Book Review

E. Thomas Ewing. *Separate Schools: Gender, Policy, and Practice in Postwar Soviet Education*. DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2010. 301 pp. Cloth $42.00.

As the title of this volume suggests, in the history of the Soviet school from 1943 to 1954, a particular experiment was carried out: separate schooling for boys and girls. The precise political aim of this experiment blatantly contradicted the ideology of sexual equality proclaimed by the October Revolution.

E. Thomas Ewing, the author of this original work, has already investigated some crucial and innovative aspects of the history of education in Soviet Union, and is well known to historians for his brilliant volume on the repression of teachers, *The Teachers of Stalinism* (2002). The present volume is striking for the wealth of archival sources analyzed, not only in relation to official discourses and speeches, but also sources revealing teachers' opinions and children's voices that are so often neglected in histories of education.

The Soviet Union, in the Europe of "modern dictators," was not the only regime to choose this reform of separate schooling. The ideology stipulated that the individual was first of all an obedient member of the social system and only secondly a person with personal and gender difference. In Fascist Italy too, coeducation was abolished after the Lateran Agreement of 1929, with Pius XI's encyclical *Divini illius magistri* "On the Christian Education of Youth" (1929), and it remained separate for around thirty years. Coeducation was not introduced again in Italy until the 1960s.

In order to explain this division of classes on the basis of gender, which already existed in prerevolutionary Russia but was absent in the Soviet revolutionary reform of 1918, Ewing stresses that education was separated due to the war as a new instrument for promoting achievement and imposing order. Boys and girls were to learn specific tasks for the defense of the country: boys in military service, girls in assistance and care duties. Marxist pedagogy, with its theories regarding polytechnic education and the conception of pedology, both denied during 1936–1937, gave way to an authoritarian pedagogy and to a culture of gender that was invented—in much the same way as social classes were—revealing how gender culture can become an artifact of the dominant culture, causing identity crisis and personal conflicts.

The volume is well structured and effectively synthesizes the manifold practices that emerged in the process of separating schools, along with the opinions manifested during the different phases of the

realization of this unsuccessful project. Ewing's main hypothesis is that "the Soviet postwar experiment provides a unique example of a large-scale effort to use gender segregation as a tool for social engineering" (p. 4). Indeed if on the one hand, it coincided with pro-natalist policies, which began in the prewar decade; on the other hand, it came across as an instrument for disciplining boys and girls at a time when other techniques were ineffective. Nevertheless, "a broader commitment to gender equality as an ideological promise remained a powerful factor in popular evaluations of separate schooling and would contribute directly to the restoration of coeducation after this eleven-year experiment" (p. 8).

In order to describe this experiment in his theoretical and practical aspects, Ewing subdivided the volume into six chapters that present the voices of school world actors with all the contradictions of the ideology and the implementation process of gender segregated education. The first chapter highlights factors that led to the decision to separate education, the steps of the reform, and the initial practices. Archival sources reveal that separate schooling responded most of all to the mobilization of society during the war emergency and the problem of discipline in schools. Chapter two focuses on teachers' expectations and pupils' experiences, analyzing the observations made by Soviet educators and pedagogues on themes ranging from the emphasis on military training in boy's schools and domestic skills in girl's schools to the more subtle adjustments in teaching historical topics, analyzing literary characters, or conducting scientific experiments. This segment also includes the "scientific discussions" of gender and psychology, along with comparison of school achievement that ultimately suggests that separate schooling had little effect on pupils' learning. These differences shaped the context in which boys and girls experienced structured gender categories, but in actual fact the distribution of pupils between coeducational and separate schools varied considerably—even in the same cities.

The third and fourth chapters describe the practices of separate schools characterized by the same academic program because "boys and girls would 'obtain identical knowledge' and 'a completely identical level of general education'" (p. 71). The image of girls' schools was that they were well disciplined, clean, and had added new subjects to the curriculum. Gender separation mostly affected personal identities and social relationships. Indeed, the ostensible purpose of the reform was to ensure that "all schools had common tasks of preparing cultured and educated people with good practical skills as well as patriotic commitment" (p. 93).

Quite to the contrary, however, the portrait of boys' schools described in the fourth chapter traces the role of discipline as a justification to make school more masculine. According to Ewing, these

justifications reinforced perceptions of boys as objects of deviance, instability, and disorder. The introduction of separate schooling in 1943 was explained as a measure to prepare boys to be brave defenders of the socialist homeland. Boys' schools received additional resources such as instructors for military training, facilities for physical education, and equipment for technology clubs.

Chapters five and six address the dissatisfaction that arose with the failure of separate schools, which undermined both governmental and public support for this experiment. Policymakers, school directors, teachers, parents, and pupils did all they could to bring the experiment to an end, which was postponed by Stalin's death. Within the Soviet Union, two geographically and culturally different republics, the Ukraine and Kazakhstan, requested coeducation in order to end the failed policy. Ewing argues that, paradoxically, the reasons that led to gender segregation of the schools and the eventual reinstatement of coeducation were the same. Furthermore, "poor discipline in boys' schools, excessive femininity in girls' schools increased alienation between the sexes, logistical challenges, and tensions with a public ideology of gender equality combined to lead school officials, teachers, parents, and pupils to repudiate separate schooling" (p. 222). In 1954, the principle that education could be simultaneously separate and equal for boys and girls was rejected.

Ewing clearly explains the reasons for the introduction of the reform and of its successive abandonment, without falling into the trap of exclusively focusing on the official motivations. In the process, he opens up a new perspective on the history of (more or less) democratic school systems, which have abolished coeducation. One could also add that within a structure, which simultaneously promised gender equality and enforced gender boundaries, it was not discussed if separation or coeducation would improve the literacy levels of boys and girls, but stressed only the education for different roles in relation to the war. In Italy, for example, there was a deep discrepancy between male and female pupils' literacy rates throughout the twenty-year period of Fascism in spite of separate education that should educate new social roles to the new generation.

Indeed, these debates omitted the reality of the generation born and growing up at the end of the 1930s in an atmosphere of terror that would have made any generation of children and adolescents more turbulent and undisciplined. The very conditions of schools in the 1930s, with their continuous cuts that caused the closure of model schools and exacerbated the phenomenon of hooliganism, exemplified the period. In this light, separation can be considered a sort of palliative attempt at improving the situation. In the end, the separation of schools produced gender segregation rather than equality, and the suspicions of

the regime toward coeducation, intended probably as private and gendered life, probably compromised the perception of the opposite gender among pupils of these schools.

In sum, Ewing's volume deals with a new topic, which is analyzed from an original standpoint. It indicates how the history of schooling is crucial to an understanding of the totalitarian system and the reforms it imposed. It reveals the oscillations of the constantly evolving ideology and, after Stalin's death, society's demands to return to coeducation, which was probably the first step in "the relaunch of the communist project" after World War II.

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