

THE COMMUNARD MOVEMENT IN RUSSIA

Problems of Soviet system of schooling and of official youth programs were well known in West, but less known is a more successful approach to work with young people, the Communards movement. This approach shows how the democratic educational community, which nurtures humane values among young people can flourish even under difficult circumstances. This paper also reviews notion of *vospitanie*.

Vospitanie.

The worst and the best of Russian education is to be found in the domain of *vospitanie*. The word is normally translated as social, value, moral, sometimes character education, or up-bringing, none of which is quite accurate. *Vospitanie* is closer to what an American psychologist would call an intervention. Traditionally it has been associated with extracurricular activities, although many argue that a classroom is also a suitable for the *vospitanie* place. A never ending, loosely defined, and multi-purpose intervention into child's development with emphasis on value changes that is. While American public would find such a concept at least questionable from the point of view of liberal philosophy, Russian society expects public school system to perform the *vospitanie* as one of its primary duties. It has been the case in pre-Revolutionary Russia as well as now. The Communists' misuse of public education for ideological control have made people to feel somewhat ambivalent about schools deeply intervening into a value system of a student at such a large extent. I believe though that the contemporary public distrust *these* schools while considering the task of *vospitanie* in general vital to the society.

The worst of Russian education is well-known. All-controlling, dominating, heavily ideological institutions made up the vast majority of public schools and other educational establishments. Many American schools control students *behavior*, sometimes in a very imaginative way, but not their souls, not in purpose, anyway. Schools in Russia were the effective part of the Soviet political regime with its dramatic lack of individual freedom. Every single person that grew up during the Soviet era could remember those dull Young Pioneers' assemblies with rows of the red scarves, red banners, pathetic speeches and desperately yawning participants. That was the *vospitanie* as most of us new it. And yet Russian educational practice made its most distinctive achievements trying to implement that very concept. Our strength and our best bet for the future are there.

I believe that the most practical reason for anyone to study Russian education is both practical and theoretical traditions of humane *vospitanie*. Mass compulsory schools all over the world face similar problems. They just cannot keep their students in, students' minds even less then bodies. There were tremendous efforts in different countries to make the learning in a classroom fascinating enough to keep all the children interested. While real progress is evident, achieving the final goal is as probable as *perpetum mobile* invention. The best Russian schools I know are much, much more than just academic institutions. They possess a charm of a community, a family, a club. I have made one puzzling observation: when academics in students' minds move to the second place, a school often gets better in academics. In order to improve learning one

needs to improve teaching—this is an assumption that is much too linear. Those two processes are connected rather indirectly, through some mysterious medium, a nutritious broth that is as elusive as vital for the education. *Vospitanie* is an art of creating such a medium, and Russians might have a findings there. We are not good yet at sharing it with the rest of the world. We do not keep it up at home as well as it deserves, too.

History of the movement.

End of 50-s and beginning of 60-s were time of Khrushchev's "Thaw" in the Soviet Union. Some hidden creative forces seemed to be released in many walks of life: literature, arts, and education. In one of Leningrad's neighborhoods Igor' P. Ivanov had organized "Frunzenskaya Kommuna", first Communards group. Simon L.Soloveichik later helped to compile a book that describes that story with the words of children themselves.¹ The group was formally a District Young Pioneers Headquarters. It engaged in social activism, kids volunteered their time working in some odd places, where they felt their help is needed. This altruistic sentiment translated into collective actions played very important role in community building process of that and all others communards' groups. But big portion of their time was spent on various creative activities, such as skits making, singing and elsewhat. Kids just loved to hang around that place which provided them with friendship, care and involvement. Regular retreats (*sbor's*) and preparation for them made up third large activity.

The adult leaders of the group, I.P.Ivanov and F.Ya.Shapiro, with their seemingly limitless inventiveness and enthusiasm, without a doubt played a major role in the group's success. But as consequent history of the movement has shown, it does not take a charismatic leader for a Communards' group to start and function. Interestingly enough, *Frunzenskaya Kommuna* in a sense overgrew it's leader. The book describes peculiar conflict between I.P.Ivanov and children. He apparently claimed more authority in making decisions than kids were ready to grant him. The group existed a few years after he left the group.

The communards' movement is undeniably single most interesting phenomenon in the area of *vospitanie* for the last thirty years. Russian author S. Soloveichik, who began to write about this about 25 years ago, once estimated that about 300,000 kids at some point of their lives went through a communards' group. The estimation was made around 1984, in a newspaper article, and since then numbers could be easily doubled.² I would emphasize, that Communards were the largest, but not the only successful experiment with *vospitanie* in Soviet era. Makarenko³ and Sukhomlinsky⁴ are two most famous examples, but dozens names and places could be added to the list. Some of these experiments had very little in common with Communards, while others seem to invent very similar approaches independently. A significant number of children's groups did not

¹ S.Soloveichik, ed. *Frunzenskaya Kommuna*. Leningrad, 1968.

² No reliable statistics however exists.

³ Makarenko, A. S. *Collective Family: A Handbook for Russian Parents*. Peter Smith. In print.

⁴ Sukhomlinsky, V. *To Children I Give My Heart*. Moscow: Progress, 1981.

call themselves Communards, and probably did not realized fully where the principles of their organization came from, but were, in fact various offspring of the movement.

In a beginning of sixties Communards came into “Orlionok”, then brand new All-Russian children’s camp on the Black Sea cost. The camp has been designed to bring in Pioneer and Komsomol activists from all Russian regions for an educational experience in social activism, along with recreation. “Orlionok” quickly adopted Communards’ ideas, and became sort of a national center for dissemination of the Communards’ movement. It is interesting to notice that in the beginning of 70-s Central Committee of Youth Communist Organization, which officially supervised Orlionok featured a political cleansing there, removing most of top administrators and creative leaders of the camp. But the good traditions died hard. I found a distinctively Communard’s spirit there, if only suppressed, when I came in 1984 to work as a counselor.

By the beginning of the 80-s there were dozens of groups all over the country. They have formed a distinctive subculture at times overlapping with other informal subcultures that together make up a peculiar culture of *intelligentsia*. Looking back I realize that the Communards movement provided vehicle of what Americans call “social mobility”. It wasn’t, however, moving from lower to a higher-income class (all incomes except those of high- ranking officials were equal). It was a social and cultural stratum of *intelligentsia* spreading its values and world view among larger groups of people.

The method

The essence of the Communards’ system is difficult to describe even to the Russian audience without first-hand knowledge. After an hour long presentation someone usually asks: “Now, tell us what do you actually *do* with kids there”? The way communards’ group get started always includes “hands-to-hands” transfer of experience. I am not aware of a single group that would start from the books only. (There are not many books around, too). Still the Communards system is transferable, which is not the case with many other educational methods. Also, as I mentioned, doesn’t take exceptionally charismatic leaders, so average teacher and counselor could get an idea of how to do it in a couple of weeks. What is really needed is a *team* of starters. To start new Communards’ group alone has proven to be very difficult task, because certain style of relationships must be shown, not explained to the rest of the people. And the whole thing is about relationships rather than anything else.

Russian culture, as perhaps many others, contains an enduring idea of a community, a commune, of some idealistic human brotherhood. At different times Orthodox Church or Communism shaped specific details, but a search for utopian society seems to be one of most powerful spiritual vehicles of our culture. A.Mudrik, an educational researcher and an early Communard himself, once noticed that Communards movement had never spread over boundaries of Russian-speaking regions of the Soviet Union. I do not believe it can be simply replicated in any other country. Not because other countries do not have the idealized image of a community, but because such an image might be quite different.

A shock and fascination that regular kids experienced by entering a Communards' group explains by an effect of revelation. Imagine a person strongly dissatisfied with the lies and boredom of real life. I don't think there were any people in USSR who did not feel a disgust towards the lies we all lived. The same person however would keep some vague image of a true Communism in a back of his or her mind; an image partially borrowed from Soviet science-fictions, partly from older generation's ideals. And suddenly such a person of 14 or so discovers an island of such an impossible, true human relationships from half-forgotten dream of brotherhood. It was an incredibly liberating experience for both children and adults. And the more grim and oppressing the social reality was, the better this contrast worked.

It took me many years to realize that a social utopia is possible to actualize only on certain conditions. From the end: (3) Real life around must be basically unjust and stupid, and be perceived that way. It must be hard for person to fulfill himself or herself, so there is an incentive to try an alternative. (2) People in a commune should be free of routine economic worries, such as how to pay for food. And (1), the utopia must be strictly limited in space and time. I do not intend to sound cynical, but we cannot really be uplifted and feel love towards large number of people for a long time. The Communards used to preach active involvement into social activism, and were in fact open and inclusive. At the same time they clearly distanced themselves from the rest of the society. It was an internal emigration of a kind, not an uncommon way of life in Soviet Union.

The utopia have to be short in time, too. We cannot have an ideal community even with a few people for the long period of time. Problem was easily solved in "Orlionok": kids lived together for a month, and almost never saw each other again. (Notice that as soon as kids realize that fact towards the end of a session, they become exceptionally sentimental and kind to each other. They wanted to keep only good memories. We called it "The effect of a finale".)

More permanent groups used one of the fundamental Ivanov's inventions, *sbor*. The word means just a gathering, but in a Communards' lingo it means something between a retreat and an assembly. Up to two hundred children and adults go out of town, or isolate themselves some other way. They have three or so very intense days (with very little sleep, actually; does it help to boost creativity?) filled with skits making, fun, way too serious discussions, some physical work and sports, and games. *KTD*, an abbreviation for a collective creative action (*kollektivnoe tvorcheskoe delo*) generally describes a primary kind of activity. On a surface it is skits making, quite elaborated in some cases. But the Communards attach to it specific meaning, sharply different from simply having fun. In fact, they perceive it as a work, as a duty, as a demanding service. *Sbor* is a spiritual experience more than anything else. Being a part of some greater whole, a communion, if you please, is the goal; skits, arts, planning, doing dishes, and even helping the neediest are the means to achieve that goal. *Sbor* is an independent non-utilitarian cultural phenomena, as for instance, a theater is. The Communards used to say "to make *sbor*", meaning that there are really different degrees of success, and everyone could feel it.

The cultural peculiarities of the *sbor* can be best explored with help of Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of a carnival. Bakhtin traces the European carnival tradition back to Antiquity, with its peak reflected by F.Rables. Its essence is a universal, all-engulfing laughter. This type of laughter exists in city crowd, on central plaza. It is the laughter of the masses, opposing the official church-dominated culture of Medieval Europe, but not a satire, not the modern understanding of laughter. The carnival laughter defies the fear by ridiculing gods and authorities, and in such a way makes the world closer and more familiar. It is an ambivalent laughter, embracing the new and the old, the death and the birth, beginning and end. The carnival gives one an experience of freedom from limitations of one's rank and wealth, makes everybody equal but united in including utopian ideas of equality and abundance.⁵ The fact that carnival-like phenomena was revived in Soviet Union tells among other things how close that country got to Medieval relations between people and officialdom. Bakhtin just recorded demise of the carnivals since 17 century, but he never connected it with progress of democracy and human rights. The role of a carnival in modern society, and in educational sphere in particular is an independent and fascinating topic.

As D.S.Likhachev and his colleagues further explored, "The laughter breaks established connections and meanings. The laughter shows a senselessness and absurdity of relationships existing in the social world. But the laughter has also some contemplative constituent, though it is in the imaginary world only. The laughter breaks but also builds something: it is a world of mixed up and illogical relationships, a world of absurdity, a world of freedom from conventions and therefore desirable and careless one... The laughter in its sphere restores the destroyed in other spheres contacts between human beings, because a laughing people is a group of 'conspirators', that see and understand something invisible or incomprehensible for others or for themselves before."⁶

The primary target of laughter in Communards' practice is, I think, normal, every-day style of relationships. One of the goals is to break, to blow up stereotypes of a school and a peer-culture. *Vospitanie* in general, and Communards' version of it in particular, is, in fact, an attempt to recreate a peer-culture, to turn around peer-pressure for some positive objectives. I know, there might be a moral argument, especially from American reader, that it is not right for an adult to provoke a peer-pressure even for goals we find to be positive. I could notice only, that the depth of this problem is very well understood in Russian educational tradition. And yet since Makarenko, who published in 30-s, most of the people in the field agree that positive peer-group (a collective, *kollektiv*), and peer-pressure from it is a necessary step towards an individual moral self-definition. Russian educators are very suspicious towards a moral education that supposedly occurs between a teacher and singular student. We have little reverence for rights of an individual to have his or her own moral beliefs. Some sort of moral confrontation is believed to be at the heart of *vospitanie*, and the collective is thought to be an agent of such a confrontation.

⁵ Bakhtin, M.M. *Tvorchestvo Fransua Rable i narodnaya kul'tura srednevekov'ya i Renessansa*. Moscow: Khudozhestvennaya literatura, 1990.

⁶D.Lichachev, N.Ponyrko, A.Panchenko, *Smekh v Drevney Rusi*. Moscow: "Nauka", 1984.

An individual is forced to define him/herself with the group, rather than simply comply with it.

Sbor's used to have a powerful liberating influence on both children and adults. Not a particularly helpful survival asset in the good old Soviet Union. That was one of the most controversial issues within Communards' educators community. We didn't really prepare children for the real life. They would become more active, creative and independent just to go back to a regular school and get into one trouble after another because of that. Communards were accused in mounting "roses glasses" on students' noses. And it was true: every single "Orlionok" counselor, including myself, could remember letters from his or her former students, filled with bitter disappointment and despair. The message we gave children was: "Go and change your school, organize a communards' club, do something". And yet we knew too well that unless an adult would be willing to help, and ultimately to head such a club, our kid had no chances to succeed. She or he would end up in a conflict with school administration, and with parents.

In a long run, however, children with communards experience gained some real advantages. Even within the Communist system those who had somewhat innovative set of mind, who could get along with others, and who knew how to organize, succeeded. One of basic Communards' mottoes was : "Do creatively, or why to bother?". There is no data about former Communards' success in the post-Communist Russia. They definitely felt good about *perestroika*, but I am not sure if it is true for the era of capitalist experiments.

One of original Ivanov's invention was *ogoniok*, a corner stone of the system. *Ogoniok* is a form of group self-reflection. Actually it resembles American T-groups and encounter groups, although I am quite sure that Ivanov wasn't familiar with them. The principal difference is that in *ogoniok* people discuss their shared experience as a group, while group psychotherapy involves discussion of previous individual experience, or modeling some artificial group experience right on the spot. *Ogoniok* is basically a group discussion about a passed day. There is quite elaborated tradition of doing *ogoniok* that includes many little ways to achieve certain emotional atmosphere of safety and trust. Singing is part of it. There are about hundred or so songs easily recognizable in all Communards establishments (and most of them are shared by other *intelligentsia* people). I think, the songs, just as a fire have some hypnotic influence on children. Again, Russians are disgusted with procedures and formalities. Too much of a structure in a conversation is for us a sure sign of a falsehood. One shouldn't expect some formal decision at the end of the *ogoniok*, although it is in fact a highest decision-making body. If it reached certain emotional pick, a group assumes that everybody has understood what to do the next day. It is rather motivating than decision-making process. *Ogoniok* allows a group very quickly become a community. Kids say and hear things they never hear and say in a course of normal life. Just like encounter groups, *ogoniok* gives a person accurate picture of how he or she is perceived by others. But, using American notions, it is more about group dynamics rather than about sensitivity training.

Communards' groups, especially during the *sbors* were run mostly by kids. Adults would come to a *sbor* as one of the teams, with no special power, and with one vote per person. They would have to be asked for help by the kids, if their service is

needed. Otherwise, adults would do just the same things as students, which is to work for *sbor*, and enjoy themselves. One of the lesson from Communards' experiment is that an educator does not have to function as an organizer and authority figure in order to achieve educational goals. In the domain of *vospitanie* indirect influences as a rule are more effective than direct ones. Ivanov borrowed from Makarenko and transformed the idea of temporary committees, that allows children constantly shift from leading to subordinated positions, and to participate in group decision-making. Those committees make up informal and flexible system of power redistribution, without neither written rules, nor much attention to procedural details.

Ideologically Communards represented something I would call a Communist's Protestantism. As was mentioned earlier, it was a specific form of opposition to the Communist system. But we all simply knew no other language but Marxism. Most of the criticism was done from Marxists positions. Soviet authorities were somewhat ambivalent. On one hand, Communards never got any support. They received next to zero publicity and promotion. Unknown number of Communards' groups were disbanded or harassed by local authorities. Almost none of the Communards group settled within public schools system. But there wasn't really anything authorities could incriminate to the movement. They did exactly what Communists' rhetoric asked educators to do. You can't prosecute someone for being too good. Some people within the Party establishment surely realized the great potential Communards' movement had, and it was neither supported, nor officially condemned.

Communards had friends everywhere, including power structures. For instance, L.K.Baliasnaya, former Deputy Minister of Education of Russian Federation, took interest in "Orlionok", and supported spreading on Young Pioneers Headquarters - structures associated with Young Pioneer Organization, but working outside of school system in every big city. Many of these groups were run by former "Orlionok" counselors. Some of educational researchers, for example, group of L.I.Novikova from Moscow for many years supported Communards, and tried to understand its nature.⁷ The dawn of *Perestroika* with its hopes to reform Communism was, perhaps, the highest tide in the Communards' history. Dozens new groups sprung out, "Uchitelskaya Gazeta" supported the movement without reservations, many schools tried to incorporate the method into regular academic process. Some people thought it was too fast and too many, because in some cases educators adopted superficial traits of the method only.

Prospects

A Communist heresy it was. One might argue that the Communism itself is a Christian heresy, and Christianity is in turn a Judaic heresy. But still collapse of Communism severely impacted Communards. Many of the Communards' groups (but not all of them) used to carry red banners, they sang about heroes of Russian civil war, etc. When all of it suddenly went out of fashion, Communards didn't have time to adjust, partly because these groups, just like boy-scouts, emphasized their traditions. It is very

⁷A story of *vospitanie* theory in Russian educational research community should be told someday separately. An official dogma never existed without the intellectual opposition.

interesting to mention, that adult leaders of the groups were and are very ironical and skeptical people. So are most of the kids. But when they get together, for obscure reasons they had to stick to some dear traditions. I am not sure if it makes any sense to an American, but it is very hard to through away some silly symbol you've once pledged allegiance to in front of children. Even if you are pretty sure that the symbol means nothing, and you were fooled to believe in it. Well, maybe it is like American baby-boomers returning to a church when they have children? For these reasons some adult Communards felt uncomfortable to denounce Communism they once believed in, even though it was non-orthodox and somewhat rebellious version of it.

No one in Russia yet came up with "secular" form of Communardism, or, at least, I am not aware of it. All words that have a root "commune" sound bad in Russia now. Another thing is great variety of today's youth subcultures compare to 70-s and 80-s. Then one often had a choice among official Komsomol, Communards, and criminal world. Now young person in an urban center has dozens of choices where to belong, from Hippies to fascist militants. Communards promoted altruistic slogan: "Why to live? -- for the sake of your fellow's smile, for an improvement of the nearby world". New Russia promotes consumerism and entrepreneurial spirit with a rigor of a proselyte. V.Karakovsky, who in the 70-s have created one of the very few Communards schools, told me that his school is alone again. Nobody does *vospitanie* anymore, he said. Everyone makes money. It goes out of the fashion not in the least because of that wonderful American education system we all should learn from. Many people share ridiculous theory: Certain country is very well-off, therefore everything it does would make us well-off if copied.

Vospitanie will eventually come back, I believe. Not just because the concept is built-in into our culture. I think that experiments with the children's collective are valuable for understanding the possibilities of an education. We know now, that a peer-group may be deeply restructured on positive moral foundation, and that such a peer-group may profoundly impact individual moral development. We also know how to do it. First, children should be involved into some meaningful activity that by its very nature requires a group-cooperation. It also must be creative and ultimately altruistic activity. Both positive and negative experience of such cooperation may be used for community building process, through group self-reflection in particular. Childhood and adolescence is time for utopias, communes and idealism. That is a bare-bone theory of *vospitanie* I would never dare to jam into one paragraph in Russian.