifying that only between 17% and 25% of the employable blind had a job. See GARF, f. 413, o. 1, d. 75, l. 5.

claiming that it was impossible to hire disabled people due to the lack of specialized housing.⁷⁸

The Narkomsobes attempted to involve its local officers, reminding them of the duty to find jobs for the disabled in their region, but its circular letters did not have any impact either: most meetings of local Narkomosbes sections passed over in silence any issue related to the vocational education and employment of the disabled.⁷⁹

The story of the factory Zemes is a good illustration of the fate that befell many disabled enterprises in the 1930s. Zemes had been organized at the end of 1929 by the Leningrad section of VOS. It was a small workshop that produced electrical fans and employed around 20 blind individuals. The production was mechanized – which required the teaching of proper industrial skills and a minimal technical knowledge. Zemes worked so well that in 1934 a large three-floor building was built for it and the workshop turned into a factory for the production of electric engines. Resisting the general disenfranchisement of VOS's workshops of the mid-1930s, Zemes was able to remain under the management of VOS. In 1937, the factory successfully employed around 350 blind workers who performed 75-85% of the work (the remaining percentage being carried out by a small cohort of able-bodied workers). Following the Sovnarkom's decision at the end of 1937, the factory was moved to the jurisdiction of the Commissariat of Local Industry and then to the Commissariat of Auto-Tractor Industry. From that moment onwards the blind stopped to be considered the main cohort of workers; production was no longer set up with their peculiarities in mind; and their number started to decrease very rapidly, going from 350 to 158 by the end of 1939. The blind workers who continued to work for Zemes were employed in the delivery sector and, when this closed, the number of blind employees further decreased and

⁷⁸ See for instance a case from Gor'kovskaia oblast in GARF, f. 413, o. 1, d. 75, l. 20. The problem of housing constantly resurfaces in the sources. Presumably, living facilities had to be specialized and therefore difficult to organize. However, I was not able to locate any specific document on the issue of disabled housing and the secondary literature is not helpful either.

⁷⁹ GARF, f. 413, o. 1, d. 75, l. 7 and d. 1195, l. 3.

finally equaled zero.⁸⁰

Stories from other corners of the Russian Republic reveal that the state's economic agencies often did not care to set up the proper technical and safety conditions for the hiring of the disabled. The Narkomsobes barely intervened and its few initiatives were ineffective. In the Saratov province, for instance, the managers of the local industries did not take any measure to hire the blind. To the contrary, they frequently fired them for no specific reason. In the city of Balakovo there were 37 employed blind in 1939, but only 11 in 1940; in Vol'sk, the number of employed blind went from 70 to 46; in Balashov, it decreased from 40 to 7. A high rate of firings occurred in 1939 also in the Krasnodarskii krai: 397 blind used to work in the enterprises of local industry, but their number decreased to 284 in 1940. The workshops for the blind of the Krasnodar province were in total disarray: one worked only 15 days a month; another completely stopped functioning and left its blind employees without any work.⁸¹ The knitwear factory of Tambov had 94 blind people working in its premises in January 1939, but by August of the same year only 70 blind were still employed there. Some representatives of the Narkomsobes and the Chairman of VOS V.A. Medvedev investigated the causes of the blind's exodus from this factory. It turned out that 9 people had been fired for violating the enterprise's labor discipline, while 15 blind had left "on their own will" because, as they told Medvedev, they had been moved to positions for which they had no training and their salaries had been significantly lowered. The factory director categorically refused to hire other blind individuals declaring that: "the blind are worthless workers...they don't fulfill the norms." The head of the oblast' section

⁸⁰ The story of the factory Zemes as told by the activist Shaverin is preserved in GARF, f. 413, o. 1, d. 1952, ll. 15-16.

⁸¹ GARF, f. 413, o. 1, d. 75, l. 2.

of light industry echoed: “We need quality of production; the blind cannot give it to us.”⁸²

How can we explain this “voluntary” exodus of disabled workers from productive units that had been set up especially for them? Besides the housing problem, penury of raw materials and adequate machines as well as frequent stoppages in the provision of power caused significant interruptions in the flow of work, forcing enterprise managers to lower the salaries of both healthy and handicapped workers.⁸³ Abuses, squandering of public means, and embezzlement of state money were usual occurrences in many local enterprises and a feature of disabled workshops as well. Continuous wastage and stealing, untrained and unqualified cadres, a sharp turn-over among the personnel, organizational chaos, chronic problems with funding, and the constant shifting of jurisdiction led to the bankruptcy and closure of many UPMs.⁸⁴ Blind and deaf-mute workers recognized the disabled enterprises’ limited ability to produce income and to guarantee a stable financial base for the cultural and social services that VOS and VOG were supposed to provide. It was the recognition that no real help was coming from the state in terms of fair employment that led many disabled to leave the UPMs “on their own will,” give up on the ideal of labor and integration, and often choose a life of begging, fortune-telling, singing, and postcard-selling in the marketplaces.

But when they did not leave “voluntarily,” why were the blind and the deaf-mute so frequently laid off? Since data on the production quotas of handicapped and able-bodied workers are contradictory and unreliable, we cannot determine whether the profound motives behind the firing of disabled workers lay in the relative productivity of the two groups of workers, in the

⁸² GARF, f. 413, o. 1, d. 75, l. 2.

⁸³ Data on the salary of the disabled is contradictory. The Narkomsobes stated that in 1950 the average yearly income of a blind worker employed in a UPM was 20,373 rubles (GARF, f. 413, o.1, d. 1480, l. 14). But according to a more pessimistic calculation it was around 330 rubles a month or 3,960 rubles a year (GARF, f. 413, o. 1, d. 1754, l. 172).

⁸⁴ GARF, f. 413, o. 1, d. 75, l. 9; d. 1195, l. 5; and d. 1480, l. 12.

managers' prejudices, or in a combination of both. Available evidence shows that the administrators drafted production plans that did not consider the peculiarities of the disabled labor force and the engineers projected technologies that had the able-bodied in mind. The UPMs directors prioritized issues of production over issues of fair employment, forgetting that they managed not industrial enterprises but special didactic units. They preferred to hire the able-bodied labor force, because they believed that this gave them an easier way to over-fulfill the plans.

Contending that the crux of the problem was the refusal of invalid cooperatives and local industries to hire disabled individuals, Bernice Madison has explained that the leadership of the Soviet economic agencies "did not desire and did not care" to realize the disabled's right to be helped through labor.⁸⁵ Much of the blame for violating labor regulations, setting up unsuitable working conditions, and treating the disabled and the able-bodied unequally certainly lay on local enterprise directors. The latter shared responsibilities with policymakers that put too much emphasis on fulfilling the production plans and demanded an ever-increasing growth of the industrial out-put. Furthermore, in a period defined not only by breakneck industrialization but also by social fears and political stigmas, the managers' social prejudices had ideological reasons too. Blindness was first of all physically incapacitating in terms of labor productivity, but it also represented a visible defect perturbing the image of the healthy body politics. Although neither visible and nor directly impinging on a worker's productive abilities, the communicative isolation of deafness also caused problems when the deaf-mute attempted to enter the workplace. Indeed, deafness was assumed to impair mental competence and preclude full social participation. As Claire Shaw has explained, the parallels between deafness and political

⁸⁵ Madison, *Social Welfare in the Soviet Union*, 186. The quotation is from a report preserved in GARF, f. 413, o. 1, d. 1195, l. 16.

fallibility were not less troubling than unfulfilled production quotas, since the inability to communicate with the collectivity was perceived as anti-Soviet.⁸⁶ The otherness and isolation caused by blindness and deafness were sinister and suspicious behaviors in the late 1930s because they correlated to anti-Sovietness.

While individual blind and deaf-mute people left the disabled productive units (largely because they recognized the UPMs' inability to offer them the income and social services that they desired) and while managers were reluctant to hire disabled workers (because they doubted their productive abilities and feared their political reliability), disabled activists vehemently – but unsuccessfully – argued with both. On one hand, they reproached the resigning disabled for “loving easy incomes” and rejecting the “authentic employment” that the state did offer them.⁸⁷ On the other hand, to counter the managers' prejudices, the activists insisted that the disabled could work better than the able-bodied. The blind were depicted as exemplary workers thanks to their ability to maximally focus; the deaf-mute were said to have a stronger sense of touch, which allowed them to fix very quickly any malfunctioning in the machines and to prevent breakdowns. In particular, VOG activists advertised the employment of the deaf-mute in noisy environments where the sound level would have damaged the hearing of able-bodied workers.⁸⁸ The social worker Bobrov claimed that the disabled could keep the same pace in production as the able-bodied and even become *udarniki* and stakhanovites.⁸⁹

Thus, in the conceptualization of the right to be helped that VOS and VOG activists had

⁸⁶ Shaw, *Deaf in the USSR*, 14, 41, and 93-98. See especially her discussion of the so-called “deaf-mute affair,” a purge in the Leningrad branch of VOG that took place in 1937 (at 102-105). The communication barriers that separate the deaf from the hearing and that constitute the main social handicap of deafness have been described also in other national contexts. See for instance, Karen Nakamura, *Deaf in Japan. Signing and the Politics of Identity* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 11.

⁸⁷ These words belong to the Narkomsobes administrator Bobrov. GARF, f. 413, o. 1, d. 75, ll. 3-4.

⁸⁸ Professor A. Fink, “Glukhonemye i glukhonemota,” *Beregi Slukh*, 25 December 1935, 2.

⁸⁹ GARF, f. 413, o. 1, d. 75, l. 7. See also the anonymous article “Cherez shkolu i trud vosstanovim sotsial'nuu polnotsennost' glukhonemykh,” *Beregi Slukh*, 25 Dec. 1935, 3.

elaborated in the 1920s and continued to advance throughout the 1930s, help to the blind and deaf-mute was intimately linked to the socialist right to work. However, the disabled activists' ideal construction of help through labor contrasted with the indifference of the state and its impersonal economy to accommodate the aspirations and needs of blind and deaf-mute people. Even at the time when the Five-Year-Plan economy forcefully demanded to employ the labor of *all* individuals, economic institutions and various state agents still considered the blind and deaf-mute as one of the most backward groups of Soviet society, intrinsically different from the able-bodied workers and unable to partake in the common economic and political life of the country. Despite their imbrication with official productivist discourses, at the end of the 1930s, disabled activists' aspirations for integration remained largely unfulfilled. Even when the disabled ostensibly worked side by side with the able-bodied, they still felt as strangers (*chuzhie*) among the latter and often complained about a "schism" (*raskol*) separating them from the collective of healthy workers.⁹⁰ This tension between inclusion and exclusion on the shop floor crucially undermined the disabled's right to be helped through labor and undercut their desire for integration in the Soviet social body.

3.3 The new humanism of disability advocacy in the post-war years

Did the Second World War change disabled activists' approach to the issue of inclusion and exclusion? And what kind of impact did the war have on their understanding of the right to be helped through labor? The significance of WWII in transforming Soviet society and culture between 1941 and 1953 has been remarked by many scholars. In particular, social historians have studied how the war affected social cohesion, political values, and the relationship between

⁹⁰ In the articles written by a deaf-mute man called V. Iachmenev for the wall paper of his working unit in 1940, the deaf-mute appear as afraid of their able-bodied fellows and suspicious of them due to bad past experiences. See several of his articles in *Biulleten' stengazety "Nash prizyv"*, no. 7, June 1940.

the government and the populace.⁹¹ Noting that the war veterans returned with a strong sense of entitlement to state welfare in return for military service, Mark Edele has contended that their material expectations were frustrated and their hopes for a better post-war life remained unfulfilled by a sluggish state welfare system. There were not enough resources and the state opted for a repressive rather than helpful role towards the veterans.⁹² In terms of the war's impact on the around 2.5 million war veterans who were recognized as disabled,⁹³ scholars have so far investigated issues such as the limited availability of housing facilities for them and the harsh demands of the post-war economy on their labor force. For instance, Elena Zubkova, Beate Fieseler, and Donald Filtzer have contended that the post-war policies ultimately neglected and even inflicted deprivation and repression upon the disabled veterans. As a result of poverty, exhaustion, and discrimination, the war disabled remained a tame and disillusioned group.⁹⁴ More recently, Claire Shaw has nuanced this argument by confirming "a certain passivity" in the deaf post-war community, but also showing a tension between this "passivity" and the "desire for autonomy and 'normality'."⁹⁵

Shaw's observation applies to the blind post-war community as well. In the context of general grimness and poverty of the immediate post-war years, a new cohort of activists entered

⁹¹ Juliane Fürst, *Stalin's Last Generation. Soviet Post-War Youth and the Emergence of Mature Socialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Idem, ed., *Late Stalinist Russia*; Smith, *Property of Communist*; Weiner, *Making Sense of War*; Elena Zubkova, *Russia after the War: Hopes, Illusions, and Disappointments, 1945-1957* (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 1998); and V.F. Zima, *Golod v SSSR 1946-1947 godov: proiskhozhdenie i posledstviia* (Moscow: Institut rossiiskoi istorii RAN, 1996).

⁹² Edele, *Soviet Veterans*.

⁹³ G.F. Krivosheev, *Soviet Casualties and Combat Losses in the Twentieth Century* (London: Greenhill Books, 1997), 92. For a discussion of who was included in this definition see Edele, *Soviet Veterans*, 81-82.

⁹⁴ Zubkova, *Russia after the War*; Beate Fieseler, *Die Invaliden des "Grossen Vaterländischen Krieges" der Sowjetunion: Eine Politische Sozialgeschichte 1941-1991* (Habilitationsschrift, Ruhr-Universität Bochum, 2003) and "The Bitter Legacy of the 'Great Patriotic War';" Filtzer, *Soviet Workers and Late Stalinism*. See also his most recent book *The Hazards of Urban Life in Late Stalinist Russia. Health, Hygiene, and Living Standards, 1943-1953* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). Chapter 4 of Edele's *Soviet Veterans* advances a similar argument concerning the constant frustration of disabled veterans' expectations, which led to "anger, bitterness, and resentment" among this population. *Soviet Veterans*, 100.

⁹⁵ Shaw, *Deaf in the USSR*, 165-166 and 167.

the ranks of VOS and from within this organization struggled to create a discourse that challenged their status as physically disabled and therefore marginalized individuals. These new activists were blinded veterans who searched for ways to interpret the devastation wrought upon their physical abilities by the experience of the war. They turned their injury into a chance to reflect on their social alienation and an opportunity to create a new sphere of advocacy. Despair and bitterness were a response to disability that these men could not afford to maintain for long periods. Indeed, both material and ideological reasons compelled them – as they did with their predecessors – to reject invalidism, overcome disability, and kindle renewed hopes for integration and happiness through labor.⁹⁶

The blinded and deafened veterans who chose to join VOS and VOG and engage in disability advocacy had a definite moral authority over the other members of the two societies because they had laid down their able-bodied-ness in acts of bravery during the wartime. This gave them an elevated status within the two organizations and made their views hard to undermine. From their positions of moral leadership, these disabled veterans changed the understanding of the right to be helped that existed in their communities.⁹⁷ They no longer simply claimed the right to work for blind and deaf-mute people, but also stressed the importance of giving non-economic supports to the Soviet disabled. Their new emphasis on the emotional needs of the disabled combined with the long-standing discourse of help as *trudoustroistvo* and significantly reshaped the productivist obsession of the 1930s. The personal psychological balance of the disabled came to acquire new importance and now flanked labor, the denial of

⁹⁶ Similar issues have been discussed in works that consider the impact of military conflicts on the construction of disabled masculinity. See, for instance, Bourke, *Dismembering the Male* and Robert Weldon Whalen, *Bitter Wounds. German Victims of the Great War, 1914-1939* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1984).

⁹⁷ Russian scholar A.E. Shaposhnikov has remarked that the invalids of war contributed to making the work of both VOS and VOG livelier. A.E. Shaposhnikov, *Biblioteknoe obsluzhivanie invalidov: istoriia, sovremennost', tendentsii* (Moscow: MP "Optimist", 1992).

invalidism, and the transcendence of disability in defining the right to be helped of blind and deaf-mute people.

While Soviet deafened veterans and their struggles to come to terms with disability have been explored in some detail by Claire Shaw, in the following pages I will investigate the post-war changes in the notion of the right to be helped that were brought about by the so-called “blind-of-war” (*voennooslepshie*). Apart from the fact that blinded veterans-activists have received less attention in historiography, I selected them for a number of other reasons. First, men who became visually impaired as a result of military injuries constituted a larger portion of the Soviet invalids of war than the acoustically impaired.⁹⁸ Second, welfare policies to alleviate visual impairment caused by military conflict had a longer and stronger history than assistance to the soldiers deafened by war injuries. This was related both to the larger number of blinded versus deafened veterans and to the greater respectability that blindness enjoyed in terms of popular attitudes.⁹⁹ Finally, since blindness (in comparison with deafness and some forms of dismemberment) precludes physical work in a more significant way, it provides a crucial testing ground to probe into the post-war activists’ discourse of enabling and transformative labor.

The issue of help to the blind-of-war was first raised during the Russo-Finnish war of 1939-1940, when the provision of assistance to this category of veterans was entrusted to the

⁹⁸ The Soviet government released no official statistics on the total number of people who became blind during WWII. An early statistic from July 1943 counted 2,125 individuals (GARF, f. 413, o. 1, d. 347, l. 7). In October 1943 Muratov, an administrator of the Narkomsobes, counted between 6,000 and 8,000 blind-of-war and complained that VOS was able to recruit in its ranks only 1,543 of them (GARF, f. 413, o. 1, d. 347, l. 20). In 1948 VOS calculated 14,179 blind-of-war out of 61,846 blind individuals in the whole Russian Republic (GARF, f. 413, o. 1, d. 1195, l. 2). VOG instead counted only a total of 2,174 individuals who had lost the sense of hearing during the war. See Shaposhnikov, *Biblioteknoe obsluzhivanie invalidov*, 37. Fieseler counts approx. 3,000 men who suffered from permanent hearing loss as a result of combat. In addition, this scholar remarks that in many cases blindness and deafness combined with injuries to the spine and loss of limbs. See Fieseler, “The Bitter Legacy of the ‘Great Patriotic War’,” 46-47.

⁹⁹ Lack of speech had always been imagined to impact on an individual’s mental development more than lack of vision. See Malofeev, *Spetsial’noe obrazovanie v meniaiushchemsia mire. Rossiia*; and Shaw, *Deaf in the USSR*.

Military-Medical Commission of the Leningrad Military District. In collaboration with the Department of Defectology of the Leningrad Pedagogical Institute, this agency elaborated a detailed plan of welfare and rehabilitation activities. In the military hospitals, the blind-of-war were taught to read and write in Braille alphabet. However, in line with the understanding of help as job placement that had been promoted in the pre-war years by the Narkomsobes as well as by VOS activists, the plan of the Leningrad Military-Medical Commission and the Department of Defectology put a definite emphasis on the blinded veterans' return to productive labor.

At the very outbreak of WWII, the Narkomsobes, VOS, and the Central Military Organ of Health Care (*Glavvoensanupr*) issued a series of directives which were characterized by a definite urgency in assisting the blind-of-war, but did not propose anything substantially new in the articulation of relief policies for this population. In August-September 1941, several documents mandated immediate and maximal outreach to this category of blind. "All their needs, all their demands...we need to solve them before they ask for their resolution," stated a representative of the Narkomsobes.¹⁰⁰ Local VOS cells were required to get in touch with military hospitals and calculate how many blind soldiers were being treated in them. Every soldier who lost his sight in battle had to be informed about the relief work performed by VOS and promptly recruited in the Society's ranks. VOS activists were instructed to teach Braille to the blinded soldiers, providing them with paper, writing devices, and literature in this alphabet. In addition, local VOS sections were asked to engage in the vocational training and job placement of the blind-of-war through their UPMs. Circular letters coming from the central organs of VOS recommended training in simple occupations based on concrete opportunities of future employment in the job market. They also repeated the mantra that employment had to be

¹⁰⁰ GARF, f. 413, o. 1, d. 347, l. 3.

guaranteed within state and cooperative enterprises.¹⁰¹

However, in October 1943, a VOS Plenum stated that work with the invalids of war should be a new type of social assistance, different from the activities so far conducted with the Society's members. One of the key novelties was in the "affection" with which to approach the "new comrades." For instance, an activist ordered: "create for them such an atmosphere that would immediately turn them away from self-destruction...and toward a new style of life."¹⁰² The passage from able-bodied-ness to blindness was recognized as a complex psychological process during which the blinded person needed to be helped. Some participants of this Plenum knew very well this condition, since they were experiencing it. As one of them said, "I know it from my own experience. I suffered not one but many years. But, finally, thanks to the fact that I felt among comrades...I could go from a seeing style of life to a non-seeing one."¹⁰³ When the blind-of-war joined VOS, they brought with them their pre-war and wartime life experiences and created contents and forms of activity that significantly changed the disability advocacy of the mid-1940s.

The logic articulated by the "new comrades" was in perfect agreement with what VOS activists had been preaching in the preceding decades. As the Chairman of the Moscow city section of VOS, Ivan Fedorovich Glazykin, argued at the 1943 Plenum, "because our comrades lost one organ which is fundamental for working..., because they need to acquire a trade, it is necessary to organize help for them."¹⁰⁴ As this quotation clearly reveals, the new activists did not dispute the old lore that help on behalf of the blind is motivated by the loss of working ability

¹⁰¹ See for instance GARF, f. 413, o. 1, d. 166, ll. 10-11. On the involvement of the sanitary sections of the Red Army see GARF, f. 413, o. 1, d. 166, ll. 13-14 and ll. 30-31. Palennyi has described similar methods of working with deafened veterans. See his *Istoriia*, 434.

¹⁰² GARF, f. 413, o. 1, d. 347, l. 16.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ GARF, f. 413, o. 1, d. 347, l. 17.

and the need to restore it through a new occupation. Nor did they oppose close management and control from above. However, they strongly re-oriented the vector of help towards the blind themselves. While at the Third All-Russian Congress of the Deaf-Mute in 1931 the disabled were asked to “help the state build socialism at a Bolshevik pace,”¹⁰⁵ at the VOS Plenum of 1943 the activists lay the duty to help squarely on the state and its official welfare organs: “the provision of help to the invalids of war...is our duty because...we can be useful to them.”¹⁰⁶ Comparing the productive enterprises of VOS with the cooperatives run by other invalid groups, Glazyk wondered: “what about us, are we only step-children? Are we worse than these people? Don’t we also need encouraging measures? Don’t we also need those rights that are given to all citizens?”¹⁰⁷ With this string of rhetorical questions Glazyk touched on three key points in the definition of the disabled’s right to be helped: 1) blind people are not worse than any other Soviet person; 2) they need help (here phrased as “encouraging measures”); and 3) they need and want the same rights that are granted to all the other Soviet citizens. This chain of thought is reminiscent of the advocacy championed by the disabled activists of the early 1920s.

While an enabling conceptualization of the disabled’s work was not new, the claim about the blind’s working capacities acquired a different valence when applied to the blind-of-war as opposed to those handicapped at birth or maimed by peacetime accident. The blinded veterans were young men who had received education and professional training as able-bodied persons before the war. In addition, as they averred, the wartime experience had provided them with a special resourcefulness. As a result, the blind-of-war had the potential not only to turn into good workers, but even to be carriers of *kul’turnost’* to the kolkhoz and the factories, real authority

¹⁰⁵ GARF, f. 511, o. 1, d. 18, l. 15.

¹⁰⁶ This phrase was pronounced by I.G. Trutnev, a VOS activist from Kuibyshev. GARF, f. 413, o. 1, d. 347, l. 17.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

figures for their villages and hometowns.¹⁰⁸ As the activist Sysoev put it, the blind-of-war “are the best men in the factory...With weapons in their hands they defended our Country. In the same manner, they provide examples of labor enthusiasm.”¹⁰⁹ In short, economic well-being and a full-fledged social life appeared more accessible to the blind-of-war than to the blind civilians. For the ex-servicemen, it was allegedly easier to transcend blindness and the exclusion that came with it.

Another major difference with the disability advocacy of the decades before the war was a new attention to the theme of sexual relations as a source of happiness and love for young disabled men. While family life did not appear as a major concern in the discussions of the 1930s, now VOS activists brought family issues to the fore and strove to convince the blind-of-war that return to work would have also meant return to a happy private life. Indeed, married blind-of-war were profoundly worried by family issues, because experience was showing that the emergence of blindness caused many marriages to fall apart. Their concerns soon extended to the unmarried former soldiers as well as to the civilian blind. The blind-of-war Aleksandr Malyshev gave voice to a shared preoccupation: “many are ashamed of their injury and believe that it is impossible to meet a woman in these conditions.”¹¹⁰ An activist attempted to cheer up by saying, “many comrades got married. This, in reality, has nothing to do with our discussion. However, when a comrade builds a family, he does not care anymore about his blindness and becomes active.”¹¹¹ This rather awkward comment reveals the priorities of the new cohort of activists: to stop being worried about their blindness, find a job, and get married. This set of aspirations was often captured by the phrase “feeling alive.” Help meant to return working abilities to the blind-

¹⁰⁸ GARF, f. 413, o. 1, d. 347, l. 19.

¹⁰⁹ GARF, f. 413, o. 1, d. 347, ll. 20-21.

¹¹⁰ A. Malyshev, “Vizhu serdtsem,” *Vecherniaia Perm'*, 13 March 1981, 3.

¹¹¹ GARF, f. 413, o. 1, d. 347, l. 18.

of-war, but also “the ability to laugh, joke, enjoy...”¹¹² The words *zhit'* (to live) and *trudit'sia* (to work) were constantly paired in activists' texts of the post-WWII years, revealing that job placement was more than ever understood as finding a place in life. Tellingly, the word *trudoustroistvo* was at times replaced by the term *zhizneustroistvo*, that is the idea of settling both in the professional and private spheres of one's life.¹¹³

The Return of the Blinded to Professional Life was the title of a 1946 best-seller written by the ophthalmologist Boris Kovalenko.¹¹⁴ In this work, Kovalenko (himself a blind man) argued that there was no reason to regard blind individuals as permanently excluded from the ranks of life. Being a doctor as well as an activist, he grounded his argumentation in modern science. He insisted that special pedagogical methods and technologies of blind rehabilitation replace both the superstitious fear and the compassion that able-bodied people feel towards the blind. Thanks to science, the blind can study and work on a par with the visually unimpaired, and this provides for a full-fledged life.¹¹⁵ Kovalenko did not celebrate labor per se or in view of any specific economic or political exigency, but rather because he believed it to be the means that made human life worth living. Although his discourse operated within the hegemonic socialist construction of labor, it also denied the exclusive focus on production of the 1930s and fundamentally re-humanized labor.

The attention to the human component of labor is evident in the “conversations” that

¹¹² N.B. Kovalenko, “Pis'mo k sostaviteliu sbornika,” in *Permskii pedagogicheskii institut – frontovikam. Kursy podgotovki voennooslepshikh v vuz i k intellektual'nomu trudu (1941-1946)*, A.F. Malyshev, ed. (Perm', 1974), 76. For the original archival material see GAPK, f. 1640, d. 125, ll. 47-51.

¹¹³ See for instance GARF, f. 413, o. 1, d. 347, l. 19 and A. Malyshev, “Vizhu serdtsem,” *Vecherniaia Perm'*, 14 March 1981, 3.

¹¹⁴ B.I. Kovalenko, *Vozvrashenie oslepshikh k trudovoi zhizni* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe Uchebno-pedagogicheskoe izdatel'stvo ministerstva prosveshcheniia RSFSR, 1946). For a biography of Boris Ignat'evich Kovalenko (1890-1969) see N.B. Kovalenko and V.M. Sretenskaia, *Boris Ignat'evich Kovalenko (k 100-letiiu so dnia rozhdeniia)* (Moscow: Vserossiiskoe Obshchestvo Slepikh, 1990).

¹¹⁵ Kovalenko, *Vozvrashenie oslepshikh k trudovoi zhizni*, 3.

doctors, specialized pedagogues, and VOS activists were asked to have with the blind-of-war. These conversations were to be conducted already in the military hospitals; they focused on the educational and professional opportunities that were available to blinded veterans and had the goal to dissuade them from seeking charity – a practice that would have led them to apathy and fatalism. Rather, these dialogues had to inspire courage and give moral support to men who had become suddenly blind. False hopes on the re-acquisition of vision were to be avoided: “the blind-of-war should know the truth in order to step on the right path,” wrote Kovalenko.¹¹⁶ And yet, the truth was not revealed immediately, but gradually: at each new meeting, the doctor talked about the loss of sight in a more definite manner, carefully selecting his words and employing the right intonation (“avoid hurried talk, and rather wait for the reactions and answers of the blind, pay attention to his face,” wrote Kovalenko¹¹⁷). Most importantly, this process was supposed to reveal to the blinded veterans that they still had many opportunities for a full-fledged life.

The communicative approach entailed in these conversations was directed at infusing courage in the depressed and more introverted among the blind-of-war. The pedagogues wanted to mobilize all the energies of these former soldiers to fight against the consequences of blindness. The discovery of truth should not lead to anxiety, a sense of desperation, and hopelessness. To the contrary, a properly conducted conversation was supposed to give a new life to the blind. The disability advocacy of the post-war years paid attention to the mood of the blind-of-war and to the issues that touched their intimate lives in a new way. Depression and loneliness, what worried and what brought joy to the blind, their painful desire to see, and all their emotions were given great consideration. While feelings such as “deep humiliation,”

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 13.

“anxiety,” “the sense of self-commiseration,” and “shyness” were criticized as provoking “fruitless sad thoughts,” the activists’ discourse and practice of help encouraged confidence and awareness of one’s usefulness for the collectivity. As an activist recommended, “Say it loud that you are not lost people, that you are the best people, useful to the country.”¹¹⁸

After discharge from the military hospitals, the blind-of-war could go to boarding homes for the disabled, special residencies for the blind, or back to their families. Kovalenko contended that the invalid homes were a dangerous place for the blind-of-war and recommended that the local Narkomsobes organs place there only those rare individuals who could neither go back to their old jobs nor be professionally re-trained. Sanatoria for recovering blind-of-war were equally dangerous, since forced inaction was the number one enemy of every blind. Kovalenko argued that to put blind people in shelters in order to provide them with “rest” was in fact nefarious for the disabled themselves. Those who started with this “rest,” averred Kovalenko, frequently turned into “invalids” who would constantly need care and be painfully dissatisfied with their lives. “This happens,” wrote Kovalenko “because [the shelters] do not create the conditions for work, which they [i.e. the blind-of-war] need above all.”¹¹⁹

Labor alleviated suffering by distracting the disabled’s thoughts from their sight.¹²⁰ It helped the disabled “overcome all sorts of difficulties, believe in their strength, and earn the respect of those surrounding them.”¹²¹ Kovalenko considered it crucial that each disabled worked at his/her full potential, “otherwise people go to pieces, gradually become wrapped in the mold of ‘invalidism,’ lose faith in their strength, begin to expect and demand ‘concessions for their

¹¹⁸ GARF, f. 413, o. 1, d. 347, l. 22.

¹¹⁹ GAPK, f. 1640, d. 112, l. 1.

¹²⁰ GAPK, f. 1640, d. 112, ll. 5-6.

¹²¹ Kovalenko, “Pis’mo k sostaviteliu sbornika,” 76.

blindness'”¹²² Indeed, blind activists did not demand special indulgences or concessions, but rather wanted to occupy a place in the common social order. Their slogan “together with everybody and on par with everybody” (*vmeste so vseimi i naravne so vseimi*) aimed at integrating the disabled in the regular life led by the able-bodied.¹²³ The blind-of-war had to be given a job because “in the Soviet state everybody...is a full-fledged person...with the right to have a place in life.”¹²⁴

In sum, disabled activists continued to tap into the socialist ethos of work throughout the early Soviet and Stalinist experience. However, while there is a definite continuity in their conceptualization of help as job placement from the early 1920s throughout the 1930s and 1940s, the Second World War contributed to shift attention from the fulfillment of production quotas back to the emotional state of the disabled as an important component of their right to be helped.

3.4 Rejecting help as *trudoustroistvo*

Some blind and deaf-mute individuals resisted the hegemonic discourse of enabling labor. They refused to become members of VOS and VOG because they were reluctant to believe the activists' ephemeral promises of education and job placement. They rather opted for a life of begging, fortune-telling, public singing, and postcard-selling on trains and open-air markets.¹²⁵ Narkomsobes administrators and disabled activists called them “loafers who love easy income” and “drunken hooligans.”¹²⁶ Most of them did not leave any written record, but they sometimes poked their heads in the official documentation of various Soviet agencies. Their

¹²² *Ibid.*

¹²³ A. Malyshev, *Vizhu serdtsem* (Perm': Permskoe Knizhnoe Izdatel'stvo, 1982), 5. Malyshev first published this book in several installments in the newspaper *Vechernaia Perm'*.

¹²⁴ GARF, f. 413, o. 1, d. 347, l. 22. See also N. Milov, “Tsel' ego zhizni,” *Molodoi leninets*, 2 October 1958, 3-4.

¹²⁵ Many disabled who had an official job also engaged in other unofficial, alternative, and often illegal activities. See Edele's discussion of these practices among the war invalids. As Edele shows, most employed invalids “did reasonably well only if they supplemented their income with private...economic activities.” *Soviet Veterans*, 90-99.

¹²⁶ GARF, f. 413, o. 1, d. 75, ll. 3-4.

attitudes to employment as a form of help are difficult to gauge, since their practices and narratives of help are almost always refracted through the words of the social activists. And yet they let us imagine a notion of the right to be helped that differed from that of Narkomsobes workers, VOS and VOG activists, and these societies' conscientious members.

In 1940, for instance, the Moscow city section of VOS reported to the police a number of blind men and women who had refused to register with VOS. Among them was Nikolai Alekseevich Timoshkin, a blind fortune teller in his late thirties who had tried to convince some VOS members to stop working and start making a living by fortune telling on the streets. His main argument was that, as blind men, they could make up to 100 rubles a day with this activity. Anna Ivanovna Kalinina (born in 1910) was a blind single mother, who made a living by “going around stores” and selling fabric. The blind woman Agrippina Shilkina was another Moscow fortune teller, while the blind man V.E. Golovanov lived outside of the city in his own dacha and made a living by begging on trains. According to the people who handled these cases, none of these men and women wanted to work and, even when offered several jobs, they rejected them, wishing only to live in poverty and engage in unproductive activities outside of the collective.¹²⁷

In all actuality, these statements tell us little about the desires of the individuals whom they maintained to describe. They rather speak to the motivations and aspirations of people who looked down at them from the self-righteous position of VOS and VOG activists. Descriptions of unemployed disabled men and women who refused to join VOS and VOG leave us with many open questions. Did these “loafers” and “drunken hooligans” really reject job offers? Or was this narrative an easy explanation that the activists concocted to cover up their own failure at providing help through employment? Perhaps they were offered jobs that no one would possibly

¹²⁷ GARF, f. 413, o. 1, d. 75, l. 4.

want to perform. Was their motivation for refusing a job really the desire to be poor? Did they rather engage in fortune telling because this activity carried with it a promise of mobility, adventure, and freedom from the constraints of regular employment? Or were “speculating in fabrics” and begging the only options left because in reality there was no better job for them out there?

Blinded war veterans were not immune from the temptation to reject the notion of help as *trudoustroistvo*. In the courses that Boris Kovalenko organized in Perm’ between 1941 and 1946 to prepare the blind-of-war for admission to institutes of higher education, disabled ex-servicemen often violated the school discipline.¹²⁸ They skipped classes, were late, did not do the homework, and did not participate in the class discussions.¹²⁹ The activist Malyshev remembered some cases of “hooliganism and debauchery” among the blind students attending Kovalenko's course and admitted that “not all our comrades distinguished themselves by their loyalty.”¹³⁰ G.N. Vishnev was caught cheating several times; V.F. Omel’ianenko was expelled from the courses because of his systematic failures in the exams and because he skipped many classes without any reason; M.M. Trapitsyn, V.A. Lebedev, and I.N. Iurchenko had insufficient grades; I.E. Kozhushkin was often singled out for “clear infractions of the discipline,” as he liked to go to the bathhouse instead of attending classes.¹³¹ Simply put, some blinded veterans studied and worked only if forced.

These violations of the work discipline threatened VOS and VOG activists’ aspiration to integrate the blind and deaf-mute into the imagined community of disciplined, hardworking Soviet people. Striving to counter what they perceived to be dark, irrational, and destructive

¹²⁸ On Kovalenko’s courses see Malyshev, ed., *Permskii pedagogicheskii institut – frontvikam*.

¹²⁹ GAPK, f. 1640, d. 116, ll. 2-4.

¹³⁰ GAPK, f. 1640, d. 127, l. 11.

¹³¹ GAPK, f. 1640, d. 116, l. 30 and l. 32.

desires, VOS and VOG reported inveterate beggars to the Office of the Procurator, went to court against them, and demanded harsh punishments because – as an activist said at the VOG Plenum of September 1943 – their behavior “dishonors the name of Soviet citizen.”¹³²

Conclusion

In chapter 1, we saw that the right to be helped of Soviet individuals who deviated from an imagined norm of physical and social fitness was often legitimized by the category of labor/contributions to the collective. Indeed, as we observed in chapter 2, the defectologists claimed that morally defective children should receive state help because they had the potential for future contributions (if transformed by the powers of science). In this chapter, I have shown that, for VOS and VOG activists, disabled people’s capacity to work was the key category legitimizing their right to be helped as integral member of Soviet society and job placement was the most important practical tool to realize this right. Deconstructing the century-long representation of the disabled as useless individuals weighing as a burden on the rest of society, VOS and VOG activists attempted to create opportunities for employing the Soviet disabled labor force. The emphasis of their disability advocacy was on the fact that the blind and the deaf-mute could and should work together with the able-bodied and thereby participate in the construction of the communist society. In asking Soviet authorities to help them realize their right to work, VOS and VOG activists claimed recognition as willing and able hands at the service of the Soviet collectivity. In their view, even those who were perceived as the most backward could become fellow travelers on the road to socialism. From integration through labor

¹³² GARF, f. 413, o. 1, d. 346, l. 45. Not all activists were so harsh towards the disabled who did not want to work. For instance, in 1943 the Chairman of the Tambov section of VOG said: “it is our duty to care for such [not laboring] deaf-mute; he is one of us and we should not pass him over to other organs, such as the police” (GARF, f. 413, o. 1, d. 346, l. 9). Edele has argued that the 1940s were characterized by a “relatively lenient approach” towards the illegal activities of war invalids, as a large campaign against all “parasites” was launched only in 1951. Edele, *Soviet Veterans*, 94-95.

derived not only a sense of economic independence, but also a personal gratification that would have ultimately led the blind and deaf-mute to happiness. Even at the high peak of the Stalinist industrialization, when the mandate to fulfill production quotas seemed to completely obscure the right to work of blind and deaf-mute people, VOS and VOG activists presented the involvement of their constituencies in the country's big industries as a way of integration into Soviet life.

The conceptualization of the disabled's right to be helped as right to work was an enabling discourse that met the desire for integration felt by VOS and VOG disabled activists. At the same time, this construction of the right to be helped ordered and channeled their desires by contending that integration and happiness could be realized only through discipline. While empowering, because it emphasized the abilities of blind and deaf-mute people, the emphasis on the transformative power of work fit well with the authorities' disciplining project and the need to create subjects loyal to communism and its ethos of labor.

Chapter 4

Gender:

Ommlad's Regime of Care for Single Mothers

“Every woman has the right to go through a school of motherhood, where every mother – under the direction of a doctor – can learn to feed her baby and take care of him.”¹

“The most helpless” among the students attending Kovalenko’s rehabilitation courses for blinded veterans was a woman called Galina Vasil’evna. She had lost one eye before the war and then became completely blind during the wartime. Although she put a lot of effort in her rehabilitation, she was never able to be as independent and self-confident as her male fellow students and had a much harder time overcoming her fears. Indeed, Galia – as the woman was affectionately called – was afraid of walking in the city alone and demanded to be accompanied everywhere by Vasilii Shumilov, himself a blind student attending the courses.² While Galia was in constant need of help, the able-bodied women of Perm’ were important sources of assistance for the blinded men undergoing rehabilitation in that city. As the blind memoirist Aleksandr Malyshev recalled, the female students of the Perm’ Pedagogical Institute helped the blinded ex-servicemen do their laundry and fix their clothes. They also went to the movies and to theater performances with them. One day, for instance, Malyshev heard “a happy noisy crowd moving towards the theater wardrobe.”

In the crowd were also my veteran friends. Many of them were there with their girlfriends. Without a word, the girls would run to the wardrobe first, take off the coats and help us, men... With the years, the girls’ gesture became for me something

¹ These words were pronounced by one of the leaders of the Perm’ section of Ommlad, Evgeniia Anatolevna Balakshina. Her speech is preserved in GAPK, f. 15, o. 1, d. 348, l. 158.

² Malyshev, “Vizhu serdtsem,” *Vechernaia Perm’*, 12 March 1981, 3.

conceptually bigger than a simple show of attention or care. It merged with the image of our faithful girlfriends, willingly taking upon themselves an uneasy burden and carrying it until the end of their lives.³

Malyshev further explained that Soviet women's help to the blinded veterans was motivated not by compassion, but by an all-female sense of loyalty and self-sacrifice.

The two images of the helpless blind Galia and the helpful "girls" in the theater highlight a complex relationship between understandings of help, disability, and gender. They reveal that all single women – no matter whether disabled or able-bodied – were in a certain sense "defective" because they lacked a male breadwinner. The disabled Galia needed to be walked everywhere by Vasilii and the able-bodied female students could not go alone to the movies. Their position of need as women without men mandated the special solicitude of a male individual – such as a husband, a doctor, a pedagogue, a social worker – or a state agency. These images also show that Soviet women were intimately associated with the provision of help and often played the role of saviors of their fellow citizens. However, the help that came from women did not indicate the care of the strong for the weak, but rather symbolized loyalty, duty, self-sacrifice, kindheartedness, hard work, and subjection to discipline.⁴ Thus, in relation to Soviet societal models, single women embodied both need and labor. Both notions informed the socialist regime of care towards them and legitimized their right to be helped in often contradictory ways. Indeed, this combination of need and labor was undergirded by deep-rooted patriarchal views of gender which granted Soviet single women both strong entitlement and profound marginalization.

³ *Ibid.*, *Vechernaia Perm'*, 13 March 1981, 3.

⁴ Lynne Attwood has analyzed how hard work had to be interwoven with more traditionally feminine traits and roles by looking at representations of women-workers and women-mothers in the journals *Rabotnitsa* and *Krest'ianka*. See her "Rationality versus Romanticism: Representations of Women in the Stalinist Press," in *Gender in Russian History and Culture*, Linda Edmondson, ed. (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 158-176.

A model of womanhood that constructs women as particularly vulnerable, while also exalting their nurturing nature, caretaking proclivities, self-abnegation, and ability to make sacrifices for the collective is not unique to the Soviet Union. However, while Soviet conceptions and policies of women's care echoed those of other world powers and individual reformers, the application of these ideas conformed to specifically Soviet concepts of citizens' duties and state imperatives.⁵ What made the Soviet case different was the way in which the helpless female recipient of help and the good female helper related not simply to the male wage earner or the doctor, but ultimately to the Stalinist state as the key source of well-being. Single women represented the helpless subjects who could nonetheless overcome their defectiveness through loyalty to the state and self-sacrifice and hard work on behalf of the collectivity. This ambiguity of being both the rightful petitioner for state help and the dutiful supporter of the state in all its endeavors lay at the core of the Soviet right to be helped.

Female celibacy and especially single motherhood tend to become the object of widespread concern at times of change, when traditional understandings of gender clash with shifts in social relations.⁶ In post-revolutionary Russia, unmarried mothers were indeed at the epicenter of a crisis of sexuality and gender that had multiple implications. The experiences of the Revolution, the civil war, and the transition to the NEP had caused a higher rate of female unemployment, the growth of prostitution, the increase of venereal disease, and momentous changes and great insecurity in the reproductive and sexual lives of Soviet women.⁷ To counter the economic effects of war, famine, disease, and malnutrition on its female population, but also to respond to the pervasive feelings of chaos, social upheaval, and instability in gender relations,

⁵ Tricia Starks, "A Fertile Mother Russia: Pronatalist Propaganda in Revolutionary Russia," *Journal of Family History*, 28:3 (July 2003), 411-442.

⁶ Mary Louise Roberts, *Civilization Without Sexes. Restructuring Gender in Postwar France, 1917-1927* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

⁷ Goldman, *Women, the State, and Revolution*; Bernstein, *The Dictatorship of Sex*; and Eric Naiman, *Sex in Public*.

the Soviet state instituted a special Department for the Protection of Motherhood and Infancy (*Otdel Okhrany Materinstva i Mladenchestva* or Ommlad). The activists and doctors working in it developed a program called “school of motherhood” (*shkola materinstva*), a body of health information, advice, and practical assistance providing a blueprint of socialist help to single mothers. Establishing a model of reproductive conduct and shaping motherly behavior, the school of motherhood was of great import to the Soviet project of re-educating the entire population and wholly remaking reality.⁸ It also nicely fit with the humanitarian motives informing the Soviet right to be helped.

Analyzing Ommlad’s discourse and practice of help to single mothers between 1918 and 1950, this chapter also offers a contribution to the periodization of Soviet gender history. Supporters of the so-called Great Retreat model have contended that Stalin’s consolidation of power in the late 1920s-early 1930s involved the assertion of what are understood to be traditional gender values, especially pro-natalism and a decidedly non-egalitarian family structure.⁹ In line with scholars who have called into question this paradigm,¹⁰ I argue that the

⁸ An extensive body of literature has argued that women in the Soviet Union were imagined as immature and uncultured, in need of change, tutelage, and assistance, even threatening to the revolution if not transformed. Elizabeth Wood has first made this argument in her classic work *The Baba and the Comrade: Gender and Politics in Revolutionary Russia* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997). Wood has recently substantiated this argument with additional evidence by looking at show trials relating to women and conceptions of gender. See her *Performing Justice. Agitation Trials in Early Soviet Russia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005). Russian historian Iulia Gradskaia has argued that social welfare service for women were part of a discourse of help to backward populations which the Bolsheviks considered decisive in achieving the communist transformation of Russia. See her “Kul’turnost’, gigiena i gender: sovetizatsiia “materinstva” v Rossii v 1920-1930-e gody,” in Iarskaia-Smirnova and Romanov, eds., *Sovetskaia sotsial’naia politika 1920-1930kh godov*, 242-261. Specifically dealing with the transformation of the domestic sphere and women’s roles is Michelle Fuqua, *The Politics of the Domestic Sphere: the Zhenotdely, Women’s Liberation, and the Search for a Novyi Byt in Early Soviet Russia* (Seattle: Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies, University of Washington, 1996). On the Soviet campaigns for “modern mothering” see Elizabeth Waters, “The Modernization of Russian Motherhood, 1917-1937,” *Soviet Studies*, 44: 1 (1992), 123-135. For a discussion of the child-rearing methods and the visions of a new Soviet family that were spread among Soviet women through Ommlad see Starks, “A Fertile Mother Russia.”

⁹ The classic work is Nicholas Timasheff, *The Great Retreat: The Growth and Decline of Communism in Russia* (New York: Dutton, 1946). Wendy Goldman is among the scholars of gender who see a radical break in the 1930s.

¹⁰ Elena Shulman, *Stalinism on the Frontier of Empire. Women and State Formation in the Soviet Far East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Bernstein, *The Dictatorship of Sex*; Hoffmann, *Stalinist Values*;

shift to traditional gender values was not a radical novelty of the Stalinist revolution because it had been facilitated by developments in the conceptualization of gender that characterized the previous decade. The case of single mothers reveals that many gender norms that are usually associated in historiography with the 1930s were in fact already advanced in the 1920s. In other words, I would suggest that a common legacy of attitudes towards lonely women and single mothers underlie the first three decades of Soviet rule, from the Revolution to the immediate post-WWII years. In addition, by remarking that reproductive and parental advice as well as practical help to single mothers had a rigid and proscriptive nature from its very inception in 1918, I strive to nuance the standard assessment of the 1920s as an age of gender experimentation. Single motherhood was always already tinted by a range of assumptions originating in women's supposed helplessness and in traditional gender concepts. This coloring underpinned single women's right to be helped throughout the early Soviet and Stalinist experience.

While the traditional gender ideas that promoted help to single mothers in the 1920s continued to encourage assistance to this social group in the 1930s and 1940s, the forms of care and control implemented by Ommlad did undergo some changes. Elizabeth Waters has argued that "relationships of mothering remained unchanged; it was their political context that underwent restructuring."¹¹ Initially, Ommlad-affiliated figures viewed single motherhood primarily as an issue of health closely related to the problem of child mortality and posited lonely women's right to be helped as a gynecological question. In reality, medical images of the "single mother" provided doctors with an accessible way to discuss the social organization of gender.

Catriona Kelly, *Refining Russia: Advice Literature, Polite Culture, and Gender from Catherine to Yeltsin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

¹¹ Waters, "The Modernization of Russian Motherhood," 130.

Under the pretention of confining themselves to passing judgment on purely medical matters, doctors and activists were able to address moral, ethical, and social issues which structured both male and female gender roles.¹² By the late 1920s, when health concerns became subordinated to the goals of production, the issue of help to single women stopped receiving a primarily medical response.¹³ Intrusive gynecological controls over women's reproductive abilities began to be flanked by the equally invasive regulation of their productive skills. Productionist and medical discourses became interconnected and focused on both the productivity and re-productivity of single women. In light of the party's ambitious plans for industrialization, single women's labor had to intensify in both spheres.¹⁴ Only in the post-WWII years, the upheavals and diseases of wartime would prompt again Ommlad to broach single women's right to be helped from a stronger medical – and often narrowly gynecological – standpoint.

In the chain of help described in the writings of Ommlad activists, everybody had a clear role and occupied a well-defined hierarchical position: single women were the helpless receivers of aid; female social workers channeled state assistance to them and appeared as the “good helpers” of a doctor that was always discursively cast male; physicians, higher-up administrators, policymakers, and political leaders were at the head of this chain of help and stood for the state as the ultimate male breadwinner and provider of help. In the last section of this chapter, my analysis of the discursive representation of various female providers of help will reveal that the hierarchies of Soviet women's activism reproduced the original dichotomy between the helpless

¹² This point has been raised also by Janet Hyer in her essay on the role of the medical profession in defining the parameters of Russian women's participation in the paid workforce. See her “Managing the Female Organism: Doctors and the Medicalization of Women's Paid Work in Soviet Russia during the 1920s,” in *Women in Russia and Ukraine*, Rosalind Marsh, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 111-120.

¹³ Bernstein has remarked that medical discussions of sexuality abruptly disappeared from public discourse in the early 1930s. Bernstein, *The Dictatorship of Sex*. See also Waters, “The Modernization of Russian Motherhood.”

¹⁴ For a description of how Soviet women were enticed into the labor force on a large scale, see Wendy Goldman, *Women at the Gates: Gender and Industry in Stalin's Russia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

and the good helper upon which Soviet womanhood was premised. Women who did not score high on the patriarchal gender scale found their own others – ruder, darker, more backward, ignorant, and undisciplined. At the top of the hierarchy, Ommlad women-activists exemplified a new model of womanhood, which was intrinsically affiliated with the Soviet state.¹⁵ The discipline and loyalty implied by the connection with the state distinguished Ommlad female leaders from other models of womanhood and allowed them to overcome the status of helpless backward women.¹⁶

4.1 The emergence of Ommlad and its conceptual framework

The Russian post-revolutionary government did not wait long before elaborating the basic legal principles of social care for its female population. Among the most significant and long-lasting policies of this period was the Sovnarkom decree no. 117, dated June 1, 1919, which mandated the provision of monetary subsidies or help in nature to all pregnant female workers and women who had just delivered. Circulating the decree, the Narkomtrud accompanied it with a “List of rules for the provision of subsidies and pensions to workers” – an instructive document that proved to be widely used in the practice of local Narkomsobes offices. In Section 3, on assistance to pregnant women and new mothers, article 13 specified to whom the right to

¹⁵ In historiography, the terms “woman-activist” and “female activist” are usually employed to translate the Russian *obshchestvennitsa*, i.e. the non-employed wife of an industrial manager, engineer, or elite worker, who carried out volunteer work to improve working and living conditions at the factory where her husband worked. Instead, in this Chapter, I use the term “woman-activist” to indicate women who were employed by Ommlad, advocated for single women’s rights, and carried out paid social welfare work on their behalf.

¹⁶ Of course, hierarchies operated also vis-à-vis the recipients of help. Describing welfare programs for single mothers in the United States, Anna R. Igra has shown how assistance often went hand-in-hand with disciplining strategies based on categorizations of women in need: unwed mothers occupied the lower ladder, worthy widows of war veterans were at the top of the hierarchy, and deserted wives were somewhere in the middle. See her article “Likely to Become a Public Charge: Deserted Women and the Family Law of the Poor in New York City, 1910-1936,” *Journal of Women’s History*, 11:4 (2000), 59-81. When these hierarchies were reproduced by the women themselves in order to establish scales of worth in their demands for help, these categorization could be read through the theoretical framework of nesting orientalism. See Milica Bakić-Hayden’s discussion of the gradations of Orientals that designate the Ottoman Balkans in her “Nesting Orientalisms: The Case of Former Yugoslavia,” *Slavic Review*, 54:4 (Winter 1995), 917-931.

maternity subsidies was to be granted: all women employed in state, nationalized, private, and public institutions and enterprises, independently from the nature of their work and from their working seniority; all women who were officially registered as unemployed at the labor exchange (*birzha truda*); and all women who were recognized as disabled. Art. 23 added insured workers' wives to this list.¹⁷

As this decree reveals, the social insurance law that was drafted immediately after the Revolution foresaw widespread assistance to women as mothers. In the difficult years of the civil war, a series of legislative acts re-affirmed priority in the provision of foodstuffs to all pregnant and breast-feeding women and established a special subsidy for the purchase of objects of care and food for newborn children. In addition, pregnant women and breast-feeding mothers were granted priority to medical help and protected from job layoffs.¹⁸

To implement this legislation, various local Narkomsobes sections provided uninsured pregnant women and new mothers with a special food card that gave them priority access to a series of key products. Unfortunately, when women tried to use their special cards, the local organs of food distribution often denied them the products they had been entitled to by the Narkomsobes. Commenting on this situation, the Perm' section of the People's Commissariat of Control contended that pregnant women and new mothers were "unable to personally defend

¹⁷ GAPK, f. 9, o.1, d. 121, l. 25.

¹⁸ On the social services offered to women in these years see Esfir' M. Konius, *Puti razvitiia sovetskoi okhrany materinstva i mladenchestva (1917-1940). Po materialam org i nauch. s'ezdov* (Moscow: Tsentr. in-t. usovershenstvovaniia vrachei, 1954); Goldman, *Women, the State and Revolution*, esp. 8-10 and 46-48; and Madison, *Social Welfare in the Soviet Union*, esp. 169-171. The Soviet state's drive to manage women's reproduction through maternal health care policy was very similar to the population politics practiced by other European countries in the interwar period. See David Hoffmann, "Mothers in the Motherland: Stalinist Pronatalism in Its Pan-European Context," *Journal of Social History*, 34:1 (Fall 2000), 35-54. For a theory of reproduction as politics see Faye Ginsburg and Rayna Rapp, "Reproduction as Politics," in Susan Gal and Gail Kligman, eds., *The Politics of Gender after Socialism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 15-36.

themselves from the unjust actions [of local administrators] and to claim their rights.”¹⁹ Although endowed with the same rights as all the other citizens, Soviet women were not ready to rationally defend themselves and stand up for their rights precisely due to their pregnant condition, their female nature, and their lack of *kul'turnost*.

To defend dark women and check on the correct implementation of Soviet laws for the protection of motherhood, the Bolshevik government established a number of state and party organizations. The most prominent – and most studied – among them was the Commission for the Improvement of the Work and Life of Women (hereafter Zhenotdel). Its main goals were to guarantee complete legal equality and independent productive labor to Soviet women. Women living in “backward” Soviet republics (especially in the Central Asian republics of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan) or belonging to ethnical minorities (such as Chinese and Korean women) were at the center of this organ’s legislative efforts. Economic support to unemployed women was not considered the primary competence of the Zhenotdel. Quite to the contrary, it was believed that so-called “socio-legal help” distracted activists from the fundamental tasks of political and cultural education of the non-Russian female population. Local Zhenotdel sections were often criticized for engaging in *sotsbytovshchina*, i.e. the mundane provision of material help that went to the detriment of the more important political work.²⁰ In other words, the Zhenotdel had no official interest in questions of uninsured women’s rights to social assistance.²¹

¹⁹ GAPK, f. 9, o. 1, d. 305, l. 85.

²⁰ See for instance GARF, f. 6983, o.1, d. 5, l. 37.

²¹ Among the most authoritative works on the Zhenotdel are Richard Stites, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Russia: Feminism, Nihilism, and Bolshevism, 1860-1930* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991); Carol Eubanks Hayden, “The Zhenotdel and the Bolshevik Party,” *Russian History*, 3:2 (1976), 150-173; Barbara Evans Clements, “The Utopianism of the Zhenotdel,” *Slavic Review*, 51:2 (Summer 1992), 485-496; and Wendy Goldman, “Industrial Politics, Peasant Rebellion and the Death of the Proletarian Women’s Movement in the USSR,” *Slavic Review*, 55:1 (Spring 1996), 46-77.

Ommlad, instead, put issues of unemployed and lonely women's everyday life at the center of its attention from the very beginning of its activities. The reason for this difference could have been in the fact that this agency operated within the administrative structure of the Narkomsobes.²² It officially started to work on January 1, 1918, and slowly took under its jurisdiction all former tsarist organizations that dealt with the protection of mothers and infants.²³ Ommlad's main goal was formulated as providing Soviet women with an "all-inclusive" assistance that would have helped them perform their social functions – namely, delivering and raising children.²⁴ To accomplish the "social protection of motherhood," Ommlad chose to move into three main directions: 1) legislative work directed at defending pregnant women and breast-feeding mothers; 2) education on issues of maternity and child care; and 3) organization of special facilities where mothers could be practically helped and "rational" baby-care concretely implemented.²⁵

The Narkomsobes Commissar A. Vinokurov described Ommlad's responsibilities in a directive addressed to local social welfare sections. First of all, this department had to organize consultation points for pregnant women, milk-stations for newborn babies, Homes for Mother and Child, nurseries, shelters for abandoned newborn babies, free canteens for pregnant women

²² Another agency offering help to uninsured single women were the so-called soviets of social help. These councils were made up of representatives coming from such diverse organizations as the Zhenotdel, the society "Children's Friend," the Russian Red Cross, local enterprises, insurance funds, trade unions, and Ommlad. At the beginning of their activities in the early 1920s, they only cured women suffering from tuberculosis and venereal diseases. Later, around 1926, they extended the range of their welfare activities. Unlike Ommlad, however, the soviets of social help were not systematically funded through the budgets of a state commissariat. They had to build their own material base through donations from non-state associations, lotteries, the sale of tickets for movies, concerts, and other performances. See V. Malyshev, "K dokladu po organizatsionnomu voprosu," *Voprosy sotsial'nogo obespecheniia*, no. 2, July 1921, 42-43. See also the directives "Polozhenie o sovetakh sotsial'noi pomoshchi pri konsultatsiakh," dated 25 February 1925 and published in *Biulleten' Narodnogo Komissariata Zdravookhraneniia*, no.5, 1925, 5-6, and "Polozhenie o sovetakh sotsial'noi pomoshchi" dated March 1927 and preserved in GAPK, f. 132, o. 1, d. 289, list unnumbered. See also E.S. Kopelianskaia, *Zashchita prav rebenka v sovetskom sude. Prakticheskoe posobie* (Moscow: OGIZ, 1936), 119; and various other archival documents in GAPK, f. 132, o. 1, d. 289, list unnumbered; and GAPK, f. 132, o. 1, d. 292, l. 8.

²³ Konius, *Puti razvitiia sovetskoi okhrany materinstva i mladenchestva*, 96-98.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 102.

²⁵ GAPK, f. 15, d. 366, l. 11.

and breast-feeding mothers, and a system of patronage including home visitations. Second, it needed to train qualified social workers, assign them to all these facilities, and regularly check on their work. Ommlad was also supposed to help Soviet mothers by distributing foodstuffs and cash to buy objects of primary necessity for the care of newborn children. This agency was required to elaborate policies of labor protection and check on their implementation in collaboration with the Department of Labor Inspection. Finally, Ommlad had to conduct the usual “cultural-enlightenment work” among Soviet women.²⁶ In the first two years of its existence Ommlad oriented its work mainly at the provision of material assistance to pregnant women and breast-feeding mothers in the form of monetary subsidies and help in nature.

Then, in June 1920, Ommlad was moved from the Narkomsobes to the Narkomzdrav. The former organ was criticized for having framed the defense of motherhood simply as economic aid to needy women. Soviet administrators now contended that the provision of subsidies was a “dispersion of means, which does not give any help to mothers, because the money goes in the general family budget.”²⁷ Narkomzdrav instead could have given Ommlad “a correct medical organization.” Doctors – it was argued – could determine monetary subsidies better than simple social workers, because they could calculate the due date of a pregnancy and therefore better understand when financial help was indeed needed.²⁸ At Ommlad’s All-Russian Meeting on December 1, 1920, the Department’s chair Vera Pavlovna Lebedeva proposed that all Ommlad facilities be headed by a doctor and include an expert midwife or a nurse familiar with the technique of breast-feeding.²⁹ Indeed, leadership positions in the various provincial, district, city, and neighborhood sections of Ommlad began to be assigned almost exclusively to

²⁶ GAPK, f. 15, o. 1, d. 332, ll. 43-44.

²⁷ GAPK, f. 15, o. 2, d. 94, l. 113.

²⁸ GAPK, f. 15, o. 1, d. 349, ll. 8-11.

²⁹ GAPK, f. 15, o. 1, d. 349, l. 6.

medical professionals. Only the nuts-and-bolts administration and daily economic management of single facilities were entrusted to individuals with non-medical background, such as pedagogues, Narkomsobes employees, and Zhenotdel members. This change in institutional jurisdiction and personnel modified the content of Ommlad's work by introducing a heightened attention to medical issues.³⁰

Their professional qualifications notwithstanding, most Ommlad activists were convinced that the best form of help to Soviet women – especially the unmarried ones – was assistance in the field of motherhood. In their view, Ommlad had to cover all aspects of “lived motherhood” and “function as a defender (*zashchitnik*) when the interests of a mother were infringed.”³¹ Indeed, the image of women *as mothers* pervaded Soviet law, policy, and culture. It found dominant expression in the political iconography, legislation, policy-making, and socialization efforts of the 1920s, which reinforced the notion that child care was an exclusively female domain.³² In line with this, Ommlad was imagined as helping single women by solving their medical and housing problems as mothers. At the same time, Ommlad activists emphasized that single motherhood was a social, rather than a private domestic matter. They looked at the single woman-mother (*odinokaia zhenshchina-mat'*) as a “social unit” and as “part of a class” which was entitled to participate in productive labor and “the construction of the new Soviet life” without renouncing motherhood.³³ As a 1923 slogan proclaimed, “by protecting the woman-

³⁰ On the alliance between doctors and the party in the context of care for Soviet mothers see also Waters, “The Modernization of Russian Motherhood.”

³¹ GAPK, f. 15, o. 1, d. 349, ll. 12-13.

³² Victoria E. Bonnell, *Iconography of Power: Soviet Political Posters under Lenin and Stalin* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Waters, “The Modernization of Russian Motherhood.”

³³ This was Aleksandra Kollontai's mantra in the immediate post-revolutionary years, which was almost literally repeated in the writings of many Ommlad activists. The words quoted here come from a report written by one of the first Ommlad directors in Perm', Evgeniia Anatolevna Balakshina (GAPK, f. 15, o. 1, d. 349, ll. 12-13). For another example see a report written by the Ommlad activist Anna Nikitichna Markova (GAPK, f. 15, o. 1, d. 366, ll. 40-43).

mother we give her the opportunity to reconcile motherhood and socially useful work.”³⁴ Thus, while Ommlad activists perpetuated the image of woman as mother and their discourse constructed single women’s problems through a narrow lens focused on reproduction, they also strove to define a new relationship between wage labor and motherhood as non-mutually exclusive fields of female activity.

Ommlad’s special investment in helping needy single mothers is not surprising. The 1918 Code on Marriage, the Family, and Guardianship had legalized divorce and made it easily obtainable. As a result, the divorce rate had increased markedly. Historian Wendy Goldman has explained that the socialist vision of free union embodied in the Code ended up having negative consequences for many women who were abandoned by their husbands without any means of support. The weakness of the marital tie, the ease of divorce, and the freedom of marital relations worked to women’s disadvantage in creating a mass of single women who carried the burden of child care alone, without support from their husbands. Many women were in such a dire economic position that they could find material relief only by prostituting themselves.³⁵ Ommlad activists were well aware that these developments were producing a mass of isolated and – in their view – helpless mothers.

In the discourse that Ommlad developed in the early 1920s and continued to promote until the late 1940s, single mothers were often called *besprizornye*. Commonly used for orphaned and abandoned minors, when applied to adult women this term functioned as a synonym for loneliness and lack of male protection. As much as a *besprizornyi rebenok* was a child deprived of parental care and educational discipline, so a *besprizornaia mat’* was a woman

³⁴ GAPK, f. 15, o. 2, d. 93, l. 4.

³⁵ Goldman, *Women, the State, and Revolution*, 110-114 and 119-122.

without a male breadwinner to care for (and control) her. Single fathers – who in truth constituted a much smaller group than the mass of single mothers and were mostly widowed men – were never presented as a problem and never called *besprizornye*, that is they were never qualified as lacking protection. Echoes of these gendered representations resounded in the very petitions for help written by single mothers and fathers. While the former often evoked “orphanhood” (*besprizornost*) and “helplessness” (*bespomoshchnost*) as categories legitimizing their right to be helped, the latter almost never did. Single fathers strongly preferred to indicate objective conditions of poverty and to employ the larger moral notion of desperation (*besvykhodnost*).

The condition of female orphanhood and neglect was initially seen as “a typical phenomenon” of the Russian urban population. The “typical” orphaned mother was a woman who had been abandoned by her husband and found herself in a state of need.³⁶ Although the image of the orphaned mother could equally refer to Russians and non-Russians, urban and rural women, it tended to take up different nuances when applied to non-ethnic Russians or to peasant women. For instance, the “single Oriental woman” (*odinokaia zhenshchina-vostochnitsa*) who had left her patriarchal household, was considered unable to find a job on her own and particularly vulnerable to prostitution: “they don’t hire her anywhere; she is not a member of the union; the only income left to her is prostitution.”³⁷ The single peasant woman, especially the *bedniak* woman and the *batrachka*, was often represented not only as helpless, but also as a

³⁶ One of the most vivid characterizations of the orphaned mother can be found in Lebedeva’s speech at Ommlad’s meeting on May 15, 1928. GARF, f. 6983, o.1, d. 5, l. 208.

³⁷ GARF, f. 6983, o.1, d. 5, l. 290. For a representation of Yakut women as particularly backward and abject see GARF, f. 6983, o.1, d. 6, l. 4.

fundamentally irresponsible mother who, during the high season of agricultural work, would “leave her offspring to the whim of fate.”³⁸

Grounded in female backwardness and abjection, help to orphaned mothers was ultimately a means to protect the future generation of Soviet workers. A series of labor regulations formalized the link between single mother’s rights and the campaign against child mortality by explicitly defining care during pregnancy as the first step to lower children’s death rates at birth. Popular slogans in the mid-1920s ordered: “Attentiveness and care to pregnant women! They carry the future generation inside them.” Another slogan solemnly defined “the woman-mother” as “a social asset” and “the joy of a working people.”³⁹ Doctors’ and social activists’ writings further popularized these ideas.

In a brochure programmatically entitled *The protection of motherhood and how it must be realized*, a certain Doctor G.L. Grauerman wrote:

During pregnancy, childbirth, the days after delivery, and the period of breast-feeding, the mother and her child...need protection...All mothers...have the right to protection (*pravo na okhranu*), which should be granted to them by the social collective for the service that they perform.⁴⁰

These words point to two interconnected key principles of the Soviet right to be helped. First, help was not a form of philanthropy, but a state duty. Second, the right to be helped was also a civic duty. In the case of single mothers, this right was granted in exchange for their reproductive labor. This meant that they were entitled to free and readily available healthcare, but were also responsible before the collective for their sexual and reproductive health as the carriers of the next generation of workers. In emphasizing women’s social obligations as mothers, Soviet

³⁸ GAPK, f. 15, o. 2, d. 95, l. 4 and l. 6. See also GAPK, f. 15, o. 2, d. 95, ll. 53-54.

³⁹ GAPK, f. 15, o. 2, d. 93, l. 4.

⁴⁰ G.L.Grauerman, *Chto takoe okhrana materinstva i kak ee sleduet osushestvliat* (Moscow: Otdel okhrany materinstva i mladenchestva Narodnogo Kommissariata Social’nogo Obespecheniia, 1919), 3-4.

activists placed upon the state the duty to defend their interests and health, but also compelled women to put the needs of the collective before their individual ones. Soviet single women had the right and the obligation to contribute to the population growth: depending on their reproductive contributions, they were granted the right to receive social assistance and to put their children in orphanages; their reproductive performances were also subject to social controls and sometimes to outright punishments.

Like the defectologists and the disability medical experts that we encountered in the previous chapters, doctor Grauerman grounded his “rational view of the defense of motherhood” and “its economic and social importance”⁴¹ in scientific research. Indeed, many doctors-activists of the 1920s invoked science to combine pregnancy hygiene with discussions of sexual hygiene and, most importantly, to prove that both sexual and reproductive activities made women physiologically weaker and more prone to suffering than men. Ommlad advocates often depicted the fecund female body as diseased and dangerous. Reproductive health was rare and always defined negatively as the absence of a series of sexual diseases.⁴² In their writings and in the practical help that Ommlad activists offered to single mothers, there was an implied highly gendered connection between sexuality and sickness, whereby promiscuous men actively spread disease and helpless women passively suffered from it.

Historians studying other countries have remarked that medical diagnosis of poor women’s ill health defined their deserving status, but also reinforced female dependency and undermined women’s efforts at self-sufficiency.⁴³ In Soviet Russia, reproduction gave women

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 6

⁴² See Tricia Starks, “A Fertile Mother Russia,” 428. Similarly, as Frances Bernstein points out, “healthy sex” was “the absence of sick and deviant behavior.” Bernstein, *The Dictatorship of Sex*, 39.

⁴³ See, for instance, Marilyn Schultz Blackwell, “The Deserving Sick: Poor Women and the Medicalization of Poverty in Brattleboro, Vermont,” *Journal of Women’s History*, 11:1 (Spring 1999), 53-74.

the right to be helped, but also turned them into vulnerable creatures. In a letter to the Perm' Narkomsobes section, a certain Doctor K. Zviagin compiled a list of diseases of the female sexual apparatus which should excuse women from working duties. He wrote:

It is rare the woman who has a totally healthy sexual apparatus. The main reasons for this are the following: 1) delivery and miscarriages are very often the causes of various diseases; 2) the huge spread of gonorrhea among men...is a cause of infection for many women and for this reason their whole sexual apparatus is brought to total destruction ...In addition, if we take into consideration the generally weaker physiology of the female organism in comparison to the male one as well as the periodical losses of blood (menstruation), which are physiological, but nonetheless are often accompanied by all sorts of pain – all this gives grounds to assign women significantly easier demands in the area of physical work than those assigned to men. Thus, no heavy physical work...should be assigned to women. This should be granted for the sake of saving the health of the mothers of the future generation.⁴⁴

The woman-doctor and activist Evgeniia Anatolevna Balakshina echoed Zviagin by arguing that “the ‘normal’ development of a girl’s sexual apparatus, her pregnancy and maternity can happen only under the correct conditions of work.”⁴⁵ And Grauerman added, “poor women who live out of their labor should be given the chance to recover their strength after delivery...It is necessary to let them rest as much as possible.”⁴⁶ Again, the level of care provided to single mothers and the rate of children’s mortality were seen in a relationship of proportional dependency: rested mothers produced healthier babies, while worn out women gave birth to a weak generation. The interests of both mother and child were the domain of the doctor.

In March 1923, a certain Dr. Iakhlakov, the head of a local Narkomzdrav section in the Perm' province, compiled a “plan of work” to tackle “the almost complete ignorance of women

⁴⁴ GAPK, f. 9, o. 1, d. 121, l. 256. In September 1922 Zviagin was appointed director of a birth clinic in Perm' and assigned the task to organize obstetrical and gynecological help in the whole Perm' province. GAPK, f. 15, o.1, d. 359, l. 191.

⁴⁵ GAPK, f. 15, o. 1, d. 349, ll. 12-13.

⁴⁶ Grauerman, *Chto takoe okhrana materinstva*, 8.

concerning issues that closely concern them, such as the defense of children's and mothers' health, hereditary and acquired diseases, and the problem of infectious diseases that can affect the whole family." Iakhlakov conceived the mother's body as a habitat for the life and the development of the child. Taking women under its tutelage from the very act of conception, Ommlad was supposed to "simultaneously observe the life of the pregnant woman and that of the fetus, the changes in the organism of the woman together with the development and the growth of the fetus." Additionally, Ommlad had to "show pregnant women a correct way of life for the correct development of the fetus." Eventual diseases in the child (such as rachitic syndrome and idiotism) were conceived as consequences of the mother's incorrect way of feeding. The logical conclusion was that Ommlad had to control the life of the mother during pregnancy, after delivery, and until the end of the breast-feeding period.⁴⁷

Similarly, Grauerman insisted that during pregnancy women regularly go to the doctor and closely follow his (sic) suggestions and orders. Not only did he define as "ignorant" those women who did not go to the doctor for the whole nine months of pregnancy, but also threateningly warned them that they would "pay" for their carelessness with their own lives and those of their children.⁴⁸ Balakshina agreed that the inability of single mothers to take care of and feed their children in the correct way was one of the main causes of the "colossal" death rate of children under one year of age.⁴⁹ A report from the mid-1920s linked *kul'turnost'* to lower mortality rates among newborn children and, as a final result, to the improvement of the national economy: "the more cultured the nation, the less mortality in it...and the lower the mortality, the more able-bodied workers we will have and more possibilities to achieve the material well-being

⁴⁷ GAPK, f. 15, o. 2, d. 140, l. 1.

⁴⁸ Grauerman, *Chto takoe okhrana materinstva*, 23.

⁴⁹ GAPK, f. 15, o. 1, d. 348, l. 158.

of the nation.”⁵⁰ A popular 1923 slogan put it more bluntly: “Ignorance on how to correctly breastfeed kills 1.5 million newborns every year. Down with darkness! More knowledge to women!”⁵¹ Grauerman emphasized that single mothers’ behavior immediately after delivery could be very “irrational” and thus necessitated “the unwavering control of the midwife.”⁵²

In sum, doctors wished to seize child care from women’s hands because they deemed single mothers incompetent. To their darkness, ignorance, irrationality, and sometimes outright hysteria, they opposed a “rational therapy” and “rational help” that corresponded to “the contemporary requirements of science” and that only medical professionals could offer.⁵³ Following the medical profession’s self-presentation as the guardian and practitioner of rational knowledge, Soviet authorities rejected women’s own experience as inadequate vis-à-vis the new medical information. This endorsement of rational medical care to single mothers was made urgent by the panic for the increasing rate of mothers’ and newborns’ deaths. In addition, it nicely fit with the wider health campaign that ridiculed the belief in folk medicine and vilified the networks to which women had traditionally gone for advice.⁵⁴ As Tricia Starks has argued, the maternal health campaigns “hoped to rob women of authority in matters of child rearing and replace mothers and fathers with the male doctor and his new, scientific, Soviet lifestyle.”⁵⁵ This discourse reduced dependent women’s welfare rights to a rather narrow form of gynecological help. It conflated single women with single mothers and assumed that women would stop abandoning their children if given the time and space to rest before delivery and to bond with

⁵⁰ GAPK, f. 15, o. 2, d. 95, ll. 53-54.

⁵¹ GAPK, f. 15, o. 2, d. 93, l. 4.

⁵² Grauerman, *Chto takoe okhrana materinstva*, 18 and 23.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 7. See also GAPK, f. 15, o. 2, d. 140, l. 1. For a representation of pregnant women as hysterical see GAPK, f. 132, o. 1, d. 293, ll. 30-31.

⁵⁴ Traditional practices of female care were called with a series of disparaging terms such as *znakhastvo*, *povituchestvo*, and *babnichestvo*. See Elizabeth Wood, *Performing Justice*, 142-146.

⁵⁵ Starks, “A Fertile Mother Russia,” 412. This argument has been advanced also by Elizabeth Waters in her article “The Modernization of Russian Motherhood.”

their offspring in the post-partum period. As I will discuss in the following section, this assumption tended to overlook many profound and long-term legal and economic needs of single women or to treat these needs as unrelated to their obstetrical ones.

4.2 Sites and forms of help to single mothers

The Soviet state was explicitly and stably committed to help its female population, especially that part of it which for various reasons lacked male protection. This commitment to supposedly isolated single women was grounded in their perceived status as misinformed, needy, and helpless individuals. It often resulted in intrusive forms of control over their sexuality and their everyday lives. In the years between the emergence of Ommlad in 1918 and the welfare reforms of 1949, this organ's various sites of help to single mothers (its consultation points, Homes for Mother and Child, working dorms, and socio-legal cabinets) tended to focus on different forms of care and control. Until 1927, Ommlad emphasized medical and educational help to single women, then it gave preference to providing the economic and legal conditions for single mothers to perform their productive and reproductive labor. Finally, in the post-war years, it re-directed its attention on almost exclusively gynecological matters. However, conceptually underpinning help to single women was always already a conception of them as needy, ignorant, and helpless.

The emphasis on medical and educational help (1918-1926)

To fight the darkness of Soviet single mothers and thereby reduce the occurrence of various diseases during pregnancy, Ommlad established so-called women's consultations (*zhenskie konsul'tatsii*). These facilities were supposed to be an ongoing school of motherhood educating Soviet single women throughout their sexual life, from puberty to menopause. As

educational institutions, the women's consultations countered all sorts of gynecological incorrect views and taught women hygiene and infant care. As centers of prophylactic medicine, the consultations not only provided qualified obstetrical emergency help, but also performed preventive medical checks on pregnant women and their children until the age of two.⁵⁶

One of the consultations' key educational and prophylactic goals was to prevent single women from falling victims to the village healing-woman (the so-called *znakharka*) and her abortion practices. In the mid-1920s, when abortion was still legal,⁵⁷ Soviet district doctors indicated that aborting individuals included mainly two types of women: peasant "unmarried girls" who were ashamed and afraid of their parents; and mature women who were not in an officially registered union or who had been abandoned by their husbands. In both cases, single women were believed to worry about the material means by which they could raise their children and this preoccupation was interpreted as a sign of their ignorance about Soviet alimony laws.⁵⁸

Since the main reason pushing women to perform abortions was thought to be their "absolute economic, social, and legal helplessness," the consultation points emerged as sites of both relief and propaganda. Indeed, in the campaign against abortion of the 1920s, the saving and disciplining aspects of help to single women easily merged into one: Ommlad's medical personnel strove to save women from the risk of death by agitating about the damage that abortion caused to the female organism and by advertising contraceptive measures.⁵⁹ Some Ommlad activists recommended directing the propaganda effort also at fathers by launching a

⁵⁶ GAPK, f. 15, o. 1, d. 359, l. 258; GAPK, f. 15, o. 2, d. 95, l. 23; GAPK, f. 132, o. 1, d. 283, ll. 151-152.

⁵⁷ Abortion was legalized in November 1920 and re-criminalized in June 1936. Chapters 7 and 8 of Goldman's *Women, the State and Revolution* provide a detailed study of Soviet policies concerning abortion in the 1920s and 1930s.

⁵⁸ GAPK, f. 132, o. 1, d. 279, ll. 56-73. This file contains the forms filled in by 10 district doctors of the Perm' province in 1925.

⁵⁹ GAPK, f. 15, o. 1, d. 359, ll. 103-104. On abortions in the mid-1920s see also GAPK, f. 132, o. 1, d. 280, l. 188.

campaign for their involvement in the support of children.⁶⁰ However, this sort of agitation never convincingly took off as the state did not make any serious attempt to change men's roles in the household.

Breast-feeding is a telling example of how Ommlad's consultation points framed single mothers' right to be helped in medical and educational terms. As Balakshina wrote, "under the direction of a doctor, every mother can learn to feed her baby and take care of him."⁶¹ That this learning process was a crucial component of women's right to be helped is revealed by a specific condition for the reception of help: to receive a subsidy and a maternity leave, single women had to go twice a month to the consultation centers and let Ommlad's medical personnel check on the progress of their breast-feeding. In the absence of consultation points, special commissions of trusted women workers were asked to verify that subsidized single mothers were indeed breast-feeding their babies.⁶² Breast-feeding was defined as natural, but portrayed as a skill ("*umenie vskarmlivat*" or "*umeloe vskarmlivanie*"). As such, it was subject to inspection and eventual correction at the hands of the doctor and the midwife. By giving suggestions and orders, by showing pictures, and by demonstrating how to use various objects of baby care, Soviet doctors and midwives could teach breast-feeding and skilled care even to illiterate single mothers. Women who, after all this agitation, still decided not to breast-feed, were defined as "irrational mothers" incorrigibly harming their children.⁶³

⁶⁰ GAPK, f. 15, o. 2, d. 94, l. 104.

⁶¹ GAPK, f. 15, o. 1, d. 348, l. 158.

⁶² GAPK, f. 15, o. 1, d. 328, l. 5. Not only breast-feeding mothers, but also pregnant women were asked to visit the consultation every two months and, at least, three times during the whole pregnancy. In return for these regular visits, the consultation gave pregnant women a "priority right" (*preimushchestvennoe pravo*) in the access to hospitals' delivery wards. GAPK, f. 132, o. 1, d. 288, ll. 125-131. On subsidies for breast-feeding mothers see also GAPK, f. 15, o. 1, d. 328, l. 17 and d. 329, l. 3.

⁶³ GAPK, f. 15, o. 1, d. 332, l. 69.

Breast-feeding played a big role in the discourse and practice of assistance to single women because it related to one of the biggest dilemmas of the Soviet social and health system – how to liberate women from the burden of exclusive care of their babies, while also preserving the physiological bond between the mother and child (which Soviet doctors considered fundamental for the latter’s survival). Having the pretention to know what the feeling of maternal attachment meant, doctors prescribed the act of breast-feeding and the constant proximity between the mother and the child as “powerful factors in kindling the feeling of motherhood there where this feeling for one reason or another is silent.”⁶⁴ In the case of single mothers, who were believed to “hate” their children at the time of birth, the bond with the child was particularly encouraged to avoid abandonment. Ommlad activists insisted that “lonely dumped women” would have been able to keep their children and develop an attachment to them only if they received educational support from the doctors and material help from the state.⁶⁵

Around 1926, in connection with the ratification of a new Marriage and Family Code, women’s consultations began to be officially called “expanded consultations” (*razdvernutye konsul’tatsii*). The name change was meant to indicate that these institutions offered multiple forms of welfare without compartmentalizing between gynecological, educational, economic, and legal help to Soviet single women. Through a special “juridical section,” the expanded consultation was supposed to assist all women by offering legal defense and advice on questions concerning their legal rights. Although the establishment of juridical consulting offices alongside the medically-oriented ones seemed a step towards a stronger practice of legal protection, many Ommlad social workers were skeptical. They contended that female legal ignorance and helplessness prevented homeless and husbandless orphan-mothers from taking advantage of the

⁶⁴ Grauerman, *Chto takoe okhrana materinstva*, 8.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 33.

rights granted them by Soviet laws and autonomously defending their interests as mothers. Because they lacked “legal awareness,” women put themselves in difficult positions.⁶⁶ As the Supreme Court explained, “sometimes the woman plaintiff absolutely does not know the name of the father, who left her and the child to the whim of fate. And sometimes, due to illiteracy, she indicates the address of the defendant too vaguely...”⁶⁷

The Soviet legislative framework itself entailed the idea that women were weak, naïve, and by nature defenseless. Investigating discrimination and sexual harassment against women-workers, Lisa Granik has written that “gender myths were so embedded in Soviet legislation and legal practice that the notion of formal equality itself was a myth, supported only by official rhetoric and propaganda. Soviet legislation was so engendered that it institutionalized, rather than eradicated, gender inequality.”⁶⁸ Soviet law identified unmarried women’s legal issues as questions related to abortion, child abandonment, sexual infection, rape, alimony, and the establishment of paternity. Underpinning this list was a patriarchal view of women which in turn let help to them revolve almost exclusively around the medical campaign against child mortality and sickness. While men remained unmarked as ordinary workers, essentialist notions of women’s nature as mothers were institutionalized through a legislation that protected them mainly as mothers.

Given this view, it is not surprising that even after the promulgation of the new Marriage and Family Code and the establishment of the “expanded consultations,” the main emphasis of Ommlad’s consultations remained on medical and educational work. As an Ommlad activist in

⁶⁶ “Instruktsiia o rabote iuridicheskikh konsul’tatsii po voprosam okhrany materinstva i mladenchestva,” *Biulleten’ Narodnogo Komissariata Zdravookhraneniia*, no.5, 1925, 6.

⁶⁷ GARF, f. 6983, o. 1, d. 222, l. 3.

⁶⁸ Lisa Granik, “The Trials of the *Proletarka*: Sexual Harassment Claims in the 1920s,” in *Reforming Justice in Russia, 1864-1996. Power, Culture, and the Limits of the Legal Order*, ed. by Peter H. Solomon (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1997), 131-167, at 133.

Perm' explained discussing the consultations' work in 1926, these centers' key goals were "to improve the gynecological condition of pregnant women, raise their cultural level..., prepare their homes for the delivery or for the return from the hospital, and teach women how to care for the baby to come." In addition, this activist asked to focus energy on "cultural-enlightenment work," which was to include "individual conversations" between the doctor and the woman visiting the consultation and "group conversations" on female hygiene, deliveries, menopause, sexual life, abortions, baby care, and breast-feeding. In this activist's view, "cultural enlightenment" happened every time that a single woman looked at the wall-papers, pictures, posters, and educational exhibits that decorated the premises of the consultation. It took place also through the organization of show trials against mothers abandoning their children.⁶⁹ This description of functions reveals that the number one task of the "new" expanded consultations remained to serve as a site of surveillance and a school of motherhood.

Reports from Ommlad's local sections indicate that few women actually made the fulfillment of these functions possible since they did not visit the consultations on a regular basis. In March 1927, for instance, the Perm' Ommlad office attempted to organize a consultation in the Ocherskii industrial settlement, but this enterprise turned out to be rather unsuccessful: the consultation was not popular at all, since "the women still prefer to turn for advice to the village midwives (*babki-povitukhi*)."⁷⁰ In the Cherdyn' district (Perm' province), "only occasionally do women come for advice on how to feed their babies and take care of them. In the majority of cases they bring sick babies, who need not advice but medical help." Local activists condemned women's behavior since, in their opinion, the main purpose of the consultation should have been

⁶⁹ GAPK, f. 132, o. 1, d. 288, ll. 125-131. One particularly successful show trial took place in Perm' in 1927 during a three-day campaign for the protection of motherhood. See GAPK, f. 132, o. 1, d. 288, l. 149. On trials in which women appear as victims and/or villains in the context of motherhood see the chapter "The Trial of the New Woman," in Elizabeth Wood's *Performing Justice*.

⁷⁰ GAPK, f. 132, o. 1, d. 289, list unnumbered.

prophylactic (“to check on healthy babies” – as one activist put it).⁷¹ Women’s defection and misuse of the consultations was explained once again by reference to the lack of culture (*nekul’turnost’*) of the Soviet female population.⁷² It seems plausible, however, that many women simply looked at the consultation as a sort of medical ambulatory, where they could go to receive specific medical assistance or new prescriptions for their medicines.

Another site where single mothers could receive the state’s material support together with its disciplining regime was the so-called Home for Mother and Child. Grauerman defined the purpose of this facility as

providing the abandoned lonely woman...with the possibility to rest from her usual heavy work and her worries about the future so that she could gather energy for the upcoming important act – the delivery of a new citizen.⁷³

Women without men were entitled to physical and spiritual care as the producers of a new generation of citizens. In all effects, the Homes for Mother and Child were a “school of motherhood,” in which the final beneficiaries of help were the children, while the new mothers mainly received lessons on how to care for them.

The Homes for Mother and Child were based on women’s right to rest immediately before and after delivery. Initially, all poor (*neimushchie*) and single (*odinokie*) pregnant women could be admitted to the Homes for Mother and Child two months before delivery and remain there for two-three more months after childbirth. This vague condition for admission into the Home for Mother and Child – that is to be needy and alone – was qualified more narrowly in the mid-1920s, when Ommlad attempted to limit access to single women without housing (*bespriutnye*). When the rate of female unemployment peaked, the ever larger cohort of

⁷¹ GAPK, f. 15, o. 2, d. 97, ll. 104-105. See also GAPK, f. 132, o. 1, d. 283, l. 141.

⁷² GAPK, r-15, d. 366, l. 45-48.

⁷³ Grauerman, *Chto takoe okhrana materinstva*, 33.

unemployed single mothers was encouraged to put their children in state nurseries without seeking admission in the Homes for Mother and Child.⁷⁴ As it often happened in Soviet socialism, a progressive sounding right was restricted by the state's objective penury of resources.

Each Home for Mother and Child was designed to host around 20 single women, their children, and Ommlad's personnel. This institution was supposed to be a model community that combined moral improvement (cleanliness, order, thrift, and sobriety) with reproductive and mothering success. The everyday life in the facility clearly reflected this understanding. While parasitism (*tuneiadstvo*) was inadmissible, the principles of mandatory collective work and self-help regulated the daily regimen. All the women took care of themselves and their children, did the laundry, cleaned the locales of the home, and took turns in cooking. Only in the six weeks immediately before and after delivery were women dispensed from physical work in the home. While the heaviest chores were performed by a janitor (preferably of the female sex), all the residents were required to fulfill their everyday cleaning and mothering duties following the instructions of the home's medical personnel. Mothers fed the babies, changed their diapers, and gave them baths under the surveillance of experienced nurses. Some homes had a workshop for those women who wished to work in it and a library with literature on the defense of motherhood and infancy.⁷⁵ No woman residing in the home could receive external visitors.⁷⁶ Single mothers were not supposed to feel like the wards of the old shelters, but rather like citizens performing a socially useful labor in the field of motherhood.

⁷⁴ GAPK, f. 15, o. 1, d. 366, ll. 7-10 and ll. 14-17.

⁷⁵ GAPK, f. 15, o.1, d. 332, ll. 84-85.

⁷⁶ Graeurman, *Chto takoe okhrana materinstva*, 19.

Indeed, single mothers living in these homes were not only required to care for their own children, but also assigned the “state responsibility” to breast-feed a certain number of baby orphans which were regularly placed into the Homes for Mother and Child.⁷⁷ These were the wetnurses (*kormil'tsy*) and their life and labor in the homes were regulated by “Instructions” similar to those that articulated the duties of the nannies regularly employed in these facilities. These documents reveal both what the *kormil'tsy* were instructed to do and what they did in reality. For instance, while Ommlad activists strove to discipline the *kormil'tsy* into having their meals at fixed times, these women wandered to the common kitchen whenever they wanted. The extra-detailed and pedantic character of these “Instructions” indicates also a basic lack of trust towards single mothers, especially in regard to their health and cleanliness.⁷⁸ The wetnurses were constantly reminded of a series of hygienic norms: to wash their hands and breasts before and after the breast-feeding session; to let few drops of milk fall before giving the breast to the baby; to keep their hair and their clothes clean. Another sign of the activists’ profound mistrust towards these women emerges in the regulation of their free time: the *kormil'tsy* could leave the home every afternoon to take care of personal business, but they had to be back by 6 pm; after dusk they were allowed to leave the home only in groups and under the vigilance of a staff member; they were supposed to be in their beds from midnight to 6 in the morning. Lonely women were often seen as inclined to practice prostitution and this schedule was clearly oriented at preventing women’s free use of their sexuality. Finally, since “the feeding of children is a job,” upon admission in the home the *kormil'tsy* was tested for two weeks: they would have remained only if they turned out to be fit for the position. In addition, while these women were allowed into the

⁷⁷ GAPK, f. 15, o. 1, d. 349, ll. 19-20.

⁷⁸ See Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger. An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1966).

home as single mothers and together with their children, they were also asked to leave their children in the nursery and visit them only during the breast-feeding sessions.⁷⁹

The investigation of the body was a reality of the Homes for Mother and Child that applied not only to the *kormil'tsy*, but to all its female residents. Not unlike the defective children that we saw in chapter 1, single mothers were the object of constant “observations” and “medical controls.” Upon admission in the home and during their entire stay, women were “accurately visited” and “subjected to detailed general and gynecological inspections.” Their genital areas were shaved and disinfected; their entire bodies were cleaned with soap and warm water; they were dressed in sterile clothes and provided with sterile sheets. While gynecological visits were supposed to be rare, the investigation of the external surface of single mothers’ bodies was recommended as frequently as possible. If the institution’s personnel had even the slightest doubt that the pregnant woman was sick, they placed her in isolation.⁸⁰ Indeed, single mothers suffering from any infectious disease were not welcome in the homes. Syphilitic women were isolated for therapeutic purposes and returned to their mothering and breast-feeding duties only after having been cured. Mothers with tuberculosis were allowed to feed their babies, but not to care for them.⁸¹ Women who were receiving medical care in psychiatric hospitals were admitted to the Homes for Mother and Child as long as they proved “calm, conscious, and with a lot of milk in their breasts.”⁸²

⁷⁹ GAPK, f. 132, o. 1, d. 279, ll. 8-9 and ll. 14-15.

⁸⁰ Grauerman, *Chto takoe okhrana materinstva*, 18-19. Medical control over single women was often demanded not only by doctors but also by the women activists of Ommlad. See for instance, Tkal’s speech in at the Second City Conference of the Women Workers of Perm’ (March 1920). “2-ia Permskaia obshchegorodskaia konferentia rabotnits,” *Krasnyi Ural*, 3 March 1920, no. 49, 4; and Tkal’, “Zadachi Okhrany Materinstva i Mladenchestva v derevne,” *Krasnyi Ural*, 4 March 1920, no. 50, 3.

⁸¹ See GAPK, f. 15, o. 1, d. 349, l. 6.

⁸² GAPK, f. 132, o. 1, d. 280, l. 148.

The reports written by various Ommlad inspectors in the 1920s reveal that the Homes for Mother and Child did not effectively accomplish their tasks. Most archival documents depict a picture of disastrous sanitary and economic conditions, in which the homes could offer neither real rest nor significant education. The directors of these facilities strove to exploit women as providers of milk in exchange for a miserable shelter and women dragged their feet and made all possible efforts to offset the social controls envisioned by Ommlad.

A case in point is the Home for Mother and Child in Perm'. Located on the second floor of a two-story stone building in the center of the city, this facility could theoretically host up to 20 women and their children. However, there were not enough bed sheets and the available underwear for both women and children was very limited: there were only 18 shirts, most of which were torn; there were no bras, panties, socks, scarves, or shoes; there were very few diapers. The oven did not work properly and filled the rooms with smoke. The walls needed to be repainted and the leaking roof needed to be fixed. Women hung wet diapers on a rope in a poorly furnished kitchen. For their physiological needs, the women had to go out of the building. Heavily pregnant women and mothers who had just delivered would walk through a yard filled with trash (since there was no garbage dump and the trash was spread all over the yard) and reach a cold and dark cabinet that functioned as toilet.⁸³ Given these conditions, it was not surprising that many women "bring their babies, leave them there to be raised, and go away. They prefer to attend some kind of courses or classes."⁸⁴ Those who remained in the home attempted to take its management as much as possible in their hands. In 1927, a disappointed and frustrated Ommlad activist wrote that the Perm' Home for Mother and Child was in "a state of anarchy": no medical personnel controlled the resident single mothers and no educational work

⁸³ GAPK, f. 132, o. 1, d. 278, ll. 15-16; d. 280, l. 116; and d. 283, l. 20.

⁸⁴ GAPK, f. 15, o. 1, d. 351, ll. 18-20.

was conducted among them. As an “undisciplined element lacking both skill and will to work,” orphan-mothers had turned Ommlad’s facility from a school of motherhood into a “home of squabble and parasitism” (*dom sklok i tuneiadstva*) with a “corrupting” influence on Soviet women.⁸⁵ The story of the Perm’ Home for Mother and Child indicates that Soviet single women could have definite desires for upward mobility and, when they stayed in Ommlad’s institutions, they did not wish to be pinned down to the mothering labor that this uncomfortable facilities forced upon them.

The focus on productive and reproductive labor (1927-1943)

Historian Wendy Goldman has remarked that, instead of expanding state services for homeless and orphaned mothers, in the late 1920s some policymakers proposed to train this group of marginalized women and put them to work at the least expense to the state.⁸⁶ Ommlad activists too began to identify the best form of help to single mothers as their engagement in independent productive labor. Ommlad began to strongly promote labor as an effective solution both to the condition of female orphanhood and to the problem of child abandonment which supposedly resulted from women’s loneliness. For instance, the director of Ommlad in Perm’, Klavdiia Vasil’evna Grebneva, claimed that single pregnant women needed above all to be “taken away from the street” and put into institutions that would teach them professional skills.⁸⁷ As we have seen in the previous chapter, the path from “the street” – with its associations of begging and labor desertion – to various sites of industrial production was being advocated in the same years also by VOS and VOG activists. This was the direction that Soviet help took in the late 1920s and throughout the 1930s in relation to marginalized social groups.

⁸⁵ GAPK, f. 132, o. 1, d. 284, ll. 41-42.

⁸⁶ Goldman, *Women, the State and Revolution*, 90-91.

⁸⁷ GAPK, f. 132, o. 1, d. 295, ll. 330-331.

In 1927 a directive of the Sovnarkom and the VTsIK mandated to strengthen help to needy single mothers through work-oriented help. Ommlad followed suit and set up special working dorms (*trudovye obshchezhitia*), craftwork cooperatives (*kustarnye arteli*), and other collective enterprises for orphan mothers. These facilities were asked to promote women's labor qualifications in order to fight a long list of enemies: prostitution, child abandonment, parasitism, and – of course – single mothers' darkness and ignorance.⁸⁸ As we read in a joint circular letter drafted by the Narkomsobes and the Narkomzdrav on December 29, 1930, work was made available to "poor, orphan adult women, and women who engage in prostitution" as a "means for re-educating them and inculcating in them labor habits."⁸⁹

The workshop for homeless mothers that the Perm' section of Ommlad opened in 1928 is a good example of the new orientation of social help to single mothers. This facility's goals were thus articulated: "to inculcate working habits in the mothers, teach them a skill, give them a qualification, find them a job, and along with this prevent them from abandoning their children."⁹⁰ The workshop admitted 15 single mothers with children between 3 and 12 months old and let them reside in its dorm for a period of 3-6 months. Besides offering them shelter, the workshop compensated women's work with a 10-ruble monthly salary. In line with the principle that the dorm's residents should cover their own outlay, the income made from the sale of the artifacts produced in the workshop did not go directly to the women, but was used to maintain the dorm itself and to provide women with some cash upon dismissal from the facility. If women

⁸⁸ For a copy of the Sovnarkom and VTsIK directive dated 20 June 1927 see GAPK, f. 132, o. 1, d. 291, l. 2. See also a copy of the directive "Polozhenie o trudovykh masterskikh dlia odinokikh materei" in GAPK, f. 132, o. 1, d. 299, ll. 59-60. The first working dorms for single mothers appeared in 1926; by 1928 there were 29 of them in the Russian Republic, providing help to a total of around 1,000 women. See GARF, f. 6983, o.1, d. 5, l. 214 and l. 265; and GAPK, f. 132, o. 1, d. 289, list unnumbered. For more information on the working dorms for single mothers see GARF, f. 6983, o.1, d. 5, l. 319 and GAPK, f. 132, o. 1, d. 292, l. 6.

⁸⁹ This circular letter is quoted in Ia.A. Perel' and A.A. Liubimova, eds., *Okhrana materinstva i mladenchestva* (Moscow and Leningrad: Gosudarstvennoe Uchebno-Pedagogicheskoe Izdatel'stvo, 1932), 64.

⁹⁰ GAPK, f. 132, o. 1, d. 291, l. 18.

produced an income higher than the set norm, the surplus money was given them as incentive to production. Here, as in the Home for Mother and Child, the principle of self-help determined the workshop's everyday life: each mother performed chores in the communal areas, such as cleaning the rooms, caring for the children (under the control of a sister), washing the laundry, heating the stove, carrying the milk from the milk station, etc. However, to avoid the “anarchy” that had emerged in the Home for Mother and Child, Ommlad established more rigid controls on women's labor: if women proved unfit for the jobs taught in the workshop, abandoned their children, found a source of permanent income outside the workshop, failed to respect the rules of this facility, or proved guilty of wrong-doings of any kind, they would have been immediately expelled.⁹¹ Thus grounded in self-discipline, financial self-sufficiency, and engagement in productive labor, the working dorm that emerged in the late 1920s would remain one of the preferred sites of help to single women for the following decades of Soviet history.

Unlike other marginalized groups' labor, however, unmarried women's contributions to the collective were imagined not only as productive, but also as reproductive. To eliminate the family and everyday conditions which could have prevented husbandless women to perform their allotted reproductive duties, in 1933 Ommlad set up the so-called “socio-legal cabinets” (*sotsial'no-pravovye kabinety*). These were supposed to provide legal and material assistance to economically weak and emotionally unstable women who were suspected of desiring to escape their reproductive labor.

The activist Sofiia Kopelianskaia (whom we already saw advocating for state help to defective children) expressed this vision of single mothers as both “suffering” (*neblagopoluchnye*) and “suspicious” (*podozritel'nye*) in a brochure that described the work of

⁹¹ GAPK, f. 132, o. 1, d. 281, l. 25 and d. 292, l. 6.

the socio-legal cabinets.⁹² Writing in 1936, in the context of the re-criminalization of abortion and at a time of heated discussions concerning the new abortion law, Kopelianskaia defined the category of “single woman” as comprising a large spectrum of helpless women: wives abandoned by their husbands while pregnant, divorced women, underage pregnant girls who came from the countryside with the specific goal to terminate their pregnancies or get rid of their babies, women without permanent residence and stable jobs (particularly female domestic servants), all pregnant women who had unhappy family relations and who experienced negative conditions of everyday life (especially women-alcoholics), and – last but not least – all women suffering from sexually transmitted infectious diseases and the victims of sexual violence.⁹³ They all demanded the watchful attention of the socio-legal cabinets, whose task was to provide timely help and thus dissuade women from performing abortions or abandoning their children. As Kopelianskaia wrote,

when the lonely woman who has become a mother, holds in her hands...a small living creature, is overwhelmed by mixed feelings (motherly joy and pride, fear for the future of a child without father and for her own fate) and is insecure about how to attain her rights (if these rights are at all familiar to her...) ⁹⁴

The feelings, triggered in a single woman by the birth of her child, often compelled her to rid herself of the newborn baby. The presence of Ommlad socio-legal workers at the very bedside of the delivering woman had the goal to prevent child abandonment and convince single women to undertake their mothering labor.

The fundamental method of work of the socio-legal cabinets was the so-called “social patronage,” which entailed the performance of inspections in the women’s homes and

⁹² Kopelianskaia, *Zashchita prav rebenka v sovetskom sude*, respectively 112 and 108.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 107.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 108.

workplaces. Social patronage visitations were carried out in all cases concerning housing and family issues, such as conjugal disagreements over children, issues of alimony, and any kind of family conflict. They had the purpose to gather an “unmediated, holistic, and profound knowledge” concerning the family relations as well as the economic and housing conditions in which single women lived. Yet, these investigations were not limited to the collection of information and the verification of women’s everyday conditions of life. They also had the pragmatic purpose to resolve conflicts and initiate negotiations on the spot, providing help “in an unmediated way.” Indeed, one of the fundamental aims of these investigations was to eliminate the sources of family conflict without starting judicial cases.⁹⁵

Besides performing patronage inspections, the socio-legal cabinets could summon single individuals to their facilities. These special calls were often practiced to establish a child’s paternity: when the woman was still pregnant or had just delivered the child, the suspected father was summoned by the socio-legal cabinets and compelled to sign documents that recognized his paternity. Activists resorted to summonses also to regulate the payment of children’s alimony and spouses’ support. Like the patronage inspection, the summons was considered indispensable to solve disagreements concerning children and other family conflicts in an amicable way. In Kopelienskaia’s words, the summons was “a most precious means to promptly solve a problem outside of the courts and conclude peaceful agreements.”⁹⁶ Underlying both patronage inspections and summonses was the activists’ desire not to pass over women’s cases to the courts. This could have been motivated by the fact that the courts were already overloaded with work or by the activists’ attempt to harness more power for themselves.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 110.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 111.

When the new mother was still in the birth clinic, socio-legal workers conducted negotiations with potential breadwinners to “settle the life of the lonely new mother.” Activists thought that single mothers had a hard time obtaining the necessary documents. Both literate and illiterate women “easily get confused in the labyrinth of institutions, administrations, divisions, and sections (where they often come across the defendant’s friends).”⁹⁷ In other words, red tape and corruption – here clearly gendered male – got in the way of single women’s legal requests; bureaucracy and gender solidarity among men in powerful positions demanded that the socio-legal cabinets take upon themselves all the paperwork, search for insolvent men, and force them to pay alimony.

Ultimately, the assistance provided by the socio-legal cabinets was another prophylactic (although not medical) measure in the campaign against child abandonment. It reveals once more that care and control equally constituted the Soviet right to be helped. It also shows that this right was not simply granted to single women as needy individuals, but in a sense also imposed on them as the carriers of the next generation and the performers of a service to the collectivity.

The renewed relevance of medical help in the post-war period (1944-1949)

In 1944, a new Family Law abolished the right for unmarried mothers to appeal to the courts for the purpose of establishing paternity and obtaining maintenance. The loss of support from biological fathers was made up by an *ukaz* of the Presidium of the Supreme Council “On the strengthening of state help to pregnant women, mothers of many children and single mothers.” Ratified in the midst of the war (on July 8, 1944) and confirmed by an endless series of additional ordinances and circular letters, this decree redefined Soviet single women’s right to

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 112.

be helped in the immediate post-WWII years.⁹⁸ Its key stances were extensively discussed in party and soviet meetings, but also widely publicized through radio broadcasts and the press.

The nature and scope of the assistance to single women officially articulated in this decree were quite broad. The 1944 *ukaz* mandated to revitalize medical services on behalf of single women, but also confirmed the significance of “socio-legal help” as a form of assistance that combined the material and legal sides of help. The Commissariat of Trade was required to provide food cards to all pregnant women and breast-feeding mothers, while the Commissariat of Finance was supposed to assign state subsidies to single mothers through its provincial and city sections. Ommlad activists had to help needy single women finding a job, encourage them to ask for benefits at local executive committees, write petitions on their behalf to the courts, and assist them in obtaining access to the Homes for Mother and Child. Although the decree mandated the provision of economic and legal services as well as the expansion of the net of non-medical facilities for single women, it above all emphasized prophylactic gynecological and obstetrical help. At least this was the way in which it was interpreted by Narkomzdrav administrators. For instance, the Tatar Commissar of Health issued an ordinance on December 30, 1945, which thus instructed: “Under all circumstances provide the population with a sufficient number of beds for delivering women...absolutely don’t allow any rejection when delivering women ask for ambulatory help.”⁹⁹ Two years later, in December 1947, a letter of the Deputy Minister of Health, Mariia Dmitrevna Kovrigina, argued that the main tasks in the field of assistance to

⁹⁸ *Sbornik zakonov SSSR i ukazov Prezidiuma Verkhovnogo Soveta SSSR. (1938-iiul’ 1956 gg.)* (Moscow: Gosiurizdat, 1956), 383. Besides the decree of July 8, 1944, many other official directives regulated help to single women in the post-war period. For instance, the directives of the Sovnarkom of the SSSR no. 1122 dated 18 August 1944 and no. 1571 dated 10 November 1944; the directive of the Sovnarkom of the Russian Republic no. 814 dated 30 November 1944; the Narkomzdrav ordinances no. 755 and no. 55 dated 15 December 1944; the ordinance of the People’s Commissariat of Trade no. 566 dated 28 November 1944; and the joint ordinance of the People’s Commissariat of Trade and Health no. 431/592 dated 7 September 1944.

⁹⁹ GARF, f. 8009, o. 22, d. 88, l. 8.

single women was to offer obstetrical and gynecological help of better quality, to lower mothers' and children's mortality at childbirth, and to thwart abortions.¹⁰⁰

Did the 1944 decree signal a change in single mothers' right to be helped and the gender conception underpinning it? Historians Chris Burton and Mie Nakachie have remarked that, after having gone through an unprecedented demographic crisis, in the post-WWII period the Soviet state put a lot of effort to encourage an increase of the birthrate. As Nakachie writes, "in order to revive and expand a healthy population, viewed as essential to postwar economic and social reconstruction, Soviet leaders adopted a new pronatalist policy which promoted births among both married and unmarried mothers." From this standpoint, continues Nakachie, "reestablishing regular prophylactic measures was a fundamental task for Soviet obstetricians and gynecologists."¹⁰¹ Certainly, the Soviet state desired to radically improve the quality of medical services for single women in the wake of the devastating effects of the war on both female and male reproductive health. However, I reject Nakachie's contention that single motherhood was created as a new legitimate site of reproduction only after 1944. As we have seen, single motherhood was *de-facto* legitimized through pronatalist reproductive policies already in the immediate post-revolutionary years. All women – including unmarried ones – were expected to become mothers and their obligatory participation in reproducing the Soviet nation was not a novelty of the post-WWII period. In other words, a "motherist language" (in Nakachie's

¹⁰⁰ GARF, f. 8009, o. 22, d. 106, l. 1.

¹⁰¹ Chris Burton, "Minzdrav, Soviet Doctors, and the Policing of reproduction in the late Stalinist Years," *Russian History*, 27: 2 (Summer 2000), 197-221. Mie Nakachie, "'Abortion is killing us.' Women's Medicine and the Dilemma for Postwar Doctors in the Soviet Union, 1944-48," in *Soviet Medicine, Culture, Practice, and Science*, Frances L. Bernstein, Christopher Burton, and Dan Healy, eds. (Northern Illinois University Press: Dekalb, 2010), 195-213, at 196. See also her articles "N.S. Khrushchev and the 1944 Soviet Family Law: Politics, Reproduction, and Language," *East European Politics and Societies*, 20:1 (2006), 40-68; and "Population, politics and reproduction: Late Stalinism and its legacy," in *Late Stalinist Russia*, 23-36.

terms¹⁰²) and the set of gender relations implied by it had been part and parcel of the Soviet pronatalist logic since the foundation of Ommlad in 1918. Help to single women as mothers remained a priority task of the Soviet state throughout the period under consideration and reproduction as a civic responsibility of both married and single women continued to fundamentally mediate the relationship between the regime and its female population.

What changed in the post-1944 period was not so much the content of the state's regime of care to single women as the forms of control coming with it. Strict medical surveillance intensified every time that the panic over women's anti-reproductive behaviors grew.¹⁰³ Similarly to what had happened in the years following WWI, the revolution, and the civil war, Soviet physicians of the immediate post-WWII period devoted considerable energy to the battle against venereal diseases in single women. Most consultation visits turned into gynecological appointments where single women's sexual apparatus was "accurately investigated" and the conditions of their everyday life "exposed" to the medical gaze. Women's internal organs and their external lives were searched for pathologies: "gynecologically sick women" underwent hospitalization and patronage visits were set up when the activists found the conditions of single women's *byt* to be "negative" (*neblagtovoritel'nye*).¹⁰⁴ In addition, between 1946 and 1949 Ommlad's consultations conducted various systematic mass prophylactic visits. These were gynecological check-ups that all Soviet women with active sexual life were required to undergo once a year; they had the clear purpose to identify gynecological ailments in the Soviet female population.¹⁰⁵ Activists contributed to avert the "threat of abortions," by conducting "sanitary

¹⁰² Nakachie, "N.S. Khrushchev and the 1944 Soviet Family Law," 47.

¹⁰³ This is also one of Burton's main arguments in his article "Minzdrav, Soviet Doctors, and the Policing of Reproduction."

¹⁰⁴ GARF, f. 8009, o. 22, d. 106, l. 66; d. 90, l. 52; and d. 87, l. 131.

¹⁰⁵ This practice is described, for instance, in the document "The experience of mass prophylactic visits to women in the rural areas of the Rostov oblast as a method to fight gynecological diseases," dated March 1949. The author of

enlightenment work” through exhibitions, posters, brochures, and textbooks that preached pregnancy hygiene and explained the damaging effects of abortion and venereal diseases on women’s sexual health. When, notwithstanding all this help, women still contracted venereal disease and underwent criminal abortions, their cases were passed over to the office of the procurator.¹⁰⁶

In the context of this intensified medical control, some activists proposed to affiliate Ommlad’s consultations more closely with birth clinics and hospital obstetrical wards. For instance, in 1948, the head of the Narkomzdrav’s Department for Obstetrical and Gynecological Help, O.D. Matspanova, criticized Ommlad’s consultations for being “the most backward ring in the system of institutions for the defense of motherhood,” and suggested to merge consultation points and birth clinics in a single institution providing exclusively medical help to single women.¹⁰⁷ On May 7, 1948, the Minister of Health E.I. Smirnov issued an ordinance mandating the merger. In the work of the new unified institution, priority was given to helping “gynecologically sick” women.¹⁰⁸ Ommlad’s consultations returned to be the original therapeutic and prophylactic institutions of the early 1920s, in which the medical content of single women’s right to be helped definitely prevailed over the legal and economic one.

In comparison with the massive offer of medical relief of the immediate post-WWII years, the socio-legal cabinets described by Kopelianskaia in the 1930s ended up offering a rather vague and undefined form of help. Since Ommlad’s socio-legal workers were now closely

this text, D.S. Baranovskaia, was the director of the Research Institute of Obstetrics and Gynecology of the Rostov oblast. GARF, f. 8009, o. 22, d. 175, ll. 98-118.

¹⁰⁶ GARF, f. 8009, o. 22, d. 106, l. 11 and d. 158, l. 62. In his analysis of criminalized abortion during late Stalinism, Chris Burton has argued that consultations’ doctors played three different roles: they were informants, criminal investigators, and educators at the same time. This caused a fusion of the role of the doctor and that of the social worker into one. Burton, “Minzdrav, Soviet Doctors, and the Policing of Reproduction.”

¹⁰⁷ GARF, f. 8009, o. 22, d. 175, l. 47.

¹⁰⁸ GARF, f. 8009, o. 22, d. 175, l. 34.

involved in the abortion commissions, their activism was increasingly directed at countering extra-hospital abortions. Although they kept giving legal clarifications on the 1944 decree and explaining to pregnant women what were their “rights and privileges,” socio-legal workers now focused their “conversations” on depicting the evils of abortion.¹⁰⁹ As stated in a document on the activities of the socio-legal cabinets of the city of Moscow in 1948, “real help” consisted in “any effective means” to prevent certain groups of women (the poor, those with already many children, those who just had a baby, and the unmarried ones) from performing abortions. Material help was believed to be operative only insofar as it convinced women “under the threat of abortion” to continue their pregnancy.¹¹⁰ As the chairman of the Alma-Ata city executive committee cogently put it commenting on the poor state of economic help to single women in 1949: “The decree is very good, but it’s impossible to implement it.”¹¹¹ Although the state tried to reach out to as many women as possible, subsidies to single mothers were given out very slowly and erratically.¹¹² Part of the problem was that the cabinets of socio-legal help did not have their own monetary funds to provide fast relief in the most urgent cases. Another reason was the usual problem of lack of qualified personnel. More importantly, socio-legal help increasingly turned into an auxiliary tool in the medical campaign against illegal abortions.

In short, at the end of the 1940s, Ommlad’s consultations continued to be a site of help and surveillance over Soviet single women, but care and control over them now meant the almost exclusive provision of gynecological help and the systematic medical investigation of their reproductive practices. Single women’s right to be helped was explicitly glorified in the 1944

¹⁰⁹ GARF, f. 8009, o. 22, d. 158, l. 59.

¹¹⁰ GARF, f. 8009, o. 22, d. 158, l. 61.

¹¹¹ GARF, f. 8009, o. 22, d. 73, l. 165.

¹¹² Greta Bucher, “Struggling to Survive.”

ukaz, but while single motherhood was now officially and loudly legitimized, it was also medically monitored more intensively than it had ever been.

4.3 The agents of help to single women

As in many parts of the world, in the Soviet Union too women were considered particularly fit for becoming social workers and nurses.¹¹³ For instance, in the summer of 1921, a circular letter addressed to the Zhenotdel invited all the women's sections to nominate candidates from among their female ranks for positions of leadership in the organs of the Narkomsobes. The letter also strongly encouraged women to apply for jobs as nannies in the facilities managed by this Commissariat.¹¹⁴ The construction of the provider of help as female happened to different extents in all the sectors of Soviet social welfare. However, the gendering of the agents of help was both more prominent and more problematic in the case of Ommlad.

In the field of assistance to women without a male wage earner, the ultimate source of help was always discursively cast male and often rested with the doctor, while the dispensers of this help were fashioned as female. In practice, matters were more complicated: despite the discursive construction of help as originating in a male figure and being channeled to single women through "his good female helpers" (*ego khoroshie pomoshchnitsy*), the overwhelming majority among the leaders of Ommlad were women (and often women-doctors).¹¹⁵ These female activists' perspective on single women's right to be helped did not differ from that of their male colleagues, nor did they provide an alternative educational program of help to single

¹¹³ As Mary Louise Roberts writes, a maternal role was projected onto professions such as social work and nursing also in post-WWI France. *Civilization Without Sexes*, 165.

¹¹⁴ "Vsem zhenotdelam gubkomov R.K.P. i gubsobesam," *Voprosy sotsial'nogo obespecheniia*, no. 3-4, August-September 1921, 68-69.

¹¹⁵ For instance, out of the 10 doctors working in 1926 in the facilities of Ommlad in Perm', 8 were women. See GAPK, f. 132, o. 1, d. 283, l. 172.

mothers. In other words, the content of their advice and their practice of help did not vary from that of male activists. Ommlad women activists were not feminists contesting an official line that represented single women as helpless and reduced their right to assistance to a duty of motherhood. To the contrary, they closely followed state directives and frequently accused their male colleagues of being too lax and inefficient. Ommlad's women activists made all possible efforts to be more competent and energetic, more stubborn and persistent than their male colleagues. For instance, the activist Klavdiia Afanas'evna Putina tirelessly campaigned to transform the Perm' provincial section of Ommlad in an organ that could "foresee all eventualities and act more solidly and independently than the departments led by my male colleagues."¹¹⁶

As emancipated women-doctors and agents of the Soviet system, most Ommlad activists assumed public roles that were associated with masculine abilities both in the country's historical past and in contemporary discursive practice. In occupying leadership positions that were imagined for men, Ommlad women-activists took up male personalities as the only means to receive some credit, autonomy, and recognition. In Susan Reid's words, women's "narrative and compositional devices reproduced their subjection to patriarchal authority."¹¹⁷ Their incursions into professional positions associated with masculinity were not free of ambiguity: while activism offered great potential for realizing one's aspiration for respect and autonomy, it also compelled women to perform an intense scrutiny of their personal behavior.¹¹⁸ Being an

¹¹⁶ GAPK, f. 9, o.1, d. 305, l. 551. Tellingly, her aspiration was dismissed as "pretentious and exaggerated."

¹¹⁷ Susan Reid, "All Stalin's Women: Gender and Power in Soviet Art of the 1930s," *Slavic Review* 57:1 (Spring 1998), 133-173, at 148.

¹¹⁸ See also Shulman, *Stalinism on the Frontier of Empire*.

embodiment of the state's welfare system entailed participation in a structure that reaffirmed traditional gender hierarchies.¹¹⁹

The Soviet conceptualization of social activism on behalf of single women was not only determined by stable traditional gender roles, but also strongly seeped through with deep-rooted patriarchal values. For instance, in Grauerman's normative booklet *The protection of motherhood and how it must be realized*, the Home for Mother and Child – as the ideal site of help to single women – had to include the following staff: 1 doctor, 1 midwife, 1 or 2 sister-instructors (or sister-educators), 5 medical sisters (nurses), 4 nannies, 1 cook, 3 laundry-ladies, 1 janitor or *factotum* person. The doctor and the midwife appeared as the ideal Soviet conjugal couple, ready to “give all their love and all their labor” to the defense of helpless single mothers. The midwife resembled an obedient wife – submitted to the doctor-husband, but rigid and disciplinary when in charge of their daughters.¹²⁰ Discursively cast as a true *pater familias* (although in reality often a *mater*), the doctor managed the home both in medical and administrative terms, regulated the chores and schedules of the all-female personnel, and was responsible for the so-called “sanitary enlightenment” of both staff and residents. As in a large patriarchal family, the female members of the household stood in a sort of hierarchy of worth. The nanny definitely occupied the lower level (below her stood the cook and the laundress – also part of the all-female personnel of Ommlad's facilities, but never represented as “helpers”); then came a cohort of “red sisters,” that is nurses, instructors, pedagogues, and social workers of various kind. While these female practitioners of help fulfilled the duties of daily care, ultimate authority always rested with the doctor.

¹¹⁹ In her book on gender and dissent, Anke Stephan has remarked that traditional gender roles were stable also in the realm of political activism. Stephan, *Von der Küche auf den Roten Platz*, esp. 287, 307-311, 323-324, 335-337, and 402-412.

¹²⁰ Grauerman, *Chto takoe okhrana materinstva*, 18.

Local Ommlad administrators often lamented the lack of expert and responsible nannies who truly loved their job and knew how to perform it. In the writings of most social workers, the nanny was represented as the most uncultured among the female providers of help. Her illiteracy, ignorance, “lack of maternal qualities,”¹²¹ and “hysterical personality”¹²² (as much as the *nekul’turnost’*, the irrationality, and the lack of collective habits of the single mother) caused the suffering of the children. Some doctors and facility directors contended that the only way to have “cultured nannies” was to search for them among “the ladies of the intelligentsia.”¹²³ This perspective framed the status of the nanny in class terms, but also dangerously reversed Marxist logic by associating *kul’turnost’* not with the class that won the revolution, but with a characteristically pre-revolutionary class. This position, however, was held only by a few. Most activists put their efforts in the education of the new Soviet nanny by teaching a sanitized and medicalized way of child care to all the women that lived and worked in Ommlad’s facilities.

Numerous “Instructions to the nannies” strove to control a professional category that was perceived as undisciplined and unskilled. Revealing a definite lack of trust towards the nannies, these instructions fastidiously listed the most elementary rules of child care and gave ridiculously detailed directions. “Every time the baby cries,” mandated one of them, “the nanny should go to his bed, check if the baby is wet, if the clothes are irritating him, if he is tired of lying.” Feeding was to happen under the vigilant gaze of the sister-educator. It “should happen patiently and in conformity with the specific needs of the child.” Always worried about the cleanliness and sanitary conditions of their facilities as well as suspicious of the state of health of uncultured nannies, Ommlad activists reminded them not to blow on the baby food to cool it down, because

¹²¹ GAPK, f. 15, d. 363, ll. 22-23.

¹²² GAPK, f. 132, o. 1, d. 295, l. 124.

¹²³ GAPK, f. 15, o. 1, d. 347, ll. 34-35. See also GAPK, f. 15, o.1, d. 349, l. 36.

their saliva could fall on it and infect the baby. Similarly, “the nannies should not kiss the baby on the mouth or on the face; they should not allow the child to put in his mouth dirty toys or any other object.”¹²⁴ Underpaid and overworked nannies were expected to have an affectionate and patient approach towards the children, but also to submit completely to the sister-educator, without showing any initiative or autonomy.

In fact, most nannies did not comply with these Instructions. The directors of Ommlad’s facilities frequently complained about “lazy” nannies who worked “unwillingly and passively,” replied with rude words to the disciplinary observations of their superiors, and simply refused to perform their duties.¹²⁵ Their working day amounted to the infringement of one rule after the other: the nannies arrived late at work and left before the new shift had arrived; sometimes they simply did not show up or left without any warning; they often fell asleep during their shift; they forgot to change diapers and feed the children according to the directions of the sister-educator; they did not keep the children’s toilets and the bathroom facilities clean; they forgot to wash their hands and did not change their robes when they went out in the courtyard to fetch wood or water; they were rough with the babies and many of them took care only of their own children.¹²⁶ Receiving a miserable pay for their labor and sometimes going on for months without a salary, the nannies of Ommlad’s facilities frequently hoarded resources and grabbed any chance to leave their jobs and move on to better positions.¹²⁷

Frustrated at the nannies’ carelessness towards their duties, an activist once admitted that “the Home for Mother and Child cannot be the school of motherhood which it is supposed to

¹²⁴ GAPK, f. 15, o.1, d. 349, l. 44.

¹²⁵ GAPK, f. 132, o. 1, d. 295, l. 125 and d. 284, l. 60.

¹²⁶ GAPK, f. 132, o. 1, d. 279, l. 7 and l. 27.

¹²⁷ GAPK, f. 15, o. 1, d. 363, l. 20 and ll. 22-23; d. 349, l. 118; and d. 351, ll. 18-20.

be.”¹²⁸ Once again, women’s everyday behavior practically undermined all educational and disciplining efforts of doctors and activists. More importantly, it disrupted gendered hierarchies of power.

According to the patriarchal logic and structure that was to be implemented in the Homes for Mother and Child, the doctor and the midwife could count on the help of many daughters. They were all called “red sisters” and characterized as the doctor’s “good female helpers,” but they were assigned different roles within the common household. Some were “medical sisters,” others were “sister-instructors,” “sister-educators,” “sisters of charity,” and “sisters of patronage.” The relations among these sisters were determined by hierarchies of subordination, whereby some women had larger responsibilities and more controlling power than others. For instance, the nurse or “medical sister” was in charge of the practical execution of the doctor’s orders concerning the cleanliness, the proper temperature, the good ventilation of the rooms, and the quantity and quality of the food provided to both mothers and children.¹²⁹ However, the more important task of verifying that the doctor’s orders were properly carried out in all medical, educational, and economic matters was entrusted to the sister-educator or sister-instructor. As the doctor’s “closest helper,” she stood at the top of this inner hierarchy and from her position of relative stronger power controlled all the other sisters. “Armed with knowledge and experience,” “inspired by the bright idea of help,” and “aware of the importance of her work,” she entered “a battle against the centuries-old prejudices existing in the city, the factory, and, especially, the village.” When she worked in the remotest corners of the country, she became a veritable

¹²⁸ GAPK, f. 15, o. 1, g. 356, l. 101.

¹²⁹ GAPK, f. 132, o. 1, d. 279, l. 26.

“pioneer and carrier of the idea of help.” The sister-instructor could even replace the doctor when he was not available – a condition that was in fact very frequent.¹³⁰

Among Ommlad red sisters, great responsibilities were assigned to the so-called “sister of patronage” (*patronazhnaia sestra*). She functioned as a “transmission belt” (*provodnik*) between doctors and Soviet single mothers because her primary task was to practically convey the idea of the defense of infancy to all Soviet families. In fact, while the consultations were supposed to give Soviet mothers “a mass of both theoretical and practical indications,” doctors remained unaware of how these “indications” were employed by women in their everyday life. Patronage was conceived as “an apparatus of transmission and control” that would have solved this problem.¹³¹

The sister of patronage was supposed to visit women in their homes and educate them by practical example. This included performing even the “dirtiest” household chores without shame: the sister of patronage swept and washed the floors, dusted the household objects, re-arranged the furniture in the rooms, and let fresh air come in. She practically demonstrated techniques for breast-feeding, bathing, and diapering the baby, warming up the milk, cleaning the pacifier, cooking baby-food, and providing basic medical care. In case of need, the sister of patronage was allowed to provide single mothers with free objects of baby care, such as small bathtubs, bassinets, thermometers, pacifiers, and medicaments. The purpose of this material help was to give mothers the real possibility to execute all the indications of the doctors. In addition, the sister had to improve the conditions of women’s family life by directing them to state welfare institutions. In short, the sisters of patronage countered “all harmful customs and superstitions

¹³⁰ GAPK, f. 132, o. 1, d. 283, l. 27 and l. 141; and d. 279, l. 18.

¹³¹ V. Lebedeva, “Okhrana materinstva i mladenchestva. Patronazh,” *Zhurnal narodnogo komissariata sotsial'nogo obespecheniia*, June-July, no. 5-6, 1919, 34-38.

and thus help[ed] the reduction of children's disease and death."¹³² While single mothers were perceived as the carriers of damaging habits and superstitions, the sisters of patronage were the makers of cleanliness and comfort.

The sister of patronage was also seen as the closest person to the mother and the child. Her "very difficult" tasks required love for her work and, more importantly, great tact and patience in approaching Soviet mothers and convincing them to listen to her advice. As Lebedeva explained,

the sister who visits a family at the wrong time and demands that the family pays attention to her and her recommendations can only push away the family and all her advice would be useless...It is possible that the first visits do not produce the wished results.¹³³

According to Lebedeva, "complete trust" was to govern the relationship between the mother and the sister:

...the sister visiting a Soviet family in its home...should not give orders or reproach the mothers when they made mistakes in the care of their children...the questions that the sister asks to the mother about the care and the feeding of the child should not sound like a police interrogation.¹³⁴

Thus, official instructions emphasized that the sister should win over the confidence and trust of the family "consistently, but gently and tactfully," since success was guaranteed "only when the family meets the sister with a happy smile, looking at her as a good helper."¹³⁵

At the same time, the sister of patronage was not the philanthropist of old times. She was a definitely Soviet figure, whose role was not only to investigate into the homes of Soviet single women, but also to agitate for the socialist gender order. This is clearly revealed by the range of

¹³² *Ibid.*

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*

her responsibilities. First, she needed to have a precise idea of the conditions in which mothers and children lived: she checked out the baby, the crib, clothes, and food; wrote down all her observations on an “investigation form” (*obsledovatel’nyi list*); and passed her notes over to the doctor. Second, the sister of patronage had to acquaint the mother with the most elementary norms of hygiene and baby care. Finally, she directed the mother to the consultation points. In later visitations, the patronage sister checked whether the mother was implementing the doctor’s recommendations in the right way. The sister’s investigations were to be even more accurate and frequent for the children of sick mothers, children raised by non-biological mothers, sick children, and all children living in “bad, anti-hygienic conditions.”¹³⁶ According to this narrative, Soviet women did not know what was cleanliness and comfort; they were so dark that they needed to see how things should be done. As doctor A.N. Rakhmanov said in a speech entitled “Deliveries and the work of [Ommlad] sections,” the sister of patronage “infuse[d] health, life, and light in the darkest settings.”¹³⁷ Thus, besides normalizing, standardizing, and gendering the sister of patronage, this conceptualization of her functions also included a poorly veiled subtext that, time and again, represented the single mother as the fundamentally helpless recipient of aid and the giver of insufficient and improper care to the future generation.

Like other intermediary figures that we saw mediating help between the Soviet state and its marginalized populations, the sister of patronage refracted the light coming from higher sources of authority and directed it at dark single mothers. Because of her gender, she was believed to have the ability to win over the trust of the latter. Despite her gender, she could be trusted because she had been enlightened through special qualification courses. And yet, the sister was complementary and auxiliary to doctors who were cast male. She was a “transmission

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹³⁷ GAPK, f. 15, o. 1, d. 332, l. 7.

belt” that moved back and forth between mothers and doctors: she delivered the state’s educational program of model sexual and parental behavior and, after having observed what happened in women’s houses, reported back to the doctors. When the child fell sick, the sister was not supposed to intervene, but to report the disease immediately to the doctor. Caught in the middle, the sister was not supposed to have any autonomy and even her agency as “good helper” was rather limited and subordinated to the more passive role of observer, conduit for the knowledge of the doctor, and vehicle of the state’s will. In the end, the sister of patronage functioned as an extension of the doctor’s authority and an emissary of the state, bringing with her not just medical knowledge but also political messages.¹³⁸

This was on paper. What actually happened on the ground was not so neat. Doctors and administrators tended to take residence in the capital of the province to which they were assigned. The towns, villages, and rural settlements in which worked most sisters of patronage, sisters-educators, and nurses could be very isolated from the provincial urban centers. This condition largely left the red sisters to their own devices in the provision of help to single mothers. For instance, in 1919-1921 the Home for Mother and Child of the Cherdyn’ district (Perm’ province) did not have its own stable medical personnel and the mothers residing there were left to the care of a “sister of charity” and five nannies. Only occasionally were they visited by the doctor of the local hospital.¹³⁹ When inspector Ozernaia visited the Cherdyn’ Home for Mother and Child in October-November 1921 and discovered this state of things, she penned a very critical report. Ozernaia denounced the care that the mothers provided to their children in this home as fundamentally “incorrect” because feedings happened at the wrong times and not in

¹³⁸ On this see also Stark, “A Fertile Mother Russia,” 426-427.

¹³⁹ GAPK, f. 15, o. 1, d. 343, l. 9.

agreement with the norms. The “total chaos” reigning in this home caused “a high percentage of infections among children.”¹⁴⁰

Given the geographical set up and the lack of qualified personnel and resources, it is not surprising that the planned, efficient, and coordinated work foreseen in the official documents could rarely occur in the reality of the Soviet periphery. The bureaucrats sitting in the provincial centers constantly asked the activists in the peripheral areas to provide data in a timely manner – a sign that the passage of information did not happen so quickly and efficiently. The administrators of the provincial sections of social welfare complained that they did not know how many unmarried pregnant and breast-feeding mothers lived in each district. Doctors lamented that they did not have precise data on childbirth in the localities. All this indicates that social workers did not always fill out the forms that would have counted and categorized the Soviet female population as the state would have wanted. The instructions coming from the center largely fell on deaf ears and the leaders of Ommlad provincial sections had no way to know whether and how the sisters in the localities were performing their work.¹⁴¹

Discursive representation and reality on the ground diverged also in regard to the relationship between the sisters of patronage and their assisted. This was not the patient, trustworthy, and affectionate rapport mandated by the official instructions, and the outcome of patronage visitations was rarely the much desired re-education of backward single mothers. To the contrary, the sisters’ inspections sometimes turned into drastic interventions that destroyed single women’s households. This is what happened to a certain Iranda D’iakova, a poor single mother living in the Perm’ province. Iranda, her child, and her elderly mother occupied a room in

¹⁴⁰ GAPK, f. 15, o 1, d. 343, l. 10 and d. 349, l. 114.

¹⁴¹ This was a constant complaint in the reports written by the provincial sections of Ommlad. As an example see GAPK f. 132, o. 1, d. 279, l. 6.

a humid, cold, and dirty basement. Their only source of income was the money made by the old woman by begging on the streets. The sister of patronage who visited them could see only violence, disease, and insanity in this household: the old woman “awfully beats the child,” while

the daughter beats the old woman because she beats the child... The child's mother appears healthy, but in reality she is covered with wounds...Judging from how she talks, we can conclude that the mother of the child is not completely normal and the old woman too is not normal.

A neighbor confirmed this assessment and added the usual accusation of rudeness: young D'iakova “speaks horribly, like a cab driver, and the old mother is not less rude.” The activist’s conclusion was clear: “In one word: we must take away the child.”¹⁴²

On their end, single mothers rarely looked at the red sisters as agents of culture. To the contrary, most of the time they did not accept being schooled into becoming good mothers or to acquire any practical knowledge. As a sister complained in 1926, “mothers demand too much and look at me as a dimwit (*tupogolovuiu*).”¹⁴³ Many mothers did not trust the sisters of patronage with the care of their sick children and even accused them of “ruining the children.”¹⁴⁴ Thus, reversing the hierarchies built by the activists’ discourse of help, some mothers considered the sisters of patronage rude towards the children, deeply distrusted them, and approached the assistance offered through patronage in merely utilitarian terms.

Like many patriarchal households, Ommlad was ridden by tensions and conflicts. So-called “personal misunderstandings” happened on a daily basis between the doctors and the midwives, the red sisters and their subordinates, the nannies and the laundresses. These petty conflicts too reflected gendered hierarchies of backwardness, whereby the person occupying the

¹⁴² GAPK, f. 132, o. 1, d. 295, l. 188.

¹⁴³ GAPK, f. 132, o. 1, d. 289, list unnumbered.

¹⁴⁴ GAPK, f. 132, o. 1, d. 289, list unnumbered.

more subordinate position was also identified as the more rude and uncultured. In fact, the charge of rudeness – which stood for carelessness and indiscipline – was freely exchanged among the personnel of Ommlad’s facilities as well as between them and their assisted. Ultimately, it was a weapon to either confirm or reverse these hierarchies of subordination and the mechanisms of power that they entailed.

Single mothers actively participated in these conflicts, making use of the charge of rudeness every time they wanted to re-establish some power. They frequently asked “rude nannies” to “chat less, care more about the babies,” and – more importantly – submit to the will of the doctor or facility director.¹⁴⁵ Defending herself from the accusation of being rude, a certain Mal'gina replied that, if she was rude, it was “in a just way, to be an example.” For instance, Mal'gina related the following episode:

Ovechkina brought in a child with a temperature of 38.5 C. I don't take him and she screams 'I will leave him and go.' I say that we don't have an isolation room and I cannot take him. She says 'you don't understand anything.' This is my rudeness: that out of justice I don't make compromises with the mothers.¹⁴⁶

The allegation of rudeness and carelessness percolated the chain of relations, going down the ladder of power from the doctor/director to the illiterate nanny and, at times, climbing it back up in the subordinates’ attempts to disrupt these hierarchies. For instance, in a petition to the Perm’ district section of the Union of Medical Employees dated February 10, 1928, the midwife Nadezhda Dmitrievna Iakimova argued that Doctor V.L. Blagoveshchenskii was rude in addressing the personnel of the Chermozskii hospital and thereby created “an impossible working environment.” This doctor’s rudeness had a negative influence on the mood of the

¹⁴⁵ GAPK, f. 132, o. 1, d. 289, list unnumbered.

¹⁴⁶ GAPK, f. 132, o. 1, d. 295, l. 209.

employees, made it difficult for them to keep working in the hospital, and induced many to leave their jobs. Iakimova further accused Doctor Blagoveshchenskii of “unlimited egoism and revengefulness”: he forced his employees to demonstrate absolute loyalty to him and to take the blame for his mistakes. As evidence for this charge, Iakimova related the case of a single mother who had suffocated her new born child immediately after delivery. Doctor Blagoveshchenskii had attributed responsibility for the child’s death to the midwife and the hospital orderly (*sanitarka*) who had left the child alone with the mother despite his instructions. When asked to testify that the doctor had indeed mandated strict surveillance over mother and child, Iakimova refused to give a “loyal but false testimony,” that would have protected the doctor but led to the firing of the hospital’s employees. Reversing the logic of rudeness, Iakimova presented the doctor’s “rude and inhuman approach” towards his female subordinates as a sign of male arbitrariness in demanding loyalty and shifting blame.¹⁴⁷

When the doctor (as the head of the patriarchal household) was too despotic and arbitrary, independence seeking sisters desperately battled for some autonomy. Indeed, the more senior and experienced employees of Ommlad’s facilities often complained that skilled workers were reduced “to the role of blind performers of the doctors’ will.”¹⁴⁸ In the effort to defend their interests, midwives, red sisters, and nannies accused the doctors of “taking away all [their] rights and initiative”¹⁴⁹ and putting them in a “right-less humiliating position.”¹⁵⁰ On their end, attempting to maintain as much control as possible, doctors portrayed their rebellious “helpers” as undisciplined and unable to work properly. As various doctors lamented, sisters and nannies

¹⁴⁷ GAPK, f. 132, o. 1, d. 115, l. 62.

¹⁴⁸ GAPK, f. 132, o. 1, d. 115, list unnumbered.

¹⁴⁹ GAPK, f. 132, o. 1, d. 115, l. 79.

¹⁵⁰ GAPK, f. 132, o. 1, d. 115, list numbered.

“do not desire to be taught,” “are terribly stubborn”, and “do not perform what they are told to do.”¹⁵¹

We can see these petty conflicts as struggles for the representation of the self and the other. As such, they highlight what were believed to be the distinguishing features turning a helpless backward woman into the good and valuable helper of a doctor that was constructed as male. Impeccable physical health, literacy and special training, honesty and conscientiousness, devotion to work, disciplined behavior, and loyalty to male power (embodied by the doctor but in fact emanating from the state) allowed women to overcome their helplessness and become exemplary Soviet female subjects.

Conclusion

Soviet ideology maintained that women without a male wage earner needed the protection of the state. Help to this category of needy citizens was conceptualized around three key principles. First, the protection of single women was equated with the defense of the health of the future generation and as such it constituted part and parcel of the state’s engagement against abortion and children’s mortality. Second, help to single mothers was conceived as a “school of motherhood”: it belonged to the state’s program of “cultural enlightenment” in the realms of sexuality and parenthood. Third, while policies and laws concerning issues of labor and maternity had the proclaimed goal to emancipate women, Ommlad activists seemed to lack any emancipatory agenda for their charges. Doctors and social workers sought to treat the medical, legal, and economic ills that plagued single women, but at the same time wanted to keep them dependent on their male breadwinner. Ommlad activists assigned Soviet men and

¹⁵¹ GAPK, f. 132, o. 1, d. 115, l. 79.

women the opposing roles of male breadwinner (*kormilets*) and female dependent (*izhdivenka*); their discourses and practices incorporated assumptions about female dependence and male breadwinning abilities that fit with normative notions of gendered obligations. Conventional heterosexual family bonds remained the primary form of security for Soviet women. No real attempt was made to effectively restructure traditional gender relations and to free women from their dependence on marriage and the family.

In the case studied in this chapter, access to state assistance was clearly articulated as a legal right. Official decrees unwaveringly established the legal protection of female labor and many laws granted unequivocal rights to abandoned women. In their efforts to implement this legislation, Ommlad activists constantly reminded their higher-ups in the hierarchy of welfare that single women had the right to maternity leave and material help on the grounds of the codes of law and the directives of various commissariats. However, by investigating how single women's right to be helped was realized in practice, I have shown that the main task of Ommlad boiled down to the battle against abortions and children's mortality, while women's emancipation became a secondary goal. In the case of single women, a right to assistance that was clearly legally defined, also blatantly merged with a disciplining agenda that aimed at controlling women in the most intimate of realms.

According to Soviet conceptualization of social help, socialist assistance to single mothers should have not turned into a provision of charity that viewed women as unequal and inferior to men. In fact, undergirding Ommlad's activism was a far from revolutionary conception of women-alone as fundamentally helpless. Russian history and culture worked together with the Soviet state's policies and ideology to reinforce old images of women. Already in the 1918 Family Code and the directives issued to implement it, an enduring myth system of

women as mothers became embedded in the new Soviet legislation. Ommlad's work further naturalized the association between women and reproduction. Following the development of this conceptual framework and its concrete embodiments in Ommlad's sites of help to single mothers, I showed that strong gender boundaries, women's subordinate status as men's helpers, and their duties as mothers were part of Bolshevik ideology from the immediate post-revolutionary years and remained pivotal in defining single women's right to be helped throughout the early Soviet and Stalinist experience. To be reduced to subservient and subordinate mothers was a mixed blessing for Soviet women. It did make it easier for them to claim help. And yet, it placed them outside of the workers' movement, which in Soviet ideology was the only possible forum for class as well as gender liberation. Paradoxically, while unemployed single mothers were able to receive relatively greater state assistance than other marginalized social groups, their egalitarian integration into society remained an unresolved issue.

Traditional gender notions were so strong and pervasive that they kept animating Soviet men's and women's ways of demanding help even when the other legitimizing categories of the right to be helped became unavailable to them. In the next chapter, we will see how the interplay between a gendered conceptualization of help, relations of patronage, understandings of socialist morality, and reliance on official laws shaped activists' and individual petitioners' strategies to prod the regime to deliver help to political prisoners and their families.

Chapter 5

Socialist Morality:

The Political Red Cross's Defense of Prisoners' Rights

*"Each individual has the opportunity to defend his rights. Each individual can protect himself against violations of the law"*¹

*"The law is a taiga and the procurator is a bear"*²

*"The state donated money for the very people, whom it had put in jail – isn't that intriguing?"*³

Memoir literature has popularized the image of the Soviet prison as a place of arbitrariness and abuse of authority, where the state could heavy-handedly interfere in the lives of its subjects and individuals arrested for political crimes were *ipso facto* deprived of all rights. Legal historiography has proposed a similar understanding of the Soviet prison system as a mechanism of repression that completely disregarded prisoners' rights.⁴ In fact, a number of Soviet central agencies aimed at identifying breaches of socialist legality and curbing illegal

Portions of this chapter were published in my article "Defending the Rights of Gulag Prisoners: The Story of the Political Red Cross, 1918-39," *The Russian Review*, 71:1 (January 2012), 6-29.

¹ S. Z-tsev, "III sessiia VTsIK," *Ezhenedel'nik sovetskoi iustitsii*, no. 18, 20 May 1922, 8.

² Prison saying popular among the chekists. Quoted in K.N. Morozov, *Sudebnyi protsess sotsialistov-revoliutsionerov i tiuremnoe protivostoianie (1922-1926): etika i taktika protivoborstva* (Moscow: Rosspen, 2005), 512-513.

³ These words were pronounced by the activist E.I. Murav'eva in a private conversation with her grand-daughter T.A. Ugrimova. They are quoted in T.A. Ugrimova "Stoi v zavete svoem..." *Nikolai Konstantinovich Murav'ev. Advokat i obshchestvennyi deiatel'. Vospominaniia, dokumenty, materialy* (Moscow, OOO "AMA-Press", 2004), 307.

⁴ John N. Hazard and Morris L. Weisberg, *Cases and Readings on Soviet Law* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1950); Hazard, *Settling Disputes in Soviet Society*; Eugene Huskey, *Russian Lawyers and the Soviet State. The Origins and Development of the Soviet Bar, 1917-1939* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986); Arch Getty, "State and Society under Stalin: Constitutions and Elections in the 1930s," *Slavic Review*, 50: 1 (Spring 1991), 18-35; Solomon, *Soviet Criminal Justice under Stalin*. Russian historiography on the Soviet state's repressive policies is very vast. Among the most significant contributions are D.B. Pavlov, *Bol'shevitskaia diktatura protiv sotsialistov i anarkhistov 1917-seredina 1950-kh godov* (Moscow: Rosspen, 1999) and Morozov, *Sudebnyi protsess sotsialistov-revoliutsionerov*.

practices in the administration of prison justice. The VTsIK, the Rabkrin's Legal Department, the Sovnarkom, the Commissariat of Justice (Narkomiust), the Office of the Procurator (*Prokuratura*), and the NKVD were all in part responsible for guaranteeing the respect of laws and directives regulating imprisonment. The Political Red Cross (*Politicheskii Krasnyi Krest*) was another supervisory institution which, like the above organs, exerted control over the places of imprisonment. And yet, it was unique and special, because it was the only Soviet agency that made help to political prisoners its *raison d'être*, its primary and explicit goal.⁵

While the state was imprisoning real and imagined political criminals by the hundreds and thousands, it also permitted the existence of an organization whose job was to help them. As a non-governmental society legally operating in the Soviet Union from 1918 to 1938, the Political Red Cross (or simply the Cross, as its members called it throughout its existence and later in their memoirs) fulfilled a necessary function. Prisons were a costly institution to maintain and there was no other state agency that could adequately engage the human needs of the

⁵ Western scholarship has not yet explored the activities of the Soviet Political Red Cross. Russian language literature includes a series of articles and collections of archival documents, which narratively describe the relationship between the Cross and the state as an initial ephemeral collaboration that turned into an increasing confrontation. See for instance L.A. Dolzhanskaia, ed., "*Nash spor s Vami reshil zhizn'.*" *Pis'ma M.L. Vinavera I E.P. Peshkovo k E.D. Kuskovo, 1923-1936* (Moscow: Vostochnaia Kniga, 2009); L. A. Dolzhanskaia and I.I. Osipova, eds., "*Dorogaia Ekaterina Pavlovna...*" *Pis'ma zhenshchin i detei. Pis'ma v ikh zashchitu. 1920-1936*, (St. Petersburg: Zhurnal "Zvezda," 2005); L.A. Dolzhanskaia and I.I. Osipova, eds., *Obrechny po rozhdeniiu...Po dokumentam fondov Politicheskogo Krasnogo Kresta 1918-1922. Pomoshch' Politzakliuchennym 1922-1937* (St. Petersburg, Izdatel'stvo zhurnala "Zvezda," 2004); Ugrimova, "*Stoi v zavete svoem..*"; I.I. Osipova and A.B. Roginskii, eds., "Novye materialy o presledovanii za veru v Sovetskom Soiuze. Oprosnye listy i kartochki arestovannykh, pis'ma zakliuchennykh i ikh rodstvennikov (po materialam arkhiv Politicheskogo Krasnogo Kresta)," *Tserkovno-istoricheskii vestnik*, vol. 2-3, 1999, 5-198; Ia. V. Leont'ev, "Politicheskii Krasnyi Krest v Moskve: Opyt istochnikovedcheskogo analiza," *Arkheograficheskii Ezhegodnik za 1997 god* (Moscow: Nauka, 1997), 159-165; A. Gorcheva, "Spiski Peshkovo," *Zvezda*, vol. 3, 1996, 169-180; S.I. Golotik, "Pervye pravozashchitniki v Sovetskoi Rossii," *Volia*, vol. 4-5, 1995, 7-24. Relief committees for political prisoners existed in the centers of the Russian diaspora in Europe, such as Paris, Prague, and Berlin. Set up by political emigrées, these organizations usually collected funds only for their party members. See M.K. Galmarini and Ia. V. Leont'ev, "Deiatel'nost' berlinskikh komitetov pomoshchi russkim politzakliuchennym," in *Russkii Berlin, 1920-1945. Materialy mezhdunarodnoi nauchnoi konferentsii, 16-18 dekabria 2002 g.* (Moscow: Russkii Put', 2006), 107-134. Within the territory of the Soviet Union, bonds of social solidarity existed among the prisoners' family members. However, these informal networks of wives, sisters, and mothers had the narrow goal to provide material mutual support. Steven Kotkin mentions them in his book *Magnetic Mountain*, 348.

prisoners and their families. As the official site of help to prisoners as well as of control over legality in the Gulag, the Cross had an impact on the investigation and police organs.⁶ The very existence of an organization able to secure some leniency for political prisoners raises important questions about the measures of social control and the policies of care implemented by the socialist state towards its deviant populations. In addition, the case of political prisoners constitutes a test ground to gauge into the expectations of activists and single Soviet individuals concerning help to the marginalized members of that society. Within my study of the right to be helped, the Cross dramatizes an ambiguity of the repressive and welfare mechanisms that mutually constituted each other in the early Soviet and Stalinist experience, namely, the paradoxical coexistence of hatred for people who deviated from the norm and notions of morality and rights expressed through assistance to them as suffering individuals.

This chapter explores how the Political Red Cross claimed prisoners' rights to legal help, a better treatment during imprisonment, and material assistance for them and their families. With this investigation I pursue two interrelated goals. First, I analyze how the Cross's members (the *krasnokrestovtsy*) articulated the concept of help as protection against the abuses of state officials. Second, I show the incongruities inherent in this notion of help, in the help movement embodied by the institution of the Cross, and in the very individuals working in it. Sometimes the Cross was able to alleviate the fate of political prisoners on legal grounds; other times – by reference to socialist morality; and finally, when all the rest failed, through networks of patronage. Prisoners' right to be helped depended on the authorities' whim and the *krasnokrestovtsy*'s good relations with them. Ultimately, this right took shape in the dialogues between alternative and continually competing understandings of socialism in Soviet culture and

⁶ The police organ responsible for arresting political opponents and managing political prisoners was first called Cheka, then OGPU, and later NKVD. For sake of brevity, in this chapter I will always use the acronym Cheka notwithstanding the name changes that this organ underwent over the years.

society – past and present socialist values; legal, socio-political, and moral conceptions of socialism.

In its politics of advocacy, the Cross always alluded to prisoners' poverty, old age, loneliness, helplessness, defenselessness, material and moral wretchedness, and outright desperation. As we have seen in the previous chapters, these were all invocation of the legitimizing category of need and suffering. They were also calls to judge the politically deviant through morality, rather than exclusively through laws and juridical norms. Indeed, the legal arguments initially advanced by the *krasnokrestovtsy* soon appeared to be insufficient to legitimize prisoners' right to be helped. Increasingly, the Cross activists began to invoke moral feelings by reference to the prisoners' miserable lives. In the end, the Cross appealed to a more humane understanding of rights, whereby a formal and literal application of the law neglected the living content of human suffering, and effective justice was achieved by keeping both with laws and the dictates of one's conscience.

Justice (*spravedlivost'*) almost never appeared as a legitimizing category in the discourses and practices of the Cross. It is therefore difficult to understand how this help-oriented institution related the concept of justice to its understanding of legality. On one hand, the *krasnokrestovtsy* wrote narratives of help that were based in the rule of law and that did not exonerate their clients' actions, but instead challenged the lax procedure of the notoriously corrupt Soviet police. Thus, they mounted a moral challenge not to an unjust political order, but to the illegality that could exist within that order. On the other hand, however, one could suggest that they insisted on legality because they were aware of the absence of justice in their political system.

This ambiguous relationship between legality and justice is an indication that the Cross's help to political prisoners should not be interpreted as a narrow story of political opposition or dissent. Indeed, by combining legal and political history with a more broadly social perspective, some historians have problematized traditional simplifications of the notion of resistance. For instance, Lynne Viola has conceptualized resistance as "part of a wide continuum" and recommended scholars to engage the wide range of social and cultural complexities that inform it.⁷ Similarly, Peter Fritzsche has warned historians not to assume that resistance is "more true to the identity of the subject than accommodation or collaboration,"⁸ and Anna Krylova has questioned historians' conceptual views leading to the construction of stable and unitary subjects with "features of internal coherence."⁹

In line with this historiography, in this chapter I propose "liminality" as a more useful conceptual and analytical tool for understanding why and how an organization such as the Cross could emerge in 1918 and – more or less effectively – keep providing help to Soviet prisoners until 1938. As a hermeneutical concept, liminality is the state of being both insider and outsider.¹⁰ As a method of analysis, liminality helps scholars of Soviet history avoid the classic opposition between believers and dissidents, and rather shows the continuum between loyalty

⁷ Viola, "Introduction," in *Contending with Stalinism*. 1.

⁸ Fritzsche, "On the Subjects of Resistance," 147. See also Idem, "Where Did All the Nazis Go? Reflections on Resistance and Collaboration," *Tel Aviver Jahrbuch für Deutsche Geschichte*, Band XXIII, 1994, 191-214.

⁹ Anna Krylova, "The Tenacious Liberal Subject in Soviet Studies," *Kritika*, 1: 1 (Winter 2000), 119-146, at 126.

¹⁰ My understanding of liminality builds primarily on Primo Levi's notion of the grey zone. Primo Levi, *The drowned and the saved* (New York: Summit Book, 1988). Useful in thinking about liminality are also anthropological analyses of rites of passage. Most famously, Victor Turner has emphasized the temporal dimension of liminality by defining it as the preparatory phase to the passage itself. See his "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in *Rites de Passage*," in *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967), 93-111; "Liminality and Communitas," in *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine Publications, 1969), 94-130; and "Passages, Margins, and Poverty: Religious Symbols of Communitas," in *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors. Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974), 231-271.

and resistance.¹¹ As postcolonial literary scholar Homi Bhabha has argued, “the temporal movement and passage” of a liminal space “prevents identities...from settling into primordial polarities.”¹² While liminality allows historians of the Soviet Union not to heroicize, romanticize, and thus reify the *krasnokrestovtsy* as resisting subjects, it also prevents representing them simply as accommodators or adapters. Rather, these activists were untidy, contradictory, and unsettled actors, individuals who were variously mobilized and transformed by a revolution that created for them political and personal possibilities. They were not so much resisting the encroachments of the state, but rather being entangled in its relationships of power. Applying liminality, we can interpret the *krasnokrestovtsy* as social activists who operated as liaisons between the state and its needy Gulag population, advocating for the prisoners’ rights and reminding the state of its duties towards them.

The institution of the Cross, its activists, and its practice of help to political prisoners were liminal also in a temporal sense because they stood on a chronological boundary of historical traditions and conceptions of socialism. The Cross occupied a hybrid position in the passage from earlier movements and competing visions of socialism to the more monolithic stance of high Stalinism. While the *krasnokrestovtsy* inherited the ethos of their immediate predecessors (the revolutionaries of the 1880s who helped fellow party members agonizing in the tsarist prisons),¹³ these activists did not relate socialist help to dissent, but rather combined civil

¹¹ Alexei Yurchak suggests a similar argument when he describes the boundary between believing and rejecting in “the last Soviet generation.” *Everything was forever, until it was no more: the last Soviet generation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

¹² Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 4.

¹³ Relief activities specifically on behalf of “politicals” started in Russia at the beginning of the 1870s as a private initiative of the Kornilov sisters and other members of the Chaikovskii circle. Since then, Russian revolutionaries – both in the underground and abroad – never stopped helping their imprisoned comrades-in-arms. Important rings in the chain linking the Soviet Political Red Cross to the pre-revolutionary homonymous organization were the Petrograd and Moscow bureaus of the Aid Society for Released Politicals, which operated for a brief time in the Spring-Summer of 1917 and saw the involvement of many future Cross’s members, especially Vera Figner, Ekaterina Peshkova, and Ekaterina Murav’eva. See the entry “‘Krasnyi Krest’ politicheskii,” in *Otechestvennaia*

engagement and the moral obligation to social service with loyalty to the state. The *krasnokrestovtsy* linked themselves closely to the letter of the Soviet law and learned how to use legal provisions to protect the interests of (allegedly) harmful and dangerous elements. At the same time, the Cross's activists spoke against illegality without openly criticizing Soviet policies or otherwise waging wars with the state. In this, the activists of the 1920s-1930s differed not only from the pre-1917 revolutionaries, but also from the democratic dissidents of the post-Stalin period. While the latter also spurred practices of assistance to political prisoners basing their claims in law and "regard[ing] the right to defend every oppressed individual as a moral obligation," they distinguished themselves from the *krasnokrestovtsy*, because they took their ideas into the public sphere of the samizdat and thereby prompted social change.¹⁴ Indeed, the dissidents of the Khrushchev and Brezhnev eras preferred to associate themselves with the culture and the ethics of the pre-revolutionary intelligentsia than with those of the *krasnokrestovtsy*.¹⁵

In the following pages I will employ liminality first to trace the institutional history of this organization, then to examine the diverging life experiences and convictions of three *krasnokrestovtsy*, and finally to reconstruct the dialogues between the activists, the state, and the

Istoriia. Istoriia Rossii s drevneishikh vremen do 1917 goda. Entsiklopediia (Moscow: Nauchnoe izdatel'stvo "Bol'shaia Rossiiskaia Entiklopediia," 2000) vol. 33, 102-103. On the pre-revolutionary Cross see also: Sergei O. Tserdnerbaum, *Zhenshchina v russkom revoliutsionnom dvizhenii, 1870-1905* (Leningrad: "Priboi," 1927); L.P. Roshchevskaiia, *Revoliutsionery-raznochintsy v zapadnosibirskom izgnanii* (Leningrad: Izd-vo Leningradskogo universiteta, 1983); Jay Bergman, *Vera Zasulich. A Biography* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1983); Margaret Maxwell, *Narodniki Women. Russian Women who Sacrificed themselves for the Dream of Freedom* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1990). Vera N. Figner, *Pol'noe sobranie sochinenii v shesti tomakh* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Politkatorzhan, 1929); Idem, "Obshchestvo pomoshchi osvobodhdennym politicheskim", in *Deviaty Val. K desiatiletiu osvobodzheniia iz tsarskoi katorgi i ssylki*, V. Vilenskii, F.Koni, B.Breslav, V.Pleskov, E.Nikitina, eds. (Moscow: Uchebnaia Tipografiia "Indpedtekhnik", 1927), 135-161; V. Galkin, "Khar'kovskii Revoliutsionnyi Krasnyi Krest pomoshchi politicheskim ssyl'nym i zakliuchennym (1884-1920)," *Puti Revoliutsii. Istoriko-revoliutsionnyi zhurnal*, 1: 2 (1925), 79-90 and 1:3 (1925), 152-164; Leburzhua, "P.A. i S.G. Kropotkin v dele pomoshchi russkim ssyl'nym," *Katorga i ssylka. Istoriko-revoliutsionnyi vestnik*, 22 (1926), 141-143; G. Filat'ev, "Pervaia pomoshch' amnistirovannym v Moskve," in *Deviaty val*, 168-175.

¹⁴ Ann Komaromi, "Samizdat and Soviet Dissident Publics," *Slavic Review*, 71:1 (Spring 2012), 70-90, at 72.

¹⁵ The literature on dissent used for this dissertation is cited in the "Introduction," footnote 18.

prisoners. And yet, seen through liminality, not only the defense of political prisoners but also the broader idea and the practice of the right to be helped emerge as a reality of early Soviet and Stalinist life which did not spell resistance. In one way or the other, all the communities of activists analyzed in this dissertation aimed at disrupting the marginalizing impulses of the Soviet state vis-à-vis its deviant populations, but also largely sustained the all-pervasive power of that state. This peculiar combination of activism and loyalty to the existing government was the *sine qua non* condition of the Soviet right to be helped. However, it also infused this right with many tensions and contradictions. Ultimately, the humanitarian concern for the personal suffering of marginalized individuals and the defensive desire to maintain socio-political order placed the help movement and the very concept of the right to be helped both inside and outside of Soviet socialism and its moral order.

5.1 The institution

Foundation, goals, and philosophical platform of the Political Red Cross

On January 30, 1918, the Commissar of Justice Isaak Z. Shteinberg wrote a note to the “comrades” in the Commissariat for Judicial Cases asking them to “pay attention to Vinaver’s proposal to establish a Political Red Cross in Moscow.” He added that a similar institution already existed in Petrograd where “it work[ed] wonderfully.”¹⁶ Written at the time of the coalition government between the socialist revolutionaries and the Bolsheviks, Shteinberg’s letter offered ground to establish official relations between an organization providing help to political prisoners and the judicial authorities. Following this letter, first the Commissar of Justice of the

¹⁶ GARF, f. 8419. o. 1, d. 1, l. 1. The Petrograd PRC was organized already in 1917. One of its first appeals for donations appeared in some Petrograd newspapers on December 10, 1917. After the opening of the Moscow offices, the Petrograd PRC soon turned into a minor branch. See Z.N. Gippius, “Peterburgskii Dnevnik (Vypiski iz dnevnika Z.),” in *Pamiat’. Istoricheskii sbornik*, vol. 4 (Paris: YMCA Press, 1981), 353-373; and Dolzhanskaia, “*Nash spor s Vami reshit zhizn’*,” 104.

city and province of Moscow, Aleksandr Shreider, and then the head of the Cheka, Felix Dzerzhinskii, gave the members of the Committee of the Moscow Red Cross permission to visit places of imprisonment and meet with the prisoners' representatives to enquire about their needs. As a member of the Moscow group said, "at a time when it [was] so difficult to feed the prisoners and the judicial apparatus [was] only taking shape, [this activity was] very essential both for the prisoners and the state."¹⁷ "The practical usefulness of our efforts" echoed the *krasnokrestovets* Nikolai Murav'ev in the first annual report to the general assembly of members, "reconciled the state's representatives with our activities."¹⁸

Like all the other non-governmental societies of the time, the Moscow Committee of the Political Red Cross needed to have a statute. The Cross activists elaborated a draft statutory document which carried the signatures of the old revolutionaries Vera Nikolaevna Figner, Vera Ivanovna Zasulich, and German Aleksandrovich Lopatin. The officially approved "Statute of the Russian Society of the Red Cross for Help to Political Prisoners (Political Red Cross)" was printed in Moscow in 1919 and signed by Mikhail L'vovich Vinaver as Chairman of the Moscow Committee.¹⁹ The documents differed only in two points: the printed statute limited the activities of the Cross to the Moscow territory and – probably to prevent any doubt concerning its loyalty – did not mention "moral support" to political prisoners as one of the Society's stated goals. In all other respects the two statutes were identical. They explained that the Society was established "with the goal to provide help to individuals deprived of freedom for political reasons without distinction of party membership and professed convictions." Both documents emphasized that all

¹⁷ GARF, f. 8419. o. 1, d. 2, ll. 1-2. The quote is from a letter dated 13 June 1918 and addressed to a local relief organization for political prisoners in Astrakhan'.

¹⁸ "Rech' na godichnom sobranii Politichskogo Kasnogo Kresta 14 marta 1919 g." from Murav'ev's family archive, quoted in Ugrimova, *"Stoi v zavete svoem..."* 127.

¹⁹ The draft document signed by the old revolutionaries is preserved in GARF, f. 8419. o. 1, d. 1, ll. 6-18. The booklet printed by the Tip. Tsentr. T-va 'Koopervativnoe Izda-vo' is in GARF, f. 8419. o. 1, d. 1, ll. 19-28.

actions undertaken by the Cross were within the limits of legality. Both writings identified the distinguishing trait of Soviet help to individuals accused of political crimes as the regular provision of assistance by a state-recognized organ. This feature clearly distanced Soviet help to political prisoners from the pre-revolutionary relief, which was irregularly administered by an illegal underground organization.²⁰ In order to turn the defense of political prisoners into a state-approved practice, the *krasnokretovtsy* loudly proclaimed the principle of non-participation in politics not only in the Society's statute, but also in a note that appeared in some Moscow newspapers in May 1918.²¹ At a time when the civil war was at its climax all over the territory of the new Soviet state, this principle was the only guarantee to preserve the newly organized institution and hope to achieve any results in its activities.

Thus, from its very inception, the Cross took upon itself the role of a-political, non-party, legal defender (*pravozashchitnik*) or rights' advocate (*pravozastupnik*).²² It defined political defense as the provision of a professional service to any individual accused of political crimes. Although this claim represented a political move by itself, the Cross insisted that its advocacy was neither a political activity nor an ideologically grounded defense of prisoners' rights. Rather this organization attempted to establish humanitarian and legal criteria for determining prisoners'

²⁰ A comparison between the Cross's statutes and the constitutional document written by Vera Figner in 1910 for her Paris Committee to help political exiles would be an interesting exercise to identify what remained and what was left out from the pre-revolutionary subculture of help to political prisoners. The non-party character of help to prisoners is the trait that most conspicuously remained. The biggest difference was that Figner's Paris committee combined material and moral support to prisoners through political agitation in the name of political freedom. It protested not only against the detainees' conditions, but against the whole Russian political system. See Figner, *Pol'noe sobranie sochinenii v shesti tomakh*, vol. 3, 383 and 460.

²¹ See for instance *Nashe slovo*, 26 [13] May 1918, 3.

²² While Russia had a long tradition of *pravozashchitniki*, the term *pravozastupnik* emerged towards the end of 1917 to signify unlicensed or informal defenders who appeared as representatives of a party with the special consent of the court having jurisdiction over the case. The Cross often helped prisoners find either a *pravozastupnik* or *pravozashchitnik* (i.e. a professional with a juridical degree) willing to defend them as individuals accused of political crimes. The procedure for obtaining legal assistance involved several steps. First, the prisoner had to send a petition to the tribunal asking to be assigned a defender. Then, the Cross could formally operate as intermediary and submit to the court an official request for the assignation of free defense. See GARF, f. 8409, o. 1, d. 1, l. 228 and l. 349. See also Ugrimova, "Stoi v zavete svoem...", 292.

entitlements. In the Cross's view, humanity and necessity impelled the prisoners' right to material relief, while a legal (not political) line needed to be followed in assigning juridical help. However, this a-political argument was in fact political and thereby sustained a very ambiguous project. As we will see by analyzing the disputes that in the following years would dominate the relations between the Cross and the police organs, the issues of who and how should oversee the prisoners' welfare and perform supervisory functions in the Soviet prisons were much more than simple a-political questions. In the way of the protection of prisoners' right was nothing less than state security. The profoundly political character of prisoners' care and control would become explicit every time that the Cross activists competed with the representatives of the police in defining the right to be helped within the Gulag.

In the conceptualization of the activists who founded the Cross,²³ the advocacy for political prisoners had to be not only a-political, but also essentially non-party. This meant that help was provided to anyone deprived of freedom for reasons of political and/or religious nature. This included all kinds of persons. Indeed, political sentencing was a very blurred and elastic concept in the Soviet Union. The political section of the Criminal Code of 1922 provided a long list of political offenses dubbed as "counterrevolutionary" and defined in the broadest possible terms. The Cheka issued general allegations and sometimes did not formulate any accusation at all. The majority of "politicals" were individuals who neither belonged to a party nor could be

²³ The founding members of the Cross were a group of around 50 individuals. Among those who remained more active in the organization throughout the years were E.P. Peshkova, M.L. Vinaver, N.K. Murav'ev, E.P. Rostkovskii, I.S. Kal'meer, V.N. Maliantovich, and A.I. Peres. V.G. Korolenko was chosen as the Society's honorary chairman, while V.N. Figner, V.I. Zasulich, and P.A. Kropotkin were nominated honorary members. "Rech' k Vere Nikolaevne Figner, Vere Ivanovne Zasulich i Petru Alekseevichu Kropotkinu po povodu izbraniia ikh pochetnymi chlenami Politicheskogo Krasnogo Kresta" from Murav'ev's family archive, quoted in Ugrimova, "Stoi v zavete svoem...", 134-135. According to the lists published by Golotik, at its inception in 1918, the organizations' membership counted 200 activists. Golotik, "Pervye pravozashchitniki v Sovtskoi Rossii," 15-24. Lia Dolzhanskaia has calculated that between 1918 and 1922 around 1,000 persons paid membership fees to the Cross. Dolzhanskaia, "Nash spor s Vami reshit zhizn'," 35.

accused of specific political crimes. Especially in the high-pitched atmosphere of the collectivization, many “political offenders” were in fact peasants for whom charges had escalated from ordinary to political. Indeed, after 1928, acts once treated as banal hooliganism, cases of negligence on the work, and common offenses such as arson, assault, and murder were re-qualified as political crimes and the peasants who committed them were sentenced to terms of 8-10 years or even to death.²⁴

Since the authorities could politicize almost any crime, the Cross’s advocates could take on almost any case without going beyond the limits of their jurisdiction. The Cross adapted its working definition of political prisoner to the practices of the police organs, but also to the pressure of petitioning citizens, who relied on the imprecise content of political crimes to draft extraordinarily diverse requests, complaints, and petitions. Although in its makeup the Cross consisted mostly of former socialist-revolutionaries (and perhaps it was initially created for the sake of this political group), it soon accepted as clients “ideological political prisoners” from all backgrounds (socialists and anarchists of all possible colors) as well as a mass of ordinary persons.²⁵ In addition, the Cross decided not to limit itself to helping the inmates, but to extend assistance to individuals recently released from prison and to the prisoners' relatives.

As I discussed in Chapter 1, the Soviet state’s official discourse of help mandated social assistance to all individuals who were in dire need but unable to work and without responsible

²⁴ Robert Sharlet has argued that the category of political prisoners continually expanded and contracted throughout Soviet legal history, depending on the party leadership’s variable definitions of politically deviant activity. Robert Sharlet, “Stalinism and Soviet Legal Culture,” in *Stalinism. Essays in Historical Interpretation*, Robert C. Tucker, ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company Inc., 1977), 155-179.

²⁵ For instance, the Cross helped the peasants of the Tambov region who had been arrested at the end of the civil war when the bands of Antonov were liquidated. These included up to 400 men and women, elderly and children of various ages from 2-3 months to 16 years (GARF, f. 8419, o. 1, d. 1, l. 79). In 1920 the case of 20 peasant men who had been sentenced to death for organizing a revolt in the Kuz'minskaia volost' was assigned for defense to a lawyer affiliated with the Cross (GARF, f. 8419, o. 1, d. 5). Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the number of “non-political” clients increased exponentially. The Cross maintained a distinction only between individuals accused of political crimes (*politicheskie zakliuchennye*) and citizens arrested for penal crimes (*ugolovnye arestovannye*).

relatives. In line with this official discourse, the Cross took upon itself the defense of those prisoners who were not economically self-sufficient and did not benefit from the care of close relatives. According to its statute, to accomplish this goal the Society arranged frequent visits to the places of imprisonment “with the permission of the authorities.” It regularly offered meals to political prisoners and provided them with foodstuffs, clothes, and medical help.²⁶ It interceded for the improvement of the conditions of imprisonment, for amnesty, and for reductions in the sentences of condemned politicals. It facilitated – “through all possible legal means” – visitation and written communication between the prisoners and their relatives and friends. It gave the prisoners books, journals, and newspapers. It organized lectures, performances, concerts, and literary evenings to collect donations. It had the permission to publish books, brochures, journals, and newspapers “with humanitarian content.” The latter point of the statute opened up space for the propaganda of humanitarian ideas and the elaboration of theoretical issues related to political imprisonment. In practice, to the best of my knowledge, the Cross never published anything.²⁷

The Society enjoyed the property rights of an autonomous juridical person and had its own official seal. There was no limit on the number of its members: new members were admitted upon written recommendation by two older members and anybody could be a *krasnokrestovets* as long as he/she paid the yearly membership fee, had reached majority, and had not be condemned for major crimes. The Society’s central administrative organs were located at the address Kuznetskii Most n. 16 (at walking distance from the offices of the police organs on

²⁶ Between 1918 and 1922, when the Cross’s activities were limited to the city of Moscow and the surrounding area, the organization serviced around 30 places of imprisonment. In 1921 it provided 18,504 persons with food rations. According to Murav’ev’s calculation this corresponded to one meal a day for 30% of the prison population in the city of Moscow (GARF, f. 8419. o. 1, d. 1, l. 79 and l. 34). After 1922 the Cross started to serve prisons and camps all over the Russian territory. In particular, it helped prisoners in Iaroslavl’, Arkhangel’sk, Pertominsk, and Kholmogorsk. According to Vinaver, every assisted prisoner stayed under the PRC’s care for an average period of 6-9 years (GARF, f. 5865, o. 1, d. 101, ll. 72-73).

²⁷ GARF, f. 8419. o. 1, d. 1, ll. 19-28.

Lubianka Square). They included a general assembly of members, a council with a presidium (consisting of a chairman, a vice-chairman, and a secretary), and a central revision commission. But the pulsating heart of the Cross was the central committee and its four executive commissions: for the visitation of prisoners, financial and economic, medical, and juridical. The economic commission took care of satisfying the prisoners' needs for foodstuffs and clothes as well as improving the conditions of their frequent transfers between places of detention. The medical commission organized health care for the prisoners and checked on the sanitary and hygienic conditions of the places of imprisonment. The juridical commission carried out the court defense of the prisoners, drafted their legal requests and petitions, and strove to solve all theoretical and practical issues concerning the legal status of political criminals.²⁸ All the work on the ground was performed by the commission for prison visitation. Its members visited detainees in prison, inquired about their needs and wishes, and facilitated communication with relatives and friends.²⁹

The central committee had also the task to keep in touch with all national and international organizations dealing with political prisoners. The Cross was founded and operated independently from the Russian national section of the International Red Cross – the so-called “Russian Society of the Red Cross for Help to Sick and Wounded Soldiers,” which had been opened in 1867. The Cross never advanced pretensions to become a national society and recognized that only the Russian Society of the Red Cross “ha[d] the right to operate as the

²⁸ The Criminal Code of Procedures detailed the rights of the accused and mandated the investigation organs to respect legal guarantees even in the case of “enemies” of the people. This code gave the Cross the legal space to engage in defense activities. M. Grodzinskii, “Dopros obviniaemogo v novom protsessual’nom kodekse,” *Pravo i zhizn’*, 3 (1922), 56-65.

²⁹ A “Mandate” further detailed the tasks of each section of the PRC (GARF, f. 8419. o. 1, d. 1, ll. 29-30). See also the documents “Organizatsiia khoziaistvennogo otdela” (GARF, f. 8419. o. 1, d. 1, ll. 53-54), “Proekt organizatsii kollegii upolnomochennykh” (GARF, f. 8419. o. 1, d. 1, l. 55), as well as several other documents on the chancellery and the economic section.

exclusive national society for help to sick and wounded soldiers.”³⁰ The Cross did not participate in any international conference of Red Cross organizations. However, as a note in the statute explained, it “operate[d] in harmony with the principles of the International Red Cross and in solidarity with it and its national sections.”³¹ In a letter to one of their donors, the *krasnokrestovtsy* further explained that their Society operated “on the grounds of the Geneva Convention of 1864” which – in the *krasnokrestovtsy*’s interpretation – mandated to offer “non-party help to all who suffer for their political convictions.”³² Furthermore, while the International Red Cross never officially recognized the Political Red Cross, the Polish section of the Red Cross hired the *krasnokrestovtsy* Ekaterina Peshkova and Mikhail Vinaver as its official representatives in Russia. Polish citizens detained in Russian prisons sent them their petitions for release and repatriation and asked them to intercede with the higher organs of the Soviet state. The *krasnokrestovets* Nikolai Murav’ev was also involved in providing legal assistance to Polish citizens detained in Russian prisons.³³

At the beginning of 1921, when Murav’ev was holding the position of Chairman of the Moscow Committee, he charged the revision commission member Aleksandr S. Tager to investigate whether their Society could legally use the name and the icon of the red cross. The question was not trivial, since the name and logo of any organization are public symbols that stand for an identity. The statute printed in 1919 had a complex logo which combined the red

³⁰ GARF, f. 8419. o. 1, d. 1, l. 43.

³¹ GARF, f. 8419. o. 1, d. 1, l. 20.

³² Letter to the Society "Koooperatsiia" in GARF, f. 8419, o. 1, d. 8, ll. 3-4.

³³ For some examples of petitions sent by Polish prisoners to Peshkova as plenipotentiary of the Polish Red Cross and her advocacy on their behalf see GARF, f. 3341, o. 2, d. 52b, l. 6 and ll. 15-19.

cross and the chains, the latter being the international icon of *fin-de-siècle* relief committees for political prisoners.³⁴



Figure 4: Detail from the cover of the Statute of the Moscow Society of the Red Cross for Help to Political Prisoners (Political Red Cross). Source: Dolzhanskaia, "Nash spor s Vami reshil zhizn'."

Later documents had only the cross.



Figure 5: Detail from a letter to the Presidium of the Moscow Soviet. Source: GARF, f. 8419, o. 1, d. 1, l. 41.

The denomination and the emblem of the red cross symbolized activities performed in the name of humanitarianism with the purpose to help people suffering in various tragedies. Tager argued that help to political prisoners in Russia was congruent with the general principles of red cross work, which, in his view, had an international nature and a binding force for all Western states. The Cross thus strove to operate by the rules adopted “in all civilized countries” and “in

³⁴ Nikolaus Brauns, *Schaftf Rote Hilfe!: Geschichte und Aktivitäten der proletarischen Hilfsorganisationen für politische Gefangene in Deutschland (1919-1938)* (Bonn: Pahl-Rugenstein, 2003).

the other states of the cultured world.” Tager listed two necessary conditions for his organization to work legally under the red cross icon: 1) that its endeavors neither violate nor contradict Soviet legislation; 2) that its legal work corresponded in theory and in practical content to the general principles of international red cross relief. The Moscow Political Red Cross satisfied both requirements. As Tager wrote,

before the revolution of 1917 the Political Red Cross existed illegally. At that time, not only the name and the icon of the red cross, but its very activities...were against the law. ...This situation immediately changed after the revolution.³⁵

For the first time in its history, after October 1917 the Cross legally provided help to all sorts of political prisoners. Tager insisted that

the activities of our Society in providing various forms of help to political prisoners happen in a completely open manner, legally, with the permission of the organs of the state and with their collaboration in those cases when this collaboration is necessary.³⁶

In this light, it is not a coincidence that the chain symbol disappeared. The new Soviet organization needed collaboration from the most diverse organs and the icon of the pre-revolutionary underground Political Red Cross might have induced them to refuse it. Instead, the principle of humanitarian help and the non-party make-up could continue to be articulated through the traditional icon of the red cross.

As I have mentioned, visits to the places of imprisonment were one of key components of the Cross’s work and reflected the relationship of the Cross with various state agencies. Already in August 1918, the Punitive Section of the Narkomiust had issued a circular letter regulating

³⁵ GARF, f. 8419. o. 1, d. 1, ll. 37-40

³⁶ *Ibid.*

prison visitation by the representatives of the Cross.³⁷ The Society's "right of prison visitation" was later confirmed by a resolution of the Presidium of the All-Russian Cheka issued in February 1919. A telegram written by the head of the Cheka Council, Samsonov, on May 16, 1921, informed the provincial chekists that the representatives of the Cross should be given permission to meet with the prisoners' elders. The Cross had a copy of this telegram and its delegates showed it to the provincial chekists every time they wanted to access a prison.³⁸ Despite all this, to obtain access to prisons and camps, the *krasnokrestovtsy* still had to overcome a series of hindrances coming from the lower agents of state power. According to Murav'ev, the latter

considered the activity of our Society as 'counter-revolutionary' and were unable to comprehend the high idea of service to the human person which we adopted as our leading principle... They set up cavils and wrecked the nerves of our collaborators...³⁹

In December 1921, the chekist Rozenblium cancelled the universal permission to access all camps that had been granted to some activists and instead promised that he would give the *krasnokrestovtsy* L.E. Elliner and I.S. Kal'meer permission to visit any camp anytime they called him by telephone.⁴⁰ Thus, three-four years since the inception of their activities, the source of the activists' "right to prison visitation" moved from a piece of paper to a telephone call. The passage from bureaucracy to personal connections made the ground on which the Cross was standing much shakier. The relevance of personal connections became even more pronounced in

³⁷ The circular letter no. 44, dated 31 August 1918, was published in the journal *Proletarskaia revoliutsiia i pravo*, n. 5-6, 1918, 75-76.

³⁸ GARF, f. 8419, o. 1, d. 8, l. 46.

³⁹ "Rech' na godichnom sobranii Politichskogo Kasnogo Kresta 14 marta 1919 g." from Murav'ev's family archive, quoted in Ugrimova, "*Stoi v zavete svoem...*," 127. For instance, the *krasnokrestovka* N.A. Peres was herself subjected to arrest when she tried to help the White officers held in the building of the former Alekseevskii school.

⁴⁰ GARF, f. 8419, o. 1, d. 8, l. 57. In his memoirs, Murav'ev mentions his constant "conversations and telephone calls." Ugrimova, "*Stoi v zavete svoem...*," 172.

1922 when permission to visit places of imprisonment was granted only personally to Peshkova and Vinaver.

Indeed, 1922 was an important year of change for the Cross. In the month of June, a resolution of the Presidium of the VTsIK had established that all Soviet societies and associations (excluding the trade unions) had to be registered with the NKVD and that new societies could not be opened without proper registration and approval of their statutes. All organizations which did not register within two weeks from the date of this resolution would have to be closed. This legislation encouraged the development of associations working in close contact with state and party organs – and finding themselves under their immediate control.⁴¹ The Cross sent a series of letters to the Moscow Soviet asking to be officially registered. To make their case, the *krasnokrestovtsy* reminded the state authorities that their Society had emerged in 1918 with the collaboration of the then Commissar of Justice Isaak Shteinberg. Although founded by individuals who had been close to the socialist-revolutionary party (which in 1922 was under trail), the Cross claimed to have always existed as “a-political organization” recognized by the Presidium of the VTsIK, the Cheka, and personally by the Chairman of the Moscow Soviet L.V. Kamenev. These letters argued that the forms of help offered by the Cross were in accordance with Soviet understandings of social assistance: help to prisoners could be material (through the provision of foodstuffs, clothes, soap, and other basic goods), medical (through the distribution of medicines), cultural-enlightening (through the supply of books to the prisons' libraries), and juridical (through the submission of official petitions to the Cheka and the

⁴¹ Concerning Soviet legislation on non-governmental organizations see A.P. Kupaigorodskaja and N.B. Lebina, “Dobrovol’nye obshchestva Petrograda-Leningrada v 1917-1937 gg. (tendentsii razvitiia),” in *Dobrovol’nye obshchestva v Petrograde-Leningrade v 1917-1937 gg.*, 5-16.

drafting of papers on behalf of the prisoners).⁴² When asked to make a choice between official registration and liquidation as a legally operating society, the Cross readily adopted the Soviet culture of help.

Despite all explanations and argumentations, the Cross was officially closed down on August 25, 1922, and forced to interrupt its work for a few months. While the Society ceased existing as such, on November 11, 1922, the *krasnokrestovka* Ekaterina Peshkova was given a special written permission to resume relief work on behalf of political prisoners. Not only could she receive petitions, but she could also organize collections of money and accept private donations on behalf of any individual imprisoned for political crimes. Among her “rights” was also the permission to conduct official correspondence with the state organs. Peshkova’s status as activist was completely formalized: she had stationary paper and a seal with the engraving “E.P. Peshkova. Help to Political Prisoners” (Pompolit, as the *krasnokrestovtsy* used to say).

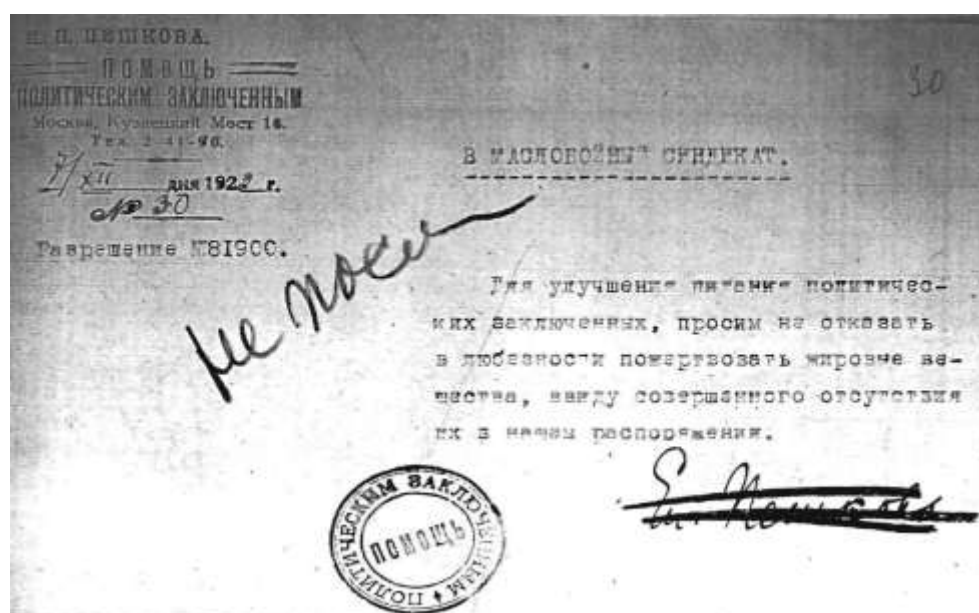


Figure 6: the new logo and seal put the word “help” in evidence. Source: GARF, f. 8409, o. 1, d. 1, l. 30.

⁴² See for instance the letter "To the Administrative Section of the Moscow Soviet" signed by Vinaver and dated 22 August 1922. GARF, f. 8419, o. 1, d. 1, l. 70.

The “new” institution could hire its own employees and consultants, but, in practice, its membership was drawn from previous *krasnokrestovtsy*. The Pompolit was officially made up of Peshkova and her aid Vinaver; its additional 10-15 members figured on the Cross’s register of employees as “technical personnel.”⁴³ The Pompolit inherited the property of the old organization and kept operating in its facilities. And yet, there were some substantial differences between the Political Red Cross and the Pompolit. The latter did not preserve the official denomination of “society” (*obshchestvo*) or “civil organization” (*obshchestvennaia organizatsiia*) with a printed statute, but turned into a loose “charitable institution, working with the permission of the GPU [Cheka].” Like its predecessor, it provided material help to the prisoners and their families, but it no longer offered systematic legal defense to its clients. Since its “rights” were granted by administrative organs without being confirmed by legal ones, they looked more like special permissions than legal rights. Most importantly, the Pompolit as an organization could not visit prisoners in the Gulag. Peshkova and Vinaver – who were not elected by their peers, but nominated in their positions by the Cheka – remained the only two persons with the permission to visit places of imprisonment.⁴⁴

What was the Pompolit able to achieve in the midst of these restrictions? Until 1938 it effectively performed the important function of information bureau able to locate prisoners and communicate crucial information to their relatives. It also kept sending money and goods to prisons and camps all over the Soviet Union. In general, the potential for providing some forms of material help was greater than the odds of changing one’s sentence. In some cases, however, the Pompolit was able to successfully vindicate prisoners’ complaints. For instance, it called off

⁴³ Dolzhanskaia, “*Nash spor s Vami reshii zhizn’*,” 10; and Idem, “*Dorogaia Ekaterina Pavlovna...*,” 47.

⁴⁴ See Vinaver’s letter to Ekaterina Kuskova dated 3 January 1923, preserved in GARF, f. 5865, o. 1, d. 101, ll. 18-19, quoted in Dolzhanskaia, “*Nash spor s Vami reshii zhizn’*,” 32. On the difference between the two incarnations of the Cross see also Dolzhanskaia, “*Dorogaia Ekaterina Pavlovna...*,” 34-35.

some death sentences issued for political reasons.⁴⁵ To obtain the suspension of executions, the *krasnokrestovtsy* used to refer to socialist morality understood as a shared conception of justice, a common sense of what is true or false, good or evil. As an activist put it, “the death penalty should be abolished...for reasons of high humanity and for a principled negation of it.”⁴⁶

Another form of help that the Pompolit successfully provided was assistance in leaving the Soviet Union. This activity was not much advertised, because it was not part of the official Soviet understanding of help, and after 1931 became more and more difficult to accomplish. However, the Pompolit managed to obtain legal permissions to exit the country for health purposes when a medical commission certified that the applicant could not be cured in the Soviet Union. In addition, Peshkova and Vinaver could “personally” receive permissions for elderly people and children. The Pompolit did not organize illegal escapes from the Soviet Union, but rather helped those who wanted to emigrate to obtain legal permissions to exit the country.⁴⁷

By 1930, the *krasnokrestovtsy*’s power to bargain was definitely decreasing. However, their pushing and pulling still led to the revision of some sentences. For instance, Vinaver, Peshkova, and Murav’ev devoted much energy to the defense of Pavel Nikolaevich Maliantovich, a member of the Moscow City College of Defenders who was accused of belonging to the Central Bureau of the Menshevik Party and condemned to ten years of forced labor. “Talking” with the authorities and applying all possible legal norms, they obtained a change of sentence from camp imprisonment to exile. This was considered a good outcome because Maliantovich’s case was a difficult one and, as Vinaver admitted in his private

⁴⁵ See for instance GARF, f. 8419, o. 1, d. 5, ll. 2-16 and ll. 22-23; and d. 8, l. 5 and ll. 8-10.

⁴⁶ GARF, f. 8419, o. 1, d. 8, l. 128 dated 17 Jan. 1920 and addressed to the Sovnarkom. Copies of this letter were sent also to the Cassation Tribunal of the VTsIK and the Cheka (GARF, f. 8419, o. 1, d. 8, l. 129).

⁴⁷ Vinaver’s letter to Kuskova dated 15 January 1931 preserved in GARF, f. 5865, o. 1, d. 101, ll. 99-104, quoted in Dolzhanskaia, “*Nash spor s Vami reshil zhizn’*,” 133-134.

correspondence with Kuskova, “the external proofs were against him.”⁴⁸ A few years down the road, the *krasnokrestovtsy*’s intercessions would lose much of their effectiveness. Indeed, in 1938 Maliantovich’s sons, Vladimir and Georgii – who were also members of the Moscow College of Defenders – would be shot within one year from their arrest and despite the Pompolit’s advocacy on their behalf.

Finances

Contrary to Murav’eva’s words quoted in the epigraph, the Cross never enjoyed formal financial support from the state. It started off with a 3,000 ruble loan from the Office of Resort Help to Political Prisoners (*Biuro Kurortnoi pomoshchi politicheskim zakliuchennym*, an ephemeral organization that gathered around itself some old revolutionaries during the Provisional Government phase of 1917) and ended its first year of work with a positive balance of 500,000 rubles.⁴⁹ Its stable material base consisted in mandatory membership fees, voluntary donations from various institutions and single individuals, and the income from the Society’s properties and capital management. The Cross was allowed to “buy” performances in the city’s theaters and use the money made from the sale of tickets to help political prisoners.⁵⁰ Rafail Fridlender’s factory – until its nationalization in 1927 – was a big source of income, covering the

⁴⁸ Vinaver’s letter to Kuskova dated 31 May 1931, preserved in GARF, f. 5865, o. 1, d. 101, ll. 106-108, quoted in Dolzhanskaia, “*Nash spor s Vami reshil zhizn’*,” 143.

⁴⁹ “Rech’ na godichnom sobranii Politicheskogo Kasnogo Kresta 14 marta 1919 g.” from Murav’ev’s family archive, quoted in Ugrimova, “*Stoi v zavete svoem*,” 128-130. See also Filat’ev, “Pervaia pomoshch’ amnistirovannym v Moskve,” 169.

⁵⁰ In the archive of the Cross are preserved the documents illustrating the conditions of its agreements with some Moscow theaters. See for instance GARF, f. 8409, o. 1, d. 25, l. 131 and l. 459. In a letter to the Administration of the Central Commission for the Improvement of the Lives of Scholars, Peshkova said: “I have the legal permission to organize evenings and concerts with the purpose of obtaining funds for my work.” GARF, f. 8409, o. 1, d. 1, l. 60. The Cross had the rule to remunerate speakers for their lectures and artists for their performances, but many of them gave up half or the whole compensation for the sake of political prisoners. For instance, F.I. Shaliapin, donated 30,000 rubles after his performance at a concert organized by the Cross in the fall of 1919. Ugrimova, “*Stoi v zavete svoem*,” 305-306.

rent of the office on Kuznetskii Most and the salary of four employees.⁵¹ Peshkova and Vinaver, who until 1937 freely moved through the Soviet border on Polish visas, brought back to Moscow donations from foreign friends. There were few occasions when money and help in nature was sent through Jewish charitable organizations in visit to Russia.⁵² But, most importantly, the Cross received parcels and a significant amount of cash from Russian political émigrés in Berlin, Prague, and Paris.⁵³ In June 1926, one of the founders of the Cross and by then political émigré, E.D. Kuskova, informed A.A. Vinogradov, the secretary of a Russian émigré organization based in Prague, that “it is extremely easy to send money to Ek. Pav. [You can send] a check through the bank – better not from an institution, but from a private person. She always sends back a receipt.”⁵⁴ Money went into a bank account opened in the name of Peshkova, but the inspectors of finance recognized that the money belonged to the Pompolit and did not tax Peshkova for it.⁵⁵ The flow of money into the Pompolit and its taxability status reveal once more the liminality of this institution and its members.

With the onset of the NEP, the Cross lost the possibility to receive foodstuffs and goods of basic consumption from state institutions. Without broad public support from non-governmental organizations and private individuals, argued the *krasnokresovtsy*, they would have soon been unable to fulfill their humanitarian duties. Indeed, the Cross contacted several potential non-state sponsors with the plea to make periodical donations either in cash, foodstuffs, or other consumer goods. Letters to donors invoked the category of *sochuvstvie*, that is

⁵¹ Dolzhanskaia, “*Nash spor s Vami reshiti zhizn’*,” 196. The technical personnel were regularly remunerated, while the work of all the activists who occupied elective positions was unpaid.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 175-176.

⁵³ GARF, f. 5865, o. 1, d. 101, ll. 18-19, quoted in Dolzhanskaia, “*Nash spor s Vami reshiti zhizn’*,” 31; and GARF, f. 5865, o. 1, d. 101, l. 31, quoted in Dolzhanskaia, “*Nash spor s Vami reshiti zhizn’*,” 37.

⁵⁴ GARF, f. 5880, o. 1, d. 10, l. 145. On Ekaterina Dmitrievna Kuskova (1869-1958) and her involvement in the Cross see Dolzhanskaia, “*Nash spor s Vami reshiti zhizn’*,” 6-7.

⁵⁵ Letter of L.O. Dan to Kuskova dated 20 Nov. 1930, preserved in GARF, f. 5865, o. 1, d. 156, l. 12.

compassion for the prisoners and sympathy for the ideas and work of the Cross. Political prisoners, who did not receive any assistance from outside sources, found themselves in the most arduous conditions. The general penury of foodstuffs that characterized many places of imprisonment was one of the most acutely felt problems, because it led to diets low in calories, to an insufficient intake of fats, and to under-nutrition. This in turn caused extreme bodily emaciation and the spreading of serious diseases such as typhus and scurvy among the already sickish Gulag population. Describing political prisoners' "scandalous poverty" to potential donors was a risky move because, while it induced compassion for the prisoners, it might also have aroused public resentment towards the state. To achieve empathy but at the same time avoid a sense of indignation, the *krasnokrestovtsy* wrote carefully crafted letters that positively emphasized the humanitarian and civic meaning of help to political prisoners.⁵⁶ And yet, this was an ambiguous project: monetary contributions to political prisoners could be a means to identify with them and indicate political attitudes.⁵⁷

After the organization was re-opened as Pompolit, Peshkova made all possible efforts to maintain its sources of funding. In a letter to the Administration of the Cooperative of the Employees of the Moscow Consumers' Society, she explained that the Pompolit had received permission to provide help to political prisoners in place of the previous organization and asked them to "assign to us the foodstuffs that the Administration had deliberated to assign every month to the Moscow Political Red Cross."⁵⁸ In a similar letter to the Narkomsobes, Peshkova wrote:

⁵⁶ The letter to the Society "Kooperatsiia" is preserved in GARF, f. 8419, o. 1, d. 8, ll. 3-4. For examples of other letters see GARF, f. 8419, o. 1, d. 8, l. 44; l. 100; and l. 113.

⁵⁷ See Badcock, *Politics and the People in Revolutionary Russia*, 48; and Diane Koenker, *Moscow Workers and the 1917 Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 274 and 286.

⁵⁸ GARF, f. 8409, o. 1, d. 1, l. 44.

I have received permission to provide help to political prisoners... Therefore, I ask to grant me the permission, which was enjoyed by the former Moscow Political Red Cross, to place the politicals released from Moscow prisons in the dorm on Trifonovskaia street n. 18 in case they don't have relatives here or financial means and would need a temporary shelter until they could return to their place of permanent residence.⁵⁹

Although after November 1922 the legal permission to continue relief activities was granted to Peshkova personally, she still tried to position the Pompolit and its work in the Soviet institutional network of help.

The organization's financial situation, however, became increasingly more difficult. If in 1924 it could give to prisoners around 45,000 rubles (including cash and help in nature), in 1926 its yearly budget was around 30-40,000 rubles.⁶⁰ In the summer of 1926 Vinaver wrote to Kuskova that "although we are always broke and the help that we receive is small, we somehow manage to survive."⁶¹ But, by the end of that year, he already defined the Pompolit's material situation as "nasty."⁶² The Petersburg office closed business in 1928 because it did not have money to pay for the rent and Vinaver was worried that the Moscow committee too might soon follow suit.⁶³ In November 1929 Peshkova wrote: "we are broke at Kuznetskii most."⁶⁴ The existence of the Pompolit after 1931 resembled more and more a struggle to find the financial means to survive. In January 1935, Vinaver predicted that "the Cross will materially survive for the next one-and-half year. I don't now what will happen after that. The usual sources [of money] are drying up; I don't see new ones coming."⁶⁵ This financial downslope definitely contributed to the Pompolit's final closing in 1938. However, that lack of money was not the key

⁵⁹ GARF, f. 8409, o. 1, d. 1, l. 45.

⁶⁰ Vinaver's letter to Kuskova dated 17 July 1926, preserved in GARF, f. 5865, o. 1, d. 101, ll. 35-36.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² Vinaver's letter to Kuskova dated 27 December 1926, preserved in GARF, f. 5865, o. 1, d. 101, l. 41.

⁶³ Vinaver's letter to Kuskova dated 21 January 1929, preserved in GARF, f. 5865, o. 1, d. 101, ll. 69-70.

⁶⁴ Peshkova's letter to Kuskova dated 10 November 1929, preserved in GARF, f. 5865, o. 1, d. 390, ll. 68-76.

⁶⁵ Vinaver's letter to Kuskova dated 7 January 1935, preserved in GARF, f. 5865, o. 1, d. 101, ll. 128-130.

reason for it. In the end, financial problems made many Soviet institutions ineffective, but they did not determine their closure. The profound motivations for the Pompolit's end lie elsewhere.

5.2 The people

Although the Cross spoke to the prisoners and the authorities in a unitary voice (rarely a signature appeared on the Cross's correspondence with both), in fact it was the host of multiple and sometimes conflicting forces. Help to political prisoners was a common cause that bound the few activists undertaking it in lasting webs of personal friendship; shared interests served to paper over the divisions that ran through the Cross and shared duress rendered the disagreements weaker. However, the differences remain visible to the historian's eye. The activists' diverging life experiences and convictions engendered different approaches to prisoners' right to be helped. They also contributed to making the offices at Kuznetskii Most a liminal space.

Nikolai Murav'ev, Mikhail Vinaver, and Ekaterina Peshkova took turns as chairmen of the Cross's Central Committee and were its most active members throughout the years between 1918 and 1938. However, the acquaintance between them went back to the pre-Soviet time, when they had been involved in the revolutionary movement and had actively participated in the legal defense of political prisoners and other less legal activities pursued by the underground red cross.⁶⁶ After 1917, all three of them decided to engage in help to Soviet prisoners, but they differently reflected on their loyalties and duties as activists in a socialist political system. One of the key differences was in the extent to which they combined national sentiment and attachment to the Soviet regime. Murav'ev was always very careful not to fuse national and political

⁶⁶ Murav'ev and Peshkova had met in 1902, when the latter asked the former to organize the defense of the workers of the Sormov factory (in Nizhnii Novgorod), who had been brought to court for participation in a street manifestation. At that time, Murav'ev's wife, Ekaterina Ivanovna Guseva-Murav'eva, was a member of the illegal political red cross. See Ugrimova, "*Stoi v zavete svoem..*" 236.

allegiances. The category of civic duty was the ruling concept behind his conceptualization and practice of help. This standpoint led him to be more prone to judge Bolshevik morality. Vinaver, on the contrary, definitely supported the Bolshevik path of national renovation and shared in the Bolshevik sense of morality. However, even for the “believer” Vinaver, patriotic duty never represented a complete fusion of the Soviet and national ideas. He opposed bureaucracy and cruelty, while maintaining a strong overall faith in the revolutionary project and the potential for correcting the system. Perhaps because of her gender or because she ended up representing the Cross for the longest time, Peshkova appeared as a very ambiguous activist, who did not leave an extensive written record and whose assessments can be gauged only through her actions.

Murav’ev, Vinaver, and Peshkova were variously caught between their pre-revolutionary identity as *intelligenty* and their new personas as Soviet social activists. Of course, both constructions are ideals, which were probably never fully inhabited by any Russian man or woman. And yet, they are conceptually useful to mark the end points of a continuum. Murav’ev stood closer to the ideal image of the old activists, embodying the pre-revolutionary sense of socialist morality, keeping it alive throughout the 1920s-1930s, and painfully disappointed with the revolution. Instead, Vinaver and Peshkova – the first with his vocal optimism and the second with her silent compromises – chose to assume the identity of Soviet social activists and to embrace the notion of Soviet help that came with it.

Nikolai Murav’ev: “the humble Russian activist of a great global idea”

Nikolai Konstantinovich Murav’ev (1870-1936)⁶⁷ had been one of the pillars of political defense in pre-revolutionary Russia. Socialist by inclination, but formally never affiliated with

⁶⁷ For the details of Murav’ev’s biography see the entry “Murav’ev” in the biographical dictionary *Politicheskie deiateli Rossii 1917* (Moscow: Bol’shaia Rossiiskaia Entsiklopediia, 1993). On his pre-revolutionary work see E.I.

any political party,⁶⁸ Murav'ev was a convinced enemy of autocracy and spent most of his life advocating for the arrested opponents of the tsarist regime. By 1917 he was already a well-known lawyer, who had defended in court hundreds of striking workers, rebelling peasants, members of ethnic minorities, and religious dissenters such as the sectarians and Tolstoyans-pacifists. Many of the individuals that he helped would occupy high positions of leadership in the Soviet state. Indeed, the list of Murav'ev's "interlocutors and addressees," whom he would "flood with telephone calls" during his tenure as *krasnokrestovets*, is rather impressive: among his most famous and influential patrons were L.B. Kamenev, N.I. Bukharin, A.I. Rykov, A.A. Solts, N.I. Muralov, N.N. Krestinskii, L.B. Krasin, D.I. Kurskii, A.M. Lezhava, and P.G. Smidovich.⁶⁹ Even more important was, perhaps, the fact that in 1914 Murav'ev had provided help to a group of Polish revolutionaries arrested and evacuated from Warsaw to Moscow. Among them was the future chairman of the All-Russian Cheka F.E. Dzerzhinskii.⁷⁰

Murav'ev was involved with the Cross from its foundation in 1918 and until its closure in 1938, but the nature of his affiliation changed with the evolution of the Cross itself. For the first four-five years of the Cross's life, Murav'ev was an official member and rotated with other *krasnokrestovtsy* as Chairman of the Moscow Committee. In March 1922, Murav'ev was not re-

Rozental', "Moskovskii kruzhok molodykh advokátov (K probleme uchastiia intelligentsii v osvoboditel'nom dvizhenii kontsa XIX-nachala XX v.," in *Iz istorii Rossii XVII-nachala XX v. Issledovaniia i materialy*, A.V. Lavrent'ev, ed. (Moscow: Gosudarstvennyi istoricheskoi muzei, 1995), 142-165; N.A. Troitskii, *Advokatura v Rossii i politicheskie protsessy 1866-1904 gg.* (Tula: Izd-vo « Avtograf », 2000) and Idem, *Sud'by rossiiskikh advokátov. Biograficheskie ocherki i kharakteristiki* (Saratov: Izd-vo SGU, 2003), esp. 106-114. As head of the defense in the 1922 process against the socialist revolutionaries, Murav'ev figures preeminently in Mark Jansen's book *A Show Trial under Lenin. The Trial of the Socialist Revolutionaries, Moscow 1922* (The Hague; Boston: M. Nijhoff, 1982). On Murav'ev's post-revolutionary work see also Mark Jansen, "The Bar During the First Years of the Soviet Regime: N.K. Murav'ev," *Revolutionary Russia*, 3:2 (December 1990), 211-223. A collection of Murav'ev's unpublished writings has been recently edited by his granddaughter Ugrimova: "*Stoi v zavete svoem...*"

⁶⁸ In October 1905 Murav'ev had refused to enter the constitutional democratic party. In the summer of 1917, Murav'ev chose again to avoid participation in politics and "stay out of the political mess" (Ugrimova, 23). In his "Avtobiograficheskaia zametka" he defined himself as "independent socialist" (Ugrimova, 107).

⁶⁹ See Murav'ev letter to A.M. Aleksandrovskii, dated 9 March 1935, preserved in GARF, f. 1652, o.1, d. 56, l. 14, quoted in Ugrimova, "*Stoi v zavete svoem...*," 171-172.

⁷⁰ "Avtobiograficheskaia zametka," quoted in Ugrimova, "*Stoi v zavete svoem...*," 113.

elected in the Committee. In an “Autobiographical Note” that Murav’ev wrote in 1930, he briefly qualified this change in status as the “result of inner frictions” and claimed that, after that episode, he “abandoned forever this organization.” In fact, we know that he kept collaborating with the Cross by providing legal and material help to political prisoners. However, he operated no longer as an officially affiliated member, but informally as an occasional consultant.⁷¹

Throughout his life as political defender and activists, Murav’ev remained faithful to the deep-rooted tradition of service that characterized the legally-oriented Russian intelligentsia. As mentioned in the Introduction, Russian pre-revolutionary legal theorists and intellectuals such as Kistiakovskii, Berdiaev, Bulgakov, Gershenzon, Izgoev, Struve, and Frank had expressed the desire to change the existing social order into a system based on morality, law, and justice. Like them, Murav’ev was convinced that all accused, and especially the poor, were entitled to political defense.⁷² Unlike them, however, he believed that the methods and forms of political defense “went hand in hand with the revolutionary movement.”⁷³

Murav’ev (“with whom you cannot keep up [since] he does not walk but flies,” as the poet Aleksandr Blok once wrote⁷⁴) was also a forward-looking and strikingly modern human rights advocate. Faced with “the total disavowal of the rights of the human person,” Murav’ev asked Russian civil society to “raise...the banner of respect for Man and care for the human

⁷¹ Murav’ev’s official disengagement with the Cross might have been related with his arrest in August 1922. Murav’ev was initially condemned by the Collegium of the All-Russian Cheka to three years of exile, but, thanks to Figner’s intercession, he ended up spending only few months in Kazan’ and could return to Moscow already in the Summer of 1923. From then on, Murav’ev’s primary source of income was the Moscow College of Defenders, where he was officially employed until its closure in 1930. See “Avtobiograficheskaia zametka,” quoted in Ugrimova, “*Stoi v zavete svoem...*,” 109-111 and footnote 235 at 297.

⁷² “Avtobiograficheskaia zametka,” quoted in Ugrimova, “*Stoi v zavete svoem...*,” 14-15.

⁷³ GARF, f. 533, o. 1, d. 284, ll. 24-25, quoted in Ugrimova, “*Stoi v zavete svoem...*,” 239.

⁷⁴ Aleksandr Blok, “Pis’mo materi” dated 18 May 1917, in *Sochineniia v dvukh tomakh* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe Izdatel’stvo Khudozhestvennoi Literatury, 1955), vol. 2, 722.

person (*chelovecheskaia lichnost'*).⁷⁵ Being committed to the sanctity of human life and the integrity of the self, Murav'ev used the category of *lichnost'* to challenge those conditions of Soviet prison life that violated the dignity and natural rights of Man. He portrayed the *krasnokrestovtsy* as the best up-keepers of Russian social thought who felt "the aspiration to ease the horrifying inhuman suffering experienced by the citizens of our country."⁷⁶ He also liked to present himself and his fellow activists as "patriots," caring for the life of their country and worried about the political and social chaos through which it was going.

The tradition and heritage of the old Russian civil society and, in particular, of the pre-revolutionary Political Red Cross of the 1880s were key in Murav'ev's self-identity – a trait that we will not see in Vinaver's and Peshova's personality. In Murav'ev's view, the repressions of the Cheka were comparable to those of the tsarist police. However, he remarked an important difference: the reactionary rule of Aleksandr III and Stolypin did not have pity even for a "humble, essentially a-political institution." The Bolshevik state, instead, allowed the Cross to "exist and operate completely openly." As Murav'ev wrote, "the current state, after some wavering, in the end had to recognize the need for the existence of a legal society with goals such as those pursued by the Political Red Cross."⁷⁷

Murav'ev contended that the platform of the Cross and the ideas that inspired its members were "the same ideas of protection of the rights of the human person and reduction of human suffering that are pursued by the International Red Cross." Murav'ev believed that this difficult

⁷⁵ "Kratkii ocherk vozniknoveniia i deiatel'nosti Obshestva Krasnogo Kresta dlia Politicheskikh Zakliuchennykh v Rossii (Politicheskii Krasnyi Krest)," GARF, f. 8419. o. 1, d. 1, ll. 31-36, at 32. The archival text has been published by S.I. Golotik in the article "Pervye pravozashchitnye organizatsii rossiiskoi federatsii v 20-e gody," *Otechestvennaia istoriia*, 4 (1995), 159-178.

⁷⁶ GARF, f. 8419. o. 1, d. 1, l. 32.

⁷⁷ GARF, f. 8419. o. 1, d. 1, l. 33.

work was a duty of social service which had a particular importance “in the current global moment.”⁷⁸ As he wrote:

...the ideas of non-political involvement, non-party makeup, service to the cause of humanity, protection of the rights and dignity of the human person...must be applicable not only in foreign wars, but also in all those cases, when inside a state events break out...such as class or civil wars or popular catastrophes...⁷⁹

In several occasions, Murav'ev attempted to argue for the globalization of help to political prisoners, contending that the specific characteristic of his time was the international scope of the affairs of single states. Murav'ev was writing at the end of a war that had enveloped the whole world. He was also witness to the first attempts to establish an international organ of peace such as the League of Nations. Murav'ev was fascinated by the idea of a union of states (“a grandiose International of powerful authority”⁸⁰), whose resolutions could have global resonance and meaning. Furthermore, broad organizational forms would have prevented the Cross from remaining isolated, alone in its service to the ideals of humanity. As he wrote: “the ardently expected response from the far away West...will multiply the efforts of the humble Russian activists of a great global idea.”⁸¹ Murav'ev hoped that international societies, such as the Red Cross in Geneva, the League for the Defense of the Rights of Man and Citizen in Paris, and the Workers' International, would have responded to his appeals and united in relief work across national borders. Even more ambitiously, Murav'ev had toyed with the idea of building an “International of Culture.” As he imagined it, this was supposed to be an international organization with the goal to protect the rights of the human person as well as human happiness,

⁷⁸ GARF, f. 8419. o. 1, d. 1, l. 35.

⁷⁹ “Rech' na godichnom sobranii Politicheskogo Kasnogo Kresta 14 marta 1919 g.” from Murav'ev's family archive, quoted in Ugrimova, “*Stoi v zavete svoem...*,” 132.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 133.

⁸¹ “Kratkii ocherk vozniknoveniia i deiatel'nosti Obshchestva Krasnogo Kresta dlia Politicheskikh Zakliuchennykh v Rossii (Politicheskii Krasnyi Krest),” GARF, f. 8419. o. 1, d. 1, l. 36.

which, Murav'ev insisted, "should be put as the basis for every social and political achievement."⁸²

Murav'ev shared the Bolshevik ideal of cultivating the masses, but he was also firmly convinced that *kul'turnost'* could not be achieved through violence and coercion.

We must not infuse this culture by violence. The human soul would not accept it and...remain in its primitive wildness... a violently introduced culture empties and wipes off all colors from the living human soul, raises a scheme instead of the living human personality...and kills in it both the freedom and all the richness of the colors of nature.⁸³

Murav'ev was appalled by any brusque transformation which, in his opinion, would give only temporary and unstable achievements – what he called “a phony victory.”

We don't need abrupt breaks. What purpose do they serve? They are damaging and unnecessary, when so much can be done by ably using the natural energies and nature of Man, in order to...create an improved nature and a better Man.⁸⁴

Murav'ev saw his time as a “bloody and dark” epoch and explicitly criticized the “unrestrained” and “horrifying” violence and the “wildness” characterizing it.⁸⁵ He always defended the pre-eminence of human rights and legality over Bolshevik ideology and unrelentingly aspired to civil autonomy and independence.

On March 14, 1919, Murav'ev drafted the annual report to the general assembly of members. Drawing a balance of the Cross's first year of work, he distinguished civil interests from political aims and argued that the former did not entail *per force* following a political line.

⁸² “Rech' na godichnom sobranii Politichskogo Kasnogo Kresta 14 marta 1919 g.,” from Murav'ev's family archive, quoted in Ugrimova, “*Stoi v zavete svoem...*,” 134.

⁸³ Murav'ev's speech “Pamiati A.E. Kulyzhnogo,” from family archive, quoted in Ugrimova, “*Stoi v zavete svoem...*,” 154.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 154-155.

⁸⁵ These phrases resurface all the time in Murav'ev's writing. See in particular his speeches “Rech' na godichnom sobranii Politichskogo Kasnogo Kresta 14 marta 1919 g.” and “Rech' k Vere Nikolaevne Figner, Vere Ivanovne Zasulich i Petru Alekeevichu Kropotkinu po povodu izbraniia ikh pochetnymi chlenami Politicheskogo Kasnogo Kresta,” from Murav'ev's family archive, quoted in Ugrimova, “*Stoi v zavete svoem...*,” 124-135.

“Our Society” started off Murav’ev, “does not pursue political goals, but this does not prevent it...to have a large civil meaning...” At a time of exacerbated political struggles, “when the dictatorship of one class determines the whole political and social life of the country,” the *krasnokrestovtsy* represented a group of social activists who distanced themselves from the political squabbles. According to Murav’ev, to implement the idea of a Workers’ and Peasants’ Dictatorship implied the use of violence in all realms of social and political life. It was for the sake of the culture and achievements of Russian society as well as for the defense of the dignity and rights of the human person that the *krasnokrestovtsy* had decided to protect political prisoners. The banner of non-party belonging and non-involvement in politics was the indispensable condition of the Cross’s activities.⁸⁶

Murav’ev further portrayed the Cross as the conscience of the Revolution, which should remind the Bolshevik leaders of their revolutionary aspirations:

At a time of extreme political transformations and deep upheavals in the national social order, it is natural for the main actors of the revolution to forget...that the political achievements and the social reforms are only a means, while the goal must be the happiness of the people, the growth of the human person...⁸⁷

Thus, the *krasnokrestovtsy* were the living voice of this revolutionary conscience, those who “found in themselves enough firmness and courage...to loudly proclaim the notion of the value of the human person.” Indeed, in Murav’ev’s view, the *krasnokrestovtsy* needed to focus all their efforts to limit as much as possible the damage that was being inflicted upon human rights.

⁸⁶ “Rech’ na godichnom sobranii Politicheskogo Kasnogo Kresta 14 marta 1919 g.,” from Murav’ev’s family archive, quoted in Ugrimova, “*Stoi v zavete svoem...*,” 124.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 125.

...to remain passive in the grand battle exploding in front of us and refuse help to the violated human person (notwithstanding class, political party, social order, or religious confession) would testify to the big cultural poverty of Russian society...⁸⁸

Murav'ev believed that even in times of intense political confrontation the right to legal defense had to remain beyond any possible doubt. He also claimed that the state's approach to this issue, its respect for the rules of judicial procedure, and its implementation of court defense as a social service were measures of its level of civilization which did not contradict the task of revolutionary re-construction of the country's political and social order.⁸⁹

Nikolai Murav'ev considered himself "an authentic person" living in "a time of falseness, fakeness, lies, falsification, posing, and cheating."⁹⁰ Memoir literature largely romanticizes Murav'ev by emphasizing his extraordinary responsiveness to the needs of political prisoners, his heroic unselfishness, and his ethos of sacrifice. In the footnotes to Murav'ev's unpublished writings, his granddaughter T.A. Ugrimova writes that Murav'ev was

a well-read, very experienced, well paid, and...privileged lawyer with 'merits towards the revolution.'...However, behind this façade of success he never gave up his endless interventions on behalf of those who were persecuted...⁹¹

His daughter, T.N. Volkova, has emphasized that

he was always extraordinarily faithful to his principles...in his whole life he never stepped back from his principles. Never. Never. Not even under the most difficult circumstances.⁹²

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 132.

⁸⁹ The Chairman of the Supreme Court of the Russian Republic, Petr Stuchka, used a similar vocabulary when he argued that the inviolability of the person and the right to counsel were not to be considered as bourgeois institutions, but rather as "cultural achievements" of mankind that needed to be preserved. See Solomon, *Soviet criminal justice under Stalin*, 73.

⁹⁰ Murav'ev's speech at the anniversary of the Union of Cottage Industry in 1925, from family archive, quoted in Ugrimova, "Stoi v zavete svoem...", 155.

⁹¹ Ugrimova, "Stoi v zavete svoem...", 145.

⁹² T.N. Volkova, *Ustnye vospominaniia*. Oral interviews and recorded memoirs preserved in the Section of audio documents at the library of the Moscow State University, cassette no. 839, partially quoted in Ugrimova, "Stoi v zavete svoem...", 314.

Vera A. Kovtun, who was taken in Murav'ev's family as housekeeper after her husband was arrested, wrote:

His appearance was dry, but what a soul hid behind this look! How much good and help he gave people in all sorts of suffering and tragedies! ...nobody left him without advice and often the promise of intercession: he turned for help to all institutions and people. And this not for money as a lawyer, not for a compensation, but out of love for humanity...and not for religious convictions, but because he had a good soul.⁹³

His "self-sacrificing work," added N.N. Polianskii, "required much work and nervous energy, was sometimes dangerous, and did not bring any profit at all."⁹⁴ The piano player Aleksandr B. Gol'denveizer remembered Murav'ev as a "highly cultured, deeply principled, and charming nature."⁹⁵

Reading Murav'ev's letters and notes, the drafts of his speeches, and his autobiography, one cannot deny the high ideals and morality, the intact professional ethics, the noble nature, and the sincere motivations of a man who did so much for protecting the dignity and human rights of Soviet political prisoners. At the same time, we should neither mythologize this *krasnokrestovets* nor reify his humanitarianism. Moving beyond redemptive and martyred vocabularies, I would rather see Murav'ev as a liminal person, who never closed his eyes to the fact that the Cross could be useful to political prisoner only by "staying in constant touch" with the Soviet state and operating within its penal system. Murav'ev struggled for the correct observance of the procedures laid down in Soviet legislation rather than for the overthrow of the regime. Indicating to the state its own mistakes, turning the authorities' attention to the forgotten Gulag inmates, insisting on the necessity to mitigate the repressions, and adopting all available policies to

⁹³ Memoir written by Vera A. Kovtun in 1969, preserved in Murav'ev's family archive, quoted in Ugrimova, "*Stoi v zavete svoem...*," 183.

⁹⁴ N.N. Polianskii, "Kharakteritika N.K. Murav'eva," dated 28 September 1947, quoted in Ugrimova, "*Stoi v zavete svoem...*," 229-230.

⁹⁵ From Murav'ev's personal archive, quoted in Ugrimova, "*Stoi v zavete svoem...*," 268.

alleviate the punishments given to political prisoner were the methods that Murav'ev used as *krasnokrestovets*.⁹⁶

Murav'ev was a liminal figure because he recognized the new political and legal order, but at the same time he refused to abandon the morality of the pre-revolutionary intelligentsia. As the proponent of civil liberties and international legal norms in Russia, Murav'ev was also the *krasnokrestovets* who came closer to our contemporary understanding of a human rights advocate. His thinking was permeated by the Enlightenment values of the French and American revolutions and other ideas that would constitute the key principles of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The very category of human rights and happiness informed much of Murav'ev's argumentation and inspired his practical relief work on behalf of Soviet prisoners. He conceived this work as the responsibility – “the heavy duty” as he like to repeat – of serving the idea of humanity and easing its suffering, torment, and pain at a time when that idea was subjected to severe infringements. Help to political prisoners was for him a sign of respect and care for the individual, and as such it was a task of civil society.

Mikhail Vinaver: “how cruelly was this man punished for his optimism!”

The lawyer and social-democrat Mikhail L'vovich Vinaver (1880-1942?)⁹⁷ was one of the founders of the Moscow Committee of the Red Cross. He signed the letter to the Commissar of Justice I.Z. Shteinberg which proposed to create a Political Red Cross in Moscow. His signature was also on the officially printed statute of the Society. Besides these two documents, Vinaver's written record is not so extensive and diversified as Murav'ev's. In his case, however,

⁹⁶ “Rech' na godichnom sobranii Politicheskogo Kasnogo Kresta 14 marta 1919 g.,” from Murav'ev's family archive, quoted in Ugrimova, “*Stoi v zavete svoem...*,” 129.

⁹⁷ For a short biography see Dolzhanskaia, “*Nash spor s Vami reshil zhizn'*”, 230-237. For more details see H.M. Winawer, ed., *The Winawer Saga* (London: Hartnoll, 1994), 103-121.

historians can rely on the large correspondence that he entertained between 1923 and 1936 with the political émigré and active sponsor of the Cross, Ekaterina Kuskova. Since these letters did not go through the Soviet border, but were all written and mailed during Vinaver's numerous trips abroad, we can assume that they were not censored and that their authors felt rather free to express their ideas through this medium.

Vinaver was an intellectually rounded personality: he closely followed the course of Soviet economy as well as the international political and economic developments; he read the journals and books published abroad by the Russian émigrés, but was also well informed on the political tendencies that animated the Party; in addition, he was very interested in the nationality question and in minorities' rights. In his contemporaries' memoirs, Vinaver appears as a better financial administrator than Peshkova and as a man with much energy, initiative, and sensibility. At the same time, the grandson of the *krasnokrestovets* A.N. Bakh remembered that Vinaver was called in his family "the man from Lubianka."⁹⁸

Vinaver was an incurable optimist and a convinced believer in the idea of progress. At the time of the foundation of the Cross, he believed that, although "all kinds of zig-zags" were still taking place, with the end of the civil war the state would have soon become more solid and "regenerate[d] itself." He recognized that the Russian economic re-birth was happening slowly, but he thought that it followed an upward line. In a letter that he wrote to Kuskova in 1923, Vinaver was glad to remark a 50% increase in the growth of the country's industrial development and argued that the commercial sector had a positive balance too. Looking back at the big changes that Russia had undergone in the years between 1919 and 1923, "from a period of chaos and destruction" to one of "construction and creation," he was positive that the country

⁹⁸ Dolzhanskaia, "*Nash spor s Vami rehit zhizn*," 25.

“will bloom in 10-15 year” and that “politics will follow the economy.”⁹⁹ In 1927 he wrote again: “at the present moment, everything seems difficult in economic and financial terms, but if you look at the past and at the future, you will see a line of development, an upward line.”¹⁰⁰

According to Vinaver, the state’s attitude to politically engaged citizens was determined by its sense of how frail Russia was. As he claimed,

If the state keeps persecuting the socialists and part of the intelligentsia, it is because it is well aware that the economic concessions [of the NEP]...invariably carry with them also political concessions.¹⁰¹

Fearing the compromises of NEP, the state looked at the social revolutionaries and the social democrats as its most dangerous competition and felt threatened by the old “cultured bourgeoisie.” This sense of panic explained the political persecutions. However, with his characteristic optimistic outlook on the future, Vinaver predicted that

the next 2-3 years will bring not pogroms, slaughter, and violence over Russia, but gradual concessions and the gradual, perhaps slow and oscillating, but steady involvement of non-Bolsheviks in the government.¹⁰²

He argued that, by the mid-1920s, the state would have solved all issues concerning the various nationalities constituting the Soviet Union and given autonomy to some regions independently from their populations’ ethnicity. Indeed, to nurture the country’s productive forces, Vinaver found it necessary to combine economic development with a greater autonomy for each component of the Soviet Union.¹⁰³ He also appreciated the state’s approach to the peasantry and praised the Soviet government for extending the population’s voting rights and investing money

⁹⁹ Vinaver’s letter to Kuskova dated 1 February 1923, in GARF, f. 5865, o. 1, d. 101, ll. 26-27.

¹⁰⁰ Vinaver’s letter to Kuskova dated 7 January 1927, in GARF, f. 5865, o.1, d. 101, ll. 44-49.

¹⁰¹ Vinaver’s letter to Kuskova dated 12 February 1923, in GARF, f. 5865, o. 1, d. 101, ll. 20-22.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ Vinaver’s letter to Kuskova dated 6 May 1927, in GARF, f. 5865, o. 1, d. 101, ll. 54-57.

in the formation a new professional intelligentsia of teachers, agronomists, and provincial doctors.¹⁰⁴

The changes that Vinaver hoped for did not come as fast as he wished. In his correspondence with Kuskova, he admitted that 1926 had been a difficult year for Russia's economy. There had been shortages of basic necessities and a huge unemployment rate, which had especially affected unskilled workers. Vinaver agreed with Soviet ideologues and propagandist of the late 1920s that the desperation caused by the global economic crisis would have led to a war, which in turn would have triggered a series of revolutions.¹⁰⁵ He was very preoccupied with the issue of industrializing the Russian rural country and frequently lamented the slow pace of industrial development as well as the inability of the Soviet industry to absorb the many people who moved from the countryside to the cities. He also complained that since the cultural level of the village was not increasing, the peasant masses did not understand the economic theories behind the state's policies and saw only the negative consequences that impacted their everyday life.

From his position as educated man, instead, Vinaver could see the collectivization as "an economic and political necessity." He imagined the collective farms as

big associations where [the state] could employ modern American technology (such as tractors and so on), where it could fertilize and use correct agricultural management techniques...The fast-growing heavy industry must be the master of raw materials and it should not depend on individual consumption.¹⁰⁶

Heavy industry, in Vinaver's view, had to be regulated centrally. As he argued,

¹⁰⁴ Vinaver's letter to Kuskova dated 3 April 1925, in GARF, f. 5865, o. 1, d. 101, ll. 5-8.

¹⁰⁵ Vinaver's letter to Kuskova dated 5 January 1932, in GARF, f. 5865, o. 1, d. 101, ll. 115-116.

¹⁰⁶ Vinaver's letter to Kuskova dated 16 June 1930, in GARF, 5865, o. 1, d. 101, l. 86-91.

Despite all the beautiful words, until now the Soviet state...has supported the rich peasant, since the *bedniak* and the *sredniak* didn't have anything to give...The continuation of this policy would lead in the near future to political consequences, i.e. the demand of political power [on the part of the rich peasant]. The Soviet state needs to build collective farms where part of the necessary financial means is obtained by employing high technology and a better organization.¹⁰⁷

Vinaver did recognize an “unhealthy” pace in the collectivization, but justified it as “the result of a general psychosis.” As he wrote,

Of course, there was a hell lot of tragedies, stupidities, and unnecessary cruelties...The cities had troubles with the provision of foodstuffs ... There still will be penury of meat and butter for one and a half years to come, but I think that in 1 ½-2 years from now these inconveniences will end and a more or less normal time will come when both goods of basic necessity and foodstuffs will be available.¹⁰⁸

Vinaver claimed that the Soviet state had undertaken collectivization only after having prepared the ground for it in the countryside. In his view, by 1930, the youth, the *bedniaks*, and a big part of the *sredniaks* already supported the collectivization. For this reason, although “much damage has been done,”¹⁰⁹ the collectivization would not have caused the collapse of the Soviet regime – an outcome that Vinaver wished to avert.

This activist's thoughts were always projected into the future. And they were almost always optimistic thoughts. In 1932 he still encouraged his correspondent Ekaterina Kuskova to wait two-three years before giving up hope on the realization of the revolutionary dreams. Vinaver saw “big achievements” everywhere – in the economic, cultural, and political life of the country. He wrote: “life in the USSR is softer than it has ever been. In the last 3-4 years there have been almost no arrests...”¹¹⁰ As proof of a “softer” political line he bragged that he recently obtained a change in sentence from ten years of prison to five years of exile for the socialist

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ Vinaver's letter to Kuskova dated 5 January 1932, in GARF, f. 5865, o. 1, d. 101, ll. 115-116.

Sergei Osipovich Tsederbaum.¹¹¹ Concerning political repression, he argued that, before Kirov's assassination in December 1934, "there was almost none. There were single cases, but no mass repression."¹¹² This statement seems rather paradoxical if we consider that, according to the data collected by the human rights association Memorial, in 1933 around 505,000 people were arrested for political reasons.¹¹³ Vinaver might have referred to the period between May 1933 and December 1934, when the decree of the Party and the Sovnarkom "On the interruption of mass exiles of peasants, the regulation of arrests, and the overloading of places of imprisonment" enabled a short-lived amnesty campaign. In truth, Vinaver desperately wanted to see the symptoms of a changing tide, but his interpretations appear to us rather twisted. For instance, concerning the official state attitude towards the intelligentsia, he wrote: "they are releasing the engineers. They employ them in the camps."¹¹⁴

In January 1935, commenting on the terror that followed Kirov's assassination, Vinaver made another ambiguous statement:

Do not think that all those who have been shot are 'innocent' ... Most of them are in fact spies, counter-agents, etc... Of course, this terror was useless and negative. But one should not close his eyes on the big achievements and make all conclusions only considering the fact of the terror.¹¹⁵

Vinaver further criticized Kuskova for considering only the "nasty facts," which prevented her from seeing the "big cultural advancements and the fast pace at which the cultural level of our life is growing..., the cheerfulness, the big security, the faith in the beautiful upcoming future..."¹¹⁶ The use of the word "cheerfulness" (*velesel'e*) anticipated Stalin's famous words in

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² Vinaver's letter to Kuskova dated 7 January 1935, in GARF, f. 5865, o. 1, d. 101, ll. 128-130.

¹¹³ Dolzhanskaia, "*Nash spor s Vami reshil zhizn'*," 163.

¹¹⁴ Vinaver's letter to Kuskova dated 7 January 1935, in GARF, f. 5865, o. 1, d. 101, ll. 128-130.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

his speech at the First All-Russian Meeting of Stakhanovites in November 1935: “Life is better, comrades. Life is more cheerful.” Written in a letter dated January 1935, Vinaver’s words were not a blind repetition of Stalin’s phrase; they rather reflected the *Zeitgeist* of the mid-1930s – at least for part of the Soviet population. When Vinaver wrote that “everything is calm concerning repressions,”¹¹⁷ he probably did not refer to the purges shaking the high echelons of the party after Kirov’s assassination, but rather to the situation of ordinary people. And yet, we cannot close our eyes to the fact that, in the “happy” years between 1935 and 1941, around 20 millions people had been arrested and around 7 millions had been shot while in prison.¹¹⁸

Vinaver’s political and economic beliefs as well as his attitude towards the repressions reveal that, in the continuum between loyalty and resistance, he was probably closer to support. He once wrote to Kuskova:

I am completely aware of the negative side of the coin, but I see also the positive one; I see that life has become richer and that it moves [underlined in the original]; that the distance between the state and the people decreases....The negative side of the coin is known to me not less than to you, and I fight against it as I proved with my work, which gave me many troubles – personal, material, and family-related.¹¹⁹

For the sake of relief work, Vinaver lived separated from his wife Elena Germanovna, who resided in Warsaw. For the prisoners’ sake, he rejected better job offers.

It would be simplistic to say that Vinaver approved all the actions of the Stalinist government. He wanted to see “glimpses of light” and “positive signs” in the dark reality that made his everyday as *krasnokrestovets* and blindly believed that a more solid politico-economic situation would have reflected positively on the fate of the political prisoners. He accepted Soviet

¹¹⁷ Vinaver’s letter to Kuskova dated 17 January 1935, in GARF, f. 5865, o.1, d. 1010, l. 127.

¹¹⁸ See Grigorii Pomerants, *Sledstvie vedet katorzhanka* (Moscow: Nezavisimoe izd.-vo ‘Pik’, 2004), 8. Pomerants here uses data collected by the so-called commission Shvernika which investigated the assassination of Kirov in 1960.

¹¹⁹ Vinaver’s letter to Kuskova dated 2 May 1925, in GARF 5865, o. 1, f. 101, ll. 10-11.

authority and looked for the rationales behind the state's policies arguing that they were dictated by historical expediency. In the end, Vinaver was a tragic and contradictory figure who strove to understand and adopt the new form of morality that was behind the Stalinist state's actions.

Vinaver believed in the potential for dialogue with the Soviet regime. His belief translated into pragmatism and a willingness to engage with the circumstances of the time in order to advance the cause of help to political prisoners. He once argued that, if the Russian intellectuals would have "gone to work," the state would have changed its attitude towards them.¹²⁰ His fate proved him wrong: despite the inexhaustible energy with which he worked, a complete reconciliation between him and the Soviet state never happened. On August 3, 1937, Vinaver was arrested with the accusation of being a Polish spy. The tribunal of the Moscow military district condemned him to ten years of corrective forced labor. His fellow activists in the Cross were not able to save him.¹²¹ As the old socialist and émigré Lidia Dan wrote in a letter to Kuskova one year after Vinaver's imprisonment: "He was arrested for being a Polish spy and all his red cross activities were regarded as camouflage for that...How cruelly was this man punished for his optimism!"¹²² Vinaver did not live enough to see the "more or less normal times" for which he had been waiting for.

Ekaterina Peshkova: "one of the few individuals who enjoys the trust of both sides"

Ekaterina Pavlovna Peshkova (1876-1965) was a socialist revolutionary woman with an impressive record of social work. She began her humanitarian activities in Nizhnii Novgorod in

¹²⁰ Vinaver's letter to Kuskova dated 17 July 1926, in GARF, f. 5865, o.1, d. 1010, ll. 35-36.

¹²¹ See Dolzhanskaia, "*Nash spor s Vami reshit zhizn'*," 231. Vinaver had been arrested before, but he had always been released. For instance, in March 1919, he was arrested and sent to the Butyr'skaia prison, but released after 2-3 weeks. In that circumstance, the Cross had interceded for his release and proposed itself as guarantor for Vinaver arguing that he had a "complete loyal attitude towards the Soviet state" and that his arrest was "based on some misunderstanding." GARF, f. 8419, o. 1, d. 183, l. 143. The precise date and the circumstances of Vinaver's death are still surrounded by mystery.

¹²² GARF, f. 5865, o.1, d. 156, l. 2.

the 1890s; in 1904-1905 helped revolutionary sailors in Crimea; between 1908 and 1912 worked in émigré mutual help organizations in Paris; and during WWI organized a commission to help children victims of the war. Concerning help to political prisoners, Peshkova's activism dated back to the underground pre-revolutionary political red cross. After the February Revolution of 1917, she led the Moscow office of the Society for Help to Released Politicals. In 1918, she was among the founders of the Moscow Committee of the Political Red Cross. In the fall of 1920, she also began to work as plenipotentiary of the Polish Red Cross in the Soviet Union and occupied this position until April 1937. During WWII, Peshkova was one of the founders and active members of a relief organization on behalf of evacuated children in Tashkent. After the end of the war, she resumed her advocacy for political prisoners, but this time she had no official powers and could only use her personal connections to alleviate the suffering of few detainees. Throughout the years, Peshkova consistently built her public persona as Soviet social activist. Her private life as Maxim Gorky's first wife and life-long friend was also harnessed for the purposes of her activism.¹²³

Once called by a woman petitioner "the official face of help to political prisoners,"¹²⁴ Peshkova was celebrated in most of her clients' letters for her courage, responsiveness, and selfless nature. The majority of the recollections about her that were penned after her death seem inspired by a romantic view of the late nineteenth century revolutionaries – an image that

¹²³ For a more detailed biography see Lia Dolzhanskaia, ed., *Ekaterina Pavlovna Peshkova. Biografiia: dokumenty, pis'ma, dnevniki, vospominaniia* (Moscow: Vostochnaia kniga, 2012). See also the collection of letters that Gorky wrote to Peshkova: A.M. Gor'kii, *Pis'ma k E.P. Peshkovo*, vol. 1, 1895-1906 (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe Izdatel'stvo Khudozhestvennoi Literatury, 1955) and vol. 2, 1906-1932 (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia Literatura, 1966). Memoir literature on Peshkova includes: Tamara V. Ivanova, *Moi sovremenniki, kakimi ia ikh znala. Ocherki* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1987), 354-364; T.F. Pavlova, F.F. Perchenok, and I.K. Safonov, eds. *Milaia, obozhaemaia moia Anna Vasil'evna* (Moscow: 'Progress', 1996); Nina N. Berberova, *Kursiv moi: Avtobiografiia* (Moscow: Soglasie, 1996); A.N. Pirozhkova, "Ekaterina Pavlovna Peshkova," *Oktiabr'*, 7 (2003), 180-191.

¹²⁴ GARF, f. 8409, o. 1, d. 565, ll. 14-15, dated 1931. This women's son was detained in a political isolator in Verkhneural'sk.

memoirists liked to apply to Peshkova as well. The activist Vera A. Peres, for instance, remembered Peshkova as:

a person capable of extraordinary empathy and humanity towards other people, a person who loved truth, who strove to make truth prevail over everything, to exculpate the victims of mistaken, incorrect accusations and actions, and to liberate them from physical suffering. Her love for people and justice opened the way to her intercessions and gave great power of persuasion to her appeals.¹²⁵

Olga Kniper described Peshkova in her elderly years:

She preserved an absolutely pure soul and mind, faith in Man, and a heart full of love. And the complete lack of sentimentalism and bigotry....What a great meaning it had for people shunned by all their friends and acquaintances...to come to her, hear her voice, and find out at least where their close ones were and what expected them.¹²⁶

At the same time Kniper recalled that

E.P. did not waste many words; she was too busy for that. Every time that I came out of her office, in the reception room the visitors asked: 'So, is she very harsh today?'...It turned out that, despite her determined appearance, she was a very shy person and it cost her much effort to talk with people, for whom she felt sincere pity.¹²⁷

Olga Chernov's memoirs offer a similar representation:

She comported herself in her habitual stern manner, making us feel unsure of what she really thought of us. I got the impression from her coldness that she did not approve of us. Only later did we find out how much she loved us. Secretly, she had been proud of us, but he had been unwilling – or unable – to communicate this at the time.¹²⁸

Peshkova's private correspondence with her old comrade in arms Ekaterina Kuskova and her husband Maxim Gorky reveals the face of a woman simply exhausted by her work as social activist. Much less optimistic than Vinaver and less intellectually sophisticated than Murav'ev, Peshkova would become easily tired from running around and keeping the huge correspondence

¹²⁵ Narodnyi Arkhiv, f. 278, d. 164, drafts of obituary for Peshkova, quoted in Dolzhanskaia, "Nash spor s Vami reshit zhizn'," 246.

¹²⁶ A.V. Kniper, "Fragmenty vospominaniia," *Minuvshee. Istoricheskii almanakh*, 1 (1986), 99-190, at 146-147.

¹²⁷ Pavlova et al., eds., "Milaia, obozhaemaia moia Anna Vasil'evna...", 96.

¹²⁸ Olga Chernov, *Cold Spring in Russia* (Ann Harbor: Ardis, 1978), 239.

with the detainees and the prison administrators. In addition, she suffered from frequent headaches and sometimes complained about her heart. As Vinaver commented, “this work wrecks so much her nerves that from time to time she needs to run away to rest and she does that 2-3 times a year.”¹²⁹ Indeed, her visits to Gorky in Sorrento gave her some respite. In the letters that she sent to Kuskova from Italy, Peshkova wrote that she used to arrive in Sorrento “half-dead,” only wishing to stop thinking about her work.¹³⁰ In November 1931, she wrote that “at times it is unbearably difficult, it is even physically impossible to receive the mass of people who come to the reception hours.”¹³¹ In December 1934, Peshkova wrote that after the reception hours she was taken by “an invincible mood of frustration and indifference.”¹³²

Susan Morrissey has shown that between the 1880s and the 1910s, stress and overstrain were very much seen as interlocking problems. The depletion of the nervous system could lead to fatigue, and weakness – both physical and mental – could cause headaches.¹³³ Peshkova had all the symptoms of nervousness described by Morrissey: mental exhaustion, lack of appropriate rest, depleted energy. Together with Vinaver and Murav’ev, the *krasnokrestovka* used the idiom of nerves to conceptualize her afflictions and interpret her physical and mental-emotional state. In his 1930 “Autobiographical Note,” Murav’ev emphasized the “excruciating” and “frustrating” nature of relief work for political prisoners: “the heavy burden of this organization...is indeed a heavy cross...which cost me the loss of much health and energy.”¹³⁴ Around the same time Vinaver confessed: “we are very tired both on the physical and on the nervous level... We can

¹²⁹ Vinaver’s letter to Kuskova dated 3 April 1925, in GARF, f. 5865, o. 1, d. 101, ll. 5-8.

¹³⁰ Peshkova’s letter to Kuskova dated 24 September 1927, in GARF, f. 5865, o.1, d., 390, ll. 60-67.

¹³¹ Peshkova’s letter to Kuskova dated 29 November 1931, in GARF, f. 5865, o.1, d., 390, ll. 77-84.

¹³² Peshkova’s letter to Kuskova dated 14 December 1934, in GARF, f. 5865, o.1, d., 390, ll. 85-88.

¹³³ Morrissey, “The Economy of Nerves.”

¹³⁴ “Avtobiograficheskaia zametka,” quoted in Ugrimova, “*Stoi v zavete svoem...*,” 108-109.

still do much. But our nerves are constantly under great pressure.”¹³⁵ These activists explicitly invoked the nervousness construct in relation to relief work. Referring to general symptoms such as exhaustion, weakness, and headaches, Peshkova self-diagnosed her nervousness as a sort of professional disease. Thus, the insistence in talking about her nervous weakness provided a discursive linkage between her individual state of being and the atmosphere of nervous strain in the Cross and, by extension, in Soviet life. Implicitly these discourses blamed the social environment of the *krasnokrestovtsy*’s lives and their incessant struggles to help prisoners against the odds of Soviet politics. Indeed, the restorative measure to the implacable demands of relief work was to go to Italy and escape the Soviet reality. As a woman, Peshkova wallowed in the condition of nervousness and her weaker constitution made her particularly susceptible to nervous illness, but it was above all the common diseased socio-political environment that strained her nervous system. Vis-à-vis the model of the Soviet social activist as defined by severity but fairness, willpower, strength of character, and fortitude, Peshkova appeared rather old-fashioned with her bouts of nervous oppression.

Gorky once described his wife as “one of the few individuals who enjoys the trust of both sides.”¹³⁶ Written in the fall of 1922, when the Cross was re-opened after few months of inactivity, this sentence refers to Peshkova’s relationship with Felix Dzerzhinskii and indicates that the Cross could continue to help prisoners because the head of the Cheka trusted Peshkova personally.¹³⁷ The relationship between Peshkova and Dzerzhinskii was well-known and much gossiped about in Russian intellectual circles at home and in emigration. It became the object of a lively polemic in 1926, when Dzerzhinskii died and the Cross went through some significant

¹³⁵ Letter to Kuskova dated 31 May 1929, in GARF, f. 5865, o. 1, d. 101, ll. 72-73.

¹³⁶ Gor’kii’s letter to Peshkova dated 25 October 1922, in *Pis’ma k E.P. Peshkovoi. 1906-1932*, 220-221.

¹³⁷ See also Dolzhanskaia, “*Nash spor s Vami reshit zhizn’*,” 244; and Idem, “*Iz perepiski E.P. Peshkovoi*,” *Zvezda*, 7 (2006), 145-167, at 148.

changes. This polemic is relevant to my discussion of the right to be helped because it sheds light on an understanding of morality that distinguished Peshkova from Murav'ev and the other *krasnokretovtsy* belonging to the older generation of pre-revolutionary activists.

On the day of Dzerzhinskii's sudden death on July 20, 1926, Peshkova wrote to Gorky that "Felix" had been "irreplaceable for the Cross" and wondered whether it was still possible to continue relief work for political prisoners after his death. She also added: "There is no better person, endlessly dear to everyone who knew him."¹³⁸ In a private letter to Ia.S. Ganetskii, Gorky reported Peshkova's words and strongly endorsed them. When Gorky's letter was published in the Soviet press,¹³⁹ it provoked an angry reaction, a sense of betrayal, and a moral outrage in many Russian émigrés. Peshkova became the object of a powerful moral critique which threatened to undermine her legitimacy as *krasnokrestovka*. For instance, in a letter to Gorky, Mikhail Osorgin argued: "I know the difficult path walked by Dzerzhinskii and his personal unselfishness...However, a state killer...is no longer a man, but the perversion of the idea of man."¹⁴⁰ Since émigré groups were the main financial source of the Cross, Peshkova for a while thought that she had to abandon relief work on behalf of political prisoners. As she wrote in a letter to Kuskova:

I don't hide my opinion on Dzerzhinskii from the émigrés and even consider it my moral duty towards him to tell all the good things that I know about him. He so much helped us in all these years, getting rid of much useless stuff, a fact that eased the fate of our assisted.¹⁴¹

¹³⁸ Quoted in Dolzhanskaia, "*Nash spor s Vami reshil zhizn'*," 182.

¹³⁹ "M. Gor'kii o F.Z. Dzerzhinskom," *Pravda*, 11 August 1926, 4.

¹⁴⁰ Quoted in Irina Bocharova, "Soglasno golosu sovesti," *Arbatskii Arkhiv. Istoriko-kraevedcheskii al'manakh*, 1 (1997), 335-339, at 337. In his "autobiographical note," Murav'ev remembers Dzerzhinskii as "a revolutionary with a sincere and pure soul," but also as "fanatical enthusiast." Quoted in Ugrimova, "*Stoi v zavete svoem...*," 113.

¹⁴¹ Peshkova's letter to Kuskova dated 30 August 1926, in GARF, f. 5865, o. 1, d. 390, ll. 89-96.

In other words, at stake in this polemic was the monopoly over definitions of humanity and moral duty. Condemning Dzerzhinskii, the émigrés claimed the superiority of their notion of help and their ethos of service. Recognizing the good that Dzerzhinskii did, Peshkova revealed herself as less principled and more attuned to the complications and paradoxes of Soviet life.

This relationship with Dzerzhinskii markedly distinguished Peshkova from other women activists such as Lidia Dan, Berta Mering, and Ekaterina Kuskova, who had been members of the Cross before emigrating abroad. Again, the key divergence between the pre-revolutionary women activists and a Soviet woman activist like Peshkova was a different conception of morality. Dan clearly disapproved of Peshkova's "*personal* relationship" [emphasis in the original] with Dzerzhinskii and claimed that even Peshkova's closest collaborators did not know anything about it.¹⁴² "This relationship of hers with Dzerzhinskii is for me like a thunder in clear skies."¹⁴³ Dan thought that Peshkova's feelings for Dzerzhinskii were "illogical," since the *krasnokrestovka* had seen his victims more often than Dzerzhinskii himself, and felt "almost offended" and "unmotivated to further work with her."¹⁴⁴ As a result of this scandal, most of the old revolutionaries did not trust Peshkova anymore and, after 1926, started to send money to Vera Figner, whom they perceived as faithful the old morality of help.

This was a deciding moment in the life of the Cross: to allow Peshkova to keep doing her job after her words of praise for Dzerzhinskii would have meant to accept a radical change in the conception of prisoners' right to be helped. For Dan, Mering, and Kuskova, the coordinates of

¹⁴² Dan's letter to Mering dated 18 August 1926, preserved in Mering's archive in The International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam and quoted in Dolzhanskaia, "*Nash spor s Vami reshii zhizn*," 188. There is no evidence that the relationship between Peshkova and Dzerzhinskii was an intimate one, but one definitely suspects it. On the intimate relation of Peshkova with Dzerzhinskii and, later, of her grandchildren Dar'ia and Marfa with Iagoda and Beriia's son see Kornei Chukovskii, *Dnevnik 1930-1969* (Moscow: Sovremennyi pisatel', 1994), vol. 2, 203 and 216; and Pirozhkova, "Ekaterina Pavlovna Peshkova."

¹⁴³ Dan's letter to Mering dated 18 August 1926, quoted in Dolzhanskaia, "*Nash spor s Vami reshii zhizn*," 188.

¹⁴⁴ Dan's letter to Kuskova dated 12 December 1926, in GARF, f. 5865, o.1, d. 156, l. 17.

the only possible moral system were the social and political passions that they had forged in the 1890s. Instead, Peshkova strove to adapt to the new political fashion of the 1920 and 1930s and became used to turning to the state as the exclusive provider of help as well as rights and legality.

The members of the Cross's Central Committee argued that the émigrés' critical assessment of Peshkova's personal relationship with Dzerzhinskii should have not induced her to give up relief work for the prisoners. As for Peshkova, in the end she cared more about what the prisoners themselves thought. In a letter to Kuskova dated October 18, 1926, she commented:

No one among the prisoners and the exiled reacted like that; there wasn't even anything similar to that. Some got interested in why I spoke in that way about Dzerzhinskii. But I did not encounter harsh attitudes towards me... The fact that the prisoners' trust towards me was stronger than their natural unpleasant impressions helped me overcome the whole nervous quivering of the last period...¹⁴⁵

In fact, this polemic was much more than "nervous quivering." It was motivated by the very important question of who invested Peshkova with the moral authority to help the prisoners. After 1926 it was no longer the old revolutionaries and initial founders of the Cross, but the growing cohorts of prisoners themselves, cohorts that were de facto made up of ordinary people who did not belong to any party. In a way, this was a moment of democratization. As Peshkova wrote, "it is the prisoners and not us who have to decide whether I should keep performing this work."¹⁴⁶

Thus, Peshkova had to balance the dictates of multiple loyalties: to Dzerzhinskii and his successors in the state security organs, to the other *krasnokrestovtsy*, to the Cross's donors, and

¹⁴⁵ Peshkova's letter to Kuskova dated 18 October 1926, in GARF, f. 5865, o.1, d. 390, ll. 21-36.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

to the prisoners themselves. Performing this balancing act, she strove to make the Cross an integral part of the Soviet institutional fabric. But her efforts in the end went to naught: the Pompolit remained a liminal institution for which there was no more space when Soviet legal institutional life solidified in the mid-1930s. I would argue that Peshkova's liminal position even contributed to the decline of the Cross. This woman came from the past: her social origins were aristocratic, her party belonging was socialist-revolutionary, and her intellectual background was non-Marxist. Like many other emancipated women of her generation, after the Revolution she secured an official position in a Soviet institution and ended up belonging to the ruling establishment. However, Peshkova had not been educated and professionalized by the Soviet state; she never belonged to the new generation of the 1930s, who owned career and prestige only to the Party. As the *vydvizhentsy* that represented the post-revolutionary technical intelligentsia were climbing up the ladder of Soviet social mobility, Peshkova's star was gradually, but inexorably falling down.

5.3 The dialogues

Negotiating with the state

The Cross did not work in a vacuum. This organization carried out its provision of help with the cooperation of the state. Soviet organs not only let the *krasnokrestovtsy* visit prisons and camps, but they also took into some account the requests and petitions submitted by the society and its legal defenders.

Initially, the Cross attempted to make the cooperation with the state as broad as possible by expanding the scope of its legal help. Indeed, through the juridical defense of individuals charged with political crimes, the Cross's lawyers positioned themselves as direct participants in

the machinery of the state. A document entitled “Thesis on the provision of juridical help by the Moscow Political Red Cross” framed the practice of prisoners’ legal defense as a service to the collectivity.¹⁴⁷ Considering the growing need for court defense among the Soviet population, Murav'ev asked the Cassation Tribunal of the VTsIK to admit to its meetings defenders from the ranks of the Cross.¹⁴⁸ In a letter to the Narkomiust, the Cross activists argued:

The Extraordinary Commissions would be significantly more efficient, if the representatives of the Red Cross could take part in the defense in court. This would give the representatives of the Red Cross the opportunity to show their collaboration in the process itself and would release the representatives of the state from the necessity to study the petitions of the Red Cross.¹⁴⁹

The author of this letter also remarked that the College of Defenders was overloaded with work and did not have enough personnel to deal with it. Finally, the Cross contended that the non-party nature of its work completely guaranteed the political loyalty of its members. The impartial work of the Cross’s lawyers, continued the letter, “could significantly help the uncovering of judicial truth.”¹⁵⁰ As Murav’ev further explained in a letter to the Chairman of the Moscow Soviet, the Cross was neither the representative of the interests of single individuals nor a side in a case. Rather, it was an organization interested in the just resolution of every case and with the mission to eliminate all possible injustices and mistakes.¹⁵¹ What Murav’ev had in mind was not a genuine adversarial courtroom, but a system whereby the prosecution and the defense would work together to establish the “truth.”

The attempt to gain a larger and more solid space of judicial action failed and, in practice, the *krasnokrestovtsy* could only “talk” with the authorities. The process of interceding on behalf

¹⁴⁷ GARF, f. 8419, o. 1, d. 1, ll. 2-5.

¹⁴⁸ GARF, f. 8419, o. 1, d. 8, l. 125.

¹⁴⁹ GARF, f. 8419, o. 1, d. 1, ll. 57-58.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁵¹ GARF, f. 8419, o. 1, d. 8, l. 60.

of prisoners (the so-called *khodataistvo*) entailed a great deal of negotiation with legal organs and high administrative institutions. Several revolutionary tribunals as well as the agencies of the political police replied to the Cross's enquiries concerning the arrested, looked at its intercession letters and official petitions, and kept it informed about their resolutions.¹⁵² When the provincial Cheka sections delayed replying to the Cross or distributing the parcels that it sent for the prisoners, the All-Russian Cheka ordered them to speed up their administrative procedures.¹⁵³ The Narkompros collaborated with the Cross in releasing minors who had been imprisoned illegally. The Rabkrin also held regular correspondence with the Cross.

A number of factors might have forced even the most intransigent leaders to do some maneuvering in the relationship with the *krasnokrestovtsy*: the common origins and ideological base, the year-long personal contacts and the experience of common underground revolutionary activity, the non-Bolshevik past of many individuals in the governing regime, the revolutionary merits of some *krasnokrestovtsy* and their popularity among the democratic strata of the population, and – last but not least – the high international authority of Peshkova's husband Maxim Gorky. Indeed, the Cross might have initially emerged as a means to soften and restrain the repressions against the Bolsheviks' former comrades-in-arms and then expanded the scope of its work well beyond relief to the arrested members of the oppositional parties.

Each *krasnokrestovets* had different personal connections.¹⁵⁴ Vera Figner negotiated with the Central Committee of the Party, while Murav'ev and other lawyers submitted official

¹⁵² In the archive of the Cross I found correspondence with the Moscow Revolutionary Tribunal, the Railway Tribunal, and the Supreme Revolutionary Tribunal of the VTsIK, and many others.

¹⁵³ See for instance GARF, f. 8419, o. 1, d. 8, l. 45.

¹⁵⁴ On personal networks and political patronage see Sheila Fitzpatrick, "Blat in Stalin's Time," in *Bribery and Blat in Russia: Negotiating Reciprocity from the Middle Ages to the 1990s*, Stephen Lovell, Alena Ledeneva, and Andrei Rogachevskii, eds. (New York: St. Martin's, in association with the School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University of London, 2000), 166-182; Idem, *Everyday Stalinism*; Alena V. Ledeneva, *Russia's Economy of*

intercessions with the Presidium of the VTsIK.¹⁵⁵ The protocols of the meetings of the Cross's Central Committee reveal that the chairman of the Moscow Soviet L.B. Kamenev was a big patron of the Cross, ready to intercede with the Cheka on its behalf. For instance, in December 1919, the Cross forwarded to Kamenev a telegram that it received from a group of political prisoners in Nizhnii Novgorod and asked him "not to refuse to give orders to satisfy the petition submitted by the prisoners in this telegram."¹⁵⁶ Vinaver and Murav'ev had frequent "talks" with Kamenev.¹⁵⁷ Supposedly following one of these conversations, the chairman of the Moscow Soviet visited some places of imprisonment to check on their sanitary conditions, gave orders to the Moscow Cheka to keep the arrested in preventive imprisonment no longer than 48 hours, and promised to bring the issue of groundless arrests to the attention of the Moscow Soviet.¹⁵⁸ Another time, Murav'ev visited Kamenev and asked him to renew permission to visit the Butyr'skaia prison to all members of the Cross. Kamenev agreed to talk with Dzerzhinskii about this.¹⁵⁹ Although both Murav'ev and Vinaver had access to Dzerzhinskii, Peshkova – as we have seen – was known as the one who could negotiate with Iron Felix in a more personal way. I.S. Unshlikht was reported to have fairly positive attitude towards the Cross and, indeed, he was the one who signed the permission for the Society to continue its work in November 1922. Vinaver regularly met with Unshlikht and brought to his attention all the chekists' actions that he found "unacceptable." If we believe Vinaver's words, Unshlikht was unaware of the

Favours: Blat, Networking, and Informal Exchange (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Barbara Walker, "(Still) Searching for a Soviet Society: Personalized Political and Economic Ties in Recent Soviet Historiography. A Review Article," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 43:3 (July 2001) 631-642; see also the articles by Kiril Tomoff, Vera Tolz, and Barbara Walker in the special issue of *Contemporary European History* 11: 1 (2002) and Barbara Walker's book *Maximilian Voloshin and the Russian Literary Circle Culture and Survival in Revolutionary Times* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005).

¹⁵⁵ GARF, f. 8419, o. 1, d. 27, l. 43.

¹⁵⁶ GARF, f. 8419, o. 1, d. 8, l. 22.

¹⁵⁷ Murav'ev had defended Kamenev when the latter was arrested in 1915 at an illegal conference of the Bolshevik party. See Ugrimova, "Stoi v zavete svoem...", 247.

¹⁵⁸ GARF, f. 8419, o. 1, d. 3, l. 1.

¹⁵⁹ GARF, f. 8419, o. 1, d. 3, l. 3.

censurable facts occurring in the Gulag and often promised to take measures to improve the prisoners' fate.¹⁶⁰ Negotiations took regularly place with Messing, Prokof'ev, Gai, Menzhinskii, and Deribas. After Dzerzhinskii's death in 1926, Genrikh Iagoda always had the last word: he could endorse or reject all the negotiations between the *krasnokrestovtsy* and the lower ranks in the police organs.¹⁶¹

Both activists and state officials trod a fine line between formally defined and personally negotiated interactions. The *krasnokrestovtsy* frequently received visits from police officers, who came to Kuznetskii Most to discuss the affairs of the Cross. One day, towards the end of 1928, as Vinaver was attempting to intercede for some prisoners, a Cheka agent told him:

‘Let them [the prisoners] file a petition.’ To this I replied that if this was an attempt to put us on our knees, of course, neither I nor Ek. Pavl. (who was standing by my side) will agree; but it is another matter if You mean it seriously without forcing us on our knees (*bez kolenok*). I did not get any clear answer.¹⁶²

As this episode reveals, the Cross was not willing to bend completely to the whim of the police organs. To the contrary, it strove to preserve as much autonomy as possible. There was a sort of open dialogue between the *krasnokrestovtsy* and the state authorities: it was a constant bargaining, in which each side felt relatively free to criticize the other in a more or less direct way. The relationship between the Cross and the state was neither one of opposition and resistance nor one of simple submission and blind loyalty.

As we saw in previous chapters, Soviet agencies shared responsibilities in the management of social assistance and their functions often overlapped. The division of labor in

¹⁶⁰ GARF, f. 8419, o. 1, d. 9, l. 5.

¹⁶¹ Evidence showing these connections is scattered throughout the archive of the Cross. A letter that Murav'ev wrote to N.N. Polianskii details the chains of patronage that each *krasnokrestovets* could use. GARF, f. 1652, o. 1, d. 419, l. 7.

¹⁶² Vinaver's letter to Kuskova dated 21 January 1929, in GARF, f. 5865, o. 1, d. 101, ll. 69-70.

caring for and controlling the prisoner population was also characterized by intra-institutional frictions, especially between the Cross and the police. Faced with a constant penury of qualified personnel, some state representatives addressed single activists with the offer to join state commissions for the management of prisons. However, the *krasnokrestovtsy* systematically turned down the state's propositions, preferring to play the role of prisoners' intermediaries rather than completely merging with the state's organs – and eventually sharing with them the burden of responsibility for the ineffectiveness of their actions.¹⁶³

In its correspondence with the Gulag superintendents, the Cross made it always clear that it acted as the advocate of prisoners whose relatives had asked the relief organization to intercede for them. In formulating complaints and demands, the Cross indicated concrete facts and specific cases. The motivations for help included pragmatic considerations such as the beginning of the cold fall season and the lack of heating in the cells, the penury of beds and sheets to sleep in, the spreading of epidemic diseases and the lack of medicines, and the ever present difficulties in the provision of foodstuffs. Sometimes the *krasnokrestovtsy* evoked less material reasons, but they always abstained from larger ideological discussions on why political prisoners should be helped. In conveying the requests of their clients to the Cheka, the *krasnokrestovtsy* reformulated them and couched them in the neutral and dry language of Soviet bureaucracy. Prisoners' appeals to revise their sentences were divested of all emotionality and boiled down to unembellished brief notes such as "the verdict is considered unjust."¹⁶⁴ In drafting longer letters, the *krasnokrestovtsy* took inspiration from the prisoners' petitions and reiterated the petitioners' reasoning and arguments, but they avoided politically charged tones. The *krasnokrestovtsy*

¹⁶³ See for instance "Rech' na godichnom sobranii Politichskogo Kasnogo Kresta 14 marta 1919 g.," from Murav'ev's family archive, quoted in Ugrimova, "Stoi v zavete svoem...", 128.

¹⁶⁴ GARF, f. 8419, o. 1, d. 203, l. 102.

assessed prisoners' right to be helped through categories which were not strictly related to politics, but rather to the realms of material needs and moral entitlement. These categories interspersed their correspondence with the state authorities.

The prisoners' poor health conditions were often evoked as a ground for help. In a letter to the Presidium of the All-Russian Cheka, the *krasnokrestovets* Iosif Semenovich Kal'meer asked the temporary release of a group of prisoners who were to be transferred from prisons in Moscow and Vladimir to a camp in Tashkent. He motivated his request by saying: "among them are individuals emaciated by disease and long terms of imprisonment."¹⁶⁵ Prolonged deprivation of freedom destroyed the prisoners' health. In view of this, the Cross frequently advocated for release or change of sentence from detention to exile. In a letter to the Cheka, Peshkova asked explanation concerning a prisoner who was spending his sentence in the Ekaterinenburg province and demanded to reduce the length of his imprisonment "due to his very bad health conditions" – to prove which she added a medical certificate.¹⁶⁶ In a letter dated January 24, 1923, the Cross interceded for a certain Isidor Ivanovich Ramishvili, who was detained in the Iaroslavl' political isolator. Isidor was sixty-five year-old and sick with arteriosclerosis. In addition, he recently had contracted angina and his nerves were "greatly shaken." Given his serious health condition, the Cross asked to move him to a sanatorium in Moscow. It also argued that this man had no intention to engage in political work and was so sick that he could not have done that even if he wanted to.¹⁶⁷ When the Cross asked the Presidium of the VTsIK to prohibit the transfer of the prisoner Leonid Mikhailovich Chichagov from Kazan' to Krasno-Kokshaisk, it explained that this man "needs urgent surgery, which could not be performed in the city of Krasno-

¹⁶⁵ GARF, f. 8419, o. 1, d. 8, l. 49.

¹⁶⁶ GARF, f. 8409, o. 1, d. 1, l. 50.

¹⁶⁷ GARF, f. 8409, o. 1, d. 1, l. 105.

Kokshaisk.”¹⁶⁸ In sum, old age, sickly conditions, and need for medical help were good reasons to move the prisoners to better places of detention, such as camps closer to a railway station or in milder climatic regions.

In line with the conceptions of gender and help that I discussed in the previous chapter, women prisoners were frequently presented as sick and weak individuals in need of particular care. The female fragile nervous system could be completely destroyed by imprisonment and women’s lives were at greater threat than men’s lives in the cold “far North.” For instance, in a letter to the Moscow distribution commission, the Cross asked to release a certain Tat’iana Mikhailovna Uvarova explaining that this woman had already spent half of her term, but above all emphasizing that the prisoner suffered from an acute form of tuberculosis and “the detention in prison [was] dangerous for her life.”¹⁶⁹ In a letter to the Office of the Procurator of Arkhangel’sk, the Cross interceded for the release of Raisa Anisimovna Borts on the grounds of her severe illness. This prisoner suffered from heart disease and tuberculosis. “Detention in a concentration camp, especially in the difficult climatic conditions of the far North, is fatal to her health.”¹⁷⁰ Again, as in the case of single mothers, for women prisoners too the motif of sickness combined with that of loneliness. In a letter addressed to the Procurator of Samara, the prisoner Iulia Nikolaevna Sadykova was portrayed as a “sick woman” suffering from heart disease: “life in Samara, where she does not know anybody, has serious negative effects on her.”¹⁷¹

On the grounds of traditional notions of the family, the Cross often requested to send male prisoners to camps where they could be closer to their old mothers or wives with multiple young children. In a letter to the Commission on Exiles of the Moscow NKVD section, the Cross

¹⁶⁸ GARF, f. 8409, o. 1, d. 1, l. 265.

¹⁶⁹ GARF, f. 8409, o. 1, d. 1, l. 239.

¹⁷⁰ GARF, f. 8409, o. 1, d. 1, l. 240.

¹⁷¹ GARF, f. 8409, o. 1, d. 1, l. 304.

asked to suspend the exile of a certain Genrigsen to Norway as his country of origin, because his wife was pregnant and they had eight small children.¹⁷² Loneliness and orphanhood – which in this discourse constituted the reverse of family relations – were evoked not in a sentimental and melodramatic way, but rather in a matter-of-fact tone. Forwarding the petition of a daughter for the revision of her mother's case to the Presidium of the VTsIK, Peshkova wrote: “on my end, I ask you to fulfill this petition since the 13-year-old Liubov Radtsig remained alone after the arrest of her father and mother, and she does not have anybody who could take care of her.”¹⁷³

Political prisoners were the yardstick of socio-political danger in the Soviet Union. As a counter-narrative to the official conceptualization of “the politicals,” the Cross often used prisoners’ ignorance and darkness as exculpating devices and grounded help in their actual harmlessness for the state as dark and ignorant persons. For instance, in a letter to the Presidium of the VTsIK, the Cross advocated for a certain Shal'gin who had been accused of political crimes and condemned to capital punishment. As the activist drafting this intercession explained, “the serious crime committed by Shal'gin is the result of his low level of consciousness.”¹⁷⁴ In a letter to the Office of the Procurator of Iaroslavl’, the Cross emphasized that the prisoner Tamara Ivanovna Kochergina was only nineteen and, because of her “extreme youth,” her release would not represent a danger for the state regime and the social order.¹⁷⁵

When they deemed it fit, the *krasnokrestovtsy* played also the cards of “correct” social origin, poor economic conditions, and past labor contributions. When the Tribunal of the North Railway system condemned to death the employees of its food store Sergei Ivanovich Kulishev,

¹⁷² GARF, f. 8409, o. 1, d. 1, l. 74. This prisoner’s family name was sometimes spelled also as Genriksen.

¹⁷³ GARF, f. 8409, o. 1, d. 1, l. 192.

¹⁷⁴ GARF, f. 8419, o. 1, d. 8, l. 103.

¹⁷⁵ GARF, f. 8409, o. 1, d. 1, l. 250

Nikolai Vasil'evich Serikov, and Ivan Sergeevich Lirionov, because they had hoarded some salt and flower and re-sold them for their own profit, the Cross argued that their guilt was attenuated by the following circumstances: they had a difficult material situation; they came from the peasantry; for their entire lives they had earned their bread through their labor; and each of them supported a big family. Taking into consideration the social position of the condemned and their past as workers, the Cross demanded to suspend their death sentence and replace it with a milder form of punishment. Finally, the Cross argued that, with the upcoming anniversary of the October revolution, “the satisfaction of this demand would fit with the indulgence that the population of the Russian Republic became used to associate with the celebration of the October revolution.”¹⁷⁶

The Cross paid attention to the changes in the political climate. For instance, in 1922, the Cross interceded for a group of citizens condemned to death with the accusation of “counter-revolutionary agitation” because, in a public meeting, they had opposed the requisition of church property. The actions committed by these men, argued the Cross, had not been performed for personal interest and for low and selfish concerns. Their speeches in local meetings against the requisitioning of church properties

were the open interventions of free citizens,...criticism towards the current Soviet state is admitted by the current law and, when pronounced in the presence of state's representatives, cannot be equated to secret anti-Soviet agitation. The restless social mood determined by the historical moment through which Russia was living (that is the crumbling of the old system) created among the members of the meeting a certain nervous atmosphere, but it is not possible to put the guilt for this exclusively on the condemned. This extraordinary time that is now experienced by Russia must serve as an alleviating circumstance.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁶ GARF, f. 8419, o. 1, d. 8, l. 36.

¹⁷⁷ GARF, f. 8419, o. 1, d. 8, ll. 69-76.

To grant mercy to these men, continued the Cross,

is not only an act of charity, but also a means to placate passions...To let the condemned live cannot represent any danger for the Soviet state; to the contrary, it would reinforce the awareness of the masses about the strength and solidity of the Soviet state.¹⁷⁸

Apart from passing on petitions from individual prisoners, the Cross sometimes took the initiative to advocate for the collective rights of the Gulag population. In these cases, too, we do not see much abstraction and theoretical discussion, but rather references to precedents, specific laws, and contingent conditions of need. For instance, in a letter dated October 4, 1927, Peshkova claimed the right of prisoners' relatives to visit their close ones in the Solovki camp. Her note was characterized by a rare urgency of tone motivated by the fact that navigation to the Solovki Islands in the White Sea would soon be closed and the prisoners would have been deprived of their right to receive visitations for many months. In a preceding correspondence the Moscow section of the Cheka had suggested the Cross to send this request to the Leningrad section. Peshkova was not satisfied by this answer and wrote back to the Moscow Cheka with a list of camps for which she demanded immediate visitation permits. She wrote:

In light of the fact that we did not receive any reply from Leningrad, that soon the navigation will be impossible, that all prisoners have the right of visitation, and that the visitation permits for the Solovki Islands have always be given by Moscow (and not by Leningrad), we are demanding that you proceed with their delivery.¹⁷⁹

Peshkova did not request visitation permits as arbitrary privileges, but as full-fledged rights.

Another collective right for which the Cross actively advocated was the right to nutrition.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.* I have not found any record about the outcome of this case.

¹⁷⁹ GARF, f. 8419, o. 1, d. 203, l. 62. It must be said that the Cheka tended to approve all petitions for visitation that were submitted through the Cross. As an example see GARF, f. 8419, o. 1, d. 203, l. 10 and l. 31.

¹⁸⁰ The food situation was a constant problem in the Soviet prisons. The *krasnokrestovets* Kal'meer wrote several notes to the Gulag Administration and the Presidium of the Cheka reminding them of the food norms for prisoners' rations. See for instance GARF, f. 8419, o. 1, d. 7, ll. 14-15 and ll. 27-29; d. 8, l. 53 and l. 123.

What took place in the Gulag, argued the Cross, contradicted the picture of prison life given in the press. In the spring of 1921, the *krasnokrestovtsy* proved very critical of an article published in *Pravda* by a member of the newspaper's editorial board, a certain Nikolai L. Meshcheriakov. After a two-and-a-half-hour visit to the Butyraskaia prison, Meshcheriakov felt informed enough to write an enthusiastic description of "prison life" in the new socialist state. According to him, the common cells had open doors and the prisoners could go for long walks in the halls and in the prison yard. He talked about "free socialization" between men and women, who readily obtained permission to visit each other in their cells. The superintendents always knocked before entering the isolation cells, addressed the prisoners politely, and provided them with newspapers, books, and paper to write letters. The prisoners even attended performances and lectures.¹⁸¹ From its multiple visits to various prisons and from the endless stream of petitions that it constantly received, the Cross knew a different story – one of unexpected forced transfers, overcrowded and unheated cells, anti-sanitary conditions, spreading of serious epidemics, semi-starvation, thefts and arbitrary requisitions of personal belongings, isolation, ignorance concerning the reasons for the arrest, rudeness, humiliation, insults, and corporal punishments. In short, the regime of imprisonment was "a slow and painful agony." As a *krasnokrestovets* wrote,

as a result of all the serious moral and physical suffering, the prisoners' abjection and hopelessness reached extreme limits and produced more than one case of serious psychic diseases.

¹⁸¹ N. Meshcheriakov, "Tiur'ma v Sovetskoi Rossii," *Pravda*, no. 77, 10 April 1921, 2. For the PRC's reaction to this article see GARF, f. 8419, o. 1, d. 8, ll. 37-38.

Individuals from the administrations “invited” female prisoners into their quarters allegedly for cleaning them. “Afraid of punishment and deprived of any defense of their rights, these women don't dare oppose the caprice of the prison's bosses.”¹⁸²

The *krasnokrestovtsy* denounced what they called “monstrous forms of arrest,” when “a mass of random people [were] arrested who [did] not have any relation to politics,” and were kept in prison without being interrogated.¹⁸³ Despite a VTsIK directive instructing the Cheka to complete the investigation of political cases within one month from the arrest, the rules regulating this process were not strictly observed and the investigations often dragged on for weeks and months. Although a directive of the All-Russian Cheka officially mandated politeness towards the prisoners, the guards had “not yet learned the new rules of interaction with the prisoners” and could not stop viewing the political as criminals.¹⁸⁴ The Cross appealed for political prisoners on the basis of the state rules that the chekists failed to observe.

Transmission of information is another measure of the Cross's liminality. Because no effective system of either private or administrative correspondence operated in the Gulag, the *krasnokrestovtsy* tried to establish formal arrangements to deliver information to the prisoners' relatives as well as to enhance the communication between them and their close ones in jail. At the same time, the Cross sent frequent notes to the All-Russian and the Moscow Cheka “informing” them on the “excesses” of the Gulag and demanding to eliminate the conditions that triggered hunger strikes, anxiety, and all sorts of extreme situations.¹⁸⁵ While the Gulag created an environment that was ripe for the thriving of panic-spreading “prison myths,” the Cross believed that “a-normal” events and “excesses” could be limited through accurate information.

¹⁸² GARF, f. 8419, o. 1, d. 8, l. 56 and ll. 79-80.

¹⁸³ GARF, f. 8419, o. 1, d. 8, ll. 37-38.

¹⁸⁴ GARF, f. 8419, o. 1, d. 8, l. 56 and ll. 79-80.

¹⁸⁵ See GARF, f. 8419, o. 1, d. 7, l. 4, l. 6, and ll. 14-15; d. 8, l. 24 and l. 52; and d. 227, ll. 2-3.

Since rumor was a prime concern of Soviet authorities,¹⁸⁶ the Cross could easily recommend itself up as aid to the Cheka – the deliverer of true information to the higher organs of Soviet power, the builder of official information networks, and a means against the rumor mill. Indeed, the information on the real conditions of the Gulag was not directed at the public sphere – whose indignation the Cross did not aspire to arouse – but remained for internal consumption.

The arbitrariness and the cruelty of the local prison administration were among the Cross's main concerns, since, as a *krasnokrestovets* put it, "the administration decides the fate of the prisoners without being controlled by anybody." It was above all the remoteness of the camps from the control of the central government that turned them into "nests of absolutely unacceptable disorders."¹⁸⁷ The misdeeds of local officials are well-known to historians of Soviet history. Peter Solomon, for instance, has described the relationship between central instruction and local implementation in Soviet criminal justice arguing that "officials in the localities sometimes took a casual approach to laws and directives from the center."¹⁸⁸ Local cliques took personal advantage of the distance from the center also in the administration of help to political prisoners. The Cross reacted by denouncing the negligence and wrongdoings of local officials; it criticized the dissonance between the legal policies promoted by the Sovnarkom and the Narkomiust on one hand, and the chekists' actions on the other. The Cross argued that this contradiction hindered close contact and constructive collaboration among the state organs.

In sum, the *krasnokrestovtsy* did not challenge the central authority, but rather denounced the incompetence, sluggishness, and arbitrariness of the camp administration and strove to take

¹⁸⁶ On rumors see Rebecca Manley, *To the Tashkent Station. Evacuation and Survival in the Soviet Union at War* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2009), 68-69 and 84. See also Lynne Viola, "The Peasant Nightmare: Visions of Apocalypse in the Soviet Countryside," *Journal of Modern History*, 62: 4 (1990), 747-770.

¹⁸⁷ GARF, f. 8419, o. 1, d. 8, l. 56.

¹⁸⁸ Solomon, *Soviet Criminal Justice under Stalin*, 59.

measures *through the center* to fix these phenomena. As the Cross wrote in one of its numerous letters to the Cheka and the VTsIK, “we take the liberty to express the hope that the Presidium will listen to our voice. Only the awareness of the necessity to perform our duty dictates this appeal.”¹⁸⁹ In the Cross’s narrative, the violations of prisoners’ basic human rights happened at the hands of the local administration and needed to be prevented through the intervention of the organs of central government. Lynne Viola has interpreted one’s claim of loyalty to the center against erring officials as an aspect of resistance.¹⁹⁰ Instead of seeing the Cross’s alliance with the Presidiums of the Cheka and the VTsIK against the local chekists as disguised resistance, I suggest to view this collaboration as a measure of the liminality of an untidy and contradictory organization and of the help that it provided to the most marginalized Soviet social group.

Negotiating with the prisoners

Prisoners sent their various requests to the police organs, but they often ‘copied and pasted’ the Cross as well, asking for its intercession and advocacy. Most of them knew that the final decision on their case would come from the Cheka, but they also believed that the Cross – and Peshkova personally – could effectively intercede for them or at least help in speeding up procedures. Indeed, prisoners very frequently received replies not directly from the Cheka, but through the Cross, which thus confirmed its function as middleman and patron. For instance, in March 1927 Emiliia Ivanova Ivant wrote both to the Cheka and to Peshkova saying: “on April 14 ends the term of my exile. Please send me the documents as soon as possible.” A few days later she received the following reply from the Cross: “according to the directive of the Special Council of the GPU [Cheka] dated March 28, 1927, you are permitted to live in freedom.”¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁹ GARF, f. 8419, o. 1, d. 8, ll. 37-38.

¹⁹⁰ Viola, “Introduction,” in *Contending with Stalinism*, 11.

¹⁹¹ GARF, f. 8419, o. 1, d. 157, ll. 1-3.

Almost all communications to the prisoners were like this: concise (never longer than four-five lines), with a purely informative content, and a dry, bureaucratic, and legalistic tone.

The *krasnokrestovtsy* wanted their clients to explain why they were requesting the visit of one of their representatives and what specific legal help they were demanding;¹⁹² they recommended prisoners to give “the most precise” information on the date and place of the arrest and to indicate “absolutely literally” the motivation indicated in the sentence.¹⁹³ The prisoners were supposed to send “short, motivated petitions in the name of the OGPU;” the Cross would deliver them and keep the prisoners informed.¹⁹⁴ The *krasnokrestovtsy* even devised a specific formula to pass over information to the prisoners: “In reply to your enquiry n. ...dated..., according to the information received from the OGPU, we communicate that....” With these words the Cross made its official function as intermediary explicit to the prisoners, as though it wanted to avoid any confusion on its position vis-à-vis the Soviet state and its investigation organs. There was no sentimentalism in the notes to the prisoners: both the approval and the rejection of their requests for release were communicated in a neutral and impassionate tone, because political prisoners should not perceive the Cross as an ally against the state or as a site of resistance.

Some prisoners were quite diligent. They understood how the Cross wanted to position itself and consequently crafted petitions that were motivated, brief, precise, and unemotional. Some petitioners simply wrote that they needed warm clothes, underwear, sheets and a pillow, shoes, foodstuff, and tobacco.¹⁹⁵ One man held in the Taganskaia prison asked the Cross to buy

¹⁹² GARF, f. 8409, o. 1, d. 1, l. 374.

¹⁹³ GARF, f. 8419, o. 1, d. 8, l. 61.

¹⁹⁴ See for instance GARF, f. 8419, o. 1, d. 715, l. 7; d. 565, l. 8; l. 61; and l. 65.

¹⁹⁵ GARF, f. 8409, o. 1, d. 37, l. 5 and ll. 10-11.

glasses for him.¹⁹⁶ The student of the Leningrad Polytechnic Institute Nikolai Baukevich asked to lend him 10-15 rubles which he would have returned as soon as possible.¹⁹⁷ One prisoner asked only for a toothbrush and some toothpaste.¹⁹⁸ Other petitioners dutifully presented the details of their arrest in the cold and polite language of law and then formulated questions that touched upon all possible aspects of political imprisonment, from the nitty-gritty rules of prison life (how to get a pass to bring books into the prison, how to deliver parcels, etc.) to the most complicated legal advice (whether an amnesty could be applied to their case, how to draft appeals to the cassation tribunals, etc.). For instance, on October 23, 1927, Grigorii Ivanovich Ivanov-Chernets wrote to Peshkova asking to inform him whether the amnesty for the tenth anniversary of the revolution applied to his arrested brother, what he needed to do in case it did, and eventual explanations on why it did not. “Should I send a petition or better an intercession somewhere? or would it all be useless?” he wondered.¹⁹⁹ At times, prisoners asked the Cross’s lawyers to undertake the defense of their interest and insisted on the modification of the sentences issued by the Soviet tribunals. For instance, in a letter dated January 27, 1920, a prisoner proposed to hire Nikolai Murav’ev as his advocate. He wrote: “since I have been living in prison for the last 17 months, I am not well informed on the current order of things: who can advocate for me as defender? where do I need to submit demands?”²⁰⁰

Other prisoners, however, were less disciplined. Appealing for assistance and complaining about wrongful imprisonment and sentencing, this kind of petitioners used disparate arguments and emotions to illustrate the injustice of their situation. They were very vocal in describing their painful, sad, and desperate situations and often made their stories truly pathetic.

¹⁹⁶ GARF, f. 8409, o. 1, d. 37, l. 17.

¹⁹⁷ GARF, f. 8409, o. 1, d. 37, l. 19.

¹⁹⁸ GARF, f. 8409, o. 1, d. 37, l. 32.

¹⁹⁹ GARF, f. 8419, o. 1, d. 157, l. 8.

²⁰⁰ GARF, f. 8419, o. 1, d. 6, ll. 2-3. See also GARF, f. 8419, o. 1, d. 5, ll. 9-10.

These individuals explicitly relied on the kindness and compassion of the *krasnokrestovtsy*, who – as these prisoners believed – were sensitive patrons both worried for the petitioners’ tragic fate and able to reverse it thanks to their unique relationship with the Cheka. Women, in particular, tended to look at Peshkova as their spokesperson and demanded from her understanding and consolation alongside with help.²⁰¹ Lamenting prisoners constructed an image of the *krasnokrestovtsy* as caring and relatively powerful, and then challenged them to act in conformity with this image. As Golfo Alexopoulos has shown in her book *Stalin’s Outcasts*, the more helpless the petitioners presented themselves, the more they intensified the obligation of the addressees to respond sympathetically. Their laments placed a burden of conscience: the just activists needed to help them otherwise they would have been responsible for unpleasant consequences, such as starvation and death. Thus, some political prisoners fashioned the *krasnokrestovtsy* as new Soviet patrons, who could not behave like the notorious heartless bureaucrats of the old tsarist power structure.²⁰²

Judging from the *krasnokrestovtsy*’s replies to these letters, I would argue that their self-fashioning did not match with how the emotional/pathetic petitioners approached them. Long and dramatic petitions had the same impact (if not less) as short and unemotional ones. For instance, when Lidiia Vladimirovna Osipova in 1931 poured all her soul in a series of heartfelt long letters to Peshkova, the head of the Cross dryly replied: “The petitions to the GPU [Cheka] must be brief and motivated. I will return to you the petitions that you wrote because you need to make them shorter.” Only when Osipova finally wrote a proper petition, did Peshkova submit it

²⁰¹ For some examples see GARF, f. 8409, o. 1, d. 565, l. 58; ll. 66-67; and ll. 71-72

²⁰² Besides Alexopoulos’s *Stalin’s Outcasts*, see Emily Pyle, “Peasant Strategies for Obtaining State Aid: A Study of Petitions during World War I,” *Russian History/Histoire Russe*, 24:1-2 (Spring-Summer 1997), 41-64; and Sheila Fitzpatrick, “Suplicants and Citizens: Public Letter-Writing in Soviet Russia in the 1930s,” *Slavic Review*, 55:1 (Spring 1996), 78-105.

and inform Osipova that now she should wait a couple of months for an answer.²⁰³ In 1931, a woman named Ekaterina Piotrovskaja wrote her desperate request of help in verses, but the lyrical genre did not impress the state functionary Peshkova who replied,

in reference to your letter, I communicate that it is impossible to give you any information since you do not tell when and where you were arrested and did not even write your patronymic. We ask you to write your correspondence with us in colloquial language – not in verses.²⁰⁴

The activists dutifully replied to all petitions, attempting to provide the prisoners and their relatives with the requested information, but never demonstrating any special empathy or compassion.

By the early 1930s many Soviet citizens looked at the Cross either as a patronage institution in charge of political prisoners or as an information bureau providing information on the ever growing Gulag.²⁰⁵ Sometimes the existence of such an organization seemed as improbable to Soviet people of the 1930s as it seems to us. As a woman wrote in 1930: “I discovered the existence of the Section for Political Prisoners... I don't even know whether it exists in reality; I found out by word of mouth and from unreliable sources...”²⁰⁶ But people tried their luck and were regularly rewarded with a reply that, although brief and devoid of any sympathy, provided petitioners with much needed information.

The *krasnokrestovtsy* adopted an impassive tone in their correspondence with the prisoners because they did not want their clients to misunderstand the help that their organization

²⁰³ GARF, f. 8409, o. 1, d. 565, l. 74 and l. 78. For Osipova's petitions see GARF, f. 8409, o. 1, d. 565, ll. 66-67 and ll. 71-72

²⁰⁴ GARF, f. 8409, o. 1, d. 603, ll. 331-333.

²⁰⁵ Initially, the All-Russian Cheka had an information desk by the Lubianka prison, but in the spring of 1921 it was ordered to stop providing people with information. Ordinary people had no real access to the directors of the local prisons and camps. Thus, the Cross remained the only means to find out the place of detention of an arrested individual.

²⁰⁶ GARF, f. 8409, o. 1, d. 565, l. 28. See also GARF, f. 8409, o. 1, d. 517, ll. 110-112.

offered. Peshkova and the other *krasnokrestovtsy* chose to behave not as compassionate philanthropists, but as cold bureaucrats. Although they were in fact making many unselfish sacrifices, the *krasnokrestovtsy* did not act as benefactors – “there are no sisters of charity in our Society” said Murav’ev.²⁰⁷ The *krasnokrestovtsy* did not conceive help as the sacred cause of religious creed. Their self-representation as state functionaries performing the civil duty of assistance to a particular group of Soviet citizens was in line with the rejection of charity that was touted by the state and proclaimed by all the institutions active in the field of help.

On the other hand, in its communications with the state organs, the Cross had a relatively greater freedom of expression than in its correspondence with the prisoners. Here the *krasnokrestovtsy* could stir up a moderate amount of pity and emotions. Need/suffering as a category legitimizing prisoners’ right to be helped was evoked alongside with references to laws. As we have seen, the *krasnokrestovtsy* were enraged by episodes of prison arbitrariness and did not hide their feelings in the correspondence with the Presidiums of the VTsIK and the Cheka. The Cross considered it natural and logical that the prisoners showed opposition to the arbitrary actions of the police administration, but its activists could express these thoughts only to the state organs, not to the prisoners or the public sphere.

Epilogue: the end of the Cross

Keeping the balance while walking on a tight rope was exhausting. The *krasnokrestovtsy* were wracked because they were integrated into the Soviet world, but also dissented with some aspects of it. Although nobody in the political elite significantly interfered with the Cross’s work, the constant negotiations with the Cheka and the prisoners slowly wore out the activists. And yet,

²⁰⁷ “Rech’ na godichnom sobranii Politichskogo Kasnogo Kresta 14 marta 1919 g.,” from Murav’ev’s family archive, quoted in Ugrimova, “*Stoi v zavete svoem...*,” 127.

Peshkova and Vinaver liked to emphasize that they could not quit their job, no matter how exhausting it was, “because the authorities don’t let anybody else do it apart from me and Ek. Pavl...”²⁰⁸ For many years, the Cross was the only state institution performing a difficult, but necessary function.

By the mid-1930s, this situation was bound to change. Peshkova and Vinaver appeared as weak, enervated, and unstable victims of Soviet life, while a new generation of healthy, strong, and self-disciplined men and women (the so-called *vydvizhentsy*) proved better able to master the forces unleashed by the Stalinist revolution. However, this new generation did not choose to constitute the Cross’s new cohort of activists, but rather opted to enter the Cheka. Ironical as it might seem, this situation bothered both the social activist Ekaterina Peshkova and the Cheka investigator Aleksandra Andreeva.²⁰⁹ According to the testimony of Lidia Dan, who met Peshkova in the summer of 1935 in London, the *krasnokrestovka* “complain[ed] that in the current GPU [Cheka] there are new people, who don’t understand anything and to whom the old names are meaningless.” Peshkova’s complaint almost literally echoed Andreeva’s words when she told Peshkova: “the names of Gots and Liber don’t say anything to the new fellows.”²¹⁰ The new chekists had a different understanding of what a political prisoner was and should be; they did not share the same historical references and socialist morality that had made communication (if not collaboration) possible between Peshkova and Andreeva.

²⁰⁸ Letter to Kuskova dated 31 May 1929, in GARF, f. 5865, o. 1, d. 101, ll. 72-73

²⁰⁹ Aleksandra Azar’evna Andreeva (born Gorbunova, 1888-1951) had been a Cheka investigator in the trial against the socialist revolutionaries. She had also worked as aid to the head of the Cheka’s secret section.

²¹⁰ Quoted in Dolzhanskaia, “*Nash spor s Vami reshit zhizn’*,” 211.

In explaining the closing down of the Pompolit on July 15, 1938,²¹¹ we need to take into purview the political conflicts of the time and the changes in the balance of power and personnel in the Bolshevik Party. However, I would argue that among the most important causes for the Cross's fall was the change in values that took place in the mid-1930s in the police. Not only new people, but also new organs emerged with the responsibility to control legality in the Gulag.²¹² The old generation of *krasnokrestovtsy* was losing their energy and, despite their great experience, their unique approach to help could no longer be sustained. As in the case of assistance to morally defective children, from the mid-1930s any organ dealing with political prisoners had to be better integrated in the texture of the state. The *krasnokrestovtsy* had stood on the edge of social and political consciousness and on the border of official morality for about twenty years. After 1936 there was no more space to stand on the threshold because the country had a Constitution, a series of well-established organs, and a new cohort of Stalinist graduates who could easily replace the old and old-fashioned *krasnokrestovtsy*.

Time was ready for the Cross's functions to be passed over to new institutions, which were better woven in the fabric of soviet and party systems. Indeed, replying to petitions written in 1938, Peshkova explained that the Pompolit had ceased to work and could no longer help anybody find information on the place of imprisonment and the fate of the arrested. These functions were now performed exclusively by the Gulag Administration and the Office of the Procurator of the SSSR, to which Peshkova suggested to turn.²¹³ Indeed, the procurators of the Narkomiust began to process thousands of complaints concerning supervision over the

²¹¹ Literature on the closure of the Cross in 1938 is scanty. The only persons who knew how and why it took place – Peshkova and Vinaver – left behind them neither memoirs nor personal diaries. The archive of the Cross is not very helpful either. Dismayed at the absolute lack of sources, Moscow researchers tell each other a metropolitan legend: before the closure of the Cross, Peshkova spent three days carrying out of Kuznetskii Most several boxes of documents and, having taken them to her apartment, she scrupulously burned all evidence.

²¹² See George Lin, *Fighting in Vain: The NKVD RSFSR in the 1920s* (Ph.D. diss., Stanford University, 1997).

²¹³ GARF, f. 8409, o. 1, d. 1642, ll. 1-3 and l. 8.

investigation organs and the prison administration. A few month down the road, in its December 1938 Plenum, the Supreme Court officially began to review and reverse convictions issued in political cases. However, something seems to have been lost in this passing over of tasks: the nature of the functions once belonging to the Cross changed as the center of gravity shifted from help to a poorly performed supervision of legality.²¹⁴

Conclusion

Instead of assuming oppositional tension between the state and a group of activists engaged in relief work on behalf of the most marginalized Soviet population, in this chapter I argued that what might be read as conflict can be better understood as productive interplay, for together state authorities and social activists searched for a dialogue in controlling and caring for political prisoners. The *krasnokrestovtsy* were ready to cooperate with the state to make their country stronger. They repeatedly showed themselves working not to oust the regime under which they lived, but to perfect it. They were able to complicate the state's policy of repression without challenging the new order and, above all, without undermining its legitimacy and authority in the eyes of the public, because their interventions never acquired an undesirable – from the government's perspective – broad public resonance. On its part, the new government initially supported people who strove to be useful to the state independently from their party membership. Although Soviet ideology did not accept any compromise with charitable movements, many political leaders collaborated with an organization which provided social help

²¹⁴ On the strengthening of socialist legality against police arbitrariness and how ineffective it was see Oleg V. Khlevniuk, "Penal Policy and 'Legal Reforms'," and Gabor T. Rittersporn, "Extra-Judicial Repression and the Courts: Their relationship in the 1930s," in *Reforming Justice in Russia, 1864-1996*, Peter H. Solomon, ed. (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 1997), respectively 190-207 and 207-227. See also I.P. Rashkovets, "Protiv proizvola," in *Oni ne molchali*, A.V. Afanas'ev, ed. (Moscow: Politizdat, 1991), 226-242.

voluntarily and on the basis of donations.²¹⁵ Thus, I argued that the state authorities adopted a flexible approach toward the organization of social assistance to political prisoners. In the end, the prison population was so big that the state could not easily expel it from the body politic. It was there all the time, as an abscess which the state could neither ignore nor completely excise.

The Cross's office at Kuznetskii Most was a liminal space where the continuum between loyalty and resistance could be literally seen every day. To its reception room came hundreds of prisoners' relatives, but state officers too walked over from Liubianka Square to visit the *krasnokrestovtsy* in their offices. Looking at Kuznetskii Most from a distance, the émigré Berta Mering exclaimed: "with such a pleasure I would be again in the Kuznetskii!"²¹⁶ Her words were echoed in 1942 by V. Dinesman, E. Gorbunova, and M. Savenko: "involuntarily the thoughts go back to the past, to the years when You [Peshkova] carried out that wonderful work, in which we had the good fortune and joy to take part."²¹⁷ It must have been a special space indeed, where old women revolutionaries such as Vera Figner, Ekaterina Kuskova, Berta Mering, and Lidia Dan could for a while still nurture the ideas and efforts of the pre-revolutionary ethos of help to political prisoners, while Ekaterina Peshkova and Mikhail Vinaver realized that only by becoming insiders of the Soviet governmental organs they could effectively provide help to this population. In this liminal space, the former socialist revolutionary Peshkova and socialist democrat Vinaver shared office with a convinced outsider of party politicking such as Nikolai Murav'ev. Claiming a legal benefit for political prisoners, they all appealed on the basis of state rules. However, while for the more principled Murav'ev the decision to appeal to state rules

²¹⁵ Discussing the relation between voluntary associations and state organs, Kupaigorodskaiia and Lebina remark the "contradictory tendencies" of state policies towards voluntary societies between 1917 and 1937. "Dobrovol'nye obshchestva Petrograda-Leningrada v 1917-1937 gg. (tendentsii razvitiia)," 9-10.

²¹⁶ Quoted in Dolzhanskaia, "*Nash spor s Vami reshit zizn'*," 176.

²¹⁷ Letter preserved in IMLI, Arkhiv Gor'kogo, FEP-kr, 24-29-1, quoted in Dolzhanskaia and Osipova, "*Dorogaia Ekaterina Pavlovna...*," 47.

reflected a philosophical conviction about universal human rights, for the more compromising Vinaver and Peshkova it represented something closer to a strategy.

Most *krasnokrestovtsy* conformed their conduct to the state's wishes and expectations regarding their role in the prison system. They molded themselves from old regime opponents into Soviet social activists. But this did not mean a shift of their primary loyalty away from the prisoners. Their goal remained service to the prisoners as the weakest members of the Soviet social system. The Cross was not hostile to Soviet power writ large but to excessive encroachments on the rights and dignity of the prisoners. Their disagreements with the state related to the severity of the punishment, but the *krasnokrestovtsy* neither challenged the basis of the Soviet state nor sought to mitigate the prisoner's guilt. Like other Soviet legal agencies that aimed at curbing illegal practices in the administration of justice, the Cross functioned as a restraint on the Cheka, an agency which checked rampant violations to legality on the part of local officials and plenipotentiaries.

Using an officially recognized vocabulary of help, the Cross claimed membership into the Soviet institutional system of assistance. Indeed, the *krasnokrestovtsy* often contended that the "correct and systematic help" that they provided to prisoners in collaboration with the prison administration was a way to counteract the penury of foodstuffs and the spreading of diseases in the Gulag.²¹⁸ Not too differently from the defectologists, the disabled members of VOS and VOG, and the activists of Ommlad, the Cross made all possible efforts to convince the higher organs of government that it was correctly assisting a needy population and thus deserved official support. Unfortunately, by 1937-1938 the Soviet state decided to divert its patronage

²¹⁸ See for instance "Proekt organizatsii kollegii upolnomochennykh," in GARF, f. 8419. o. 1, d. 1, l. 55

from semi-institutionalized organizations such as Peshkova's Cross and Kashchenko's Medico-Pedagogical Station to the agencies that firmly belonged to its system of welfare and justice.

Finally, help to prisoners fits with the larger story of help to marginalized social groups that I have told in this dissertation not only because of the relationship between the activists and the officialdom, but also because of the way this help was conceptualized. Assistance to political prisoners was a duty that the Cross performed as a state institution for the benefit of citizens who had no material means and were separated from their families. As such help was grounded in the legitimizing categories of need, suffering, and social vulnerability. Not unlike other marginalized groups (such as morally defective children and unmarried mothers), political prisoners were represented by their activists as the wretched victims of abjection, left alone to the whim of fate. For them as well as for the other needy populations of early Soviet and Stalinist Russia, help was possible on the basis of the formal rules of Soviet law, but also by reference to the informal rules of socialist morality. As we have seen, when it came to the right to be helped, a vague line separated legal arguments, socio-political projects, and moral ideas.

Conclusion

Striving to master the endless confusion about who enjoyed the right to state assistance in early Soviet and Stalinist Russia, men and women of various convictions, ages, and social backgrounds operated through the categories of what I call “the right to be helped.” This was not a unitary understanding of people’s legal rights to welfare, but rather an undercurrent of thought and a shared practice which regulated actions and crucially shaped how individual people made their case, various experts and social workers sustained it, and higher authorities recognized or denied it. The right to be helped was a distinctive rights consciousness that emerged in Soviet people’s orientations and decisions on how to legitimize help. The habit of seeking state audiences for claiming this right and the frictions that sometimes ensued in the process bound the right to be helped to ideas and experiences that, ultimately, defined the moral order of Soviet socialism.

While socialism has been often historicized as a socio-political project entailing a vision of the state, the society, and the subjectivities of a future order, this dissertation has reclaimed a central place for how notions of rights and help shaped the socialist order of the present. Indeed, for the people living in Russia after the Revolution, socialism was no longer an abstract symbolism of protest, nor was it only a moral order of the future. Rather, socialism meant the realization of specific demands in their present everyday lives. The assertion of material security was the principal right of the Soviet people since, to distinguish itself from the capitalist states, the Soviet government touted the rights to social welfare as the only rights that really mattered to its population. Soviet individuals expected a credible commitment from the state to realize these rights. In other words, the very political principles of the socialist order, which mandated state responsibility to help suffering citizens, led the people living in that order to demand help in their

present lives. Precisely because the Soviet government justified itself in terms of providing a more humane alternative to the societies dominated by market forces, people used socialist conceptions of protection to affirm popular rights and notions of legitimacy.

Although ethical notions of entitlement to care were central to Soviet socialism, they were rooted in competing logics of political ideology, economic exigency, and morality. Rights were in friction with other trends, especially with the aspiration to control through care. It is by exploring the tensions between these ideas and the often troubled dialogues among multiple historical actors that my story of the right to be helped has offered a new way into the history of Soviet socialism. As a result of both the frictions between alternative ideas of help and the interactions between various social forces, this story reveals how people have interpreted what socialism meant in the moral order of their present. Indeed, the dynamics between state leaders, social activists, and single individuals that I have described in this dissertation ran deeper than the administration of welfare. They saturated politics, science, the workings of institutions, and ideas of gender. They flavored both ideology and experience, thinking and feeling. As such, these dynamics gave rise to a set of ideas not only about rights and help, but also about Soviet socialism and its moral order.

The history of Soviet socialism between the Revolution and the aftermath of the Second World War looks very different not only if we move our focus from the socio-political project of the future to the moral order of the present, but also if we shift attention from the employed, healthy, and usually male industrial workers celebrated in official discourse and policy to the people whom that discourse and policy often marginalized. When we analyze closely how political leaders and social activists thought and acted in relation to morally defective children, blind and deaf-mute adults, single mothers, and political prisoners, we see that their ideas about

help entailed placing marginalized people at the center of the socialist moral order. Indeed, the very terms of Soviet social help – labor and usefulness, but also need, suffering, and vulnerability – forced leaders to take marginalized people and their activists seriously in the quest to invent socialism. In addition, the meaning of socialism hinged in no small part on how marginalized people and their advocates interpreted its role and function in their everyday lives. The reason for this is simple: when marginalized people sought to set standards of rights and protection, they had to explain why. The necessity – and the burden – to legitimize their right to be helped meant that marginalized people and their activists played a significant role in interpreting the terms of this right and how they should be applied in practice. The people who ran the Narkomsobes, the Medico-Pedagogical Station, VOS and VOG, Ommlad, and the Political Red Cross could influence how and whether official rules applied, what rights looked like, and what forms control could take.

Alongside marginalized people, marginal spaces – be it territories far away from the center or institutions at the periphery of the administrative structure – have appeared in this dissertation as the places where most ideas about the right to be helped and the socialist moral order were tested. By looking at this right from the angle of Perm', this dissertation has shown that the rationality officially ascribed to the Soviet socio-political project of care and control fell apart under the pressure of material exigencies as well as ideological incongruities. Besides the success case of the Medico-Pedagogical Station in Moscow, welfare facilities in the Perm' province have revealed a picture of disarray, chaos, and outright desperation. Despite the aspiration to channel all social phenomena into the strictures of state planning and the stigmatization of anything disorganized, Soviet help – as many other projects of the Soviet state – operated in haphazard and unconventional conditions. For instance, describing the workings of

some of Narkomsobes's local sections in the Perm' province, chapter 1 has revealed that the Soviet administration of social assistance to the uninsured and unemployed was marked by duplication and jurisdictional confusion, with local circumstances and preferences having the upper hand in determining an individual's right to state assistance. In other chapters we saw that not only in Narkomsobes but also in various VOS, VOG, and Ommlad sections, local administrators lacked clear ideas about who was eligible for assistance under the ever-changing Soviet laws and gave very personal interpretations of people's legal entitlements.

Since social insurance was officially presented as the core institution of the Soviet system of welfare, the Narkomsobes and the other organs that catered to the needs of unemployed and uninsured people occupied a marginal position in the Soviet administrative structure. These spaces were not only marginal but also liminal, because they represented sites in-between designations – even literally so – where processes of interaction could effectively take place and where officialdom and individual people could connect. In these institutions, a very vague line separated what aspects of social help the state chose to address in formal procedures and what was left to the individual social worker to decide through informal mechanisms. Throughout the sections of this dissertation and in particular in chapter 5, I discussed how activists and state officials trod this fine line between formally defined and negotiated dimensions of the right to be helped. The state tried to establish an objective procedure to regulate assistance, but it simultaneously relied on activists in liminal institutions to adjudicate on a case-by-case basis and to draw on networks of personal connections, knowledge, and opinion. This introduced an important element of pliability in the Soviet welfare system. Operating from positions of marginality, activists in these institutions had some space to democratize the moral order of Soviet socialism in their daily lives. Their liminality opened up the possibility of intervention,

although hierarchies of economic exploitation and political domination were nonetheless assumed within it.

Agreeing with Homi Bhabha that “history happens ‘outside’ the centre and core,”¹ in this dissertation I chose to analyze how people at the margins of traditional historical narratives of early Soviet and Stalinist Russia understood the categories that legitimized their right to be helped and then projected their understandings onto the socialist moral order of their present.

The first and perhaps most important of the terms and categories defining the right to be helped was labor (*trud*). Indeed, the right to social assistance and the right to work were imbricated both in the official mind and in popular consciousness. Several chapters in this dissertation have revealed the equation and conflation of help and employment, and argued that the slippage between them was the product of shared objectives. According to the Soviet logic of help, state assistance could not be received for free, but had to be earned through labor. In this respect, the right to be helped was grounded in a certain formal equality among all Soviet citizens: the carriers of bodily or mental handicaps acquired social rights in the same way as the able-bodied, namely through their labor. Marginalized people and their activists did not contest this logic, but rather contended that real equality lay in the guarantee of equal conditions for acquiring rights through labor. When Soviet authorities became confronted with the increasingly onerous demands of an industrializing country, they attempted to turn applicants for help into applicants for jobs, thus completely blurring the distinction between the right to be helped and the duty to work.

¹ Bhabha has made this argument in relation to the disciplinary project of the colonial nation-state. *The Location of Culture*, 167. Michel Foucault has shown how people’s histories of marginality are profoundly enmeshed in the disciplinary project of any modern nation-state. See his *Discipline and Punish*.

Within the category of labor, the idea of social usefulness (*poleznost' dlia obshchestva*) and that of merits earned through services (*zaslugi*) had great significance. The two concepts were closely related, as social usefulness was a tool to evaluate individuals and a measure of individual worth, while merits were markers of evaluations grounded in one's social utility. Unable to prove their social utility in the present, marginalized people often referred either to their past services or to the ones they would perform in the future – if finally put in the conditions to be useful. Within this framework, the marginalized could still represent themselves as useful and worthy.

While labor was the paramount category that defined social usefulness and thereby largely legitimized help, need was also frequently evoked in the discourses of state actors, activists, and individual people. Like labor, need was closely tied to notions of human dignity and moral entitlement.² However, more than labor, the category of need – and the ideas of suffering and social vulnerability related to it – had different currency for the four groups of marginalized people that I explored in this dissertation. Blind and deaf-mute activists strongly refused to represent their constituencies as the objects of pity, because they believed that the compassion of the able-bodied did not bring any benefit to them, but only humiliation. Helplessness (*bespomoshchnost'*) had a negative valence for the disabled because it was a quality that the able-bodied attributed to the disabled in order to deprive them of their rights. On the contrary, for single mothers helplessness was a very legitimate cry for help. Need and suffering were a good reason to help lonely abandoned women as much as orphan and defective children. Compassion brought benefits to prisoners too, especially to those who accepted to be emasculated and victimized for the sake of obtaining basic protection.

² Mark Steinberg, "Emotions History in Eastern Europe," October 2011, unpublished.

At the same time that the question of abnormality and difference – be it moral defectiveness, physical disability, female helplessness, or political danger – characterized the activists' writings, discourses of model subjectivity were defining the emergence of Soviet socialism. This dissertation has located the meaning of socialism not only in the idea of normative subjectivity, but also in the history of help to those who deviated from the norm. The different subject positions enabled by the terms of the right to be helped (the striving and the suffering, the deserving and the needy) reveal two important facets of Soviet subjectivity. First, normative subjectivity was ambivalent because it was produced in the moment of differentiation. In other words, normalization is a form of subjection that requires abnormality. Second, the measure of acceptable subjectivity in the early Soviet and Stalinist experience was not one's flawlessness, able-bodied-ness, subscription to gender roles, or even absolute political loyalty, but rather the willingness to overcome defectiveness and disability, gender disruptions and political unreliability. This implies that the healthy, happy, and achieving person of much official ideology was not the only Soviet subject. Deviancy from the imagined exemplary norm of physical, gender, social, and political fitness was a Soviet subject position too, and it was accepted as long as it came with the effort to overcome it. Finally, the experience of hardship provided an alternative marker of exemplary Soviet subjectivity – one that legitimized assistance.

Concepts and practices of labor and need as well as the spectrum of subjectivities that they entailed had developed by the mid-1920s and remained largely stable until the late 1940s. Despite this general coherence, however, the years between the Revolution and the aftermath of the Second World War saw some changes in the ways in which labor and need combined to legitimize Soviet marginalized communities' right to be helped and inform their understanding

of the socialist moral order. These changes largely depended on the context of the Soviet economy and politics. The first major shift took place in the late 1920s, when most activists narrowed their definition of the right to be helped to the right to a job that would have given them economic stability. The idea of satisfying people's psychological as well as material needs disappeared from most documents written in the period between the implementation of the first Five-Year-Plan in 1929 and the end of the Second World War. The second shift occurred towards the end of the war, when activists forcefully added happiness to the articulation of their right to be helped, desiring the lives of their constituencies to be not only socially useful, but also somehow pleasurable.³ As we read in a document drafted by the Narkomsobes in the late 1940s, the meaning of Soviet help became

to create – in every enterprise, kolkhoz, sovkhoz, and state institution – the conditions that would allow the pensioners to study and raise their qualification, that would open up for them perspectives of professional growth and give them not only material security, but also moral satisfaction.⁴

This quote reveals the post-war desire to cater to the physical needs as well as to the psychological suffering of marginalized people. It also shows that labor remained the key category of the Soviet right to be helped, but it became also the path to true happiness for the Soviet marginalized populations.⁵ In the immediate post-war period, employment re-emerged to be the means giving not only the proverbial “crust of bread,” but also joy and psychological well-being. In chapter 3, I discussed this shift from labor to life and happiness in relation to blinded veterans, a group that was particularly effective in pushing for the recognition of their

³ If we agree with Sara Ahmed that the politics of unhappiness are a form of political action, then disabled people's silence over happiness in the years between 1929 and 1945 might have expressed their disenchantment and alienation. Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010). See also Steinberg “Emotions History in Eastern Europe.”

⁴ GARF, f. 413, o. 1, d. 1632, l. 124.

⁵ On the meaning of labor for the Soviet blind in the years between 1945 and the perestroika see M. Galmarini, “Autobiography and the Soviet Blind-of-War: Reintegrating the Disabled Self and Turning Defects in Advantages,” paper presented at the Conference of the Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies, Washington DC, November 2011.

psychological needs and in voicing demands for less material rights. The importance in the post-war period of feelings, desires, and impulses that were not neatly in line with concepts of productivity is an issue that this dissertation has only gestured to. More research would reveal whether the post-war emphasis on joy and hope that I observed in the case of blind veterans is applicable to other populations and their understanding of the right to be helped.

Ultimately, in this dissertation I argued that a seemingly simple welfare preoccupation was in fact related to complicated conceptions of socialist morality and that Soviet marginalized people figured prominently in these conceptions. While my focus has been on activism on behalf of marginalized individuals and how this activism had the potential both to empower the marginalized and to reinforce the very terms of their marginalization, more research is needed to probe whether emancipation from below was at all possible. Could emancipation occur in the acts by which marginalized people themselves stake their claims and identify the means and mechanisms to manage need and marginalization? And could socialism be a framework that makes it feasible to press demands for help and integration? Unveiling how people accomplish the work of emancipation is crucial to our understanding of how political and moral orders shape individual lives and define cultures.

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